

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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The Player Pack

By Ed Greenwood

*How and where and when did the **Forgotten Realms** start? What's at the heart of Ed Greenwood's creation, and how does the Grand Master of the Realms use his own world when he runs **D&D** adventures for the players in his campaign? "Forging the Forgotten Realms" is a weekly feature wherein Ed answers all those questions and more.*

In the early 1990s, I ran several short "mini" Realms campaigns at the public library I worked at. Neither I nor the players wanted to waste a lot of time getting started, so I provided pregenerated player characters with backstories, and a starting direction for play in the form of a charter for the PC adventuring band. As the Company of the Dragon (or the Wyvern, Basilisk, Cockatrice, Falcon, or whatever) they began working together somewhere in Cormyr, with a small, simple mission they had to fulfill in return for that charter. This task was centered on a mini-dungeon or a simple mystery to unravel—something that should keep even a dawdling party busy for no more than five play sessions, but by the end of that time earn them some surviving foes and half a dozen hints for further adventures (leaving the choice of those adventures up to them). Novice players often got a "haunted" old castle keep or a ruined country mansion (haunted by ghosts, rumor insisted, but more often actually by outlaws aboveground and monsters below). More experienced players often found their characters caught in the midst of two feuding noble families or a couple of local brigand gangs involved in smuggling, kidnapping, and the like.

Because of the need to get right into hearty play in a hurry, I prepared a Player Pack for each person in the group. These bundles of information can be a good startup aid for any campaign, even one in which the players roll up their own characters at or before the first play session, and the DM goes to work after that first foray, though doing it before actual play starts would probably be best.

The term might sound rather grand, but each Player Pack is simply a few personalized sheets of paper stapled or clipped together that a DM hands to a particular player (keeping a reference copy, of course).

On those pages are a quick overview of what skills the character knows, family heritage (any "important" relatives, plus where known kin live), any local friends or enemies, tutors/former bosses/current bosses (for those PCs who have "day jobs"), plus interesting stuff that person has heard (old legends of buried treasure, hushed-up local scandals, other adventure hooks), important NPCs the character has met (local rulers or envoys, sages or wizards), nearby temples and shrines, and the like.

Ugh, sounds like work!

Well, it needn't be formal or exhaustive, and "point form" (bulleted sentences) layout will do. It can even include false or partial information (PCs might not know the truth, especially if they're naïve younglings). Ideally, a player will have a week or so to read it over early on in the campaign.

If a character happens to own a map in-game, by all means include a good representation of it in the Player Pack for that character; but if you create a map especially for someone's Player Pack, it needn't be more than a crude, hand-drawn thing with arrows pointing off the page ("this road leads to X," or "the big city of Y lies somewhere distant in this direction"). The sort of thing that someone might quickly draw in sand or dirt or scratch on the top of a tavern table—or that someone who's never traveled far from home might carry in one's head. One little finesse here: Every such map should have at least one tiny detail not on other players' maps or on any "official" maps. Knowledge unique to that character, usually very small-scale. (The same thing applies to adventure hooks in the various Player Packs; there can be overlap, but not every character will know about the same treasure tales and rumors of illicit goings-on.)

Over the decades, many DMs have complained to me about their spending weeks detailing a village or hamlet where play is to begin (complete with a local dungeon), only to see players make their characters very quickly depart that place in search of bigger, grander adventures.

Well, one way to subtly try to make players tarry a little longer in a spot than they might otherwise is to map this starting locale well. (It can be a small area, perhaps just a handful of buildings clustered at a crossroads or where a trade road fords or bridges a river, so building up gorgeous detail doesn't have to take long.) If the place where characters happen to be has more detail, it *matters* more, psychologically.

It might, after all, end up as the place the PCs ride back home to in triumph, as veteran successful adventurers, to best the local bully who derided them, defeat an oppressor they didn't have an earthly chance of thwarting when they were young and green, and so on. If it's going to serve that function, it would be nice if players could really picture it (and not just as "Remember that cool tower in that movie? Well, it looks like that, only . . .").

One way I helped to put that feeling of "it matters" into their heads was to draw artistic maps, right down to the last tree, that had no key numbers or words on them at all, just a compass rose. Then I would photocopy them darker and darker, so I could see them through a sheet of plain paper on a light table—and then put my map key numbers and information on that sheet of plain paper. In a group of Player Packs, everyone might have a map of the same area, but with each map notated specifically to account for different features or facts the owner of that map knows about. This limited-information technique works for neighborhoods in large cities like Waterdeep, too, not just hamlets and villages. One PC might know only that there's a "crazy guy" living above the fishmonger, while another PC knows he "used to be a wizard, until that curse got cast on him."

A Player Pack also needs to have class- or skill-specific information (for example, if a character is a member of the clergy, it really helps roleplaying if that player is informed of not just the dos and don'ts of a religion, but a simple prayer or two, and any commandments or goals that senior clerics have laid upon the character). Anything you can quickly note down in a Player Pack that keeps players thinking in-game rather than consulting rulebooks or asking the DM metagame questions during play is a good thing, especially if play time is limited.

Player Packs are an easy way to quickly customize any published play setting, to "make it your own" without large divergences from published lore—it doesn't matter what the rulebook says about Tethyr or Westgate, because *this* character has been there, and this is what that person *knows* (written down so the player doesn't have to remember everything all the time). The "real" Tethyr or Westgate, as this character is well aware, is rather different from what it says in a book that might have been written by someone who's never actually visited those places. (And in the differences between the Player Pack version and the published setting lies a lot of room for a DM to keep players exploring and guessing and roleplaying, rather than relying on what's printed in something they bought and can consult often.)

These days, I don't often use Player Packs, because I like describing things and speaking as NPCs and letting the players explore in their ways and at their pace, but that doesn't negate their usefulness to a DM faced with a time squeeze.

And on a grander scale, think of a Player Pack as the script for a movie in which the actors can take over the story after it gets going. Not to mention a great memento, twenty or thirty years later. . . .

About the Author

Ed Greenwood is the man who unleashed the *Forgotten Realms* setting on an unsuspecting world. He works in libraries, and he writes fantasy, science fiction, horror, mystery, and romance stories (sometimes all in the same novel), but he is happiest when churning out Realmslore, Realmslore, and more Realmslore. He still has a few rooms in his house in which he has space left to pile up papers.