THOSE WHO CRAWL

by Kiel Chenier

Dungeons and dungeon crawling; the simplest and most elegant way to present every aspect of fantasy roleplaying games. The walls of a dungeon give the game structure, both literally and figuratively. "How do we get out of this dungeon?" "Should we go left or right?" "If we listen at the door, what do we hear?" "What do you mean it has eight eyes and no legs?!"

When you delve into a dungeon, choices and consequences are abundant. A party of adventurers is faced with a darkened tunnel. What should they do?

They can stop and listen to gain more info. They can light it up with torches, but doing so might attract monsters.

They can have a character with darkvision scout ahead, but that might put them at risk. Or they can just ignore it and explore elsewhere. Dungeons provide freedom of choice, cooperation, and problem solving, all through their design.

Unfortunately, they are exhausting for a Game Master. They take a lot of brainpower and memorization to run, which is an absolute shame! The best part of the game shouldn't be nearly this mentally taxing.

Below are tips and tricks that will make running dungeons easier and faster for you and help make exploring dungeons more exhilarating for your players; no more arguing about time and duration rules or hair-pulling over accurate dungeon mapping.

1. Know the tone of your game.

Tone is the perspective or attitude that an author adopts with regards to the world they are trying to present or the story they are trying to tell. Thinking about the tone of your game will help you choose which rules reinforce the tone, and which work against it. What kind of emotions is their world trying to elicit in their players? Is your game a light-hearted, adventurous romp? Is it a gritty, action-packed drama? Is it more like a horror film, or a thriller? Do you run a game that's a gonzo mish-mash of all of these things? If so, that's totally cool. Most roleplaying games end up having a variety of tones.

Tone matters when running a dungeon crawl is because it dictates which rules you should use, and which rules you should ignore.

For example, if you are running a horror-inspired game and the dungeon is meant to be a real trial for your players, rules for managing dwindling resources will help enforce that tone. Things like accurately tracking how far a torch or lantern can light up an area, how long a torch lasts, and tracking how many of them a player has. Who is carrying the light source? It matters, because whoever is illuminated most is sure to be the first one noticed by the horrifying mutants lurking in the dark.

But if you are running a game of high adventure and larger-than-life player characters, then resource management doesn't make as much sense. Their heroic exploits and witty banter with the escaping main villain are the game's primary focus; they don't want to worry about having enough torches. They *have* torches in their equipment list. That should be enough!

That kind of meticulous resource-tracking would only slow down the flow of a high-adventure game, but it helps reinforce the danger and desperation of the game with the more horrific tone. Instead, for the high adventure game, having a really

simple and fast way for players to check rooms and hallways (say, a single Wisdom check), regardless of illumination, would be much faster.

Take stealth and sneaking for example. In the horror game, individual stealth checks might work better, as they single out characters and make the opportunity for failure greater. For the high adventure game, group stealth checks (like in the fourth-edition game) might be the best way to go, as they reinforce camaraderie among the group, where one player makes the check, but *all* the characters are providing a set bonus to that player's check. Everyone is helping and important.

2. Track Time with Dice.

It is easy to forget about the passing of time when you're deep down in a dungeon. Encounters can pop up at any moment, minutes slip away as players discuss how best to avoid a trap, choose which door to open first, and investigate things in general.

This is difficult (and dangerous) for Game Masters, because random encounters should be rolled for every 30-60 minutes, depending on how populated the dungeon is. Dungeons are dangerous, populated, living places! Accidentally ignoring that can make your games seem less challenging and immersive.

Trying to add up abstracted time is a hassle, so here's a sane and safe replacement. Track time using dice, specifically d6s and d12s.

As the Game Master, set aside a d6 and a d12 when the player characters enter a dungeon. The d6 represents minutes, and the d12 represents hours (in game time, not actual time). Both begin at the '1' position. You track time in the dungeon in ten-minute increments. When ten minutes pass, you turn the d6 to '2', then to '3' ten minutes after that. After 60 minutes have passed in game, you turn the d12 to '2' and reset the d6 back to '1'. Minutes and hours. Simple.

Each of the following things should take about 10 minutes of in-game time:

- Picking a complex lock on a door or a chest.
- Actively searching a room for secret doors.
- Searching/looting dead bodies for treasure and clues.
- A combat round taking over 3–4 rounds (this accounts for catching one's breath and recouping oneself afterwards).
- Stopping to discuss, at length, what to do next (use only if your game is more hardcore or old-school).

3. Simplify Published Adventures

Pre-written adventures are not always the easiest or fastest to run. Sure, a bunch of the work is done for you, but these published adventures can be poorly laid out and require a lot of back-and-forth referencing at the table. If you're new to running dungeons, these books can often be a hassle to

use if you're in a hurry.

If you have the time before running a game, try doing the following:

- Photocopy or print out a copy of the dungeon map (make sure it doesn't take up all of the page).
- Write down the most necessary details about the dungeon's rooms circling around the photocopied/printed map. Include things like the room's name, its contents, how many monsters are inside (if any), page references to the adventure, and page references to monster stats (if any).
- In the map itself, use symbols to indicate locked doors, traps, and other important dungeon dressings. Make sure that these symbols make sense to you.
- Write down the names of any important NPC's and their locations.

By having the whole dungeon in front of you at all times, you'll never be caught fumbling through a book trying to find the right information when players ask you questions.

4. Describe Rooms Clearly

Nothing says 'old school dungeon crawl' like busting out the graph paper and pencils and requiring your players to map a dungeon by hand as they explore it. Fifth-edition strongly emphasizes 'Theatre of the Mind'-style play, and this style of dungeon mapping is becoming widely popular once again.

For players new to it, mapping can get a bit confusing. Dungeon mapping requires a lot of back and forth communication, which can be hampered by oddly-shaped, weirdly-proportioned, and overly-detailed dungeon rooms.

Here are some tips on how to best describe

dungeons to make it easier for players to draw them:

Tell players where the dungeon begins. Where is the first entrance room located on the page? Is it at the top? The bottom? In the middle? If you don't clue your players in to this, chances are their maps will quickly run off the page. Whatever your players are mapping on should be oriented the same way your dungeon map is.

Give players shapes. Instead of just telling players that a room is 30 feet by 60 feet, tell them it is a horizontal rectangle. The dimensions are important, but giving the player a definite shape allows them to instantly understand you.

Use cardinal directions. Rather than trying to describe things as left, right, up, and down, try using north, south, east, and west. These directions remain the same regardless of where a player character's perspective is. For example, "The room extends 40 feet north/south, and 20 feet east/west." Also, try to keep the north direction on your map pointing towards the top of the page. It makes for easier mapping.

Room first, then exits/entrances. When you describe a dungeon room to players, give them the shape of the room first, its dimensions second, where they are entering from third, any/all other exits or doorways fourth, and finally room details and dressings last. For example, "You enter a square room, it's 20 feet by 20 feet, with the entrance in the southeast corner. There's one other doorway to the north, in the center of the wall. You suddenly realize it's a giant mouth. Save versus being eaten."

Point-to-Point maps. Dungeon cartography isn't for everyone. It can be difficult to cobble together a dungeon map that's accurate and fits together cleanly. When in doubt, you can suggest something more abstract: if your game doesn't rely on really accurate positioning and movement, try a 'point-to-point' map, described below. This type of map is an abstraction, but still contains all the important information.

-A point-to-point map will look like a series of shapes (rooms) connected by lines and points (hallways/ passageways).

-You give players the shape and dimensions of a room. The players draw the shape, but write down the dimensions on the sides of the room's shape. They do not need to be to scale.

-Hallways and doorways are drawn as points and lines. The length/width of the hallway is written along the line.

5. Helpful tools and aids

Dungeon crawling can be made easier with the addition of a few simple tools. All of the ones listed below are intended to make navigating space easier to understand for players, and to help Game Masters save time at the table.

Miniatures and/or tokens. Making sense of scale and position is tricky in confined spaces. Using miniatures or other small objects (cardboard tokens, paper standees, coins, dice, etc.) to stand in for player characters and monsters can make a world of difference when communicating space and movement, especially when using a tactical grid.

Wet- and dry-erase boards. These office standbys make communication between GMs and players a breeze. If players get confused about the shape of a room, or what objects within a room might look like, having something you can draw on and also erase quickly can make a world

of difference. Also, when placed on a table alongside miniatures and tokens, it can be used as a battle grid for combat.

Tablet computers. What's better than graph paper and pencils? Having a something players can draw and erase on endlessly, undoing and redoing any lines they create. By having one designated player mapping a dungeon using an iPad or a different tablet, you save a lot of time at the table. There are numerous free drawing applications and programs that you can run on most tablets (Penultimate, Layers, Bamboo Paper, and Autodesk Sketchbook Pro are among the best for mapping). If you're able to spend a little money, the Bamboo Stylus Solo is a touch screen stylus that will ensure your digital maps are as clear and detailed as you want them to be.

Image references. A picture is worth a thousand words. Trying to improvise dungeon dressings and details can be difficult for Game Masters just starting out, and boxed 'read-aloud' text can get kind of boring, and can take your players out of the game. If you have the time, a good solution is to print out images of dungeon locales and examples of architecture to show your players, or load them onto a tablet or laptop.