

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Dragon

This is a guide to tweaking “To Stand Before the Dragon’s Wrath.” The core game can stand on its own, a complete one-page experience; these two pages are ways to shake up the experience, by tweaking some of the dials.

What a Dragon Looks Like

This is a game about a dragon, but what does that even mean? “Dragon” is a broad term which refers to several different creatures from wildly disparate mythologies: they may be intelligent or bestial, truly massive about human-sized, six-limbed, four-limbed, or no-limbed, etc.

Within the context of “To Stand Before the Dragon’s Wrath,” a dragon can take just about any form; the battle doesn’t make assumptions about breathing fire or flying. All it requires is a creature which is immensely powerful and immensely dangerous, and that gives you lots of options.

To the right are thirteen potential dragons; if you’re searching for inspiration, pick one of them, or **draw a card** to choose randomly.

What Else a Dragon Can Be

If you’re already using extremely non-traditional dragons, then the question arises: what’s the difference between a very strange dragon and a thing which isn’t a dragon at all?

In this game, nothing. Altering the game so that it’s about a different creature is trivial. Maybe your town has been taken over by a sorcerer, or a vampire. Maybe you are facing down a group, such as an invading alien army; in this case, there should be a “face” of the group who, if defeated, will cause the group to disband. You can even stand before a human tyrant: well-armed and powerful but not supernatural in any way.

For this document, consider “dragon” to be shorthand for *whomever or whatever* the heroes have come together to take out.

The Timeframe

There’s no reason that the dragon has reigned for five years specifically; it’s long enough that the dragon has had plenty of opportunity to make life miserable, but short enough that the heroes will still be around. Little changes in one direction or the other won’t change much, but significantly altering the timeframe will alter the context of the battle.

After fifteen years, the dragon is long-entrenched and complacent, but the heroes beaten-down and, most likely, feeling quite old. After just a month, the heroes are stronger, but the terror is new.

(For significantly different timeframes, like a dragon which has reigned for centuries, you should consider that to be a different setting.)

- A. **The Bestial Dragon** - A blood-red flying beast which feeds on humans. It is non-sentient and cannot be reasoned with.
2. **The Moon Dragon** - The moon cracks open, revealing a building-sized creature made of transparent crystal, which descends to Earth and declares itself to be humanity’s new deity.
3. **The Time Dragon** - A two-headed dragon with white scales. One head’s breath accelerates time, making things crumble to dust. The other’s reverses time and un-makes people.
4. **The Fae Dragon** - This hauntingly beautiful woman can transform into a savage green dragon form. She’s slowly pulling our world into her magic realm, and despises all our technology.
5. **The Dapper Dragon** - A dragon-headed man in a spotless black suit, flanked by a gang of armed thugs; he is seemingly invulnerable to bullets. He says this is his town now.
6. **The Psychic Dragon** - This terrifying silver-scaled dragon is just an illusion, created by a paranoid human with psychic powers.
7. **The Dead Dragon** - A skeleton who belches miasmatic smoke, which turns those who breathe it into mindless zombie servants.
8. **The Clockwork Dragon** - This wood and brass construct was found deep underground and, unwisely, wound up. It seems to want to destroy all organic life.
9. **The Winter Dragon** - Endless winter storms follow this pale blue dragon; it merely wishes to sleep, undisturbed.
10. **The Elder Dragon** - Though this ancient grey creature is physically frail, it has mastered every form of magic imaginable.
- J. **The Aquatic Dragon** - This serpentine blue-green beast arrives with a flood that leaves much of the area under water.
- Q. **The Greedy Dragon** - This golden-scaled dragon is well-spoken and rather charming, but demands jewels and precious metals for its mighty hoard, and burns those who cannot supply any.
- K. **The Void Dragon** - A dragon-shaped patch of nothing, as black as space. It can generate and dispel miniature black holes. Its speech is incomprehensible, so what it actually wants is unknown.

Settings and Characters

The core game asks players to portray themselves, in their own town. It means that there's little time spent warming up: players know their characters right away, and the dragon's threat is immediate and tangible.

If you'd like to fight a dragon in a fictional world, however, it's easy to adapt the game to battles starring heroic knights, space pirates, superheroes, or whatever else you might imagine. It just requires a little extra preparation time.

Hosting a battle in a new setting requires two additional steps, which take place before the Prologue: **creating a setting** and **introducing characters**.

Creating a Setting:

As a group, determine the big-picture view of when and where the dragon will appear: in Prohibition-era Chicago, on a moon-colony, or in a wuxia-themed empire, for instance. If you're undecided, draw a card from the deck to pick a broad genre; you'll narrow down the specifics of the universe when you build the palette, next.

♥ **Contemporary:** The dragon has no place in the real world, and yet it arrives anyway: perhaps visiting exotic locales in a world just like ours, or a world where other supernatural creatures lurking in dark alleys, or one where super-powered heroes try in vain to stop it.

♦ **Historical:** The dragon has been languishing in shadows since before recorded history, so there's no telling when it will emerge: from Greek antiquity to the Wild West to the trenches of World War I.

♣ **Sci-Fi:** Science suggests that the dragon couldn't exist... but that won't stop it. You may find it slinking in the ruined cities of a cyberpunk dystopia, awaiting colonists on terraformed worlds, or even commandeering a spaceship deep in uncharted space.

♠ **Fantasy:** Even in worlds that allow for dragons, the dragon is THE dragon: the biggest, baddest, and cruelest, whether in a low-magic Conan-esque epic, an old school dungeon crawl, or the outskirts of a school of wizardry.

(Observant players may have already realized that this setting generator can be combined with the thirteen dragons on the previous page to rapidly generate a world and its dragon in one card.)

Creating the Palette

The *palette* is how the players will refine their broad setting. In any order, each player will declare first **one** thing that exists in the setting (which other players might not expect), and then **one** thing that does *not* exist in the setting (even though it could logically be assumed); a player might, for example, declare that a fantasy setting does have firearms, but wizards don't exist, or that a contemporary world has vampires, but lacks the Internet. You must declare *both* the existent and nonexistent things. Discuss and negotiate as needed; the players should all be happy with the palette. Continue until every player has made one declaration.

The dragon is **not** beholden to the palette; it can be a unique exception to any or all of the items that were declared nonexistent in the setting (even if the palette says "no dragons").

Introducing Characters:

One at a time, each player introduces a character, and places them in the setting: give the character a **name** and brief **description**, then connect them to an **organization** within the setting. This might be a profession, club, or big family – anything which ties the character into a larger world.

Once all the characters have been introduced, each player should determine the **relationship** their character has with the character of the player to their left. It need not be close, but they should know each other.

Now determine the **dragon player** and begin the **Prologue**.

Tweaking the Prologue

If you've created your own setting, you might need to adjust the prologue a bit to accommodate the change in situation. The **dragon player's** character will always be killed by the dragon right away, but if you are creating a setting in which the dragon has ruled for centuries, or in which the heroes are outsiders who are setting out to slay a dragon, it may not make sense for that character to be the dragon's *first* victim. Instead, make them an especially notable victim: incredibly public, surprising, or cruel, for instance.

Likewise, the setting might not allow the heroes an opportunity to interact with the dragon. In this case, their **losses** would be indirect: because of the dragon's existence, the character has been harmed or denied something which they believe they deserve. Why do they have a stake in the slaying of the dragon? Similarly, the heroes' **service** or **defiance** of the dragon can be better understood as acting in ways that helped or hindered the dragon's agenda; the heroes might not even know about how they affected the dragon.

Battle Setpieces

The battle sequence is built around nine events, or stages, that create the narrative. Collectively, these stages are called a “*setpiece*.”

The core setpiece is called “**Against All Odds**”; it’s meant to make the hero players feel as if they are facing down incredible odds: it starts with several scenes of preparation, and a fight which focuses on dramatic turning points rather than direct clashes. It’s a setpiece which will work with most dragons and in most settings, but it’s absolutely not the only option. Included are three alternate choices: **Bold Adventurers**, **Cosmic Horror**, and **A Long Journey**.

Changing a setpiece will dramatically alter the tone of the battle and, consequently, the game. Even though the mechanics of the battle are the same, and it’s no less tense as you get toward the end, the narrative that the setpiece creates will be changed, making the heroes feel more powerful, more hunted, more directed, or whatever the case may be.

Creating New Setpieces

To create your own setpiece, arrange **nine phases** that support the story you want to tell, and give each phase an evocative name and short description that has questions for the players to answer.

Every stage must be able to benefit either side; with the first four stages, neither side will be defeated, so those benefits can be subtle. Starting at five, however, that benefit can translate into victory, so both the heroes and dragon should be in a position to triumph, somehow.

A stage can cover a few seconds of activity, or years of quiet planning, or anything in between. Be sure to mix up the lengths of stages; even in the height of battle, a series of short clashes can be tiresome. Pull back from the action, force a change of set, or even have a flashback... keep things varied. Stages need not be about the heroes interacting with the dragon at all... the heroes might be on their own, or the dragon on its own. Or focus on a third party altogether. Keep changing things up.

Often stages will be more rapid as they near the ninth-stage finale, but maybe you want it to slow down. Usually, events are worded to favor the dragon, but maybe you want the heroes to feel powerful. Experiment with pacing and wording to get the emotional impact you want.

Free-flowing Battles

For an unpredictable battle, ignore pre-built setpieces and craft the stages as you go: a red card indicates something goes well for the dragon, and a black card indicates something goes well for the heroes, but everything else is freeform, based on the context of the moment. This is a good choice for especially strange settings and dragons, though it runs the risk of descending into a dull series of clashes.

Bold Adventurers

The dragon is mighty, certainly. But there are heroes who are mightier still. Their task is not easy, but with a little luck, it shall be done.

For this setpiece, the heroes are not striking out desperately: they are out to slay a dragon, in the grand traditions of traditional RPG heroes (the sort who might go to a dungeon to accomplish the task). Fighting begins early, and the dragon is guaranteed to take at least one good hit... although it might not be enough.

This setup works well with fantasy-derived settings; for extra heroism, declare that those heroes who make a sacrifice are merely knocked out. If the heroes win, they can revive and celebrate.

- **A Blood-Red Sunset:** As the day crawls to an end, the heroes stand before the dragon's lair, ready to approach. How well have they equipped themselves for the battle to come?
- **The Airing of Grievances:** The heroes stride boldly before the dragon--the tyrant shall know why it must be slain. How does it react to their unexpected appearance?
- **The Battle Begins:** The dragon has no truck with diplomacy! Within moments, the fight is on. But which side was able to secure the initiative in this battle?
- **First Blood is Spilled:** The first few minutes of the battle were fruitless clashes of steel against claw, but finally a strike hits true. Who takes the wound, and how?
- **The Dragon is Bloodied:** The heroes were able to engineer a particularly powerful strike, one which wounds the dragon painfully. How did they do so, and more importantly, is the dragon weakened or merely enraged?
- **Out of the Lair:** As the battle rages through the night, the fighters move out of the dragon's lair. Now, beneath dim starlight, who is getting the upper hand?
- **The Dragon's Wrath:** In desperation, the dragon unleashes its most powerful attack... a maneuver as taxing as it is deadly. What is this attack? How does it affect the dragon? How does it affect its targets? Are they able to fend it off?
- **A New Dawn:** As the sun crests over the horizon, one side of this battle finally collapses, too weary to continue the fight. Who falls, and who lives to see a new day?

Cosmic Horror

The dragon is a creature of immense and incalculable power, and our only hope is that it has not yet arrived... it sits outside time and space as we know it, watching, waiting for the stars to be right.

For this Lovecraftian setpiece, the dragon's presence in the Prologue should be indirect: mad cultists or eldritch minions of the dragon. The timeframe is short: only two weeks between the first death and the battle.

Whenever a hero is sacrificed, they aren't killed – they go insane. If the heroes win, they are somehow able to prevent the ritual... for now.

- **A Bizarre Murder:** A ritually-mutilated body is discovered, and the heroes travel out to see it. What was so interesting about it? Where was it discovered? Why did they go to it?
- **Interviewing the Locals:** The heroes try to discover just what the folks around here know about the latest strangeness. How well are they received? Do they learn anything of import?
- **A Long-Forgotten Tome:** The heroes are informed of an ancient book in the university's library which has information about their visions. How did they acquire it? What did they sacrifice for it?
- **The Stars Begin to Align:** In the weeks that the heroes spend poring over the tome, there are strange headlines about otherworldly creatures skulking around town. One night, they discover one. What is it? How does it react to them?
- **Dream-Visions of a Strange Land:** The night after they saw the body, every hero had the exact same dream. What did they see? Was it a prophetic warning? Was the dragon there?
- **Late Nights of Research:** The tome does not give up its secrets easily, but the heroes are beginning to understand it. How are they coping with the dark truths it reveals? Does anything interfere with their work? Do they learn anything of value?
- **Time Runs Short:** Too late, the heroes realize: the tome tells of a ritual to summon the dragon into this world! They alone can stop it. Do they have time to prepare beforehand, or must they rush immediately to stop the proceedings?
- **The Ritual:** The heroes arrive to find dragon-cultists in the middle of the ritual, chanting inhuman syllables around a bonfire. How do the cultists react to the interruption?
- **At Last, the Dragon:** Despite the heroes' efforts, the ritual was completed, and the dragon appears through a rip in fabric of reality. It's the heroes' last chance to stop it. Do they succeed?

A Long Journey

The dragon has made its lair not, as one might expect, right in the heart of town, but a long journey away. Far enough that many believe that they can live a normal life just ignoring the dragon.

This is a lightly Tolkien-inspired setpiece. It works well when there has been an especially long timeframe, and people have come to normalize the dragon's presence.

Early victory for the heroes means they encounter the dragon sooner than expected, and use their artifact successfully. If the heroes win, the Aftermath should also talk briefly about how the survivors got back home.

- **An Uninvited Guest:** The heroes did not expect to see the dragon, let alone battle it, but they were gathered together by a mysterious guide. Who was it? Why did they select this group of potential heroes?
- **Mapping the Route:** The dragon lives some distance away, and the journey would promise to be harrowing and weeks-long. What were the most frightful obstacles on the map?
- **The First Leg of the Journey:** According to the map, a safe inn was only a few days' travel away. What travelling companions did they meet up with? What nasty surprises awaited the heroes when they finally reached that inn?
- **Getting Split Up:** Travelling through the first major obstacle on the route to the dragon's lair, the heroes are split up from their guide and companions. What happened? Did their guide survive this disaster?
- **A Mysterious Artifact:** As they tried to find themselves and their companions, the heroes found and took a magical artifact, a relic of the dragon itself – and something which could be used to kill the dragon. What was it? What strange power did it hold? Who guarded it?
- **Back on the Path:** No sooner had the heroes gotten back on the road to the dragon's lair, than they were assaulted by servants of the dragon. Who were these servants, and what did they want?
- **A Fortunate Rescue:** As the heroes fled, they were saved the intervention of a mysterious outsider. Who was this stranger, and what did he offer the heroes to aid them on their quest?
- **Crossing the Border:** Some days later, the heroes finally reached the borderlands, and find the obvious path in blockaded. What back routes did they try?
- **The Dragon's Lair:** At last, the heroes made it to the dragon's lair, and the battle began. When all was done and dusted, who still stood?