

Dark Fantasy

PLACES



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What is this book about?

This book is a collection of tables about grim and perilous places. Wicked cities, somber villages, dark woods, cursed ruins, etc. It is mostly a collection of ideas about locations to be used with your game of choice. You can also use this book to generate ideas for stories, comic books, etc.

The focus is on dark fantasy tropes: flawed heroes, terrible villains, corrupting magic, ominous ruins and damned wastelands.

Although this is mostly a system-less book, it is especially suited for medieval dark fantasy games, such as my own ([Dark Fantasy Basic](#)). It contains a few concepts that are present in “classic” or “traditional” role-playing games, etc. However, these tables are a minority and can be easily “translated” to different systems.

How many tables to use?

You may use this table every time you add a new town, city, or ruin to your story or campaign. However, notice that the tables focus on the unusual, interesting and bizarre. You do not need to use all tables in all areas. A single village, for example, might be distinguished by its atypical appearance, while an average-looking hamlet could be secretly ruled by a powerful monster. Places that are likely to be visited only briefly need no detailed descriptions. Use multiple tables if the place you’re building is specially large (maybe each table applies to different parts of a city, for example) or bizarre.

Terrains and encounters

In addition to the usual “dark fantasy tropes”, I’ve added a few pages on encounters, terrains and human settlements. It’s pretty basic stuff and not necessarily “dark”, but useful for quick reference.

Credits

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You can find more of my work in my blog: methodsetmadness.blogspot.com.

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Types of Terrains

There are six basic types of terrain: forest, hills, mountains, swamps, deserts and plains. This is a traditional simplification; deserts, for example, might be hot or cold, and a mountain can be barren or full of trees. There are also jungles, savannahs, tundra, the sea, other bodies of water, and so on. In fantasy settings, there are even more possibilities: flying islands, endless holes, cursed wastelands without natural explanations, etc. However, it is useful to consider how these basic types of terrain affect traveling and the chances of finding plants, animals and people. The particulars are up to you; however, here are some suggestions.

The traditional method of checking for “encounters” involves rolling 1d6 to find if there are creatures in any particular area, with 1-in-6 (very common) to 3 in-6 (uncommon) chances of bumping into one. The same method can be used to find edible plants (unless the characters are doing something to actively look for it) or people (“people and settlements”).

In Dark Fantasy Basic (and many old school games), moving through difficult terrain (snow, swamps, thick jungles, mountains, etc.) halves speed in comparison to good terrain (plains, decent trails, etc.). Average terrain (desert, hills, wooded areas) reduces speed by 1/3. When hiking outdoors, a decent road can increase speed up to 50%, or transform difficult terrain in average terrain.

d6	Terrain	Flora and fauna	People and settlements	Travelling
1	Forest	Very common	Common	Average
2	Hills	Common	Common	Average
3	Mountain	Common	Uncommon	Difficult
4	Swamp	Very common	Uncommon	Difficult
5	Desert	Uncommon	Uncommon	Average
6	Plains	Common	Very common	Good

Random landscapes – The 2d6 method

If adventurers are traversing the wilderness at random, use these tables to see what may come next. Use them as often as you want - every day travelled, every new area explored, etc. One method I often use is rolling 1d6 to see how many days are left until the next significant change in scenery (for example, 3 days before a forest becomes a swamp or mountain).

Roll 2d6 in the tables below to find out more information about any given question. These tables are vague and open to interpretation. The humidity table may be used to indicate that an area is wet or that the day is rainy. Likewise, “high altitude” might indicate a plateau or small hill.

2d6	Temperature	Humidity	Altitude
2	Very hot	Very dry	Very low
3-5	Hot	Dry	Low
6-8	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
9-11	Cold	Wet	High
12	Very cold	Very wet	Very high

As you noticed, this 2d6 method has innumerable uses. Here are a few examples and tricks.

Next roll. Use this column if you want one roll to influence the next. For example, if one day is very wet, you can roll with a +2 bonus for the next day; it will probably be wet too. You can use this modifiers (-2 to +2) to influence different rolls; say, give a +2 bonus when rolling for temperature in high altitudes or rainy days, indicating a higher probability of cold. Use other modifiers that makes sense as needed (for example, hot deserts can be very cold during the night, so you could use -2 for night temperature).

Encounter. As an alternative to the traditional methods that predict the number of individuals in a group or the chance you’ll find a creature in its lair, you can use this table for both humans and other creatures. When you do find a group or lair, you can use whatever figures are indicated by other books, or choose a number that makes sense to you. An “empty lair” for humans means an abandoned settlement.

Questions. You can use this method to answer all types of questions. Here are two examples. The first one is used for things you know might happen, but do not know the result. A storm, for example, could mean disaster to your travel, making rivers near impassable, or reveal hidden enemies. The “yes or no” question is multipurpose. Is there a blacksmith in this town? Can a make rope with these plants? Etc. If you want double-edged answers, consider 6 to be “no, but...” (example: there is a blacksmith in a few days travel) and 8 to be “yes, but...” (example: the rope will only last for a day before it rots).

2d6	Next roll	Encounter	How did it go?	Yes or no?
2	-2	Empty lair	Terrible, disaster	No, and...
3-5	-1	Traces	Bad, worse than expected	No
6-8	0	Individual	Average, as expected	Uncertain or dubious
9-11	+1	Group	Good, better than expected	Yes
12	+2	Lair	Great, unexpected perks	Yes, and...

Humans & Civilization

In most fantasy settings, the majority of the population lives in small villages in the countryside. Cities are comparatively rare. Most places have populations of a hundred people at most (although external threats could gather more people), and few specialized services (nowhere to buy decent armor, for example).

Central power is weak in most places. These small communities must learn how to take care of their own problems. In dark fantasy setting, the reality is even harsher. Villages are subject to attacks from monsters, infiltration from evil cults, inquisitors and tax collectors, and they might have many dark things they prefer to keep secret. They will be naturally suspicious of outsiders.

Big cities are rare and have their own problems – overpopulation, bureaucracy, revolts, etc. However, for the most part, you can use the same tables for villages and cities. An “empty” city is usually a mythical ruin (see below).

If you find a human “lair” in the encounter tables, roll 1d100 to establish its size.

d100	Human settlements
01-05	A single building
06-39	Hamlet (6d6+10 people)
40-74	Village (5d6x10 people)
75-92	Town (4d6x100 people)
93-99	Large city (3d6x1,000 people)
00	Great city (2d6x10,000 people)

Villages & Cities

Travelling is difficult with limited technology and abundant dangers, natural or otherwise. Because of that, each village or city has their own culture, sometimes completely alien to other villages, and their own inscrutable laws. Here are some traits to differentiate one place from another.

d20	Appearance	Society	Problems
1	Intertwined with trees	Property is communal	Besieged by monsters
2	Buried	No concept of privacy	Ruled by tyrants
3	Lifted from the ground	Identity is defined by masks	Plagued by poverty
4	Made of moving tents	Rigid protocol for every conversation	Infected by disease
5	Camouflaged	Universal vow of silence	Fiercely territorial
6	Suspended over water	Adults are cast out	Infiltrated by demons
7	Built amidst ancient ruins	Appropriate clothing is mandatory	Filled with criminals
8	Huge and mostly empty	Visitors have no rights	Resentful of outsiders
9	Dug up in rocks	All burials must be in pairs	Ongoing power struggle
10	A single building	Children are raised by all	Cursed with madness
11	On a mountain top	A proper season for each action	Violently expansionist
12	Brightful colors	Travelers welcome for a single day	Falsely utopian
13	Tall buildings	Weapons are forbidden	Mutated by Corruption
14	Misty	“Couples” are always three	Malignant religion
15	Narrow streets	Those who can’t fight must serve	Screwed morals
16	Inside a crater	No activities during daytime	Widespread panic
17	Constantly flooded	Violence is never the answer	Hopelessly defeated
18	Poor and ruined	Everything is permitted	Hiding dark secrets
19	Beautiful and frail	Might makes right	Inhabitants cannot leave
20	Heavily fortified	Casual cannibalism	Periodic human sacrifice

Government

Each community has its own form of government. Most are predictable – democracies, autocracies, aristocracies, gerontocracies, etc. Here are some less common options.

d20	Who governs?
1	The highest bidders
2	Magical curses and laws that enforce themselves
3	A secret society which cannot be mentioned
4	The church
5	An oracle
6	The winners (or losers) of the annual lottery
7	A powerful monster
8	A set of ancient written laws of unknown origin (which are barely understood)
9	A witches' coven
10	A semi-mummified elder
11	A genetically-altered ethnic minority
12	The wielder of a sacred artifact
13	Whoever can survive the local deities' ordeal
14	The family that sacrificed the greatest number of members
15	The mob rules
16	A conquering warlord (or local thugs)
17	The brain-damaged survivor of hard drugs
18	Blind counsellors, relying on lies
19	A dying monarch with no apparent heirs
20	None – govern yourself

Buildings

Sometimes, an interesting location is just a single building, abandoned or not. You can add one or more of these buildings to a city or village, or use them in isolation, in the wilderness, near roads, etc.

d20	Building	d20	Building
1	Castle	11	Citadel
2	Monastery	12	Temple
3	Mansion	13	Pyramid/Ziggurat
4	Prison	14	Mausoleum
5	Asylum/Hospice	15	Tower
6	Underground vault	16	University or library
7	Cabin	17	Coliseum
8	Labyrinth	18	Tavern
9	Ship	19	Catacomb
10	Dungeon	20	Mansion

Mythical Ruins

Mythical ruins are not just ancient cities. These are the remains of great societies, and they were abandoned for mysterious reasons and have not been reclaimed until the present day. Entering one is often dangerous, and staying too long can be deadly. “Abandoned” does not mean empty... there might still be beasts and madmen living in its empty shell. Worse, the original inhabitants – or whatever destroyed them - may still be around.

d20	Appearance	Problems
1	Non-Euclidian angles	Fire, smoke and ash
2	Inside a great dark pit	Haunted by undead
3	On the back of a gargantuan creature	Deadly traps
4	Impossibly tall buildings	Hostile plants
5	Inside a giant carcass	Alien monsters
6	Made of metal	Bandits and Madmen
7	Lavishly decorated	Dangerously unstable
8	Underwater	Rain and lightning
9	Beehive	Slowly growing
10	Volcano	Impervious to light
11	Futuristic	Moving parts
12	Glass and crystal walls	Weird magic
13	Endless towers and bridges	Killer automatons
14	Frozen	The original dwellers
15	Vertical	Misleading illusions
16	Thick mist	Echoes from the past
17	Concentric circles	The city a living, hungry creature
18	Labyrinthine	The city moves through many dimensions
19	Gleaming	Time works differently when inside
20	Levitating structures	Within lies an ancient evil, and little else

Trouble generator

To create more problems, roll once in each table and combine the results into a coherent whole. This is meant for mythical ruins but can be used for other places too.

d20			
1	Hidden	Burning	Fog
2	Moving	Icy	Traps
3	Growing	Ravenous	Walls
4	Clockwork	Arcane	Fluids
5	Sudden	Electric	Doors
6	Deceitful	Metallic	Beasts
7	Rotten	Shadow	Ghosts
8	Massive	Vampire	Statues
9	Biomechanical	Poisonous	Treasure
10	Surreal	Infectious	Soldiers

Wilderness features

Like villages, each wild area has its own characteristics and problems. Here are some examples. These do not necessarily apply to an entire forest or region, but maybe just a few, strange areas within a greater whole.

d20	Appearance	Problems
1	Dense	Killer insects
2	Empty	Wild animals
3	Burnt	Wide rivers
4	Fragile	Pagan deities
5	Unnamable colors	Ghosts (or other undead)
6	Untouched	Bandits' hideouts
7	Littered with bones	Inclement weather
8	Frozen	Living flora
9	Gigantic features	Barbarian clans
10	Artificial	Pagan cultists
11	Always dark	Poisonous plants
12	Uneven	Mythic monsters
13	Covered in prismatic fungus	Steep inclines
14	Decaying	Cave-ins
15	Mutating	Flash floods
16	Silent	Forest fires
17	Devoid of fauna	Prehistoric creatures
18	Paradisiac	Dangerous fairies
19	Unnaturally twisted	Territorial forest-people
20	Flowery	Mutant beasts

Landmarks

Sometimes, it is easy to get lost in the wilderness. Finding landmarks, natural or otherwise, could help you find out where you are. Here are a few examples.

d20	Landmark	d20	Landmark
1	Ancient tree	11	Strange statue
2	Cave entrance	12	Monolith
3	Enormous hole or depression	13	Sacrificial altar
4	Plateau or incline	14	Menhir or stone circle
5	River (or bridge)	15	Abandoned well
6	Hot springs	16	Hanging skeletons
7	Lake island	17	A giant item (sword, etc.)
8	Asphalt lake	18	Graves
9	Waterfall	19	Crystal protuberances
10	Big unnatural clearing	20	Fountain

Addendum: Reality and nightmares

As you might have noticed, this small book does not tell you the odds of finding a shoemaker in town or facing a cold afternoon wind. There are no tables for wolves or beaver in the forests. Its content is not realistic or sensible, quite the opposite; the results are often strange or bizarre. It might be hard to make sense of all this stuff. The common advice for dealing with weird results on a random table is ignoring it... but only *after* you really tried to make it work

Realistic worlds are fun, but one of the main reasons we are drawn to fantasy is, well, the fantastic. If the characters were real people in a quasi-medieval world they, too, would pay more attention to the fact that the city has no adults than the fact that the city has no shoemakers.

That doesn't mean that having a coherent setting isn't useful from time to time. If you and the other players prefer to focus on commerce, intrigue, and politics, there is plenty of fun to be had with gold, espionage, kingdoms and baronies. Even in the most fantastical of settings, the mundane is *assumed*. You do not need a table to tell you if the day is hotter than the night because, most of the times, you already know the answer. You can even default to the ordinary in most circumstances when the characters are somewhere safe. When they are exploring the unknown, all bets are off.

Some things in fantasy do not have a base in physical reality. Instead, they are based in fiction, myth, and imagination. There should still be a fair amount of *internal* coherence, but not necessarily what you would call "realism".

Take caverns and dungeons, for example. Common sense would indicate that the deeper you go the scarcer (and smaller) life becomes. The absence of sunlight makes photosynthesis impossible, and food quickly becomes a problem. Living organisms would be basically fungus and bacteria. A dragon barely fits.

However, myths and nightmares would tell you otherwise. In the depths of our imaginations, all kinds of monsters can hide in the deeps. Maybe they take sustenance from our fears, or from the deep, pulsating heart of an Earth that is not our own.