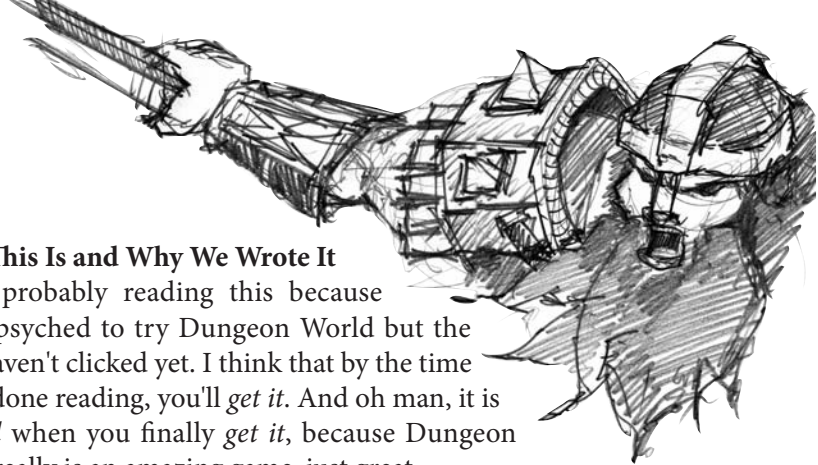




When you **read and understand**  
**Dungeon World**, roll +Int...



### What This Is and Why We Wrote It

You're probably reading this because you're psyched to try *Dungeon World* but the rules haven't clicked yet. I think that by the time you're done reading, you'll *get it*. And oh man, it is *so good* when you finally *get it*, because *Dungeon World* really is an amazing game, just great.

When I finished reading the book for the first time, I sat back and thought to myself, "*This* is the game I thought I was buying when I picked up that red box all those years ago. *This* is the game that I *wanted D&D to be*." It provides the rules and framework for real *adventures*; not a simulationist idea of medieval combat, not charts about listening at doors. It doesn't have rules for the difficulty of breaking a stone table versus a wooden one. Instead, it has rules that propel the action forward even when the players fail. *Especially* when the players fail. The way GM Moves and player Moves nest together is like a big pendulum, always pushing back and forth and creating the momentum that keeps the game running. Do you like that metaphor? Maybe it's weird, I dunno.

But when I started poking around various online forums, I discovered that a lot of beginning players have trouble with the rules. They see some good stuff in there, they're excited to try the game, but the mechanics are just so *different* from what they know. It *can* be confusing, especially if you aren't experienced with *Apocalypse World*, which *Dungeon World* is based on. I think that's because you might need to *unlearn* some things about gaming before approaching *Dungeon World*.

I think that this little book will help you do that. I haven't re-written anything and there are no alternate rules in here, it's not that kind of resource. All the advice you need for *running* the game is right in the core book. What I've done is taken the most commonly-asked questions and put down some answers in plain language, with in-depth examples. By the time you're done, I think you'll totally *get* this game and like I said before, *oh man is it good* when you finally get it.

## The Basic Mechanic: How the Conversation Works

So let's get the first big hurdle out of the way: **The GM does not roll dice for his actions. Ever.** You can roll damage dice if you want, but your NPCs don't roll for *anything*. Instead of rolling, you're going to make "moves." One of the Moves is Deal Damage, does that mean that on your turn, the GM says, "Um, the orc hits you for 5 damage"? No, it doesn't. You're not being arbitrary here, it's just that **the players' dice decide the outcomes of all your moves.** We'll go into some lengthy explanations of how this works, but the simple version is this:

1. *The GM gives the setup of a threat, but not the conclusion.*
2. *The player responds and probably rolls some dice.*
3. *The GM narrates the results, based on the player's roll.*

The dice mechanics are easy enough to understand: There are three tiers of results. On a 10+, the player gets a full success and it's all good. On a 7-9, it's a *partial* success; they don't get everything they wanted or they'll get what they want, but have to sacrifice something else. On a 6 or lower, they've failed.

There's a difference between failure in Dungeon World and failure in most other games. In Dungeon World, when the player fails a roll, the GM gets to make a "Move." This is something that confuses people, but that's just because it's new terminology. It's really very simple. **When the rules say "make a move," what they're really doing is telling you that something happens,** something besides just failure. Instead of being a dead end, a player's failure leads to *consequences*: the situation gets worse or they have to pay a price.

That's all there is to it, it's the game telling you that something should always be *happening* and that's how you keep the game exciting. Instead of letting the players meander around, you're pushing dangerous situations at them like, "what now?!" Instead of saying, "*you fail to pick the lock,*" say something like "*you fail to pick the lock fast enough, the guards are rounding the corner as the last*

tumbler falls in place." Or "A high-pitched siren screams out, you've triggered the magic alarm!" **You're focusing on the risks and rewards, not a binary pass/fail skill check.** On a 7-9, the player has consequences to deal with, but on a Miss those consequences are worse. A lot of moves have built-in results for a 7-9, but for some of them you'll have to make your own. We'll talk more about this later, but for now it's good to know that the consequences of a 7-9 are usually called "soft moves" and the consequences of an all-out failure are usually "hard moves." One is worse than the other, that's all.

So that's the whole basis of this "conversation" they talk about in the core book: you're setting up dangerous situations where failure carries a price, and the players respond to it. When their response triggers a Move, they roll for it, and you give them consequences as necessary. You'll interpret the results of their roll in a way that keeps the game moving forward, always *forward*.

## The GM Moves

So that's easy: the player gets a 7-9 and you make a "soft move," or the player Misses a roll and you get to make a "hard move." But what *are* these Moves, exactly? When the GM makes a Move, it's not some esoteric new thing. **If you look at the list of GM Moves and read them carefully, you'll realize that they're just things that we've always done as GMs.** They're just codified here for ease of use. If you've ever GM'd a game before, then you have definitely Put Someone In a Spot or Revealed an Unwelcome Truth, even if you didn't call it that.

Dungeon World puts so much emphasis on this list because *it keeps the game moving*. Whenever the players turn toward you, you make a Move, but that just means that something *happens*, remember?



At their heart, the GM Moves are all designed to create dangerous situations.. The entire list is just a bunch of things that can endanger the characters or make their lives interesting, in keeping with the Principles. Show Signs of an Approaching Threat keeps the players on edge, it tells them that something bad is on the way. Reveal an Unwelcome Truth can be something like "we're being followed" or it can be something like "the vampire isn't dead after all." No matter what form they take, the Moves are just there to spark your imagination when the players look at you expectantly, like when you're describing some action, or they've missed a roll and need a response.

A lot of the time, you won't even really need to look at the Moves. Your GMing instincts will take over and you'll just be narrating the game like you always do. The book says that you get to make a Move because of a player roll, or when the players turn to you, but that's a formality. You won't be scouring the list every time the dice hit the table or anything, don't take it literally. Instead, you'll usually know what the stakes are whenever the players roll... but when the situation arises that you're not sure what to do, then the list is there to help you out. Use it as necessary, but don't get hung up wondering if every little thing you do is on the list or not.

Alright, we understand the GM moves, and we already know how to deal with success and failure. Let's talk about the middle result, those 7-9 choices that happen so often.

### What Does a 7-9 Mean?

The first thing to keep in mind is that a **7-9 is fundamentally a success for the player.** It's just a *partial* success, or success *with a cost*. Think about what the player was trying to do, and then think of ways to give them half of what they want, or give them the core of what they want, but only if they're willing to give up something else. The player was swinging onto the balcony? Maybe they get to the balcony, but don't land on their feet. Look at the list of GM Moves and see what could apply. An example:



Let's say the hero is trying to climb up a cliff; he rolls +STR and gets an 8. He's definitely *not* falling off the cliff, so what happens? Here are a couple ideas, from a quick look at the GM Moves:

*...Use up Their Resources: he spends a use of his Adventuring Gear in the form of rope, hooks, and pitons.*

*...Tell the Requirements and Ask: he gets halfway up and realizes that he's too heavy; he must drop something or turn back.*

*...Deal Damage: he has a few tumbles along the way; give him some scrapes and bruises along with some hp loss.*

Or we could do something even sneakier. You could *separate them*; have a flying enemy attack while some of the party is still on the ground. Now, you wouldn't tell them that the enemy attacks because the player missed a roll, that would be weird, right? Instead, you can say something like, "*Well, you're an awful slow climber, but you're making progress. The rest of the party is waiting for you, but you see something off in the distance, approaching fast... looks like a huge bird of prey! It sees you, exposed on the rock face, and is swooping in for the kill!*" This is misdirection; it's what they mean when they say "never speak the name of your move." Fictionally, that bird is attacking because the character was too slow climbing the rock, he's exposed. Behind your GM notes, though, that bird is attacking as a consequence of that roll. Cool, huh? Another example:

Fast-talking her way past two guards, the Thief rolls a 9 to *Defy Danger*. It's not *Parley*; there's no leverage. So what happens? Well, it's fundamentally a success, that's important, so they *don't* arrest her. But they're not fully convinced, that's for sure. Here's some quick ideas of how the situation could go down:

*...Use Up Resources: they ask for a bribe (of course they call it an "immediate payment of fine").*

*...Offer an Opportunity With a Cost: One of them goes off to corroborate the story; she might be able to defeat the lone guard now that he's alone, but she has to act fast.*

*...a Partial Success: they'll let her past, but not without a chaperone. She's where she wants to be, except there's a guard with her!*

What it boils down to is this: **they aren't getting everything they wanted, or else they're getting more than they bargained for.** Here's a short list of ideas that could apply in many different situations, some examples of GM moves in action:

### **Worse Outcomes, Hard Choices**

*Have a new danger replace the old*

*The danger is avoided momentarily, but increases somehow  
(more enemies or increasing risk)*

*Successful action, but unintended effect:*

*(it enrages the enemy instead of scaring them, for example)*

*Threaten an ally instead*

*Make them give up something: money, equipment, a good position*

*Two options, each with benefits and drawbacks*

*Damage something important to the players-*

*(equipment, support beam, hiding spot, reputation, etc)*

*Embarrass them with a mishap*

*They're targeted by a new enemy*

*Stumble, lose their footing, or drop an item*

*Change their location or positioning, for the worse*

*Miss something important*

*(a detail, hazard, skulking enemy, or change of circumstance)*

*Add a new environmental hazard*

*(fire, smoke, breaking supports, rock shards, flooding, etc)*

*Angered deity, NPC, or monster*

*They're off-balance, confused, or in a bad position, take -1 forward.*

Another really good way to hammer home a 7-9 is the classic **hard choice**. Give them two different outcomes for the action, and make them choose one. These can be two equally *good* results or two equally *bad* results, just make the player feel like they're *sacrificing* something. Take a look at what the player was attempting, and see if you can break it into two parts. Make them choose one of those two parts, like "So you were trying to blockade the door so you could all run out the back, huh? Well, there's not enough time for that, they're already at the door; you can hold the door shut for your allies to escape or you can all get out the back but they'll be chasing you."

*"You can disarm him or knock him over, but not both."*

*"You can block this attack, or take the damage and hit him back."*

*"You only have time to either grab the orb, or take a shot at the guy reaching for it. Which is it going to be?"*

### **Hard Move vs. Soft Move**

I mentioned this earlier, these "hard" and "soft" moves. John Harper explains the difference like this: a Soft move is the *setup*, a Hard move is the *follow-through*. When the player is exploring a cavern and you say *"The ground begins shaking, some rocks start to fall, it looks like a landslide is coming down on you!"*, that's a Soft move. Something is happening to endanger the character, it's the setup portion. Just like saying, *"The lunatic lunges toward you with a knife!"*, you're framing a danger and asking the player to respond. When the player fails the roll and it comes time to hand out consequences, that's often the Hard move: *"The stones are crashing down all over the place, take five damage as one of them smashes into your skull and dents your helmet"* or *"The lunatic slashes across your chest with his knife, take six points of damage."*

Sometimes, the consequences for failure are just another Soft move. You might do this because you're snowballing a situation; making things worse for the player but still pushing them to get out of it. Watch this:

GM: *"Okay, you're running from the guards through this dark, filthy alleyway. Sounds like Defy Danger, so go ahead and roll it."*

PC: *"Oh no! I rolled a six, that's a failure."*

GM: *"It sure is. You're trying to lose them in the maze of alleys, but it's too dark in there; you trip over a pile of trash behind this tavern. Glass bottles shatter and you land with a loud thud, face-down in rotting garbage. The guards hear this and totally pinpoint your location, they're rounding the corner now, just a few paces away. What do you do?"*

Technically, the GM could have had the PC get caught here. That *could* have been the price of failure. Instead, to escalate the situation



and increase the tension, the GM made a soft move and decided to have the player Put in a Spot. So you're not bound by any particular rules when it comes to this; it's up to you as the GM to pace the story as you see fit. **The rules say you can “make as hard a move as you like,”** keep that in mind.

There we go, that's how to use GM moves and player moves, in a nutshell. To recap: the GM moves are designed to put players in dangerous situations, and to follow through on the possible consequences. The player moves respond to those situations, and give the GM a guide for narrating the outcome of the roll. Every player roll will trigger a response from the GM, and every GM move triggers a response from the players. Back and forth. Like a pendulum, yeah?

All this talk of moves and consequences is bringing us straight to the coolest, most exciting, and possibly most confusing thing for new players of Dungeon World: **combat**.



## Combat: How Does it Work?

A lot of new GMs are confused by the way Dungeon World handles combat in particular, because they don't get to roll dice and because it doesn't break the action down into turns or rounds or whatever. Don't worry, it's fine to be confused at first. It'll all make sense in a minute. Forget what you know about how RPGs work for a minute. Imagine that you're that little kid again, picking up the box with the dragon on it, and you have no preconceptions about combat rounds or initiative or anything. How would you narrate combat? It probably wouldn't be a grid-based, turn-by-turn thing; you've got board games for that. You'd probably make it more like the fantasy novels that you read, a series of fast-paced exchanges that jump from one tense scene to another, following the main characters through the fray. That's how Dungeon World does it.

And these frantic combat scenes are gonna happen without the GM rolling dice. Instead of rolling, you're going to be using your moves to set up dangerous situations for the players, like an enemy attacking, and then using the players' responses to *finish* those attacks.

### Here's how combat flows in Dungeon World, very simply:

1. You narrate the *beginning* of your NPC's action
2. The player *responds* to your action
3. If the response triggers a move, the player rolls the dice
4. You narrate the *conclusion* of the action, based on the player's result

Here's a dead-simple example:

GM: "The orc swings his club down at you. What do you do?"  
PC: "I knock it aside with my warhammer and smash his skull!"  
GM: "Sounds like we're doing some Hack & Slash, roll for it."  
PC: "I got an 8, that's a partial success, yeah?"  
GM: "Yeah, you knock the first blow aside, but he's relentless. You're both smashing each other and it's a full-on bloody brawl. We both roll damage for this."

**So we're still rolling when we encounter danger or chance, it's just that the PCs are rolling the dice and you're interpreting the results.** Combat actually runs really smoothly this way, and it doesn't feel like everyone is just taking turns hitting each other. Instead, it becomes a fluid back-and-forth. Just remember that your job as the GM is to set up a dangerous situation, and call for a response from the players. Let the player's response determine the *outcome* of the situation that you set up.

If it helps, think of Saving Throws in D&D. You know, like when you say, "The evil wizard casts a spell at you. Make a Will Save." You were basically playing Dungeon World then. You narrated what your NPC was attempting, and then waited on the player's roll to give you the results. You didn't get to announce that the PC was ensorcelled until after they rolled for it, right? That's exactly how Dungeon World works, all the time.

So I mentioned that you're setting up dangerous situations just before, let's get back to that for a moment. This "dangerous situation," it's something you do at every level of the game. When you're designing Fronts or adventure hooks, you're setting up dangerous situations, right? Combat is just a micro-version of the same thing. Every time you turn to a player, you're highlighting some thing that can cause them strife, and asking how they deal with it.

**Here are some dangers just begging to be responded to:**

*"The goblin is lunging at you, what do you do?"*

*"Once the pillar breaks, the ceiling starts crumbling down above you, what do you do?"*

*"Those archers begin firing from across the clearing, arrows are whizzing by, what do you do?"*

*"The ogre raises his club up high, and starts swinging it down at you. What do you do?"*

*"You raise your shield in time. His hammer clangs against it and he just keeps swinging over and over. He's pummeling your shield, your arm is going numb but you're not injured. Suddenly, he swings low, aiming for your legs. What do you do?"*

After you determine the outcome of the player's response, it's your turn to react again. So you respond by setting up another dangerous situation, flowing from whatever just happened in the previous move. This will be obvious, usually, because it's the natural extension of whatever is happening in the game. The orc swings his club and the player decides to counterattack, now it's back to you. Did the player roll a 7-9? Then he hurts the orc, but the orc also lands an attack on him. Remember, you're setting up a dangerous situation here, so go further than just, "*you both roll damage.*" Say something like, "*The orc slashes your shoulder, but leaves himself open to attack. You cut through his crude armor and he hollers in pain, grabbing for your weapon and trying to disarm you.*" **Take the outcome of the previous roll and think of a new stakes for the next one;** this is the entire flow of Dungeon World combat. Then the player will respond once more to this new threat, probably roll some dice, and then turn back to you for what happens. Back-and-forth, setting up situations for each other and responding to them.

### **There's No Initiative, What's Going On?!**

Another thing that seems to confuse people is the lack of combat rounds and initiative. The easiest way to grasp this is that combat runs the same as the rest of the game. There is no separate combat system, you don't suddenly break into combat rounds or anything; just because somebody draws a sword doesn't mean the flow of the game changes. We're just describing what happens in this combat, the same way we described sneaking into the castle- some tense moments, some stuff is glossed over quickly, sometimes we zoomed way in and described tiny little actions like "*how far over the ledge are you peeking?*" but we didn't need initiative or Standard/Move actions for that stuff, right? Right.

So there's no initiative, it's just the normal back-and-forth, action and reaction flow of the game. Sometimes a player will do more than one thing, like "*I cast Bull's Strength and wade into combat!*" This is fine; as long as the flow is natural, no one is limited to one action on their "turn." If it seems like a player is trying to cram too much action in, pause them and ask what the others are doing dur-

ing all this time. Think of this like an action movie, and you're directing the shots. Zoom in for a few moments on the player, show a single exciting scene that ends on a cliffhanger and then cut away to the next player. I usually go around the table, clockwise, and "check in" on each party member. There's still some structure there, we just didn't roll dice to get it.

Whenever possible, I try to make one player's "turn" flow into the next, by shifting a threat onto them or highlighting a move that could affect them, like "*Okay, Fighter, your attack scatters the group of goblins. One of those goblins is heading straight toward you, Ranger- what do you do?*" If you do this, it's also good to break that turn structure by threatening the players out of order- highlight a sudden threat to Player C during Player A's turn, and ask Player C what they do. Give them a quick spotlight and move back to your normal clockwise turn structure:

*"So, he flings his axe aside and tries to grapple you, Fighter. In fact, he throws the axe right at you, Thief, it's flying at your head, what do you do? ...okay, the Thief dodges the blade, great! Fighter, he's lunging at your throat, how are you stopping this...?"*

This reinforces the idea that we're describing a *battle* here, not a board game, and you're threatened *at all times*, not just on your "turn" or a monster's "turn" or whatever. There is *never* a safe moment so players should *always* be on guard and attentive, instead of just waiting for their turn in the initiative.

### **Triggering Moves during Combat- Which Move? When? Why?**



Players have a lot of freedom in Dungeon World, unlike some other games where there are a few specific attack types, or rules for *Dodging* instead of *Parrying* or whatever. In Dungeon World, the PCs' actions should be based in the **game fiction**, and that means that they can try *anything they want*;

they don't have to pick a move from the list, nor are they limited to listed moves. Sometimes they'll do something that *doesn't trigger a move at all*, like attacking a helpless or surprised enemy- that's not Hack & Slash, they just get to deal damage.

Sometimes it can be hard to figure out which move(s) to use, or what order to use them in. This is totally normal! Listen to *how* the the player describes his action, and that will give you an idea of *which* moves to call for. Always *focus on your game fiction* and just use what makes sense at your table. You're not bound to a strict ruling; just because you call for a certain move during one circumstance, it doesn't mean that it will work that way all the time. Every circumstance is unique!

**What do you mean, "game fiction?"**

You'll hear the phrase *game fiction* mentioned quite often. People will say something like, "use the game fiction to decide." This isn't a secret code! *Game fiction* just refers to the **established facts of the setting and situation**. Are stone golems immune to flame in your world? Did the player just say that his character is holding on to the staff with *both* hands, not one? Those are both part of the *game fiction*- they're things that the *characters* know to be true about the world. My character sheet says I have a Strength of 15, but that's not *game fiction*, that's just *rules*. When I described my Ranger's bulky, rippling muscles, *that's* game fiction. This matters in Dungeon World because it's the *fiction* that triggers moves. If I tell the GM that my Ranger is threatening the mousy clerk, then the GM might recall those rippling muscles I described from earlier and have the clerk be rightfully scared, no roll at all. In some games, "you slash his leg" might just be flavor text, but in Dungeon World that leg might be injured now. *It matters* here. When in doubt, look to your established game fiction first to see what makes sense. If the rulebook says something that contradicts the game world as you all imagine it, rule in favor of your game fiction rather than strictly following the text.

Check this out, here are some examples of moves being triggered:

**Example 1**  
GM: "The goblin archer starts firing at you from across the room. What do you do?"  
PC: "I dive for cover behind the pillar!"  
GM: "Sounds like Defy Danger, roll +DEX to avoid the arrows."

**Example 2**  
GM: "The goblin archer starts firing at you from across the room. What do you do?"  
PC: "I dive for cover behind the pillar!"  
GM: "Weren't you like right next to the pillar? Yeah, you can duck behind it no problem. Arrows are flying past you like crazy, though, so getting out will be tough."

That was an example of the game fiction either triggering or *not* triggering a move. Sometimes, a player can just *do* something without rolling- attacking a helpless or unsuspecting enemy is a good example, so are common-sense situations like the one above.

Now let's take a look at the game fiction determining what Moves are triggered. In the next two examples, the player is doing *basically* the same thing, but a slight difference in the way he does it leads to different Moves being triggered. This is something that happens all the time. It's a useful way to set the tone of a campaign, and a useful way to increase or decrease the challenge of an encounter. Let's check it out:

#### **Example 4**

GM: *"The goblin archer starts firing at you from across the room. What do you do?"*

PC: *"I run at him, ducking and weaving, and when I get close enough I'll leap at his head with my warhammer!"*

GM: *"Alright, sounds like you're Defying Danger there, with all those arrows. Roll for that first... (PC rolls an 11) ...Alright, you gracefully flit across the battlefield faster than he can shoot. He sees what you're up to and starts panicking. The arrows stop as he drops his bow and pulls out this nasty looking homemade dagger just as you step up to him. Roll that Hack&Slash if you still want to brawl with him."*

#### **Example 3**

GM: *"The goblin archer starts firing at you from across the room. What do you do?"*

PC: *"I run straight to him, swinging for his head with my warhammer!"*

GM: *"Like, straight at him? Sure, there are arrows everywhere and one of them catches you in the shoulder, take 3 damage, but you're on the goblin now and he's terrified; he wasn't expecting this and is totally off-guard, no time to draw a weapon to defend himself. Deal your damage."*

In Example 3, the DM decides not to trigger Hack & Slash because the goblin is taken off guard. It's worth noting that this is totally not dictated by the rules, it is dictated by his view of the game fiction. You could just as easily say that the goblin draws his dagger, but maybe it made more sense to let the player gain an advantage from his crazy move (and he already took damage on the way there, so it's not like he didn't earn it). In Example 4, the DM decides that the goblin has time to draw his dagger. Again, you could rule that the goblin is surprised, but maybe it seems like the player gave the creature more time to react, while he was dodging and weaving and broadcasting his intentions. Mixing it up will make combat varied and interesting, instead of a static numbers game. Some goblins are smarter than others, some react faster or are easily scared. **Every opponent is a little different, but you don't need any *mechanics* for that in Dungeon World.**

**Every fight, and every move within a fight, is a unique case.** Put the game fiction at the forefront, think about what makes sense, and make all your moves flow from there.

### **The 7-9 During Combat**

When a fight breaks out, there can be a lot of rolling. That means a lot more 7-9s popping up, and sometimes it gets difficult to think of new results. Hack & Slash and Volley come with their own 7-9 results, but you'll want to mix it up as often as possible to avoid having fight become stale rolling contests.

Like always, focus first on the game fiction and see what that points you toward. If the hero is facing a seriously large or powerful creature, you can injure their shield-arm or knock them back or prone. Have the attack connect, but the creature seizes an opening and puts the character in a rough spot: they're pinned, they're against the wall, they're grappled, surrounded, knocked down. The enemy stumbles away with the PC's sword stuck in their belly, effectively disarming them (a sneaky way to *Use up their resources*). A monster's list of Moves is really useful for determining how they should act and respond during combat.



This is a good time to threaten an ally, as well. A 7-9 could put another party member in danger instead, allowing you to turn to them for a response and keep the moves flowing. Have an unintended side effect of their action, like the enemies band together defensively, spring a trap, or it turns out that they tricked the player into following their strategy and now he's cut off from his teammates. Maybe the enemies now have a tactical advantage as a result of the player's maneuver.



Always be looking for ways for the player's move to backfire, even in small ways. If he describes lunging in for an attack, then that 7-9 gives you a chance to say "*While lunging, you leave yourself open on the side...*" If he's purely on the defensive, then he's paying more attention to the enemy's attacks than movement and didn't realize that they were maneuvering into a more dangerous spot.

### **How Difficult is This Fight?**

A really common question is "*how much can I throw at a starting party?*" And the answer is, "*as much as you want.*" It's really easy to increase or decrease the difficulty

of an encounter: just make harder or softer moves. If you want to make an battle more difficult, then use harder moves: make the enemy faster or stealthier. Describe how they use their spear to keep the PCs at arms length. Describe how they dodge and weave around the battlefield, or surround the players, or fight tooth and nail. "*You stab the goblin in its belly, but it grabs your arm and starts gnawing on it. Take 2 damage; the thing is crazed and feels no pain.*" Remember, you're focusing on the fiction here, this is not a game where armor class and damage dice rule everything. **Monsters are differentiated not by mechanical differences, but by description.** A giant is not just a collection of hit points; it's an *enormous giant*

and how are you supposed to just waltz up and *attack* it? It's twenty feet tall with a reach the length of a small building- that's *not* just "Hack & Slash," it can just slap you aside like a rodent. The players need to be creative to even get *near* it.

Conversely, if you want to make a fight easier, you can do it on the fly without trouble. Make the enemies less clever, or untrained. *Don't* make them use spears to keep enemies at bay- instead, they stab wildly, heedless of danger. *Don't* describe how the giant can just slap aside an attacker; instead you can say that he's too stupid or distracted, and allows the attacker run in and stab the giant's leg.

### Check this out:

GM: "The kobold tumbles toward you, swinging a chain over his head."

PC: "I'm gonna lunge at him with my sword."

GM: "Sounds like a Hack & Slash, go ahead and roll for it."

### as opposed to this:

GM: "The kobold tumbles toward you, swinging a chain over his head. He's like a whirling dervish, flitting around the battlefield with this rusty makeshift flail."

PC: "I'm gonna lunge at him with my sword."

GM: "He's leaping back and forth like crazy, and that chain is whizzing around like a blur, you're gonna have to Defy Danger to get close enough to even hit him. If you succeed, then you can roll for a Hack & Slash."

These are both totally valid, but in the second example the GM has *increased* the threat of this kobold, simply by playing up its *tactics* and *fictional positioning*. He has established it as a greater threat *within the game fiction*: an enemy with cunning and ability, not just some mook. At any time, you can do little tricks like this to adjust the battle if you need to. Do you ever fudge a roll when you're GMing a game? I think we all do that occasionally. This is the clos-

est you'll come to doing that in Dungeon World, but instead of messing with dice rolls, you're just embellishing the game world and making it closer to your vision of how difficult these enemies are. The important thing is to keep your fiction at the forefront of the battle (through description), and let the moves all flow from there.

In my experience, the best thing to do is think about how many enemies should be there, given your game world and situation (Remember your Principles: *Say what the adventure demands* is one of them), and just see what happens. Honestly, don't worry about the party, they'll think up tricks that you never considered, and you'll have fun responding to those tricks. Throw a whole pack of ghouls at them; see what they do. Attack them with an entire warren of kobolds; the party will find a way to scare them off or the party will run away in an exciting chase scene. You are not bound by monster stats or specific special moves, monsters do whatever you say they do. You are not stuck guessing at what is a "balanced encounter." You have total control of your monsters and they will be exactly as difficult or easy as you want, in practice. It's easier than any CR or xp pool measure, I promise!

### **Making the Threat Clear**

The entirety of Dungeon World combat is setting up those dangerous situations that I keep talking about, and therefore one the most important things you can do is **be clear about the threat**. If you say, "*The thug is swinging wildly at you*" to a PC, you need to back that up. Are you describing the previous attack, or an incoming one? Is this flavor text that you're giving them, or are you declaring an incoming danger?

I made this mistake during a battle once, so now you don't have to. My players were storming the Forbidden Realm of the Cloud Giants and they were fighting the Mad Giant King. The battle was great- chaotic, constantly shifting, full of upsets and crazy stunts. At one point, the players were forced from their hiding place and I said, "*The Cloud Giant guard is pounding his fists on the ground*

*around you now that you're exposed, the whole room is shaking. What do you do?"* Now, I was imagining that this was the threat, he was trying to squash them like bugs. So when the Cleric said *"I'm going to rush over and heal the dying wizard,"* I figured he was making a target of himself. *"You're not dodging the giant's attacks?"* I asked, incredulous. *"He sideswipes you for 8 damage."*

But it turns out that I hadn't been clear. The players weren't thinking of those pounding fists as a direct attack; they thought he was keeping them at bay, not trying to smash them into pulp. I did a bad job setting up the threat, and I should have said something like, *"He's pounding the floor, trying to smash you all. Ranger, one of these fists is coming straight toward you and it's the size of a horse, what do you do?"*

Make it clear that they're facing danger, and what the danger is. Don't be vague and don't leave room for doubt, let them know exactly what is about to happen if they don't do something to prevent or block it, because you can't just declare your damage if you didn't explain what they were supposed to be responding to.

### **How Do I Handle Multiple Enemies?**

It happens all the time: multiple PCs gang up on a large foe, or a single PC gets surrounded by a bunch of enemies. Dungeon World handles this better than other games because it focuses on the fiction instead of mechanics. You won't one-shot a PC by surrounding them with goblins, and conversely your PCs won't necessarily drop an ogre in one turn just by flanking it.

First of all, when a PC takes damage from multiple enemies at once, you take the largest damage die from all of them, and roll dice equal to the number of enemies. So if there are two goblins (d6 dmg) and a gnoll (d8 dmg) all stabbing an unlucky PC, you roll 3d8 and take the highest result. This doesn't mean only one enemy hit them, it's just a way of ensuring high but not-overwhelming damage.

The important thing, like always, is to focus on the problem of

being surrounded by foes *in the game fiction*. The PC can probably only really engage one enemy from the pack. Describe all their attacks and ask how the character deals with the situation- their response will tell you which enemy they are focusing on and what rolls to call for. Maybe a Hack & Slash with one enemy, and a Defy Danger for the rest. Maybe a Defy Danger for the whole pack. Maybe they will get to Hack & Slash one goblin, but the rest simply deal their damage.

Let's take a look at another example here:

GM: *"Two guards rush towards you with drawn swords, and the third one approaches from behind. You're surrounded as they start slashing."*

PC: *"Oh no! I do a leg sweep to trip the guard behind me and raise my shield to fend off the other two."*

GM: *"Great, roll to Defy Danger. Sounds like some acrobatic stuff, so roll +Dex."*

PC: *"That's a 9, I guess it doesn't work."*

GM: *"Well, not completely. You kick the guard's legs out from under him and he falls, but you're just too slow with the shield. (rolls a d6 for each guard, so 2d6, and takes the highest result) Ouch, 5 points of damage. Their blades cut deep gashes into your arms before you can raise the shield. Um, you don't drop it, though, you're just wounded."*

PC: *"Good. I'll start swinging at one guard, trying to push him back, while defending against the other with my shield."*

GM: *"Okay, roll a Hack & Slash for the one guard, and a Defy Danger with +Str to hold strong against the second attacker's constant barrage..."*

Now, when multiple PCs are ganging up on a single enemy, you have a choice to make: **How well can this enemy defend itself against all these attackers?** If it's a small or untrained opponent, odds are that one of the PCs will be using Hack & Slash and the others simply deal their damage, because the monster can't defend itself against them. Don't just say it like that, though, make it more

interesting than just "*go ahead and deal your damage.*" Instead, you can say that the enemy is completely focused on fighting the Ranger, or describe an opening that the PC takes advantage of, or just how the overwhelmed creature is flailing about trying to push them away.

If you think the enemy is large enough or skilled enough to face multiple PCs, then just narrate that: "*The ogre takes five damage from your attack, but smashes his fist into you for four damage, nearly knocking you down. He whirls around and swings at the Thief behind him while you're regaining your balance. Thief, what do you do?*" Remember, you're not limited by a certain number of actions, or a hard turn structure. If the foe is fast enough, big enough, or skilled enough, then you are simply narrating each move of the battle and it can totally react to multiple opponents and still pose a threat. Picture a kung-fu movie: does Bruce Lee have a certain number of actions per turn? Or is he *able to react to multiple opponents*? See the difference there?

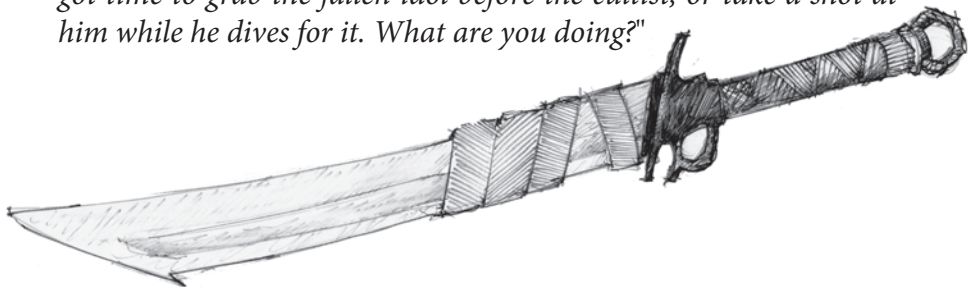
There are no *mechanical* benefits to flanking, but there should always be benefits to flanking *within the game fiction*. Even if you think the enemy can handle two foes at once, he should still be at a disadvantage, so give those PCs a break. Maybe the flanking character doesn't have to Defy Danger from attacks. Or they still have to Defy Danger, but the penalties for failure are lessened, like less damage.

## **Some Additional Ideas & Inspiration**

Now that you've got the basic flow of combat down, here are some tricks that I learned while GMing the game. Combat in Dungeon World is totally unlike the tactical, turn-based fights in most other RPGs. Instead, you've got a fast-paced battlefield filled with shifting dangers. Take advantage of this and push the players in the fiction. These are some tips that I've picked up while running some really fun battles in Dungeon World, and you'll want to work these "strategies" into your fights to make them interesting and varied.

## Move Toward Hard Choices

The \*World games are built around hard choices, so pull them into combat. Always highlight a couple options for your PCs, each of which has a cost: Defend *or* attack? If you engage *this* enemy, you'll expose yourself to this *other* one. Set up situations where you threaten two things simultaneously and make them choose. It doesn't always have to be bad, either. Give them two equally desirable things and make them pick one: "You've got a clear shot at either the Captain or that Warlock, which one are you aiming for?" "You've got time to grab the fallen idol before the cultist, or take a shot at him while he dives for it. What are you doing?"



## Do More Than Deal Damage

Obviously, you get to deal damage when the player misses on a Hack & Slash. But that's not all you get to do: the rules say "the monster makes an *attack*," not "the monster *deals damage*." Deal Damage is just one of many options, look at the GM Moves and pick one. Knock them over, grab their weapon, threaten an ally, put them in a spot, damage their armor, grapple them, surround them. Dungeon World is awesome because cinematic fights thrive under these rules, so go crazy.

## There's No Such Thing As Going "Out of Turn"

I mentioned this before, but it's worth emphasizing again. Dart around the table, asking the characters what they're doing, but make sure that you're not breaking everything up into rounds or turns. If another player is threatened by something that happened, turn to them and get a reaction. Jump around a bit and show the players that they're allowed to interrupt.

This is an example straight from my game table:

*Cleric: "Okay, so the kobolds are rushing me, right? Man, I'm down to three hit points, I'm gonna hold my shield up high, and swing my warhammer around and try to keep them away from me."*

*GM: "That sounds like... Defend. You're Defending yourself, go ahead and roll."*

*Cleric: "Ugh, that's a 6. a total Miss."*

*GM: "That's bad, real bad. Here's what happens: Fighter, remember how you said earlier that you go into this, like, battle trance? Where time slows down for you? Well, you're fighting off swarms of these kobolds but you glance over just in time to see the Cleric making a terrible mistake. He swings his shield in one direction, and his hammer in the other, and he's wide open to attack. You can see the pack of kobolds lunging at him. Then you look over at the Wizard and see a kobold sneaking up behind him, about to strike. You've got a split second to do something, but you don't have time to save them both."*

*Fighter: "So I can Aid the Cleric and turn that Miss into a 7? Or I can Defend the Wizard?"*

*GM: "Absolutely, but you've gotta make a decision right now."*

See what I did there? I could have just said, "Well, Cleric, you missed. Time to get hurt." But instead, I turned to the Fighter who was standing near him and gave him a chance to react, even though it wasn't his "turn." In order to accentuate hard choice, I mentioned that other kobold attacking the Wizard, to highlight that both allies were threatened. Of course, after the Fighter jumped to Aid the Cleric I gave the Wizard a chance to deal with his foe, but doing it this way added tension and put pressure on the Fighter. The players loved it.

As a GM, you may be used to having your NPCs act on an initiative, take their turn, and move on. Dungeon World doesn't function this way, so don't try to force it to. Instead, revel in the chaos as your monsters attack with abandon and force the players into action.



## **Zoom In and Out of the Action**

The beauty of these mechanics is that they can apply to small actions or larger ones. *Apocalypse World* focuses on this much more, but it still applies here. Sometimes, you'll roll *Defy Danger* for a single tiny moment of action- can they dodge this sword swing before they counterattack? Sometimes you'll roll to represent a longer sequence of action: can they dodge the hail of arrows while running across the narrow bridges over the fiery pits? One roll can determine a sliver of action or a large chunk, it's your call as the GM and it's good to mix it up. Direct it like an action movie: highlight one area of the battle for a bit, leave a cliffhanger, and move to the next. Set the stakes big for a single roll, then back off for another.

## **Make the 7-9 Results Count**

A 7-9 result is fundamentally a success for the player, but it's success *with a price tag*. Make them pay a price that's more exciting than "5 damage." On a 7-9, you get to make a full move just like a 6-. It may be a soft move instead of a hard one, but you can do a lot with a soft move; it's all setup for something more. So set up something interesting that builds the fiction. It could be as simple as saying "*You cut him sure, but he retaliates with a flurry of slices. Take 4 damage; he's pressing his attack and starting to push you back...*" That sets up some positioning that you can work with and builds the tension. Really, it all comes down to making the character pay a price. Make the 7-9 feel like a *sacrifice*.

## **Running Multiple Enemies as a Swarm**

This is something that's not in the rules, as far as I know, but I use it very effectively. If you want to threaten your PCs with a whole lot of enemies, just give the group one big HP pool and when that pool runs out, they are driven off. In the fiction, you treat each enemy as a separate attacker, and kill them off like minions- a few HP each. If the fighter swings his mighty sword and deals 8 damage, maybe he cuts down three or four enemies. Just subtract 8 from your HP pool; those three or four enemies has demoralized the group. Obviously, each PC will probably be fighting their own little group of attackers, and they'll take damage like normal (roll one

damage die for each attacker and use the highest result). Once the swarm's HP pool is gone, they have suffered enough casualties that they will retreat, flee, or surrender. It works extremely well and makes bookkeeping much easier. It also makes it possible to throw down some really cinematic battles, with the PCs facing dozens of monsters and cutting them down in twos and threes, barely keeping the mob at bay.

### **Remember the GM Moves**

This is probably obvious, but maybe it's worth mentioning: the GM Moves don't end because combat started, if anything they are more applicable here. Make sure you do stuff like Separate Them, by enemy positioning and features of the landscape. Show a Downside to their Equipment is a nice one- my Fighter has a warhammer with +Reach, so I swarmed him with tiny creatures, making that weapon a hindrance for a moment. All these moves set you up for future hard choices.

Some of the GM Moves seem like they might not apply, but look closer and you'll see that they're all wide open to interpretation. How about Reveal an Unwelcome Truth? That truth could be anything, *literally anything*, that the characters don't want to hear: "*Looks like he's wearing mithral armor under that robe.*" "*Looks like the troll is regenerating, he's totally unharmed by your blow.*" "*You can hear the sounds of more guards approaching.*" And then, always: "*What do you do?*"

### **Why This System Works**

It works because instead of breaking a combat into clinical, tidy little turns where everyone moves and then attacks, it becomes a cinematic battle full of *movement* and *action*. Attacks have real consequences and they feel real; slashing an enemy's leg means they'll probably collapse. Crippling their swordarm could mean winning the battle, and it's not a special Feat or Encounter ability: it's just something a player can *do*. Every single player move and GM move is designed to snowball the action, propelling it forward and making fighting a messy, chaotic, and satisfying ordeal.

I've run plenty of games for first-time roleplayers, and when a fight breaks out the same thing always happens to me. I say something like, "*the goblin attacks you with his sword*" and I start to roll dice, but the first-time player says "*Can I dodge it?*" And back when I used a d20, I would have to tell them no. I'd have to explain the abstraction of an armor class, the idea of saving throws, all this stuff that only makes sense because we spent years doing it. But in *Dungeon World*, when that new player says "*Can I dodge it?*" I can smile and say, "*Of course. Roll plus Dex.*"

That's why it works! Because you can always say "yes."

## What Else Do You Need to Know?

Okay, we've covered the most difficult hurdles for someone new to *Dungeon World*. I hope that the player/GM move structure is all crystal clear now, and you're excited to run the game.

The next few sections are devoted to helping you run that game. The rulebook has some really great advice on GMing the game, make sure you read it all! For the rest of this booklet, though, we're going to cover a few things that I've seen new GMs struggle with: **writing custom moves**, and **developing cohesive Fronts**. We've even included some awesome **Compendium Classes** from SA Forums user **Emong** that you can use in your campaign, or to spark some ideas for when you or your players want to write your own Compendium Classes.

Finally, at the very end you'll find a **lengthy example of play**, full of commentary to give you an idea of how this advice might actually work at the game table.



# Custom Moves

Custom moves are super fun to write, and super fun for the players as well. The book has some basic guidelines for custom moves, but some people have trouble writing them on their own. So let's take a look at how to use them and how to write strong ones. You know how pre-published d20 adventures always have a sidebar or something that says, "*a DC 15 Perception check will reveal the following information...*"? Well, that's what you're going for with a custom move: it's something you know will come up, and you want to prepare for it beforehand. The rule book also says "[A custom move] is strong because it is tied strongly to a particular place at a particular time," and it's good advice for sure.

**A custom move is usually something that could be covered by the basic moves, but you already know the consequences in advance.** It's like writing a Defy Danger roll beforehand, because you know exactly what the possible outcomes will be. You'll be coming up with a lot of 7-9 results over the course of each adventure and it can definitely start to tax your imagination. It's nice to have something pre-planned every now and then.

Don't pre-plan *too* much, though, you don't want to make your result choices so narrow that they can only be used once. I think a good custom move should have results that can be interpreted by the GM as necessary, instead of super-specific options with a one-time outcome. Let's do some more examples; examples are good.

Here's a custom move I wrote for my campaign, I'm proud of it:

When **you are grabbed by the blood vines**, roll +DEX.

**On a 10+**, both. **On a 7-9**, choose one:

*...your gear is unharmed*

*...you are unharmed*

Nice and simple, with clear choices and outcomes. Also, it's specific to a certain situation, but one that might come up repeatedly during the adventure. I think it came out pretty well, but the original

version was a little different, and not nearly so good. it looked something like this:

When **you are grabbed by the blood vines**, roll +DEX.

**On a 10+**, all three. **On a 7-9**, choose one:

...your gear is unharmed

...you are unharmed

...you can pull yourself free

This was *not* a good move, it's a pretty bad one, and for a couple of reasons. First of all, getting all three on a 10+, but only one on a 7-9, felt a little harsh to me. But more importantly, that third option, "...you can pull yourself free," is *terrible*. It's a total non-choice: the player was obviously going to choose to free themselves. In fact, they *had to* in order to advance the game, so getting a 7-9 result wouldn't be a real choice at all. So instead I whittled it down into this version, where the player chooses to either get hurt or lose something. The PC clearly is going to free themselves; the question is *what does it cost them?* I think it works much better.

I like how Blood Vines ended up because it's simple and retains a lot of options. The player gets to choose what's most important to them, but the GM decides the final outcome: *How* are you wounded? *What* equipment is harmed? It's something we can use over and over again without getting stale.

Here's another custom move from the Something Awful forums, co-written by user The Supreme Court and myself. He was running a pirate-themed game and obviously it's *necessary* to have a custom move for swinging across the rigging during a naval battle. I mean, it's a pirate game and stuff like this is just gonna *happen*, right? Might as well have a move handy for it.



The Supreme Court wrote this rough draft for the move:

When **you swing from a height**, roll + Dex.

**On a 10+**, all three

**On a 7-9**, choose one:

*...you take your enemy by surprise*

*...you deal +d4 damage*

*...you don't splatter horribly against the deck*

There's some good ideas in there for sure. He set some stakes for swinging in the rigging: you wanna surprise your enemy and you don't wanna fall to your death. But the stakes didn't quite feel right as they were, something was a little off.

See, there's another non-choice in there: on a 7-9, who *wouldn't* choose to "not splatter horribly against the deck"? So on a 10+ they'd be taking the enemy by surprise *and* dealing +d4 damage, but on a 7-9 they just *don't die*. That's not much of a partial success there. Additionally, it's not clear that it's explicitly a *combat* move.

So we talked about it and cleaned it up. Clearly, the player should only fall on a Miss. That's a given. This is a move that's gonna be used a lot in a pirate game, but it shouldn't always be the most powerful choice or else it'll overshadow the basic moves on mechanics alone. I thought that taking the enemy by surprise was enough, without the need for extra damage. Thinking about the options for a few minutes, I came up with this nice and blunt version:

When **you swing on the rigging** toward some scurvy bastard with a cutlass in your teeth, roll +Dex.

**On a 10+**, *one of you is knocked over when you land*

**On a 7-9**, *both of you are knocked over when you land*

**On a Miss**, *you didn't land*

Everyone liked it. It works pretty well as a custom move for a couple reasons. First off, like all good custom moves, it's tied to a spe-

cific situation that may come up more than once in the game. Secondly, the results leave some room for narration, like maybe the target is knocked prone, maybe they're knocked clean out of the crow's nest, maybe they drop that pistol they were about to fire. Finally, the 7-9 result *feels* like a 7-9 result: the player gets some of what they wanted, but it's not perfect. As an added bonus, it'll snowball nicely into some other action now that the player and her target are tangled up in a heap together.

### Writing the Result Choices

When you're writing up your list of options, keep them brief. I've seen some people write custom moves that have five or six choices, but that's almost always too many. You want your move to be instantly recognizable and easy to parse, something that won't pull the players out of the game fiction with a huge bulleted list of options. Take a look at the "official" moves; most of them have three options, four at most. Some people will think of everything that could go wrong; they try to cover every possible result of the action. Don't do that. Instead, give a short list of choices with broad impacts, so the player can easily pick the ones that interest him. The details will heavily depend on the game fiction at the time, so just put down the gist of it and fill in details during play.

It's also important to think about what options you're laying in front of the player on a 7-9, and what will happen with the ones that he doesn't choose; the results by omission. It's implied that if you don't choose a particular option, then the opposite will happen. Like this:

**Choose one:**

*...I don't take your money*

*...I don't beat you up*

You have a choice: If I don't beat you up, I *will* take your money. If I don't take your money, I *will* beat you up. The player picks the option that definitely does *not* happen, but they can't have it all. The one they don't choose? *That's* what going down for sure. That's

why you want to avoid those non-choices, any "must-have" options should just be written into the move, as a given. Don't have a result like, "*you survive the blast*," just say "*When you hit the self-destruct button, you survive the blast but choose one...*"

Here's a crappy move:

When **you sneak into the building looking for the package**, roll +Whatever. **On a 10+**, choose four. **On a 7-9**, choose two:  
*...the guards don't catch you*  
*...the cameras don't see you*  
*...the alarm doesn't go off*  
*...you find what you came for*  
*...you can get out safely*

That's dumb, right? There are way too many options, some of them overlap: if the camera sees you, an alarm probably goes off, right? If the guards catch you, how do you get out safely at the same time?

There are different ways to do a move like this, but check out the following two examples and the difference in tone between them:

**On a 7-9**, choose one:  
*...you got the package*  
*...the guards don't catch you*

**On a 7-9**, choose one:  
*...you leave behind incriminating evidence*  
*...you trip the alarm while you're inside*

The first move is nice and *clean*: you can get the package but fight some guards, or you can avoid the guards and forget about the package. The second move is definitely *not* clean; there is no option to get away without reprisals. The player's only real choice here is whether he wants to deal with trouble *now* or *later*. Both of these moves are usable, they both cover the same action, but they say very different things about the tone of your game. Interesting, huh?



So when you go to write your own custom moves, you'll know what to do: **Make sure the stakes are right**: not too high or too low, no instant win but also no instant death. **Make sure the results are where they belong**: full success, partial success, and failure. **Make your choices specific but broad**: specific enough to be clear, but broad enough to use multiple times. **Keep the text brief** so that it's easy for players to understand what their choices are.



# Worldbuilding: Ask Questions, Leave Blanks

We all know that two of the main principles for Dungeon World are **Draw Maps, Leave Blanks** and **Ask Questions and Use Answers**. And we also know that we're not supposed to determine all the adventure's or campaign's outcomes in advance either (**Play to find out what happens**, remember?). We define the steading the PCs start at, maybe draw one or two nearby points of interest, but leave the rest undefined until it comes up naturally in play. That *doesn't* mean, though, that you should never get your campaign map ready before the game.

Many GMs are more comfortable with setting everything up beforehand, laying out an entire world with cities, dungeons, ancient ruins, and other assorted fantasy bric-a-brac placed, defined and populated before the players have even started thinking about what kind of characters they want to play. That GMing style *can* work in Dungeon World too, but does require a bit of change: when you place a "point of interest", **don't define it beyond the basics**. *Don't* map it out, *don't* populate it with monsters. Instead, **ask one to three interesting questions about it, and leave the answers blank**.

What constitutes an "interesting question"? Well, for starters, it should be a leading question. Something that hints at a larger truth, something hidden, or a secret agenda. Ideally, you want questions that snowball into more questions, filling out the world as you go.

Let's say you put a ruined temple in the middle of the forest. A simple question about it would be "*what god is the temple dedicated to?*", but that's not very leading. The answer doesn't naturally lead to more questions because it's very basic; the answer could be "Grix, god of storms" but that doesn't really spark any new questions. We want questions that can lead to *more questions*. So let's expand it.

An easy way to expand our sample question is to specify something interesting about the temple and/or the god: "*What forgotten god is the temple dedicated to?*" is a good one; now not only can we eventually define the god, it leads naturally to other questions, like "*Why was the god forgotten?*"

In addition to leading questions, you also want a few open-ended ones that can easily be spun off into new adventures should the need arise; new threats, major battles, villains taking advantage of a bad situation for their own ends. Continuing with the temple example, let's say you have the idea that there are some ancient seals in the temple, and something will happen if they break or fade away; that's a pretty good adventure hook right there, right? Here's the thing, though: *stop there*. Don't plot out what will happen if/when the seals are broken. **Play to find out what happens.**

So keep the idea, but just phrase it as a question. "*What will happen when the seals in the temple are broken?*" and stop. That's a question with a lot of potential; are the seals holding back something evil or something good? If it's not a matter of "if", but a matter of "when", what event will cause the seals to break? Now you've still got your plot hook, and now it's open-ended. And that open-endedness is what allows you to work it into the game easier than with something that's hard-coded in. Your players won't be following your pre-written plotline; they'll be making *their own*.

It's better to have Portents that are triggered by the players, or at least things that they have a chance to *stop*. If you had decided early on that the seals will break five weeks after the campaign starts or when the two moons align, then it's possible that the event can happen when the PCs are in the middle of something else, or the PCs might never even find the temple or try to break the seals in the first place and you've wasted a lot of time and effort to map out a series of events that don't interest your players at all. We'll talk more about this in a bit, but what you need to remember about situations where things go off the rails is this: let it happen, and adjust your Fronts and Portents accordingly. They're guide posts, not straightjackets, so don't be afraid to tweak them as needed.

When you leave the questions open, not only can you tailor the answers to your players, you can also tailor them to the tone of the campaign, which may not be the tone you started with. The reason you ask questions and leave blanks in Dungeon World is so you can learn what the game world is like *as you go along*; that doesn't mean you can't at least have a rough idea of what will be found before you get

there, just that you're leaving the details open. So **don't pre-write a storyline**. Instead, **fill your world with interesting questions** for your players to answer as the game is played.



## Fronts, Dangers, and Portents

So how do you have an exciting and eventful campaign without pre-writing everything? The rulebook gives you a tool for that: Fronts. Fronts are a fantastic way to organize an open-ended game. I think that once you get the hang of them, you'll start using Fronts in every game you run. I do. Coming up with Dangers is usually pretty easy, but coming up with good Portents can be challenging. I've seen a lot of people online who use the Portents as a map of their campaign. But we're not pre-writing a campaign, right? So don't make a laundry list of events.

Instead, your Portents should serve two major purposes. First, **they are events to warn the players of some Impending Doom**. Secondly, **they're bad things that the players can prevent**. This is important. No Portent happens behind the scenes, like "Warlord Grak finds the Key to the Portal," that's not a *Portent*, it's just something that you've decided will *happen*. Instead, consider how the players will find out about this. How does Warlord Grak go about searching for the Key? What does he do once he finds it? Those are Portents.

Every Danger should have a Portent list, but don't make the lists too long, just a few key events on the time line. Again, these should not be pre-determined events that you have in mind. Every Portent should naturally hint at the next one on the list. It should follow logically in the game fiction, instead of being some random event. In the example above, our Portents might be "*Warlord Grak's minions begin searching*

for the Key" and "The Portal opens and demons spill out." These are things that the players will notice and want to stop on their own; they're actual signs in the game fiction that Warlord Grak is up to something big. Now *that's* a Portent.

An important thing to remember about Portents is that they can be *turning points* in the campaign. If the characters manage to take out Warlord Grak before he finds the Key to the Portal, what should you do? You tweak your Portents, of course. You could have Warlord Grak's second-in-command take over the horde and pick up where Grak left off, but that's not the best solution for one very important reason: it makes the players feel like their actions have no influence in the game. It violates the "play to find out what happens" principle. When you replace Bad Guy A with Bad Guy B and keep the plot chugging along like nothing happened, then you're railroading. You're not playing the game the *players* want, but instead you're playing the game *you* want to play.

The real strength of Fronts is flexibility. Fronts give your campaign a structure you can build off of and drive the action with, but also give enough space to expand and improvise in *response* to the player's actions. Warlord Grak is dead? Then perhaps his son Bren takes over the horde, and wants to stop chasing these stupid "key" legends and conquer the lands! Now you can split that off into a separate Front with its own Cast and Portents.

What about the Gate, though? That doesn't stop existing because Warlord Grak is dead. But because Fronts are general outlines instead of a predetermined path, you can still use it as is, you'd only need to adjust it a bit. Is there someone in the Front's cast that could step up as the driving force for the Front? Maybe the scholar that the characters consulted with might become tempted by the power of the Gate. That Front turns into two Fronts for you to use.

**Fronts are not static.** They're just organizational tools to help you run the open campaign style that Dungeon World demands. Every time the players become a force for change, look to your Fronts and see how they would respond. That back-and-forth technique sounds familiar, right? It's the *same* way moves flow from GM to player and back again. The whole game works that way! Cool, huh?

# SAMPLE CAMPAIGN FRONT

Let's look at a campaign setting, all prepped and ready to run. Take a look at his description and setup, and how he translates it into Fronts, Dangers, and Stakes questions.

## The Great Wyrm Axstalrath

by Sean M. Dunstan

**Crescent Isle** is a small island that has recently come under some very dangerous attention. The island was colonized by humans about five years ago, to the annoyance of the **native lizardman population**. Fortunately, the lizardmen had little interest of things that were going on outside their swamps, so a **loose treaty was formed** of a "live and let live" nature.

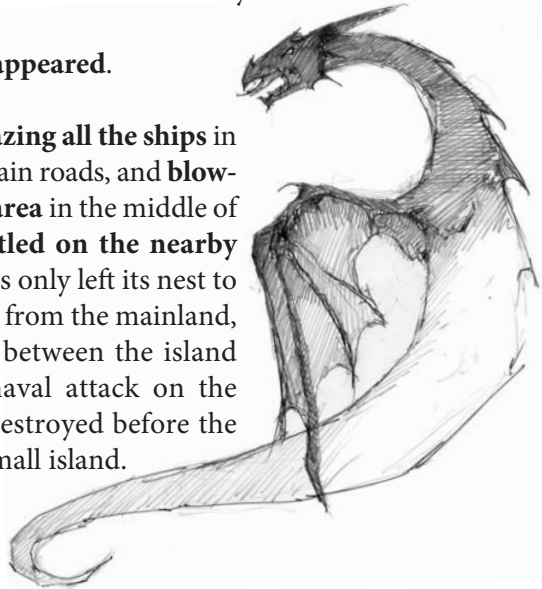
The small **Port Taramos** was founded on the eastern coast of the island, and it wasn't long before **iron deposits were found** near the forest to the south. A mine was set up quickly, and the **town of Rockbreak** was founded to support the mine, as well as to do some logging of the nearby forest. The **town of Windward** was also started in the northern part of the island where there was plenty of arable land. Supplies from the mainland come about once a month to fill in the gaps that the colonists can't supply themselves, but Crescent Isle is mostly self-sufficient.

Three weeks ago, **the dragon appeared**.

It **arrived without warning, razing all the ships** in Taramos Bay, tearing up the main roads, and **blowing a crater in a very specific area** in the middle of the island. Once done, it **settled on the nearby ocean volcano**. The dragon has only left its nest to destroy any ships seeking help from the mainland, and prevent communication between the island settlements. An attempted naval attack on the dragon's volcanic roost was destroyed before the soldiers even set foot on the small island.

In the weeks since the dragon attacks, some people have

begun worshipping it in an attempt to placate the beast. The dragon cults have been declared illegal by Port Taramos's government, but this has



just forced them to move underground where they grow unchecked.

It could be weeks before anyone on the mainland realizes there's a problem, and even longer before they send help, so the island is pretty much on its own. A call has gone out for people willing to go out and make contact with the cut-off towns, to try and figure out why that specific section of the island was razed, what's in the underground ruin unearthed in the razed land, and maybe...just maybe...defeat the dragon and save the island.

*...what do you do?*



## POINTS OF INTEREST

**Port Taramos** is the capital & only contact with the outside world.



Hemmed in by reefs, but the port considers the reefs an easy way to "funnel" traffic and keep sea raiders out. There is a large lighthouse attached to Lord Taramos's mansion, which overlooks the bay.



The town on the southern tip of the island is **Rockbreak**. This mining and logging town is the main source of the island's trade. Since the dragon appeared, contact has been cut off between Rockbreak and Port Taramos

**The Sea God's Spear** is a volcanic island where the dragon has made its nest. The charred wrecks of the island's last three naval ships are just off the southern coast.



**Ss't'k'llst** is the largest lizardman settlement and the creatures' "capital city" by default. Besides Ss't'k'llst, the lizardmen occupy most of the **Greenscale swamp** and the villagers stay out of it.



To the inhabitants of the island, **The Kelp Forest** is just a thick bed of kelp and seaweed. It is, in fact, part of a sea elf colony that brushes up against the island. The sea elves have only recently made themselves known to the inhabitants of the island.



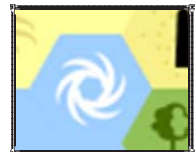
**Windward** is the farming town to the north. There's a tiny rest and resupply stop between Rockbreak and Port Taramos; the locals call it **Waypoint**.



One of the strangest mysteries on the island is



**The Monolith**, a cylindrical column six feet in diameter and fifteen feet tall, covered in untranslatable runes. On nights with a half-moon, the runes glow and the column projects a beam of light directly into the sky. This phenomenon has never been explained. The enormous whirlpool next to the Monolith is called **The Sea God's Eye**, and it swirls constantly into the unknown depths. The two curious locations seem to be related somehow, but for now scholars are stumped.





## Questions for the players

*Which one of you is a foreigner now stranded here?*

*Which of you knows the island like the back of your hand, having been born and raised here?*

*If you're a sea elf, why have you revealed yourself to the surface dwellers? How do your brethren feel about that?*

*You know one of the Dragon cultists personally. Who are they and why haven't they listened to your advice to stay away?*

*What have you been told about the Mysterious Temple on the small island to the southeast?*

*What do you know about the Monolith that no one else does?*

*If you're a lizardman, why have you left the swamplands? Why are you hanging out with these mammals?*

## NEW RACES

### Lizardfolk racial moves

**Fighter:** Your claws allow you do to your class damage without a weapon.

**Druid:** You have access to a new Land: The Fetid Swamps.

**Thief:** When you Defy Danger to hide in swampland or thick foliage you succeed as if you rolled a 10+.

**Ranger :** Your pet can take "ambush" as a cunning trick.

### Sea Elf racial moves

**Bard:** Thanks to your siren voice, you can offer your continued presence or happiness as leverage when you Parley.

**Fighter:** Any weapon you wield is considered to have the "Precise" tag.

**Wizard:** You can prepare one extra level of spells.

**Cleric:** You are attuned to the sea god. Your religion can have the domain "The Ocean and Its Secrets."

## **Danger: The Dragon** (*Arcane Enemy*)

The dragon Axstalrath has picked Crescent Island as its nest for several reasons; it's isolated and cut off from civilization, it's intrigued by the monolith in the desert, the volcano is the perfect place to lay her eggs, and when her eggs hatch the island is filled with helpless food with no way to escape.

**Impulse:** to defend and care for her young

### **Grim Portents**

Citizens of Port Taramos get restless, the cult gains members

Martial law declared

The dragon cultists try to take over Port Taramos

The dragon strikes the lighthouse near Lord Taramos' manor

The cult takes over and offers the town to the dragon

**Impending Doom:** Destruction



## **Danger: The Dragon Cultists** (*Ambitious Organization*)

The cultists believe that they can appease the dragon through worship.

**Impulse:** to worship the dragon as a god

### **Grim Portents**

Magmin appear on the western coasts

They dig up through the mine and take over Rockbreak

They strike a treacherous deal with the dragon cultists

They offer the cultists as food for the dragon hatchlings

**Impending Doom:** Usurpation



## **Danger: The Magmin** (*Hordes*)

**Impulse:** to grow strong, to drive their enemies before them

### **Grim Portents**

The dragon contacts the magmin living under the volcano

The dragon plots to turn the lizardmen against the humans

The dragon destroys a naval patrol from the mainland

The dragon hatchlings descend on the island and feed

**Impending Doom:** Tyranny

# Stakes

\*What is in the caves uncovered by the dragon's attack on the center of the island? What's inside that the dragon wants so badly?

\*What came out of the mine on the southern peninsula? What's happened to the inhabitants of the nearby mining & logging town?

\*What role will the Monolith play in the island's destiny?

\*Will the lizardmen in the swamp break their tenuous truce with the humans to side with the dragon?

\*Why are the sea elves from the kelp forest making themselves known to the island's inhabitants for the first time?

## Campaign Cast

**Lord Willam Tamos** is the Mayor of Port Tamos; the Tamos family founded the first settlement on the island and remains influential.

**Linsa Crane** is the Foreman of Operations at Rockbreak mine, which in turn makes her the Mayor of Rockbreak village. The townsfolk respect her and stand behind her decisions without hesitation.

**Karlov Grey** has been identified as the probable founder and current leader of the Dragon Cult, though his day-to-day location may sometimes be a secret. No one is sure who he was before the cult began.

**Lsst'l** represents the Lizardfolks' interests in Port Tamos, from trade politics to border issues, ensuring peace between the species. He has always claimed to fight only for peace and coexistence, but how trustworthy is he?

**Rajak Redsteel** little is known about the King of the Magmin, or to what end he drives his people to conquest. A mystery yet to be solved.

# Compendium Classes

Compendium classes are covered in the Advanced Delving chapter. They're not like regular classes chosen at the start of the game; instead they're taken as you level up and most of them require some sort of prerequisite. These prerequisites are typically something that the character accomplished or experienced in the game. *Something Awful* forums user **Emong** has written a lot of them. These are some of my favorites that he's posted; maybe some will inspire you to use them, or create your own.



## Compendium Class: Abysswalker

When you **travel the abyss and it affects you permanently** you may take this move when you level up:

**Marked By The Abyss:** The abyss has left its mark on you and you suffer some form of physical debilitation, the GM will tell you the specifics. In exchange, **once per battle you may simply deal your damage to a foe of your choice**, using the power of the abyss to catch them off-guard.

Once you've taken **Marked By The Abyss**, the following moves count as class moves for you. You may also choose from this list whenever you level up:

**Abysswalk:** When you **lead someone through the abyss**, roll+WIS.

**On a 10+**, you exit safely and at the intended destination.

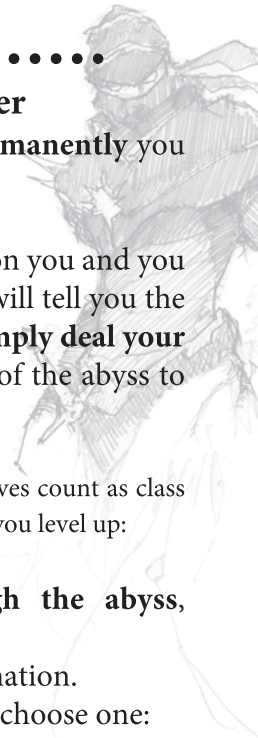
**On a 7-9**, you get out of the abyss, but the GM will choose one:

...you're in a place you've never been before.

...something has followed you out of the abyss.

**By Absence Sustained:** When a move tells you to mark off rations, ignore it. The abyss provides your sustenance now.

**The Abyss Gazes Also:** When someone Discerns Realities about you or otherwise studies or observes you intently, you may ask a single question from the Discern Realities list about them.



.....

## New Race: Automaton

A lot of players have come up with houserules for Warforged, a popular race in D&D. This is a new Race to choose from during character creation, for any class, designed to emulate some of the features of a living machine.

***Starting racial moves for Automatons of any class***

**By Iron Sustained:** If a move tells you to mark off rations, ignore it. You're a robot, why would you need to eat?

**Metal Man:** You can't be healed by mundane or magical means; instead, you or someone else can perform repairs on you whenever you Make Camp or Recover, letting you heal as normal. Additionally, when you take a Last Breath and roll a 7-9, you deactivate and go into standby mode until someone can repair you, the GM will tell you what that'll require.

**Alternative Bonds:**

\_\_\_\_\_ helped to keep me in good repair.

\_\_\_\_\_ knew my creator.

I've been a friend of \_\_\_\_\_'s family for a long time.

The human frailty and desires of \_\_\_\_\_ confuses me.

.....

## Compendium Class: Automaton Tinkerer

When you are an **Automaton** and you spend time attempting to upgrade yourself, you may take this move when you level up:

**Modular Chassis:** When you Make Camp and spend a few hours modifying yourself, choose two stats. You take +1 ongoing to all rolls using one of them, but -1 ongoing to all rolls using the other until you spend time modifying yourself again.

Once you've taken **Modular Chassis**, the following moves count as class moves for you. You may also choose from this list whenever you level up:

**Integrated Weaponry:** When you integrate a single weapon into your body, choose one from the list below. This move can be taken multiple times; add another option or new weapon each time.

*...the weapon can extend and retract at will, giving it one more range tag.*

*...the weapon folds into a body compartment, totally hidden from sight.*

*...you devise a system to make the weapon hit harder. Add +Forceful to it.*

**Clockwork Repairman:** When you **attempt to repair a piece of complex machinery**, roll +Int. **On a 10+**, you get it into perfect condition. **On a 7-9**, it's working, but there's a few problems with it that the GM will make apparent. **On a Miss** you've left it in worse condition than when you started, the GM will give you details.

**Mechanical Perfection:** At the start of the session, roll +**nothing**. **On a 10+**, hold 3. **On a 7-9**, hold 1. You may spend this hold one at a time to take +1 forward before you roll, using cold machine logic and precision to help ensure success.

**Get Equipped With:** When you **harvest an enemy for parts**, roll +Con. **On a 10+**, hold 3. **On a 7-9**, hold 1. You may spend hold one-for-one **to make a move from the list of moves for the enemy you harvested**; the GM will tell you which one is available. You can only have one of these moves at a time, and once you're out of hold you lose the move- you'll need to harvest a new foe.



## New Race: Dragon

Yes, a dragon: the classic gold-hoarding beast of guile and greed. Why not? It was a player request, and Emong wrote it with a little help from the SA forums.

### *Starting racial moves for Dragons of any class*

**Bottomless Stomach:** When a move tells you to mark off rations, mark off one more than you usually would.

**Dragonic Transformation:** As a dragon your teeth, claws, and breath weapon all deal class damage, and you may fly if you're that kind of dragon. You have access to all of your class moves as a dragon, as long as you can reasonably perform them without hands. You can also take on a humanoid form. Tell the GM that **your humanoid form has one imperfection; a tell-tale sign that you are a dragon** in disguise: reptilian eyes, lizard tongue, whatever. Make it something difficult but not *impossible* to hide.

### Alternate Bonds:

I am sure that \_\_\_\_\_ stole a trinket from my hoard.

\_\_\_\_\_ made a pact with me in exchange for lost knowledge.

\_\_\_\_\_ thinks too highly of themselves, for one so very small.



.....

## Compendium Class: Great Wyrm

If you are a dragon, and you knowingly allow significant harm to come to something or someone important to you in the name of greed and avarice you may take this move when you level up:

**Sleep On A Pile Of Gold:** For every 100 gold added to your hoard, take +1 hold. Spend this hold (and by extension, *your hoard*) to gain +*hold spent* to Parley in order to get your way.

Once you've taken **Sleep On A Pile Of Gold**, the following moves count as class moves for you. You may also choose from this list whenever you level up:

**Dragon Magic:** You gain the Ritual move as per the Wizard class, except that you may choose either +**Int** or +**Cha** when you use it. If you *already* have the Ritual move, you gain the Wizard move Prodigy instead, and can memorize it even without your spellbook.

**Burninating The Countryside:** Your breath weapon uses a damage die one step higher than your class damage. (1d4 -> 1d6 -> 1d8 -> 1d10 -> 2d6)

**Serpentine Tongue:** When you Discern Realities about a person, you may also ask "*What is it they desire most?*"

**The Superior Species:** When you Spout Lore while exaggerating or overemphasizing the importance of dragons and their history in that lore, you automatically succeed as if you had rolled a 10+.

.....

## Compendium Class: Drunken Master

When you go on a three day drunken bender, and deal with the consequences, you may take this move when you level up:

**Drink Like A Demon:** When you **take a swig of an alcoholic drink**, roll +**Con**. **On a 10+**, you now have 3-drunkenness. **On a 7-9**, you have 2-drunkenness. You may reduce your drunkenness by one at any time to heal yourself of 1d4 damage.

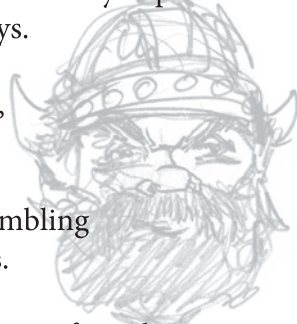
Once you've taken **Drink Like A Demon**, the following moves count as class moves for you. You may also choose from this list whenever you level up:

**Ethanol Powered:** Choose either **Hack And Slash** or **Cast A Spell**, if you have it. From now on whenever you use the move you picked roll +drunkenness instead of what the move says.

**Lightweight:** When using *Drink Like a Demon*, you gain an additional +1 drunkenness.

**Seeing Double:** When you Defy Danger by stumbling and lurching out of the way, roll +drunkenness.

**Iron Liver:** You may ignore the effects of poison. After what you do to your body every day, poison is just a drop in the bucket.



## Compendium Class: Skinwalker

When you **wear the skin of an animal as an intimidation tactic** during a battle, you may take his move when you level up:

**Walk Like The Animals:** When you wear the skin of a dangerous animal into battle, it imparts a portion of its savage nature upon you, **granting your attacks +1 piercing**.

Once you've taken **Walk Like the Animals**, the following moves count as class moves for you. You may also choose from this list whenever you level up:

**Talk Like The Animals:** When you are wearing the skin of an animal, you gain the ability to **speak with animals** as easily as you speak with people. Animals will perceive you as a normal creature of whatever skin you are wearing.

**Borrowed Savagery:** When you attack while wearing the skin of a dangerous animal, you do **+1d4 damage** as the feral nature of the animal courses through your veins.

**Become The Beast:** You gain the Shapeshifter move as per the Druid class, except that it may only be used to shift into the full animal form of whatever animal skin you are wearing.





## Emong offers this advice for writing a compendium class:

“**The concept** is the easiest part, something that's summed up with one or two sentences describing what defines the class. Like, “*Someone who has been corrupted and warped by the abyss,*” or “*Someone who drinks so much they've made it into a fighting style.*” It should be the type of character that's *possible* under the main rules, but has no *mechanics* to back up the specific theme. You could easily roleplay a drunken fighter or corrupted wanderer, but there are no special moves to reinforce your choice. So you write some yourself.

**Compendium classes have qualifications** that the character must meet. This is not always as easy as it might seem. Some classes, like my Abysswalker, have obvious requirements. Others times, where there's no obvious event that might trigger it, I come up with something thematic, like the Great Wyrm class for the dragon race: Great Wyrm is all about making a dragon more dragon-y, so the character needs to be greedy enough that he'll give up something he *cares* about for gold. He needs to love gold *more*. That's a good thematic fit.

**The opening move** is probably the most important of the moves, and not just because it has to be taken first. The opening move also should set the *entire tone* of the class. You could take just that *one move* and feel like you've earned that compendium class. **Drunken Master's** first move gives the player a reason to be drinking constantly, Great Wyrm's gives them a reason to be greedy, that sort of thing. It sets the stage for the rest of the class' abilities.

After a character gains the opening move, they have access to **the secondary moves**. These should make the character fall more in line with the class's theme, *behaviorally*. Great Wyrm is the best class I've written for showing off this idea. The class's theme is making the character more *dragon-y*, so what are dragons? Dragons are greedy (*Sleep On A Pile Of Gold*), powerful (*Burninating The Countryside*), magical (*Dragon Magic*), wily (*Serpentine Tongue*), and arrogant (*The Superior Species*). So, **every move that a character takes draws them more and more towards what the class represents**, in this case that iconic dragon-ness.

The rulebook has great advice for how to write custom moves, the advice applies here too. When **writing compendium class moves**, compare them to the official moves in terms of utility and strength. A move that will come up *less* often should probably be *more* powerful than a move used all the time. *Don't* have a move that duplicates an official move, or that replaces it in utility. If you want to make your class better at melee fighting, don't replace Hack & Slash. Give the move a bonus instead: “*When you Hack & Slash while in werewolf form...*” Also, take advantage of the fact that **every member of the class is going to have the same opening move**. The rest of your compendium class moves should flow from that first one, either in *theme* or *mechanics*.”

-Originally posted on the SomethingAwful forums

## Example of Play

This is an excerpt from my campaign, some actual stuff that went down, so that you can see how these rules and principles work in the real world. You'll see some of the moves in action, along with the advice from this booklet being used in actual play. There'll be plenty of explanations and commentary in the sidebar, so you can get insight without interrupting the flow of the text. By the way, in real life all these characters have names, of course, but for the sake of this example we're just identifying them by their class.

**GM:** “Okay, so the door to the ancient tower is hanging open on its hinges and you’ve decided to push your way inside. The stone anteroom is filled with rock dust and debris but it’s been disturbed in places, like something has been walking around. Ahead of you stands a thick set of ornate double doors made of solid granite, and the walls are covered in beautiful carved frescoes depicting scenes of an ancient dwarven war. There’s a couple interesting things in here: a small humanoid skeleton in the corner, crushed beyond recognition a long time ago. Also, there are deep scratches in the stone floor, like metal dragging across them<sup>1</sup>.”

**Ranger:** “Are the double doors locked? I’m gonna open them.”

**Thief:** “Wait! You said there was a skeleton? And scratches on the floor, huh? That’s gotta a blade trap. Everybody stand back and let me do my thing. I’m using *Trap Expert*...<sup>2</sup>”

*\*He picks up the dice and starts to roll.\**

**GM:** “Sounds great, what are you doing? How exactly are you checking for these traps? What are you doing? Are you searching the room, prodding with sticks, what?<sup>3</sup>”

**Thief:** “Good point. I’m investigating the scratches

This is the sidebar where I'll be adding commentary on what's going on: explanations of my reasoning, behind-the-scenes thought processes; stuff like that.

<sup>1</sup>Always say what the adventure demands, right? Don't withhold details or make the players Discern Realities for every detail.

<sup>2</sup>This is also a good example of offering an opportunity that fits a class' abilities.

<sup>3</sup>Always ask questions! How are you doing this? What does that look like? Get into the details of the game fiction.

first and seeing what angle they came from, then looking there to see where the blades come out. I guess I'm stepping real carefully to look for pressure plates or tripwires. Just eagle-eyeing the whole place. Sound good? Okay...I rolled an 11! So I get all three questions, yeah? Is there a trap here and what activates it? What does it do when activated? And what else is hidden here?<sup>4</sup>

**GM:** Okay, Wow, nice. There's definitely a trap, of course, activated by turning the door handle."

*\*The Ranger pantomimes letting go of the door handle suddenly.\**

**GM:** "It's not a blade trap like you suspected, there are no slots for any blades. In fact, it's really weird. There are wires visible in the door frame and the connect to the stone frescoes in the left and right wall, like they're panels that slide open when the door handle is turned. The weirdest thing is the skeleton in the corner: it was a kobold, but it didn't die from a blade: it was definitely crushed to death by something big."

**Ranger:** "This whole setup seems real strange. I'm gonna stick around and *Discern Realities* to figure out what's going on. I rolled an 8, so only one question: What happened here recently?<sup>5</sup>"

**GM:** "You get down low and inspect the tracks left in the dust. A lot of small creatures moved through here, probably more kobolds. And it's apparent that the two panels slid open, and something very big came out. Whatever it was, it walks on two legs and it crushed the kobold to death. The rest of them seem to have gotten through the door and shut it behind them.

**Thief:** "Okay, I'm disarming the trap, using *Tricks of the Trade*. I pull out some pliers, a length of wire, and a tiny blade and start working on the mechanism in the door<sup>6</sup>. I roll a 7, what does that mean?"

<sup>4</sup>Watch how I answer these questions, though, I don't tell him everything. That wouldn't be fun, there has to be mystery. Of course I have to give him his answers, he earned them, but that doesn't mean we can't build tension even while explaining the situation.

<sup>5</sup>Okay, so obviously the previous victim of this trap has rotted into a skeleton by now, so this wasn't exactly *recently*, but I'm not gonna be a stickler. Clearly I owe him an explanation.

<sup>6</sup>After a while, the players just start telling you exactly what they're doing when they use a move, no need to ask.

**GM:** "It means a choice<sup>7</sup>. While you're poking around inside, you find two sets of wires. This dwarven craftsmanship is pretty complicated but you realize that one wire opens the panels and the other set activates some device. Disabling one will trigger the other, so you've got to pick which one goes off."

**Thief:** "So I either activate an unknown mechanism, or open the panels? Ugh... I let the panels open. Everyone get inside the room and get ready."

**GM:** "The panels lurch open, powered by some hydraulics or something. They recede into the walls and expose these little alcoves, barely big enough to contain the two brass giants within. They're old dwarven automatons, clockworks with heavy brass plating built for war. They haven't activated, though, the Thief chose wisely here. They're sitting there, totally motionless. They've got inset rubies for eyes, staring straight ahead."<sup>8</sup>

**Wizard:** "How big are the rubies?"

*\*Everyone groans\**

**Fighter:** "Don't do this again, just leave them alone. You're worse than the Thief, isn't he supposed to be the greedy one?"

**Wizard:** "I need them for my experiments... they're magical components."<sup>9</sup>

**GM:** "Do you? Like, all your spells are powered by gemstones? I didn't know that."

**Wizard:** "No, just certain rituals. I, uh... grind them into powder and use it to paint the magic circle."<sup>10</sup>

**GM:** "They're big, as big as the halfling's fists. Perfect for your components pouch."

*\*Everyone groans again\**

**Fighter:** "Don't do it. It'll probably come alive and kill us all. Just leave it alone."

**Thief:** "I call the other ruby! You can't have them all!"

**Wizard:** "I'm doing it. I'm going up to the clockwork and prying loose a ruby with my pocketknife. What

<sup>7</sup>This is tough; sometimes it's hard to figure out what exactly the two choices are for a 7-9, especially on a straightforward trap. Here, I thought about what this trap did and separated it into two parts. There are automatons in the wall, and the trap activates them and sets them free. I'm *telling the consequences and asking*, here.

<sup>8</sup>This is definitely *presenting riches at a price*, right here. You just know something dangerous is gonna happen.

<sup>9</sup>I'm pretty sure he's just making excuses here, but I think this is a cool detail so I'm going to press him about it.

<sup>10</sup>That's cool! One thing I love about Dungeon World is that stuff like this happens all the time, some offhand comment will turn into something important. Keep an ear out for these sorts of details! Naturally, I'm going to entice him with these newly-important rubies.

do I roll for that?"

**GM:** "No roll, you can just do it<sup>11</sup>. You dig around in the metal eyesocket and the ruby comes loose, rolling into your hand. As soon as it does, though, the clockwork springs to life with startling speed, it's hand is shooting for your neck like it's going to grab you. What do you do?<sup>12</sup>"

**Wizard:** "Ahh! I jump away and try to get behind the Fighter!"

**GM:** "Sounds like you're *Defying Danger* by acting fast, roll +Dex."

**Wizard:** "...that's a 5. Flat-out failure?"

**GM:** "Definitely, the clockwork is way too fast for you. The huge brass hand darts out and grabs you by the neck, lifting you up from the ground in a chokehold, your feet dangling a few feet above the floor. How are the rest of you reacting?<sup>13</sup>"

**Thief:** "I'm hiding in the corner until I figure out what's going on."

**Fighter:** "Can I run in and try to break the clockwork's grip? Like, smash his arm with my hammer?"

**GM:** "Of course. As you run toward the brass beast, his other arm raises up and the hand pivots around, turning into a whirling blade. He starts swinging as you approach."

**Fighter:** "So this is a *Hack & Slash*?<sup>14</sup>"

**GM:** "Are you trying to hurt the thing, or just make it let go?"

**Fighter:** "Hurt it, of course. It's just going to keep attacking us anyway. I wanna crush its arm."

**GM:** "That's a *Hack & Slash*, then, sure. Roll +Str."

**Ranger:** "That's a 9, not bad."

**GM:** "You charge in, but this thing is much faster than you anticipated. Its arm shoots out like lightning and the whirring blade just tears through your armor for... 5 damage, blood is seeping out from your breastplate. But that gives you an opening, while the

<sup>11</sup>Prying out a gemstone isn't a Strength check or anything. Remember, *Dungeon World* isn't about difficulty, it's about consequences. I see no reason why the Wizard can't do this.

<sup>12</sup>Here it is, this is the beginning of combat, here. But there's no initiative, we just slide into it. I describe the beginning of the monster's attack and wait for the response. In this case, he decides to leap away so I call for a *Defy Danger*. Seems obvious; the danger is being grabbed.

<sup>13</sup>It's good to switch to the next character's action while the current character is still endangered. It leaves them with the sense of suspense that's necessary for a tense fight.

<sup>14</sup>You could make an argument for *Hack & Slash* or *Defy Danger* here. If his goal is just to make the clockwork release the Wizard, maybe he's *Defying Danger* from the blade while he knocks his friend free. But the player is suggesting *Hack & Slash*, which says to me that he's trying to deal damage to the enemy. Just to be sure, I clarify.

arm is extended you bring your warhammer to bear and smash into the brass plating."

**Fighter:** "Ha! 9 points of damage."

**GM:** "Wow, yeah, the thick brass armor soaks up a lot of the force from your blow, but that's a lot of damage so it dents and breaks. The mechanical arm buckles in two and the Wizard falls to the floor gasping for breath.<sup>15</sup> Ranger, what are you doing?<sup>16</sup> Just watching this?"

**Ranger:** "No way, I've got a clear shot now that the Wizard has dropped. I'm pulling out my bow and shooting the clockwork. In fact, I'm gonna use *Called Shot* to hit it right in the eyesocket!"

**GM:** "Hold on, it has to be surprised or defenseless. You're standing right there, it definitely sees you."<sup>17</sup>

**Ranger:** "Okay, *Volley* it is. That's a 7, barely made it. I guess I'll choose... to reduce my ammo by 1, I have to take several shots."

**GM:** "Makes sense, the thing is covered in brass plates. The first few shots just bounce right off."<sup>18</sup>

**Ranger:** "Totally! Yeah, the first few arrows are deflected, but I finally land one right in between two plates, deep in the machinery. That's 6 damage. Oh, plus it says here that if my hawk Companion attacks the same target, I add its *Ferocity* to my damage."

**GM:** "Okay, but how does your hawk damage this completely armored tank? I feel like its claws can't even scratch this thing."<sup>19</sup>

**Ranger:** "Um... how about my arrow finally hits, and the hawk flies over and drives the arrow in? Like, it grabs the arrow and pushes it deeper into the machinery?"

**GM:** "That sounds awesome! Yeah, it jams the arrow into the thing and sparks start flying out of it; it's twitching but still active. You're feeling proud for a second, but then you feel a wrenching pain in your ribs. Something stabbed you from behind, it's the

<sup>15</sup>This was a judgment call. 9 points is a hefty amount of damage, and the Fighter specifically said that his goal was to make it drop the Wizard. I think that this is a realistic outcome.

<sup>16</sup>The other players have had some action but the Ranger hasn't done anything yet, so I turn to him next.

<sup>17</sup>As cool as this move would be, sometimes rules is rules, y'know?

<sup>18</sup>Whenever a move calls for the player to choose an option, it's got to be something that makes sense in the fiction. So I like to come up with in-game reasons for even little things like this; it makes the world seem more real.

<sup>19</sup>Here we are again, asking questions of the player. Always make sure that the Moves make sense in the fiction. If you don't immediately see how something could work, ask the player how they see it working and oftentimes you'll get a cool answer that enhances the scene.

second clockwork that you forgot about while you were focused on the first one. Take 6 points of damage as it stabs clean through your leather armor."

**Ranger:** "What?! I had no idea it was activated, too!"

**GM:** Yeah, you guys were totally focused on the Wizard's trouble.<sup>20</sup>

**Thief:** "Okay, this is my chance. I'm cowering in the corner, right? Neither of the clockworks has noticed me? I wanna sneak in and use *Backstab*."

**GM:** "It's hard to tell where their attention is, they don't move or look around like normal people. Why don't you try and sneak up on one?"<sup>21</sup>

**Thief:** "*Defy Danger*, huh? With Dex? That's a 12, no problem. I'm like a shadow."

**GM:** "Great, while the second clockwork is stabbing your Ranger friend, you tumble behind it easily."

**Thief:** "So *Backstab* says that I get to either just deal my damage outright, or I can roll +Dex to gain additional benefits. I'm a gambling man, I'll go for it... a 9; I choose to reduce their armor by 1."

**GM:** "Cool, how do you do that, exactly?"<sup>22</sup>

**Thief:** "I pry loose a brass plate. Like, I jam my rapier into an exposed joint and then use my dagger in the other hand to pop off a big piece of armor."

**GM:** "Sounds awesome, this big chunk of tarnished brass falls to the floor with a loud clang and the automaton whirls around to face you. It's head swivels 180 degrees and it's arms pivot so that it's facing you now, without even turning its body around."

**Thief:** "I know it sucks for me, but that's pretty cool."

**GM:** "Yeah! It's raising both arms up, dripping with the Ranger's blood, and is about to bring them down on you. Meanwhile, on the other side of the room, the twitching, nearly broken clockwork still ticking for now. It raises a thick leg and gets ready to stomp the Wizard on the ground."

**Wizard:** "I wanna blast it with *Magic Missile*!"

<sup>20</sup>This might seem harsh, but it's true. They never once mentioned looking toward the second alcove. I take this as a *golden opportunity* to reveal an *unwelcome truth* and have the other enemy make itself known.

<sup>21</sup>Sometimes it's obvious when an enemy is surprised or defenseless. Sometimes it's not. In those cases, asking for a *Defy Danger* (the danger is being noticed) acts as a sort of "stealth check." The danger, of course, is being seen.

<sup>22</sup>This is one of those places where mechanics and fiction engage, and another thing I like about *Dungeon World*. If you're going to reduce someone's armor, tell me how you do it. We're all gathered around this table to imagine another world together, so let's get into the gritty details now and then. Moves and game fiction should be inseparable; you can't make a move without explaining it within the game.

**GM:** "Instead of rolling away from the stomp?"

**Fighter:** "Can I *Defend* him so he doesn't get stomped while he does this?"<sup>23</sup>

**GM:** "Definitely. Roll +Con to *Defend* him."

**Fighter:** "Crap, only an 8. I Hold 1 and I'll spend it to halve the damage from the attack. I swing my warhammer in the path of the clockwork's kicking legs, knocking aside some of the blows."

**GM:** "Okay, great, only a few kicks really connect and Wizard, you only take 3 damage from this. Go ahead with your *Magic Missile*."

**Wizard:** "...I rolled a 9. The spell goes off but I have to choose something that goes wrong. I'll 'draw unwelcome attention or put myself in a spot.' The *Magic Missile* deals 5 damage, armor piercing."

**GM:** "What does it look like? The spell, I mean, what is it exactly?"<sup>24</sup>

**Wizard:** "It just says 'pure magic energy' but I kinda imagined it being bolts of electricity."

**GM:** "That's perfect! So this thing is stomping on you with huge heavy metal feet, you're getting bruised and battered and forcing all your concentration into these electric blasts. They hit the clockwork and just completely fry it, short-circuiting the thing. It goes limp."

**Wizard:** "What about the unwelcome attention or being put in a spot?"

**GM:** "Right, I almost forgot. Um, when the thing goes limp it starts to topple over suddenly, carried by the momentum of its attacks. It's crashing down on top of you, you have a split second before you're crushed.<sup>25</sup> But now let's swing over to the Ranger and Thief again, they've got their enemy flanked but it seems like it can face any direction at will. It's swinging down on the Thief with those bladed hands."

**Thief:** "I'm gonna deflect the blow with my rapier and try to jam my dagger into an exposed area,

<sup>23</sup>This happens quite a bit in combat without initiative: player actions kinda pile up on each other; they happen simultaneously or they interrupt. It's cool if you can handle it. To me, having the players all shouting out actions makes it more exciting, like it's a real free-for-all. Just prioritize them and resolve them in the order that makes sense.

<sup>24</sup>Ask questions and build on the answers! While you're picturing the scene, go ahead and ask any little questions that spring to mind. Even in the middle of combat, why not?

<sup>25</sup>The first thing you might think of when you read "unwelcome attention or put in a spot" is that the character is going to be *attacked*, but that's definitely not always the case. It just means that something bad happens to put him in danger. Could be anything!



where I tore off the plating."

**GM:** "Sounds like *Hack & Slash* to me, right?"

**Thief:** "... Oh no! Total failure, a 4!"

**GM:** "Oh man, this thing is just so much stronger than you, no way can you parry against it. It bashes right through your attempt and buries both a blade into your arm for... 7 points of damage and you're pinned against the wall. It's got its blade clean through your shoulder and into the wall, you're not going anywhere. Then its head swivels back around to face the Ranger."<sup>26</sup>

**Ranger:** "Before it can do anything, I've dropped my bow and I'm jamming my spear into it."

**GM:** "Okay, this is gonna be *Hack & Slash* as well. It can definitely deal with both of you at once."

**Ranger:** "That's an 8 for *Hack & Slash*, so I guess we hurt each other, right?"

**GM:** "Hmmm, how about a hard choice instead? Here's the deal; the Thief is pinned right behind the clockwork and you're stabbing through it with a spear. The thing swings wide and for a split second, you've got a clear shot at the inner workings. You can jam your spear in there and bypass its armor entirely, but you'll probably stab clean through and hurt the Thief. So you won't take damage but the Thief will. Is that cool?"<sup>27</sup>

**Thief:** "That's cool."

**Ranger:** "Yeah, that's awesome. I'm gonna go for it. That's 7 points of damage."

**GM:** Okay, the Thief takes 5 damage, but that's enough to incapacitate the clockwork. It grinds to a halt with your spear stuck through it. Both clockworks are busted, now. You all take a deep breath and start to dust yourselves off when you hear a rhythmic thumping noise. You realize that it's coming from the double doors. Something is pushing on them from the other side, trying to open them...<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup>Truth be told, the whole "it's head pivots around" thing is something that I just came up with on the spot because it sounded cool. All's fair, though, because when I created the creature I gave it a move: "Reveal a hidden function." I'm using the creature move and at the same time just making stuff up! And because of this little detail, it became fictionally possible for the clockwork to fight two flanking opponents with equal ease.

<sup>27</sup>I made this up; this isn't in the rules. But it's in the *spirit* of the rules for sure; a 7-9 result is all about success with consequences. I like to check with the players so they have a chance to call foul. It's important that everyone is on the same page. In this case, they thought it was cool so we ran with it.

<sup>28</sup>I'm *showing signs of an approaching threat* to push the adventure forward to the next event.

# In Conclusion

## A few final thoughts about the game

So there you go, you've finished the guide. At the heart of it, *Dungeon World* is extremely simple and incredibly dynamic, but it's not a catch-all system if we're going to be honest. There are quite a few things that it *doesn't* do: there are no skill ranks, for example. There's no way to tell how well your character can build a chair, or tie a sailor's knot. There are no difficulty modifiers for short range or long range, or rules for making a natural-20 "hail mary" roll. This *isn't* an oversight; this is *entirely* intentional. Sage Kobold Productions didn't write a game full of rules for precisely simulating a medieval world. There's plenty of other games you could pick up for that.

They put out this game so that we can sit around the table and have kick-ass *adventures* like in the books and movies. Characters don't have basket-weaving skills because that's *not what this game is about*. Instead of determining how *difficult* an action is going to be, *Dungeon World* asks you "*what is the price of failure?*" The moves are designed to push the action forward and lead to exciting sessions filled with consequences and tradeoffs, sacrifices and heroic actions. It's a game that *knows what it wants to do*, and focuses 100% on that goal. I think it's clear that it succeeded.

I hope that this booklet helped you out, and hopefully we've cleared up any confusion you had about the system. Just focus on building your in-game fiction. Ask questions like crazy. When in doubt, just go with your gut and say what makes sense, what the adventure demands, and whatever makes the characters' lives most interesting. If you and your players go into this game looking to take great risks and receive great rewards, you're going to have a blast. So get to it!

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: For continuing discussion and advice about this great game, we suggest :  
: joining the [official forums](http://apocalypse-world.com/forums), hosted at <http://apocalypse-world.com/forums> :  
: under "Hacks".

: You should also check out the [SomethingAwful Trad Games](http://forums.somethingawful.com) forums; it's :  
: full of great discussion and really chill people. The authors of this guide :  
: hang out there all the time! Find it at [forums.somethingawful.com](http://forums.somethingawful.com) :  
:.....

**Eon Fontes-May** wrote the stuff about mechanics, combat, and custom moves.

**Sean M. Dunstan** wrote the stuff about worldbuilding and campaign Fronts.

**Alex Leal** drew all the pictures.

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and **Emong** (for letting us include his cool compendium classes).

**Dungeon World** was written by **Sage LaTorra** and **Adam Koebel** and released by **Sage Kobold Productions**.

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