Creative DMing and Playing Techniques in Neverwinter Nights

A Neverwinter Connections guide by Carlo

The contents of the following guide was drawn in part from forum discussions at the DM-Friendly Initiative (DMFI) Bioware guild. Thanks go to those who contributed their ideas. Comments and suggestions can be left at the new DMFI forum on Neverwinter Connections.

For DMs, it is assumed that you already have the fundamental skills for using the DM client in Neverwinter Nights (NWN), including exposure to some common in-game DM tools. Those seeking to build or further practice their in-game DMing skills are encouraged to take advantage of the Hall of Fame tutorial module DMFI 101: So You Want To Be A DM for the original NWN (1.69), or the updated and expanded DMFI 101: Enhanced Edition for NWN:EE.

Going Beyond the Game Engine

Creative DMing techniques allow you to go beyond how the NWN engine resolves in-game situations. This opens up many more possibilities for a DM to convey additional information about the environment, modify existing content, and create new situations. It includes a wide range of possible actions, ranging from simple and straightforward ones you can do “on-the-fly”, to complex new capabilities that may require additional preparation before a session.

This guide will discuss three main types of techniques:

- Providing descriptions of the environment (areas, objects, creatures) to PCs, both for extra flavor and to call attention to key details
- Applying the results of PC actions going beyond the game engine, including using appropriate skill and ability checks
- Simulating the effects of spells/abilities not included in NWN
How these are actually used (or not) in-game will be a reflection of your group’s preferred playing and DMing style. That said, there are a number of common techniques used in DM-led games that should add to immersion and allow the players to exercise more choice and creativity in approaching the situations they face. Choosing and implementing the techniques that work well for your gaming group can add a whole other dimension to your collective in-game experience.

**Basic technique: Environmental descriptions (broadcast and targeted)**

The most common creative DMing technique is providing players with additional descriptions of areas, objects, and creatures. Even in modules that have extensive custom descriptions of objects, or descriptive text triggers placed in areas, nothing can beat the specificity and omnipresence of a DM for providing more information about an environment. DM-furnished descriptions help make the NWN environment truly become dynamic and alive, in a way that scripting and in-game effects cannot match over the course of an adventure, because they are always responsive to what a player is trying to do – even if there is just a negative result (“You see nothing odd about the object.”)

Here are some examples of common situations calling for a DM-provided description (the chat channel used is in brackets, as it would appear in a chat log):

- **PC Bobicus: [Talk]** That throne looks suspicious to me. *carefully examines the throne and the floor around it*
  
  **DM: [Tell]** While the floor around the throne has a layer of dust on it, the throne's seat appears polished and clean.

In the above example, the DM takes the initiative to respond to Bobicus’ publicly emoted action in the Talk channel with a description in a Tell. In a later section, how DMs can choose to respond to these types of player actions is discussed in more detail.

If a player wants to be sure that a DM will respond to (or at least be aware of) their actions, it is a good practice to use the DM channel – or send a Tell to a specific DM – to describe what their PC is doing:
• PC Bobicus: [DM] While in this area, I will continually be checking the ground for tracks and trying to identify what they are.

DM: [Tell] You see a faint group of humanoid tracks heading east into the forest; you cannot tell what kind of creature made them, other than that they appear roughly human-sized.

• PC Janeyre: [Tell] I'm looking at the gate guard closely, observing his reactions.

DM: [Tell] The guard has a nervous expression and appears to be sweating.

DMs can also proactively “set the stage” for an area by giving PCs general impressions or more detailed information about it. This can simply be background “flavor text” or could be designed to convey crucial information to the party, for example by introducing a plot hook. The information can be described in a broadcast to the entire group via the Talk or Shout channel, or instead selectively provided via Tell based on an individual PC’s background, class or skills. Examples:

• DM: [Talk] ((outside the window you all hear a screeching noise rising and falling, as if caused by a group of raucous crows)) [Party broadcast]
• DM: [Tell] Your sensitive elven nose detects a sickening, rotting stench coming from the corridor ahead. [Elf]
• DM: [Tell] As you enter the tavern, you notice three richly-dressed merchants in the far corner. The one dressed in red has a visibly bulging purse hanging at their waist. [Rogue]
• DM: [Tell] As you approach the stopped caravan, you observe that the guards, all clad in poorly-maintained patchwork armor, look uneasy and are facing the woods to the west, with their bows close at hand. [Fighter]
• DM: [Tell] You notice that the normal forest sounds have ceased to your east, as if something has disturbed the animals there. [Druid]

Note on format: a common way for a DM to convey descriptions to groups is to use double parentheses around the text, to set it apart from other chat messages. However, that's a matter of style, so using asterisks, slashes or other methods (like the Shout channel) can also work.

One caveat with this descriptive technique is that it should not, under most circumstances, be used to tell players what to think, feel (in emotional terms) or
do with their PCs. Being told by a DM that their PC feels fear, happiness, etc. upon seeing something can take control and agency away from the player; it may also not match up with what a PC actually would feel in a particular situation. As just one example, perhaps a dwarf has a grudge against giants and is in fact happy to see one, in order to try and get a chance for revenge, rather than being frightened of it. For a DM, descriptions of the environment are an indispensable tool to enhance the depth and detail of the campaign world, allowing you to present more information about it and bring it alive, rather than telling players how they should be reacting to it.

Intermediate technique: Applying the results of PC actions beyond the game engine

Once players understand they are not necessarily limited to in-engine, hard-coded knowledge and actions in the gameworld they inhabit, they are able to think more creatively and broaden their range of potential choices. (Whether these will be smart choices is another matter...)

Player actions that go beyond the NWN engine – ones they could not otherwise do on their own – can be signaled using in-game emotes broadcast to everyone, and/or via communication with a DM on the DM channel or via Tell. Sometimes it helps if players do both, to make sure their companions and the DM are aware what they are attempting to do. DMs then can adjudicate the actions, if necessary, by providing players with additional information, or changing the in-game environment to reflect the results.

Some PC emoted actions of course may not call for DM intervention and are used purely for descriptive purposes.

- Bobicus: [Talk] *slowly strokes on his beard and nods his head, deep in thought*
- Janeyre: [Talk] *makes a face behind Bobicus, mimicking his gestures*

Other actions may require DM intervention to be applied in-game, for example when attempting to swim to the other side of a large stream or to climb a hillside that is impassable in the engine. The DM will need to decide how to adjudicate such actions, either by using skill/ability checks or through other methods. A DM
may, for example, decide that a particular PC would automatically succeed or fail at a particular task and apply the result. In the above examples, a success would involve the DM “jumping” the PC to the new location they were trying to reach.

In many cases, however, the result of an action – initiated by either the player or the DM – can logically and fairly be determined by a skill or ability check. The NWN engine does many such checks automatically – detect traps, or hide/move silently vs. listen/spot checks, for example. This is a strength of the computer gaming medium, as the action does not have to stop every few steps in a dungeon in order to make die rolls for everyone. However, the automatic application of such checks is limited to whatever is scripted into the module. In many cases this means that results from even basic actions, such as a PC listening at a door, are not possible without DM intervention. Skill and ability checks, used logically, can therefore allow the players to attempt (almost) anything.

A Primer on Skill and Ability Checks in NWN

One does not have to own pen-and-paper (PnP) D&D manuals, or constantly refer to the d20 SRD, to understand and employ skill and ability checks. NWN uses a subset of PnP rules that functions essentially the same as any d20-based game. Below is a summary of how that works conceptually, with the following section explaining in more detail the mechanics of how to apply it in NWN. The NWNWiki also has an entry on skills specific to NWN that may be useful to review.

Skill/ability check: roll a d20, adding the roll to your skill ranks (or ability modifier). Some skills you can use untrained (0 skill ranks), while with others you can't even make an attempt. If the "untrained" concept isn't clear, consider a person trying to play a lute – which would use the "Perform" skill in NWN – who has never picked one up before; they will inevitably fail to play a song. Conversely, skills such as “Listen” may have 0 ranks, but unless the PC is deaf they should have at least a chance to hear something.

The Difficulty Class (DC) of the task is what you are attempting to beat with the d20 roll + ability modifier. Something of average difficulty is a DC 10, for example. This applies to all skills and it is up to the judgment of the DM at what DC a particular task should be set. For a highly skilled PC, a relatively difficult task (DC 15) could even be automatic, if he/she has more skill ranks than the DC. (Note that typically a roll of a natural 1 is considered a critical fail, regardless of the
modifier, and a natural 20 an automatic success.) Some actions will be inherently very difficult because of their nature, even if theoretically possible. For example, trying to convince an NPC to do something that is perceived as illogical and a threat (“You really want to jump off that balcony while blindfolded...it’ll be fine...don’t worry...trust me.”) might have a DC 30 persuade check associated with it.

Situational modifiers of otherwise common actions should also be taken into account. For example, a rogue trying to listen for movement behind a door (assessed by the DM as normally a DC 10) could have a -4 penalty (in other words, become a DC 14) if the rogue’s companions, instead of silently waiting, are moving around and talking nearby. In NWN, it normally makes sense for DMs to come up with a final DC for a task that in a common-sense way takes everything into account, rather than make a big list of modifiers and then systematically (and slowly) apply them.

If a task logically falls within an existing NWN skill, or close to it, then a direct comparison can be made for a check. If a specific skill is not available for the proposed action, one common example being climbing or swimming, a way around this is to use appropriate ability checks. Multiple ability checks may be used, too, depending on the situation. For instance, with climbing, PCs may be required to do both a Strength and Dexterity check if it is a relatively long climb. Dexterity represents a PC's ability to place their feet properly, not lose their balance, etc., while Strength is used to represent their being able to muscle their way up and not become tired. For a short climb, perhaps one or the other ability could be picked for the check, representing what the PC would be relying on most to succeed. Applying situational modifiers again is important; for example, climbing in the rain would naturally make the surface slicker and more difficult, adding to the DC.

The process may sound complicated at first, but it all boils down establishing a reasonable DC for the task and then rolling a d20 with skill/ability modifiers to see if it exceeds the DC, for success. A DM can decide which skill/ability to use, or this can be suggested by the player. The DM should normally always determine the final DC, however.
Mechanics for handling checks in-game

The starting point for handling skill checks is the same: either a player proposes an out-of-engine action to be adjudicated, or the DM initiates a check based on what is happening in the area. An example of the latter is the party entering a particular section of a dungeon where monsters are gathered up ahead; the players do not know this, so the DM is the one to initiate a Listen check for the entire party.

Who does what, in terms of taking responsibility for executing the mechanics, can be handled by different DMs and player group as a matter of style. For example, some players may want to roll their checks personally, while other groups have the DM do all the rolling. DMs, if not rolling themselves for a check, will need to tell the individual players to make a roll when necessary.

Normally, in-game DM and player tools can be used for the mechanics. Some community modules use the DMFI Wands and Widgets package, which includes both DM and player tools (dicebags) for rolling various checks. If you are DMing in a persistent world (PW) module, it should have similar in-game tools for making these types of checks; many PWs have used the DMFI package as a starting point for their own custom ones.
In any case, the in-game tool is activated and the menu option for rolling the selected skill/ability check is then selected, with results normally broadcast privately to the player(s) involved and the DM. Note that the DC is not itself included in the roll, being the province of the DM, so although the roll is known the DM still will determine the result. That said, respecting the results of natural 1s (failures) and 20s (successes) is normal – and often a fun chance to apply the sometimes spectacular and creative results, either way.

One creative use for skill/ability checks that are player-initiated is for (voluntary) use to determine their PC’s roleplayed actions. If the PC has poor wisdom, for example, an ability check might be used by the player to see if they go ahead and do or say something unwise in a particular situation. In another example, a bard PC might self-check his Perform skill when playing a song for the group, then describe it as a masterful rendition (if successful) or as hesitant and a bit discordant (if not). Because these actions do not materially affect other characters, the DM does not need to get involved in resolving them. This practice, while certainly optional, can sometimes help provide an objective method of resolving a gap between a player’s meta-knowledge (“that would be dumb and risky”) compared to their unwise PC’s perspective (“what could go wrong?”)

**DM considerations for generating and applying results**

The simplest (and usually quickest) method is to have the DM roll skill checks, if the DM is going to adjudicate a result. In-game tools should allow checks to be made for an individually targeted PC/NPC, all PCs in an area, or all NPCs in an area. Results for each PC are normally automatically communicated only to the PC involved and the DM, not to anyone else. This has the advantage of keeping the in-game mechanics largely in the background, while still giving the players feedback on how their PCs are doing, and allowing the DM to exercise judgment as needed on the results of each check.

In adjudicating results, I believe it is most important to be: a) logical; b) consistent; and c) aware of the needs of the game. Regarding the last point, if a skill check is relatively easy and failing it would mean drastic consequences for the party, perhaps the DM will decide to fudge an extremely poor result, or just assume that the check passes without rolling for it. This falls into the realm of
general DM judgment. Along similar lines, a DM may judge that a particular physical barrier is impassable, rather than allow a PC’s swim, climb or other check to succeed, because the module is not designed to allow passage and success would effectively derail the game.

If always rolling checks in a particular situation feels disruptive or slow, for example repeatedly listening at dungeon doors, sometimes DMs may decide to look at the relevant skill ranks a PC has and use them for the basis of the expected result - a kind of a "law of averages" approach. For routine situations, this can work well and be logical, especially when a spectacular success or failure is unlikely.

Turning to how a DM can apply player actions to the in-game world, the powers of the DM client and a module’s DM tools allow for various methods. Some examples:

- Movement actions such as swimming and climbing are normally just a matter of DM-jumping the player to the desired spot, if the action is successful. If a climb action is a failure, DM tools (for example the DMFI emote wand) can be used to make the PC fall down and then the DM could even apply damage (for example via the DMFI wand of affliction) to reflect any injuries sustained, if the fall is a long one.
- With Persuade, Intimidate and other roleplay (RP) type skills, if they are employed successfully, the result will naturally change how the DM plays the targeted NPC. A failed check might also make an NPC more hostile, at the DM’s discretion.
- Actions that change the environment may be reflected by creating or destroying placeable objects. Fires are a common example; a DM can create a flame VFX placeable object, or destroy an existing campfire. There are also DM tools for visual and sound FX.

Playing around and exploring these capabilities can be easily done in-game, for example in the above-linked DMF1 101 tutorial module, and DMs should always familiarize themselves with their module’s Creator palettes to know what they have available for placeables and effects.
Caveats and tips for making skill/ability checks

As a DM, it is recommended to initiate skill checks judiciously, because they do slow down the game and distract attention. Sometimes it is necessary to hit the Pause button to make sure you can apply the results, as would be the case in the above example of a group Listen check for monsters ahead; otherwise, by the time you informed the PCs of the results, they might already have moved ahead and started the encounter. The result of the check in this case is important to the party’s knowledge and future actions, so the brief pause should not be too disruptive, but you can see how doing a lot of checks could become annoying.

One good practical rule is that the amount of time allocated for the roleplaying of particular skill checks should generally be proportional to their importance in the game. An important or challenging situation might get played out to the fullest, with pauses if necessary, while a relatively unimportant situation might simply cause the DM to roll the dice, report a one-line result, and move on.

If a DM already knows the PCs’ major skills, these can often be taken into account without the players having to do anything beyond their normal roleplay. This could mean providing a ranger with a more detailed description of a wilderness area, making NPCs more receptive when interacting with a PC that has high persuade skill or charisma, etc. DMing this way logically rewards the player for their skill/class/feat/ability selection, while also keeping the game moving along.

Situations may also arise with PCs wanting to use skill/ability checks on other PCs. Be very careful with this. It can be fun when reflecting the objective results of a situation – for example an arm wrestling contest, which after a buildup of trash talking is resolved by both players doing a Strength roll to see who wins. However, a player should never be able to tell another player what to do/believe, simply because they roll high on Persuade. From a game system perspective, these skills were designed to be used on the environment or NPCs, not other players.

NPCs should be appropriately affected by a PC’s stated use of their RP-based skills, but situational modifiers can (and should) logically reflect the players’ actual in-game behavior. This means there is not just a die roll with no context. For example, a Persuade check to let a motley group of adventurers into a Royal Ball if they are not properly attired should be difficult, unless they have a really good story to tell the guards.
Bonus basic technique: changing names and descriptions of objects

A DM has the power to modify objects – creatures, items, placeables – in the world by renaming them and changing their description, for example by using the DMFI naming wand. This is one concrete way of making these objects special or changing the environment in real time, usually in response to PC actions. A DM can also create what appear to be new objects in this way. Examples:

- A previously generic “Temple Priest” NPC is given a specific name after a conversation with the PCs, in which they learn it. (To make the NPC’s name change permanent across a server reset, it would also need to be made to the module in the toolset.)
- An important letter is presented to the PCs, with its contents in the description. Mechanically, the DM can create an existing letter or similar item and then change its description (and name, if necessary). Note that PC inventory items will retain their changes without further action needed.
- Inventory items can be modified as the result of player actions. That important letter the PC was carrying while swimming the river becomes “Soggy letter” and the description is changed to say the ink has run all over it. Oops!
Remember that the underlying statistics or characteristics of the object will not change – calling a sword an axe does nothing in that regard – but this can be a very useful technique for adding content that is primarily descriptive in nature.

Also remember that items that may be non-functional in the engine – in other words, have no scripted effects attached to them – can still be valuable in-game. Grappling hooks, rope, shovels, small mirrors attached to poles, or anything else that makes sense can be created, renamed/described, and then used as equipment. The item doesn't have to do anything (via scripting) other than be a prop with a good description. The PCs will be able to use such equipment to good effect, via DM adjudication of their actions, giving them a more realistic sense of control over the environment and increasing immersion. This is also the case for items that may have pre-scripted uses in certain places in the module, but it does not necessarily contain checks for them in every possible place.

**Complex technique: DM-adjudicated spells and spell-like abilities**

On a more advanced level, to broaden and deepen player experience, DMs may consider allowing PnP spells or similar abilities in their campaigns, beyond what is included in the NWN engine. That said, no DM should feel forced into allowing players to be able to cast a particular spell (or use a spell-like effect), simply because it's listed somewhere in a Wizards of the Coast sourcebook.

Some custom spells or spell-like abilities can be installed into a module via a hak or scripting. Whether pre-installed or solely implemented by a DM, however, DMs and builders should be aware that adding new spells can create balance issues in their modules and campaigns. If a spell is desired and can be added to the module in the toolset with a reasonable level of functionality and minimal effort, that may well be preferred, rather than have the DM spend their time manually adjudicating spell results.

The mechanics of spellcasting and its results are also easier and less open to abuse with hardcoded spells. If they are added via hak, then normally they can occupy a spell slot. Otherwise players also have to be trusted to empty their in-engine spell slots when substituting the “new” DM-adjudicated spells, or to populate them with (relatively) useless spells and cast those as a substitute. A
close-knit gaming group may allow for this, while a PW environment may not. If you do have DM-adjudicated spells allowed, make sure at minimum to have the players using them submit a list of ones prepared each in-game day, as a record-keeping tool.

While allowing the use of PnP-style divination spells (“Locate Object”, “Speak With Dead”, “Contact Higher Plane” etc.) can be a powerful roleplay addition to a campaign, thought should be given to their balancing effects. The results of more powerful ones should be handled with forethought and the details of their operation - how vague the results will be and other limitations - thoroughly understood beforehand. The concept of counterspells is also always important to keep in mind, since divination spells, even if successfully performed, could theoretically be countered by other magic - which may be both logical and necessary in your particular scenario. Bottom line, don't let a single spell wreck a scenario or campaign.

It is worth noting that DM actions can also significantly enhance the results of in-engine spells and the treatment of magic in general. At a basic level, DMs can give spellcasters feedback (via Tell) on their perception of magic items and areas with magical effects. This should not replace the Identify function, but it can lend a great deal of flavor and depth beyond what is possible in the engine by just reading an item description or examining a placeable object. If you have a roleplay focus in your module or campaign, I would also argue for giving Raise Dead and Resurrection spellcasting significant in-game consequences and challenges, especially if dependent on NPC actions; otherwise, coming back from the dead becomes little different from hitting the respawn button in single-player.

Going further, in some cases a specific spell may have additional possible effects outside of the NWN engine, which a DM can then implement. For example, one of the Polymorph Self forms is an Umber Hulk, which can (if the DM allows it) then affect the environment via the (DM-applied) destruction of placeable objects – for example, a rockfall blocking an underground passage. Applying elemental effects through damage and created VFX (burning flames, water level rising, etc.) is another common example of environmental changes, although not necessarily only as the result of spells.
As a final observation, DMs should think carefully about the effect on the gameworld setting of allowing specific spells and related capabilities. If the PCs can use these "new" spells which are supposed to be generally available, then logic dictates appropriate NPCs (including their enemies) can have these capabilities as well. The reverse is also true: if, for example, NPCs are using Teleport spell abilities at the appropriate class level and PCs are not allowed to learn the spell when they reach it, it comes across as unfair. A DM can always exercise control over spell access, for example requiring the PC to discover a spell scroll in a treasure cache or to find a particular NPC spellcaster.

**Conclusion: Playing in a Brave New Neverwinter Nights World**

With any game that has been around for some time, especially on a computer platform, the newness and excitement normally wear off after a certain amount of time. However, if new ideas, approaches, and possibilities are made available to players, the game will constantly renew itself and never feel dull. Allowing and implementing actions that go beyond the NWN engine will offer players these kinds of opportunities in every gaming session.

DMs through their creativity and skills can enhance the in-game experience for everyone. Using just some of the basic techniques described above can add new dimensions to your sessions, resulting in a more immersive, challenging, and enjoyable environment. For those who want to push the limits, using advanced techniques and adding new DM-run content can both deepen and broaden the gameworld possibilities. Whatever module or campaign your gaming group may be involved with, going beyond the engine will enhance your experience.