



Party of One

Rewards of the One-on-One Campaign

By Matt Click

A typical roleplaying game involves a group of people, usually comprised of a Game Master and a handful of players. Most tabletop RPGs assume a five-person gaming group because it allows for plenty of social interaction, creative teamwork, and fun out-of-character moments. But an underutilized and underappreciated option in roleplaying games is the one-on-one campaign, or the pairing of a Game Master and one player. Though this method requires more work and dedication from both the Game Master and the player, a one-on-one campaign can be a fun and rewarding experience for both of them.

In a one-on-one campaign, the player character is the hero, the true protagonist of the story being told. The focus of their narrative is tighter, compared to a five-person game. The plot of the campaign is driven solely by personal motivation, not by party consensus. The hero of a single-player game must take initiative and make crucial decisions on their own, thinking critically about their character and what they would do in a given situation, instead of deferring to someone else in the party. Additionally, a one-on-one campaign can be a great exercise for a Game Master looking to improve their improvisational skills, narrative techniques, and attention to detail, providing a somewhat pressure-free sandbox to test their mettle.

The unique dynamic of a one-on-one game should be explored by every GM, whether it's for a regular campaign or just a single session.

Creative Partnership

In many ways, a one-on-one game can be approached just like a traditional, multiplayer game. With a one-on-one campaign, though, the Game Master and the player can collaboratively create a world and a story just for the two of them. They can purposefully create aspects they both find enjoyable and intriguing.

While including input from the players is crucial in any campaign, it's downright imperative in a one-on-one game. If your player wants to play a cleric, work together to generate ideas for the role of their character's clergy. If your player wants to play a human, maybe they can help you develop the role of humans in your game world. Whether the player is providing a few notes or developing entire locations, characters, and cultures, sitting down and preparing the campaign can be a game in and of itself. The creative partnership is essential to create a campaign world both the player and the GM can get invested in.

At the very least, prior to planning your campaign, ask your player to write down a handful of things they think should play key roles. For instance, your player writes that they want to see Vikings, dragons, dwarves, and a legendary weapon. Now you begin work on a campaign featuring a clan of dwarven dragonslayers who send their best and brightest (the player character) to retrieve a legendary weapon of their people from Viking raiders.

Without the disparate preferences of a group to take into account, it's easier to fine-tune the game to suit both the Game Master and the player. Maybe you want a swashbuckling campaign, a niche genre that a group might not all be interested in. Or maybe you're itching for lots of in-depth character moments, and want an immersive, roleplay-focused campaign without worrying about the attention span of a group. Run the kinds of adventures you're unable to with your normal group, and don't hesitate to actively involve the player in the early stages—the campaign will be richer and more immersive as a result.

People and Plot

Memorable non-player characters enrich all good campaigns, but they are invaluable to a one-on-one game. In the absence of other players and their characters, NPCs serve to keep the game world from feeling too small or empty. Without a full party of PCs, non-player characters can become valuable allies, stalwart friends, and even full-fledged party members.

Remember that *people* drive plot. The story is progressed by the goals, motivations, and actions of characters. Populate your world with non-player characters who have strong motivations, interesting goals, and memorable characteristics. Fill the campaign with allies your player will love and villains they can't help but hate. To make it easier on yourself, task your player with developing their background and briefly describing important people and events in their backstory.

Now use those ideas to bring your NPCs to life. Are there people or factions connected to the player character that can play a key role in your campaign? Including those aspects of the player character's background will make the campaign that much more rewarding.

Perhaps a savage army is marching steadily towards the city where the player's estranged daughter is living. Or maybe the cleric's lifelong mentor and friend has gone missing, leaving nothing behind but a cryptic note. Make it personal—the best stories always are, and a one-on-one campaign provides the opportunity for more focused and personal quests.

Even seemingly insignificant non-player characters can become loyal allies. Hirelings and henchmen have been a staple of roleplaying games

since the beginning, and can be used to shore up a player character's weaknesses. Hiring a thief to deal with locks and traps, a priest to heal and support, or a fighter to aid in combat can provide more tactical options for combat-focused sessions. Consider giving control of the hiring exclusively to the player so they can plan and strategize to their heart's content.

Playing to the Hero's Strengths

A one-on-one campaign presents the GM with a rare challenge, but also a rare opportunity. With a single party member, encounters can be difficult to prepare and play out, but can also cater much more to the player character's strengths and background. Throw some undead at the player's vengeful cleric. Have the fighter with a sailing background encounter a pack of merfolk while aboard a coastal vessel. If the wizard just acquired a new area-of-effect spell, swarm them with some low-level kobolds to see that devastating spell in action. Challenge your rogue with a gauntlet of traps and enemies to stealthily avoid or assassinate.

Likewise, force your player to confront the weaknesses of their character. How would the cleric avoid or disable deadly traps in a dungeon? How would the half-orc barbarian fare at a nobleman's fancy dinner party? Don't restrict your player in what they can do; let the fighter sneak, let the wizard fight, let the barbarian talk their way out of an encounter. There's no need to promote party balance or distribution of skills and tasks with one player. They should feel comfortable taking risks they wouldn't take with a party, because they only have themselves to depend on.

For every encounter you plan in a one-on-one campaign, include three elements: terrain, features, and events. Terrain is the location of the encounter, and may help or hinder the party with movement and combat, like loose flagstones, ankle-deep fetid water, or a floor covered in glowing runes. Features are objects that the combatants can interact with and utilize during the encounter, like explosive barrels, a rack of spears, and a spiked pit in the middle of the room. Finally, events are moments that can turn the tide of the combat, providing a fun and challenging twist for your player, like when the room begins flooding with water, or fallen enemies rise from the dead.

The player will have to think creatively and utilize the environment to accomplish the tasks you confront them with. This makes for more challenging and, ultimately, more rewarding encounters. This applies to dungeons, traps, and social obstacles as well. A hero in a one-on-one campaign truly gets to shine, both by doing what they do best, and by overcoming their weaknesses.

Using One-on-One Games Effectively

The Game Master doesn't necessarily need to craft an entire campaign around the one-on-one experience. A one-on-one session can be used effectively in conjunction with a group campaign for side-missions, origin stories, and personal quests. Doing so can enrich the campaign as a whole by providing individual players with the unique opportunity to truly immerse themselves in their characters without the need to share the spotlight.

Side-missions, for instance, can illustrate what individual player characters do during downtime or dreaded party splits. Perhaps the bard wishes to earn some coin by entertaining at a nobleman's party. Or maybe the druid seeks solace in the wilds in order to reconnect themselves with the primal energies of nature. Side-missions provide an opportunity to do just that.

Likewise, origin stories can help players further develop their characters by narrating an important event in their backstory. These background tales also give Game Masters valuable insight into their player characters' backstories, and provide plenty

of fodder for more personally rewarding plot hooks and quest lines. For instance, by exploring the military background of the party's cleric, the Game Master stumbles upon the notion of including that character's superior officer as a non-player character in the campaign.

Personal quests provide players with the opportunity for their characters to pursue personal goals outside of the party: the fighter undergoing sword training, the rogue contacting a black market guild, the cleric convening with their deity. These intimate, character-focused moments can be lost or overlooked in a group game. But they are the central, driving force in a one-on-one session, and can be used as a great tool to bring players closer to their characters.

In addition, one-on-one sessions are an invaluable tool in introducing new players and young gamers to the hobby, affording them a chance to explore the rules and boundaries of the game without the pressure of an entire party depending on them. In a one-on-one session, someone new to the hobby can acclimate themselves to the concept of roleplaying—of thinking, speaking, and acting like their character—rather than approaching it like a video game. A fresh player with a few one-on-one sessions under their belt will better know what to expect, and will be more familiar with their character's capabilities and the expectations of their fellow party members.

A player contemplating a new character can stretch their roleplaying muscles and feel out the possibilities with a one-on-one session. Maybe they've never played an arcane caster before, but doesn't want to commit to anything permanent. Likewise, a Game Master brainstorming new homebrew rules or narrative techniques can attempt them free of pressure in a one-on-one session, using the game as a "training ground" of sorts.

Giving One-on-Ones a Chance

Nothing really beats a group of friends sitting around the table, rolling dice, cracking jokes, and creating worlds together. But the one-on-one campaign should not be discounted, and can easily

be used alongside a group campaign. One-on-one sessions can be incredibly fun and rewarding—a challenge that improves the skills and techniques of both Game Master and player.

Many Game Masters shy away from the idea of running one-on-ones. Oftentimes, a party will entertain itself, joking and roleplaying during lulls or downtime. Groups of people are far more likely to stumble upon trouble or make their own fun than a single person on their own. With a one-on-one, there's just Game Master and player, and if the Game Master is consulting their notes, preparing an encounter, drawing a map, etc., the player might find themselves twiddling their thumbs.

This is why a one-on-one campaign requires a bit more effort, energy, and patience from all involved. Those lulls, those moments of silence, the slight discomfort of roleplaying with just one other person, are part of the challenge, and ultimately, part of the reward. Overcoming those initial, awkward hurdles can lead to plenty of fun and adventure, and will enrich each campaign to come.

Grab a member of your game group and see if they want to up their game or try something new. One-on-ones are great for couples and families as well, providing a low-stress, intimate space to play the game and immerse oneself.

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