Facilitating Duskara Games

As the Game Master (or "Facilitator" in GM-less play), your role is to voice the world—its settlements, dangers, mysteries, and inhabitants. You're not the author imposing a predetermined narrative. You're the steward of a living world that responds to player choices and reveals itself through shared play.

This section consolidates principles, practical guidance, and specific scenarios for running *Duskara* effectively.

Core Facilitation Principles

1. The World Is Always Changing

Nothing on Duskara stays fixed. Weather patterns shift. Settlements face new crises. NPCs evolve their goals and positions. People remember what the characters did.

In Practice: When characters complete a mission, let it reshape the world. A successful salvage operation improves the settlement's Water Status. A failed negotiation creates new enemies. A rescue creates bonds of loyalty. Make the world responsive—not punishing, but honest about consequences.

2. Ask, Don't Tell

Use questions to invite participation and surprise rather than narrating outcomes. Questions share control with your players and often generate better ideas than you planned.

Examples:

- "The storm front is now visible from the settlement. What does the Council decide to do?"
- "You've been living in this settlement for three Cycles. What has made you trust the weather worker who's now asking for your help?"
- "The drone's signal goes dark. What do you think went wrong?"

3. Make Failure Interesting

When characters fail a roll, don't block their story. Open new doors. Failure is an opportunity for complications, plot twists, or unexpected discoveries.

Examples of reframing failure:

- "No..." → They fail to convince the Council, but overhear a secret they weren't meant to know
- "No, but..." → The salvage mission fails, but they discover something more valuable instead
- "No, and..." → The negotiation collapses, but it reveals that the opposing settlement has a hidden problem the characters can exploit or help solve

4. Use the Players' Character Tags

Pay attention to what players created:

- **Goals and Motives:** Introduce complications or opportunities that press on these directly. Make characters feel like their driving ambitions matter.
- **Nemeses:** Bring them back. When a character's Nemesis appears, raise the stakes.
- **Relationships:** Use relationships to create drama. A character's mentor might ask for something that conflicts with another character's Goal. A bonded partner might be threatened.
- **Frailties:** When a character's Frailty is relevant to the situation, remind them it exists—and let it matter without punishing them unfairly.

Example: Kaelen's Goal is "Recover the *Stellar Horizon*'s navigation core," and their Nemesis is "The Day Side Trading Consortium." Create situations where these intersect: perhaps the Consortium has discovered the same salvage site, or they control access to the day-side margins. This makes Kaelen feel seen and gives their choices real weight.

5. Design NPCs with Contradictions

Don't make NPCs simple. Give every significant NPC at least one contradiction:

- A stern Weather Worker who secretly fears their abilities
- A settlement leader who is politically shrewd but personally lonely
- A rival salvager who competes ruthlessly but honors their debts
- An Archivist who guards secrets fiercely but is desperate to find truth

These contradictions make NPCs memorable and create opportunities for surprising interactions or character arcs.

6. Build Unseen Forces into the World

Plant mysteries early. Duskara is vast, and humanity doesn't understand it fully:

- Strange signals from the Deep Roads
- Ancient structures that appear in satellite images
- Psychic phenomena that resist easy explanation
- Whispered rumors about pre-human civilizations
- Fragments of encrypted data that hint at bigger secrets

Don't explain these immediately. Let them grow. Some mysteries might never be fully resolved—that's okay. The mystery itself is part of the world.

Critical: Let mysteries evolve based on player engagement. A mystery you plant is not a story you'll tell. It's a seed. If players ignore it, it remains in the background. If they investigate, it becomes a story thread they're driving forward. If they solve it, what they discover should surprise you as much as them. The mysteries serve the players' emergent story, not the other way around.

What to Prepare

You don't need extensive prep for *Duskara*, but a little structure helps:

1. Settlements

Define each settlement by:

- **1–2 Key NPCs:** Who matters here? Who do the characters interact with?
- **Current Tension:** What's the settlement dealing with right now? A resource crisis? Political conflict? A recent discovery?
- **Implicit Pressure:** What's the underlying problem or opportunity? Water scarcity? Rivalry with a neighboring settlement? Unexplained phenomena?

2. Maps and Weather

Sketch the territory where play might happen. Don't make it detailed—rough is fine. But know:

- Where's the nearest storm wall?
- What direction does the wind blow?
- Are there geothermal zones nearby?
- What's the current weather condition?

Weather can change during play, especially if characters use Weather Working.

3. NPCs with Relationships

When you introduce a major NPC, jot down:

- A visible strength
- A hidden fault or fear
- A specific relationship to the character(s) or settlement

This is usually 3-4 sentences. Don't over-prepare.

4. Complications

Have a few complications in mind that you can introduce when the story needs tension:

- Environmental hazards (superstorm brewing, thermal surge, structural collapse)
- Social pressure (faction conflict, betrayal, competing interests)
- Resource pressure (water status degrades, supply caravan delays)
- Timing pressure (character's deadline, settlement's crisis, Nemesis appears)

You don't need to plan exactly when these occur. Introduce them when the fiction calls for it.

NPC Creation and Archetypes

Improvise NPCs on the Spot

When an NPC needs to appear, create them in seconds:

- **Concept:** What's their role? (merchant, settlement leader, rival salvager, worker)
- **Visible trait:** One thing you can describe (nervous hands, commanding presence, weathered face)
- **One complication:** One thing that makes them interesting (loyal but harsh, skilled but afraid, friendly but hiding something)

That's it. You don't need a full character sheet. You need enough to know how they respond when challenged.

Example: A merchant appears. Concept: salvage trader. Visible trait: scarred hands. Complication: desperate to offload cursed salvage before anyone realizes it's defective. Now you can play them honestly.

On NPCs and Emergent Play: The key to letting NPCs drive emergent play is this: **don't predetermine how they'll respond to player actions.** Create them with a concept, trait, and complication, then let them react authentically to what players do. Their contradictions will naturally create interesting moments without requiring scripting. If an NPC is "friendly but hiding something," let the players' questions and actions determine what gets revealed and when. You're not protecting a secret—you're playing a person who has one.

NPC Archetypes (Quick Reference)

Below are profession-based NPC templates you can adapt in seconds. Each includes a concept, a visible strength, a hidden fault, and a story hook. Mix and match to create memorable characters:

WEATHERWORKER

- **Concept:** Trained psychic specialist (Novice/Adept/Master)
- **Visible Strength:** Uncanny ability to read atmospheric patterns / prediction accuracy
- **Hidden Fault:** Pride in their abilities / fear of losing power / isolation from community

- **Hook:** Needs help managing burnout OR pursuing dangerous weather manipulation

THERMAL SPECIALIST

- **Concept:** Geothermal engineer / day-side salvager / thermal researcher
- **Visible Strength:** Equipment expertise / heat navigation skill / technical innovation
- **Hidden Fault:** Recklessness near extreme conditions / technical obsession / disregard for safety
- **Hook:** Pursuing dangerous salvage OR developing risky new thermal technology

COUNCIL MEMBER

- **Concept:** Settlement representative / elected leader / appointed administrator
- **Visible Strength:** Political acumen / community trust / diplomatic skill
- **Hidden Fault:** Competing interests / hidden allegiances / decision paralysis from consensus pressure
- **Hook:** Proposing controversial policy OR blocking community initiative

ARCHIVIST

- **Concept:** Data specialist / historian / Earth knowledge keeper
- **Visible Strength:** Extensive knowledge / pattern recognition / access to information
- **Hidden Fault:** Obsession with past / disconnection from current needs / gatekeeping information
- **Hook:** Protecting dangerous ancient knowledge OR desperately seeking lost data

SALVAGE OPERATOR

- **Concept:** Day-side salvager / wreck explorer / independent contractor
- **Visible Strength:** Navigation in dangerous environments / technical salvage skills / resourcefulness
- **Hidden Fault:** Greed / recklessness / willing to break rules / hiding past failures
- **Hook:** Seeking legendary salvage OR needing team for high-risk expedition

SETTLEMENT LEADER

- **Concept:** Mayor / Council head / Warmth Circle elder
- **Visible Strength:** Authority / strategic thinking / community support
- **Hidden Fault:** Authoritarianism / fear of change / protecting outdated systems
- **Hook:** Managing resource crisis OR resisting necessary innovation

CARAVAN MASTER

- **Concept:** Trade leader / route expert / nomadic merchant
- **Visible Strength:** Negotiation / knowledge of inter-settlement routes / survival expertise
- **Hidden Fault:** Deals with questionable people / bending rules / long-time grudges
- **Hook:** Offering lucrative job OR pursuing old rival

DEEP BONDED PSYCHIC

- **Concept:** Bonded specialist / fauna liaison / psychic researcher
- **Visible Strength:** Connection to native life / telepathy skill / empathy
- **Hidden Fault:** Over-attachment to creatures / trust in bonded partners over humans / emotional dependency
- **Hook:** Asking for help rescuing bonded partner OR investigating mysterious animal behavior

COMMUNITY HEALER

- **Concept:** Medical specialist / herbalist / psychic healer
- **Visible Strength:** Diagnostic skill / caring nature / technical medical knowledge
- **Hidden Fault:** Overextending resources / treating beyond their expertise / hiding own addiction/illness
- **Hook:** Needing rare medical supplies OR facing epidemic they can't handle

WATER SPECIALIST

- **Concept:** Water manager / conservation officer / hydroponic farmer
- **Visible Strength:** Resource efficiency / technical water system knowledge / conservation passion
- **Hidden Fault:** Inflexibility about rationing / hoarding supplies / conflict with other priorities
- **Hook:** Managing water crisis OR investigating water contamination

ROGUE WEATHER WORKER

- **Concept:** Outcast psychic / ideological extremist / freelancer
- **Visible Strength:** Master-level weather working / physical toughness / unpredictability
- **Hidden Fault:** Unstable / pursuing harmful agenda / psychically damaged
- **Hook:** Manipulating weather for political gain OR seeking redemption

DEEPKIN GUIDE

- **Concept:** Night-side expert / cave system mapper / deep culture specialist
- **Visible Strength:** Deep Roads knowledge / resonance communication / cave survival
- **Hidden Fault:** Discomfort on surface / cultural bias / protective of cave territories
- **Hook:** Offering guide service OR protecting night-side secrets

Use any of these as a starting point, then add your character's unique voice. The archetype is just scaffolding—player interaction will define them.

Running Without Prep

You don't need extensive preparation to facilitate *Duskara*. The game is designed for emergent play, and you have all the tools you need right in the rulebook.

You Have Enough Already

Start with what you know:

- **The setting:** You know Duskara. The Twilight Belt has settlements, wind, geothermal vents, salvage opportunities. The Deep Roads are dark and mysterious. The day side is lethal heat. This is enough.
- **The characters:** Players have created their Goals, Nemeses, Relationships. Their Tags are adventure hooks. Start there.
- **The tables:** Adventure Tables give you complications, events, encounters, discoveries on demand. Roll and incorporate.
- **The fiction:** What happened last session? What do the characters want now? That's your starting point.

You don't need a detailed plot outline. You don't need a map of every location. You don't need prepared NPCs for every scene.

Ask Questions About Character Actions and Intentions

Your job is to ask players what their characters do and why, then describe what happens next.

- "The settlement council meets to discuss the water crisis. What does your character say?"
- "You've arrived at the salvage site. What do you want to accomplish first?"
- "The weather worker is asking for volunteers for a dangerous working. Does your character volunteer? Why or why not?"
- "The rival offers you a deal. How does your character respond?"

Questions are about character action and intention. You describe the world. The players describe what their characters do in it.

Use the Adventure Tables

When you need:

- **A complication:** Roll on Expedition Complications
- **A settlement event:** Roll on Settlement Events
- **A discovery:** Roll on Salvage Discoveries
- **A Deep Roads encounter:** Roll on Deep Roads Encounters
- **A psychic phenomenon:** Roll on Psychic Phenomena

These tables exist so you don't have to invent on the spot. Roll and incorporate. The fiction adjusts around the result.

Trust Player Choices to Drive the Story

You don't control what happens next. The characters do.

- They want to explore the day side? You describe the heat, the hazards, the landscape. They tell you what they do. You respond to their actions.
- They want to negotiate with a rival settlement? You describe the rival's position and demeanor. They tell you how they respond. You describe the outcome.
- They want to investigate a mystery? You describe what's discoverable. They tell you what they investigate. You use the tables to generate complications and discoveries based on their choices.

The story emerges from what players do, not from what you prepared.

When You Don't Know, Decide on the Spot

You don't have to have all the answers ready, but you do need to answer for the world:

- "You're in the Deep Roads. The air is cold and still. The echo of dripping water fills the silence."
- "The storm front moves in. The wind picks up from the day side, carrying heat and dust."
- "The Archivist's expression hardens. She turns away without answering."

You decide what the world does. You don't ask players to help construct it.

Minimal Notes Are Enough

Between sessions, jot down:

- What each NPC cares about (one sentence)
- Current settlement Resource Status
- Open story threads
- What surprised you that you might build on next session

That's all. You don't need detailed notes. The players will remind you of what matters.

A Session Without Prep

Here's what a session might look like with zero preparation:

1. **Describe where the characters are:** Set the scene
2. **Ask what the characters do:** Open question about their actions
3. **Listen and respond:** Their choices shape what happens
4. **When they roll, interpret the result:** Use the fiction to determine what comes next
5. **When you need complications:** Roll on a table
6. **When an NPC appears:** Create them in 10 seconds (concept, trait, complication)

7. **When you don't know what happens:** Decide what the world does

That's a complete session. No outline needed. No prepared story. Just you describing the world, players describing their characters' actions, and the fiction unfolding between them.

The Trust Required

This works because:

- **The setting guides play:** Duskara's harsh reality shapes what's possible. You don't need to script outcomes—the world does
- **Character Tags drive conflict:** Players bring drama through their Goals, Nemeses, Relationships. You don't need to create it
- **Failure and complication fuel adventure:** When rolls fail, the tables give you ideas. Things get interesting without your planning
- **The table is collaborative:** Not in world-building (that's your job), but in responding to outcomes. You're not alone in interpreting what happens

You can facilitate *Duskara* with genuine confidence without preparation. The game is built for exactly this.

Zoom In and Zoom Out

You have control over narrative focus. Use it to pace your sessions:

Zoom Out: Resolve an entire scene with a single closed question.

- "Does the expedition reach the geothermal site before the storm hits?" (one roll)
- Fast, emphasizes outcomes over details
- Best for scenes that aren't emotionally crucial

Zoom In: Break a scene into multiple detailed questions.

- "Can I spot the trap before we trigger it?"
- "Do I convince the faction leader to help?"
- "Can I repair the water pump before the pressure ruptures?"
- Slower, more tense, lets players feel agency in details
- Best for climactic or emotionally important moments

Mix zoom levels within a single session to create rhythm.

Running Your First Session

Your first session is simpler than you think. No elaborate prep needed. The core goal is: everyone creates a character, everyone understands the setting, and everyone plays a scene together.

Time Budget

For a first session with 2-4 players:

- **Character Creation:** 30-45 minutes
- **Safety & Expectations (CATS):** 10 minutes
- **First Scene:** 60-90 minutes
- **Total:** 2.5-3 hours

If you have less time, shorten character creation (consider pre-generated characters) or save world-building questions for later.

Before You Start

Have ready:

- Dice (at least 1d6 per player, ideally in three colors)
- Character sheets or paper for notes
- The Adventure Tables section (you'll reference it)
- A simple settlement concept

Don't prepare:

- A detailed plot
- A mapped-out story
- Specific NPC names and histories
- Multiple scenes

You won't need them.

Character Creation (30-45 minutes)

Walk players through character creation together. Don't rush it—this is where players invest in their characters.

Structure:

1. Explain each tag type briefly (Concept, Skills, Frailty, etc.)
2. Give examples for each
3. Let players create at their own pace
4. Answer questions as they come
5. Have them read their characters aloud when done

Tip: Use the Example Character (Kaelen) as a reference model. When someone asks "what should my Skill be?" point to Kaelen's skills.

Safety & Expectations (CATS) (10 minutes)

Quick conversation:

- **Concept:** "We're telling a story about people on Duskara, surviving and exploring."
- **Aim:** "We want to have fun, discover what happens, and see how our characters respond to challenges."
- **Tone:** "It's hopeful but real. People die. Communities struggle. But there's also wonder and possibility."
- **Subject Matter:** "We'll explore resource scarcity, environmental danger, conflict, and loss. Are there topics anyone wants to avoid?"

Don't overthink this. It's just alignment.

Your First Scene

Keep it simple:

1. **Ask an opening question:** "You're in a settlement called Aetherion. The wind turbines have just been damaged by a storm. What brought you here, and how do you react to the news?"
2. **Listen to responses:** Let each character answer. You're learning what they care about.
3. **Describe the world:** "The settlement is busy with repairs. People are worried but moving with purpose. The wind is still strong—the storm might return."
4. **Ask what they do:** "What does your character do right now?"
5. **If they want to roll:** Build their dice pool and let them roll. Simple as that.
6. **Keep moving:** Don't get stuck on details. Something happens; you describe it; they respond.

Possible First Scenarios

Pick one that feels right:

Scenario 1: The Damaged Settlement

- A superstorm has damaged the settlement's key infrastructure
- Resources are degraded; leadership is making emergency decisions
- Characters are asked to help (or volunteer)
- Simple hook: "Can you help restore the [water system / power grid / structural damage]?"

Scenario 2: The Arrival

- Characters are outsiders arriving at a settlement for the first time

- Someone meets them (a contact, an old friend, an NPC with a job offer)
- The settlement has a current problem they might get involved in
- Simple hook: "What brings you to Aetherion? And what do you notice is wrong?"

Scenario 3: The Crisis

- A settlement emergency happens while the characters are there
- A caravan vanishes. Someone needs rescue. A failure occurs.
- Characters are nearby and witness it
- Simple hook: "You hear the alarm bells. What do you do?"

Pick Scenario 1 or 2 for your first session. They're easier to facilitate. Scenario 3 requires more comfort with emergent crisis.

Pacing Tips

- **Don't explain all the rules at once.** Teach mechanics as they come up. "When you try something uncertain, we'll roll."
- **After each roll, move the scene forward.** Don't explain outcomes extensively—just say what happens and ask what they do next.
- **A first session has 3-5 scenes maximum.** Each scene is usually one rolled question. That's enough.
- **End when energy drops.** A good first session might wrap after 2-2.5 hours. Leaving people wanting more is better than overstaying.

What Happens in Play

You describe → Players respond → You ask what they do → They roll (maybe) → You describe the outcome → Repeat

That's it. You don't need to manage initiative, track detailed positions, or improvise complex NPC dialogues. You just: world, character action, consequence, repeat.

Common First Session Mistakes

- **Explaining too much before play starts.** Get to character creation quickly.
- **Preparing too much.** You have enough. Trust it.
- **Trying to introduce all the world details.** Players learn Duskara through play, not exposition.
- **Asking questions about the world.** Describe the world; ask about character actions.
- **Moving too fast.** Give scenes time to breathe. Let players respond and think.

Ending the First Session

End on a moment of clarity or question:

- Characters have discovered something
- A complication has emerged
- A relationship has shifted
- An NPC has made a request
- A problem is clear

Then: "That's a good place to stop. Next session, we pick up here."

Don't try to resolve everything. You're building momentum for session two, not closing a plot.

Between Sessions

Make minimal notes:

- What each character cares about (one sentence per character)
- What happened (three bullets)
- What's coming next (one open thread)

That's all you need. Players will remind you of details that matter.

Your Second Session

You already know:

- Who the characters are and what they want
- What the settlement is dealing with
- What mystery or problem emerged in session one

That's your starting point. Same structure: describe, ask what they do, roll if needed, move forward.

You're done. You've run Duskara.

Reinforcing Tone and Managing Play

Duskara emphasizes:

- **Wonder and discovery** — The world is vast and mysterious
- **Competence** — Characters are skilled, resourceful, and capable
- **Community** — Settlements and relationships matter more than individual glory
- **Consequence** — Actions ripple outward; nothing is truly isolated
- **Respect for the environment** — Duskara is harsh but not malicious

When facilitating, lean into these. Describe the world with sensory detail. Show how character choices reshape communities. Make NPCs care about the larger world, not just the immediate

conflict.

Common Facilitation Challenges

The party is scattered: Ask each character what they're doing individually, and zoom between them. Use questions to show how their separate actions create consequences for each other.

No one is engaging with the hooks: Step back. Ask the table directly: "What does your character care about right now?" Build the next scene around their answers, not your prepared material.

A player is hogging spotlight: Use side conversations. Pull focus to quieter characters with questions: "Thalen, while Kaelen is talking with the Council, what are you doing?" Give each character scenes where they're the center.

Dice results aren't going the way you expected: Trust the dice. "Yes, and..." and "No, but..." often create better stories than your plan. Follow the fiction—that's where the story lives.

Keeping Notes

Track:

- **Resource Status Tags** for the settlement (Water, Power, Provisions)
- **NPC Relationships** that matter to characters
- **Scene Tags** that might carry over (storm fronts, psychic phenomena, structural damage)
- **Character Conditions** that persist between sessions
- **Plot threads** left unresolved

You don't need a formal ledger—a few bullet points per NPC and location are enough. The players will remind you of what they care about.

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