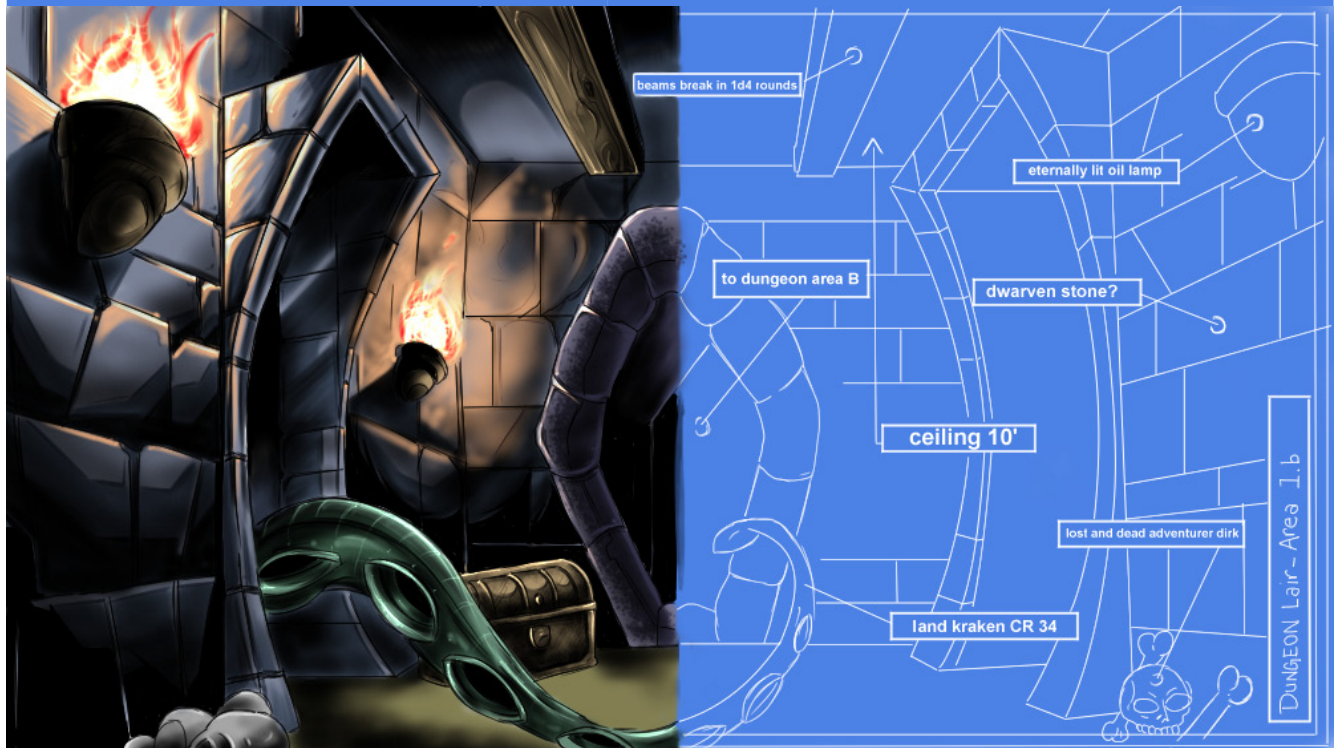


THE ARMATURE

BUILDING

A BETTER

DUNGEON



THE ARMATURE METHOD IS A SCREEN-writing technique that can help GMs of all levels of experience with writing adventures. Essentially, the armature is a single core idea which describes the experience of your story, distilled down to its most basic elements. Every single aspect of your dungeon or adventure will be built upon this framework.

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GENESIS: THE HIGH CONCEPT AND “THE ARMATURE”

When trying to create an adventure that will excite your players, sometimes the best way to begin is to flat-out ask them what they want! There’s no shame in not being a mind reader, and I’ve only ever had positive responses from players whom I’ve directly asked what they want from the game. If you don’t know who the players will be (perhaps you’re writing an adventure for publication), simply ask yourself the same question. There’s a decent chance that, as fans of the same game, your audience’s answers will overlap with yours.

Choose a single concept for the experience, one that will apply to the entire scope of your dungeon, module, adventure, or entire campaign. This concept should describe how players should feel while playing: a single, overarching idea that will describe and influence each element of the adventure. With an armature in mind, start planning. If there’s a specific purpose for this dungeon, think of ways that the armature might serve that purpose.

THE ADVENTURE: EVERYTHING FROM ONE SENTENCE

TONE AND SETTING

Consider what setting will provide the right tone for your dungeon. As always, ask yourself: “How does this relate to the armature?”

The example armature (see the sidebar above right) describes a sense of fear and paranoia, so one might picture prevailing darkness, accompanied by an eerie silence and stillness. A classic, underground dungeon fits this well, and is usually well-received by players.

Example Dungeon

Consider the following broad concept: “In this dungeon, danger always comes from wherever the party is most vulnerable. The characters are constantly looking over their shoulders for new threats.” Shorten this concept down to a single, brief sentence that describes the whole experience and solidifies the intent behind it:

Armature. The characters are constantly checking over their shoulders for danger.

This sentence is the armature, and the rest of this article will refer to this example.



Setting. An ancient, long-abandoned underground temple to an evil deity.

Continue to apply these elements to every decision you make about the dungeon, not only through location descriptions, but also with dungeon dressing—all the little details that don’t directly influence the game mechanically, but affect the players’ emotions during play.

Dressing. While not individually important to progression through the dungeon, small details like these increase your players’ immersion, while supporting and enhancing the tone of the armature.

- ▶ A skeleton slumped in a corner with its leg removed and located many feet away.
- ▶ Occasional corridor sections not only devoid of light, but where magical light sources are all but extinguished.
- ▶ Disturbing, inane scrawlings of someone driven mad in the dungeon long ago, cryptically hinting at the dangers found within.

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LAYOUT AND MECHANICS

Before creating maps, ask how the physical layout of your adventure locales relates to the armature. What kinds of designs and features would amplify the feelings of tension, vulnerability and unpredictability brought to mind by our example armature?

Some unique and unexpected traps would work, and a system of winding, labyrinthine tunnels would support that nicely. On top of that,

Setting Yourself (and Your Players) Up for Success

Before beginning to write, keep in mind a few ways to set yourself and your players up for success:

- ▶ If you're tempted to use complex ideas or mechanics, remember that you, the GM, must keep track of them all during play, which could slow down the action. Fifth edition was designed with the intent of keeping things quick and streamlined, and it's all too easy to negate this benefit with excessive complexity.
- ▶ When designing an obstacle, create opportunities instead of answers. Puzzles with open-ended solutions are more conducive to a fun game session than ones with specific solutions. This is easier said than done, of course—a whole series of articles could be written on the subject—but you should not only design multiple solutions to problems, but try to think of as many solutions as you can; if you only get one or two, chances are your party will think of a third.
- ▶ It can be difficult to get players invested in a story. Start looking for inspirations by asking the players. Appeal directly to their motivations, even only one character has an appropriate one. Deeply religious character? Maybe a nearby temple is in trouble, or the character receives a sign from above. Nature lover? Perhaps a no-good poacher is destroying habitat or skinning rare creatures. For parties who just really love treasure, you can simply dangle coins or rare items as a lure.

plenty of branching and redundant, circling path choices would add uncertainty and make the party feel more exposed.

Layout. A branching, labyrinthine network of trap-filled tunnels.

You could easily build a maze-like dungeon, fill it with traps and monsters, and be done with it. This would be a little straightforward though; the armature suggests that the party should be perpetually unsure about what danger they're in, which is a great opportunity to introduce one or more unique mechanics.

Dungeon mechanics can be either **chronic** or **acute**. Chronic mechanics affect an entire dungeon, usually altering specific actions or abilities wherever they are present. For example, each room might double the damage done of a different specific type, or any player wearing metal armor might have their speed and jump distances reduced.

Acute mechanics are either momentary conditions, similar to traps, or persistent conditions that affect only a single area. For example, a wall switch might open and close specific portcullises in sequence, or a medallion might animate statues found in a specific room.

In this example, the armature says that the party should feel vulnerable and paranoid, and since the dungeon layout has already been outlined as a dark, eerily quiet maze, both of these can be built upon with a persistent mechanic to represent the dungeon's oppressive, preternatural darkness.

Claustrophobic Darkness. All light sources are halved in range and creatures without darkvision have disadvantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks that rely on sight.

In places where even more darkness and confusion might be needed, an acute mechanic can be used heighten this effect.

Stone of Darkness. A polished black onyx gemstone with a permanent *darkness* spell cast upon it. Light from the *daylight* spell cuts through this darkness, but cannot dispel the effect. If the stone is moved, the effect moves with it.

The magical properties of this stone are permanently dispelled if it is exposed to direct sunlight, reducing it to a mundane stone worth 50 gp.

An item such as this could be used throughout the dungeon in creative and dangerous places: near traps to conceal them, carried by creatures with blindsight or truesight, or anywhere else they might trip up the party, or cause them to reevaluate their tactics—which is the goal given by the armature. Come up with more such mechanics if you can think of them, though be cautious with using too many at any once, or your encounters might become bogged down by the additional rules. Finally, always remember to consider the armature; it should provide the objective and justification for all of these mechanics.

CREATURES AND ENCOUNTERS

Continuing with our dark, labyrinthine temple dungeon, ask yourself what kinds of creatures reside here and, as always, “How does this relate to the armature?” Fortunately, the chosen armature can easily be paired with any number of monsters straight out of the rulebooks. Ideal options include monsters that are more potent in the dark and adept at using stealth and stalking. You might look to include a number of particularly dark or stealthy beasts, monstrosities, undead, demons, or aberrations, placing them in locations that will best make use of these particular talents; specifically, places that lend themselves to ambushes or to hit-and-run attacks.

Think about all of the dungeon’s combat encounters this way, up to and including the “dungeon boss,” if it has one. Every single encounter should relate back to the armature, yet feel unique. Come up with as many variations on and permutations of the environment, mechanics,

traps, and creatures you have so that no two encounters feel the same. Your adventure might also include one or more NPCs, who may be friendly or hostile (or both, or neither).

With a list of potential creatures in mind, assembling encounters which build on the armature becomes much easier. Don’t restrict yourself to the typical roles and scenarios in which you typically find these creatures. In fact, it’s often that much more satisfying using them in ways which they aren’t typically encountered.

Example Encounters

- ▶ A gang of 1d6 **bugbears** and 1 **bugbear chief** have made the forward portion of this temple their hideout. They are quite familiar with this portion of the structure, and make effective use of its looping corridors and hidden passages to set up an ambush for the intruding party. They break and scatter when they realize they can’t win, leaving any stragglers for dead. In exchange for being spared, any captured bugbears will gladly share what they know about the temple—though they admit that even they don’t go into its deeper sections, due to stories and glimpses of the strange forms seen creeping in the darkness.
- ▶ A lone **cloak** patrols some of the longer, curving corridors. It stalks the party, gliding near the dark stone floor in near-silence, quick to stay out of sight until it is ready to strike at an unsuspecting target. If outmatched and discovered prematurely, it retreats aimlessly, winding through the temple, potentially leading the party through traps or into other creatures.
- ▶ A pair of **will-o’-wisps** harasses the party with hit-and-run attacks, using their Incorporeal Movement to escape. They try to lead the party to a small crypt containing a particularly ornate marble sarcophagus. Once a creature other than the will-o’-wisps moves within 5 feet of the sarcophagus, a previously dormant **wraith** emerges and attacks.

- ▶ In the deepest, portion of the temple is a ritual chamber where a **drow mage** kneels, chanting prayers to her demon queen. Once the party arrives, 4 **shadows** rise up around her to defend their mistress. Four burnt-out braziers, each containing a single *stone of darkness*, are spaced among the room, which the drow and her minions use to their advantage.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

By now you should have all of your individual pieces and be ready to put them all together. Assemble your adventure in a way that draws in the characters and motivates them to solve the problems it presents, but keep things easily digestible for the players.

The key to this balancing act is **pacing**: pace the adventure too slowly and your players will get bored; pace it too quickly and they might feel overwhelmed or confused. A good general rule for pacing is to set up a cycle of “build-up, action, and rest” that gradually ramps up the intensity with each repetition until the finale. Each part of this cycle helps the flow of the adventure. Resting is as important as action; it’s very important to occasionally give the players time to breathe and

their characters time to rest, otherwise all the action blends together.

The easiest way to increase the tension from one encounter to the next is to ramp up the difficulty, which you can easily accomplish by piling on the deadly threats. Alternatively, consider increasing encounter complexity, either by giving the enemies advantageous conditions (in the example dungeon you could give the enemies darkness or areas of silence), by adding new acute mechanics, or by giving the encounter an unusual win condition, such as saving friendly NPCs from danger or destroying an evil artifact.

After the final combat encounter, the party should be given a suitable payoff, like magic items, treasure, or magical charms. While this reward should also be related to the armature, it is possible to foreshadow future adventures here, tying the reward to a different armature from which you can build a new adventure.

With all that said, there is one final point to make: this is your dungeon, in your world. You should never be afraid to do exactly what you want, and you should never feel the need to apologize for it. Try building your next adventure from the armature outward—your players will feel the adventure’s focus and cohesion. 🎮

