

Dungeons and Drudges: a game about an invisible class

2018 Golden Cobra Challenge

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Drudge: a person who has to work hard at boring and unpleasant tasks and who is not respected by other people.

The Cambridge English Dictionary

In the world of dungeons, there are masters, there are minions, there are monsters, and there are adventurers.

But there is also an ignored legion of janitors, maintenance workers, beast handlers, cavern decorators, and scullions. These drudges are called upon to keep the hall torches sputtering, the doors creaking, the traps springing, and the skeletons rattling . . . not to mention cleaning up after all those fireball explosions, acid splashes, and bloody sword battles that are constantly fouling up the master's lair.

Dungeons and Drudges is a darkly humorous look at an unseen, unheralded working class. The game is about the absurd demands placed upon these laborers, the surreal work environments they face, and their heroic struggles to earn respect.

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Players: You need 2-7 players. One will take on the role of the master, and the others will become the dungeon drudges.

Duration: approximately 2 hours

Requirements

- A timer.
- Pens and paper. Players will want these to keep track of names, details, tasks, revelations, grievances, and grudges.
- 3 x 5 cards. You need the same number of cards as there are players. On one side of one card, write the number 1. On the next card, write the number 2. Repeat until the cards are all numbered. Shuffle this deck.
- For the play space, you need one or more rooms. It is best if the room has random mundane objects that can be safely tapped as improvised props. Outdoor spaces can also be used. The game can be situated in a single location, or it can move to different places during the session.

Safety

Be respectful of property. Do not do anything that would harm the environments, locations, or non-disposable objects you come across.

The game aims for a grotesquely comical tone. The power dynamics of the master-drudge relationship are completely out of whack. However, in the cavernous recesses of her mind, the master realizes that the custodial work of the dungeon must be done by someone: If the drudges quit, revolt, or are otherwise eliminated, the master may have to do those menial jobs herself, and she doesn't want that to happen! The master may threaten, rebuke, penalize, and insult the drudges, but any violence in the game is strictly limited to descriptions of actions occurring "off stage."



Physical contact between players should be non-existent or minimal. If the game play creates a situation that is in any way unsafe for a player, call "cut" and rewind. Safety is everyone's responsibility.

How to play

Dungeons and Drudges recounts the rise and fall of a relationship between a group of dungeon workers and their master. At the start of the game, decide who will play the master.

During the game, use the environment creatively: Players have the power to define the imagined universe through their words and actions. A simple chair can be used as a throne in one scene, a magic-driven vacuum cleaner in another, and a seething cauldron in another.

If no prop is conveniently at hand, players can pantomime and use their dialogue to describe what they are holding or what they can see around themselves. If, for example, one player says that we are in a giant crypt filled with coffins, then we should all act with that as an established fact for the scene.

Details about the characters and facts about the world will emerge over the course of the game. Initially, you will have many questions about who your character is, your relationship to other characters, and the nature of the dungeon.

Don't let this uncertainty or ambiguity worry you: All the players will have ample opportunities to fill in details in the process of working through the scenes.

Who's your master?

At the start of the game, collectively decide upon the nature of the master, a name, the setting of the master's domicile, and the basic architecture. If this is your first encounter with *Dungeons and Drudges*, you might consider an archetypal set-up such as:

- An evil magician (Sabrina the Mauve) living in a large stone tower located in a mysterious swamp;
- A mad scientist (Doctor Electroplasm) living in a vast laboratory located outside a booming metropolis;
- A vampire queen (Vladina the Insidious) living in a decaying castle in the Romanian mountains;
- A ghoul (Whisthorn) hoarding treasure within a network of barrow mounds;
- A giant king (Grockle) living in a sprawling underground cave complex in the barren northern hills.



Game Drudgeries

To play through *Dungeons and Drudges*, you will pass through 5 scenes, each of which involves a sequence of repeated steps or drudgeries.

Drudgery 1: Setting the stage

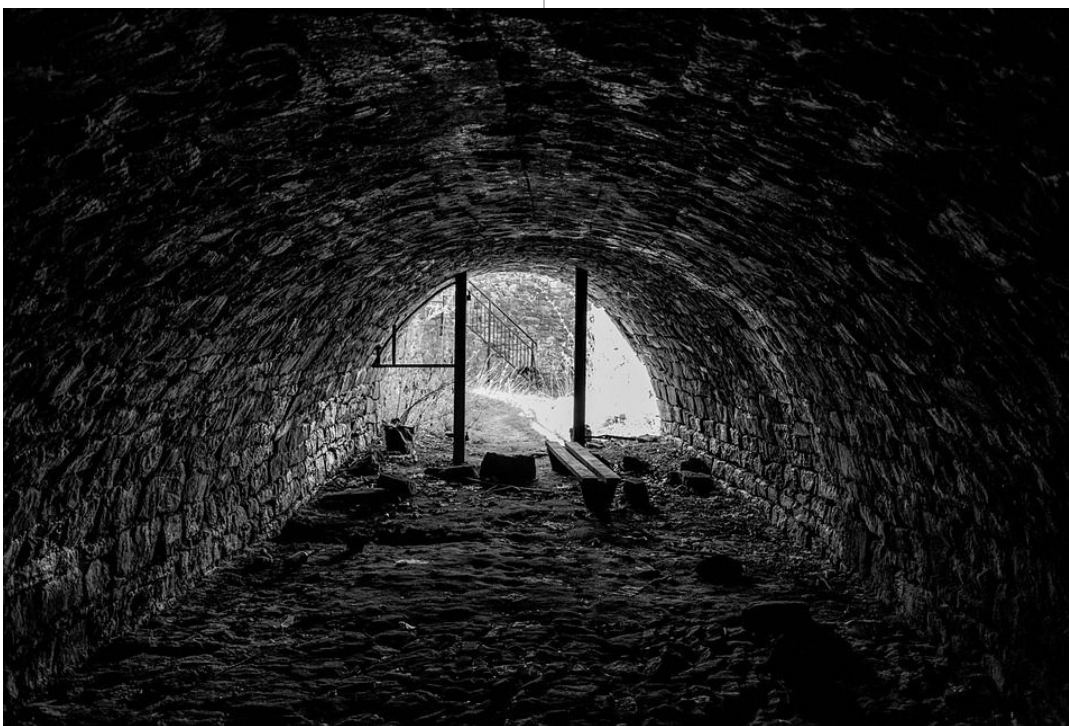
The set-up of the first scene is prescribed (see below), but for each of the four scenes thereafter, do the following:

- Shuffle the deck of numbered cards and deal them out.
- Beginning with the player holding the number 1 card and following in numerical

order, each player answers a designated question and thus sets the stage for the role-playing to follow.

- If there are fewer than seven players, go back to the number 1 player after everyone has had a turn. Continue responding to questions until all seven questions have been answered.

In answering these questions, be specific, but do not elaborate on your responses. Allow the role-playing of the scene to add muscle to the skeleton you are creating. Take notes as the other players respond, and use the answers to propel the scene.



The Seven Questions

1. **Where is the scene set?** It could be in the kitchen, beneath the cemetery, on the drawbridge, within the treasury, or at some other place in or around the dungeon.
2. **What conflict, dramatic situation, or accident has led up to this scene?** Maybe some rude adventurers have destroyed a precious artifact. Maybe the green slime that is such a crucial part of the interior decor is turning brown. Maybe the drudges have come across the master in an awkward, compromising situation.
3. **The master's mask: What is the master trying, somewhat unsuccessfully, to hide in this scene?**
4. **The drudges' mask: What are the drudges trying, somewhat unsuccessfully, to hide in this scene?**
5. **What is one thing the drudges hope to accomplish in this scene?**
6. **What is one thing the master hopes to accomplish in this scene?**
7. **What is one key prop which will be a defining feature of the scene?** Call everyone's attention to an object at hand and state what it is. For example, you might turn a floor lamp into a magic idol with prophetic powers. Or perhaps it is a sarcophagus with a foul odor of burnt cookies wafting out of it. Or maybe it has become a gross mess left by a dragon suffering from an intestinal bug.

The Job Interview

For the initial scene of *Dungeons and Drudges*, you should forego “The Seven Questions” and instead rely upon the following pre-set answers to those questions.

1. You are in front of a help wanted sign located just outside the dungeon.
2. The master’s previous drudges went on strike and were subsequently fired. Now, there is a desperate need for replacements.
3. The master knows that there are significant safety, sanitation, labor law, and building code issues with the dungeon.
4. The drudges have all left different jobs due to various embarrassing mistakes and/or negative performance reviews.
5. The drudges’ main concern is to land a job . . . any job. But they also want an employer who knows their names and who will show them at least an iota of respect.
6. The master wants to spend the least amount possible on the new hires.
7. A chair, a lamp, or any other convenient object is now an antique, worn-down statue of some forgotten figure. Everyone views the statue differently; it mirrors an aspect of themselves. A drudge sees a memorial to the unheralded workers of the world and believes the figure is holding part of a broom handle (sadly missing the lower half). A wizard sees a legendary mage waving a wand. A warrior believes the statue is a famed barbarian princess brandishing part of a sword. Etc.

Drudgery 2: Role-Playing

Set the timer to 12 minutes. Now, what you say and do is what your character says and does. Play through the scene, working to fill in details of your character and the work environment. Do your part to move the spotlight around to other players. If you get stumped for something to say or do, think about all those boring tasks—scooping litter boxes, changing diapers, fixing locks, dumping the trash—that are part of everyday life and translate those into the game setting. Start the timer, and end when the timer expires.

Drudgery 3: Pillow Talk

It is evening, and the master and drudges put their heads on their pillows. They reflect on the mistakes made during the day and on the small victories achieved. They also ponder their hopes for the future. Starting with one player and working around the group, state what your characters’ private thoughts are as they drift into dreamland. When all characters have contributed to “Pillow Talk,” go to the next scene and repeat the 3 Drudgeries.

Quitting time!

In setting up and playing out the fifth and final scene, consider some type of dramatic finale: a retirement party, a strike, a revolt, a mass layoff, or some other suitably satisfying, melodramatic, or emotional end to *Dungeons and Drudges*.



Acknowledgements

I hope you enjoy this game, and I hope the experience will remind you of those real laborers whose work makes your life more manageable, more beautiful, and more serene.

When working on this project, a few precursors were in the forefront of my mind. Paul Czege’s *My Life with Master* blazed a new trail by bringing an unheralded class of characters (the minions) into the spotlight. Robert Bohl’s *Demihumans* and *Misspent Youth* have opened my eyes to the way that games can allow us to imagine the lives of those who are marginalized and ignored.

Finally, I owe a deep debt of gratitude to the Strategy and Role-Playing Game Club at Trinity Preparatory School. Their willingness vigorously to playtest, critique, support, and encourage has turned this project from a vague, bedraggled idea into a living game.