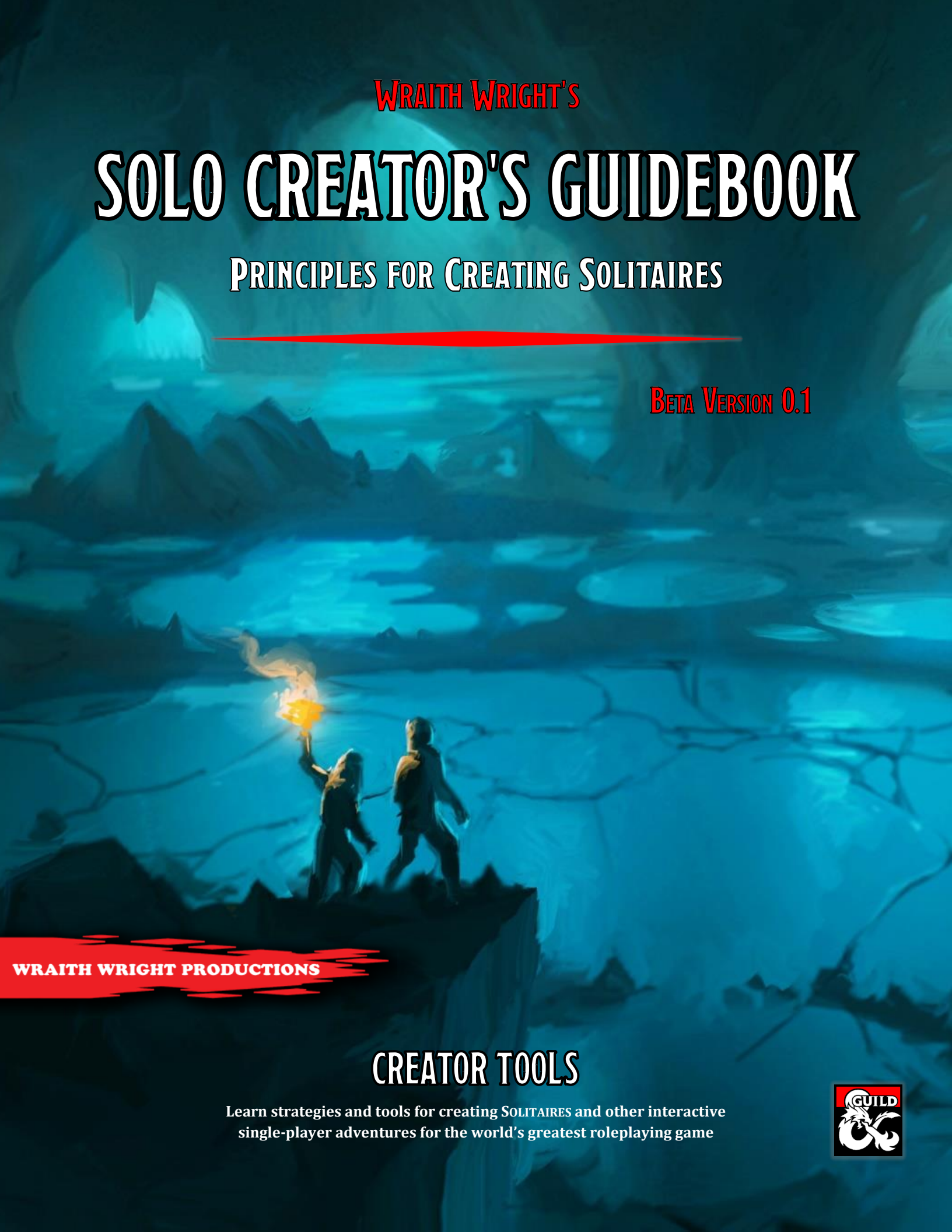
Wraith Wright's

Solo Creator's Guidebook

Principles for Creating Solitaires

Beta Version 0.1



Wraith Wright Productions

Creator Tools

Learn strategies and tools for creating Solitaires and other interactive single-player adventures for the world's greatest roleplaying game

Guild

WRAITH WRIGHT'S

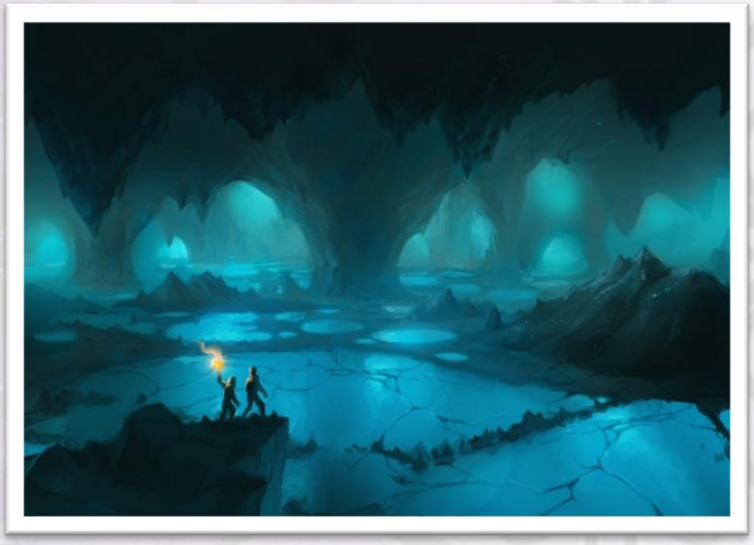
SOLO CREATOR'S GUIDEBOOK

CREDITS

Design and Writing: Randall Right of Wraith Wright Productions
Illustration: Cover by Bruno Balixa
Production and Publication: Randall Right
Quality and Development Consultation:

This product is dedicated to Paul Bimler*, who introduced some of the first commercially-viable single-player adventures to the Dungeon Masters Guild. Paul fosters an online community of fellow enthusiasts, and his products continue to push the envelope, expanding the reach of interactive adventure and showing us what is possible.*

On the Cover: Bruno Balixa's *Iced Cave*



Contents

CHAPTER ZERO

INTRODUCTION

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

- Robert Frost

THIS BOOK IS FOR WRITERS, DESIGNERS, AND publishers who wish to create interactive DUNGEONS & DRAGONS adventures designed for use by a single player. This book is the product of our research and in-house notes for best practices related to adventures of this sort. At Wraith Wright Productions, we want to make great interactive single-player adventures, and we want you to make them too!

INTERACTIVE HISTORY

Single-player interactive adventures are not new. This form of storytelling gained exceptional prominence in the early 1980s, following the rise of DUNGEONS & DRAGONS. Interactive adventures in that period allowed players to choose between several options at the end of each page or block of text. Instead of reading linearly, players would read one segment of the book, decide something related to further progression, and leaf through the book to find the segment corresponding to that choice. Such books had multiple endings, often granting varying degrees of "success," and thus varying degrees of reader satisfaction.

INTERACTION AS A GENRE

The best interactive adventures went beyond simple decision-making. They provided character sheets and inventory tracking, combat rules, and other roleplaying game elements to complete the experience. These "character-based" stories predicated outcomes on more than mere reader choices, often requiring specific character elements or random outcomes to determine or influence the reader's course.

Although its popularity waned in the 1990s, interactive storytelling has enjoyed a recent resurgence with the development of computer applications and electronic documents. The transitioning or hyperlinking functions of these mediums allow players to navigate interactive stories without having to flip through the pages of physical books. The modern landscape presents a host of tools for players and writers, laying the groundwork for interactive adventures to eclipse even their former prominence.

IN DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

Single-player interactive adventures have featured the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS intellectual property quite a few times.

The Endless Quest series of books was primarily based on the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS Roleplaying Game, although it did not employ the game's standard rules. They instead appeared in the same mold as the other interactive stories of their time. Dozens of these books were published in the 1980s and 1990s. The Endless Quest product line was revived in 2018 with another four books.

The two "MSOLO" adventures published in 1983 were nearly identical in structure, except that they called themselves "modules" and downplayed the lack of normal D&D rules. Success or failure was still down to reader

choices, not dice rolls or character sheets. As contemporary critics noted, these modules had even fewer roleplaying game elements than some interactive story books of the time.

Contemporary Types

The Dungeons & Dragons Roleplaying Game has no character-based single-player adventures in its 5th Edition product line. There are no interactive adventures that allow players to utilize D&D character sheets, maps, and dice to approximate the roleplaying game's experience.

The best contemporary offerings are third-party products, many of which are available through the Dungeon Master's Guild. The Solo Creator's Guidebook exists to support and instruct authors in the creation of even more of these products.

Solitaires

This book describes a robust method for creating single-player interactive adventures, something called the Solitaire system. This system will help you build a complete product, starting with a simple story idea and walking through successive stages of development.

Solitaires have several consistent components that distinguish them from other adventures.

Consistency

The end product of the Solitaires system will take the form of a recognizable aesthetic. The more closely a user adheres to the process, the more recognizable the end result will be as coming from this system. The recognizable aesthetic includes mechanisms, layouts, typography, and other tools that create and fulfil a consistent player expectation.

Modularity

The Solitaires system is more than just a creation method. The system expects products to adhere to benchmarks of modulatory, allowing players to string together adventures in the order they choose.

Modularity is achieved by starting and stopping each adventure at accessible points in the story, not at cliffhangers or with events that force the player to play one creator's adventures together. Modularity is also supported with guidelines for treasure distribution that prevent characters from exceeding power levels that other creators' works cannot anticipate and thus be unable to balance their challenges against.

Shared Market

The consistency in design, and the modularity in use, allow Solitaires to share a market presence as part of a larger whole. Each product exists in a collaborative product line that much larger than a single creator could build. A shared market, the Dungeon Masters Guild, is the third benchmark of Solitaires. By making the whole product line available in this space, Solitaires maximize access to their expanded market offerings, putting all its options at the consumers' fingertips. The collaborative rules of the Dungeon Master's Guild also ensure that Solitaires cooperate on even footing.

Group Support

If you are a publisher of interactive, single-player adventures on the Dungeon Masters Guild, join our Facebook group to discuss revisions and improvements to the Solitaires core mechanics, and to get community feedback and support on the development of your own products.

Find us at:

https://www.facebook.com/groups/1736486813059261/

Non-Solitaires

The principles in this book were built on broad research, performed across multiple mediums for interactive stories. They rely on tried-and-true methods and address many pitfalls common to the genre. Because there is more to making single-player adventures than writing within the Solitaires system, you might wish to use this

book to make your own type of products. Hopefully, the wealth of tips and tricks in this book can serve as an effective jump-start to your own writing and design processes.

Product Contents

This product is organized into six chapters. A sample set of player rules is packaged with this product as a separate document.

Here is a summary of each chapter in this book.

Chapter 1: Core

The first chapter provides a formulaic method for designing your story. It walks you through a process beginning with a single idea prompt, moving to a multi-level outline, then expanding to a readable set of scaffolds that can be arranged into an interactive adventure. By the time you finish this chapter, you will have a bare-bones adventure written in shorthand, one that is ready for testing, restructuring, and enhancement with the metastructure tools.

Chapter 2: Metastructure

The second chapter explains methods for making your story interactive. It starts with typography, suggestions for the appearance and formatting of various components of the text. It then examines techniques to route players through different parts of your story while empowering players to use their character sheets along the way.

Chapter 3: Challenge Gates

This chapter addresses challenge gates, the primary mechanism that distinguishes character-based adventures from simple interactive stories. It talks about efficient notation for gates, types of gates, and how to anticipate gates that players want to see based on their character sheets' "gate keys."

Chapter 4: Combats

Distinct from gates, combats are complex scenarios that can tell their own stories. Each combat can have its own heroes and villains, with rising and falling action to emphasize drama. This chapter talks about how to place and notate combat, and how to balance it in the unique environment created by having a one-person adventuring party.

Chapter 5: Writing

This chapter provides tips for writing. It begins with advice for how to replace your scaffolds with fully fleshed-out narrative prose. These are the descriptive tools that bring your world to life and draw the player into it. This chapter also delves into some of the tropes and traps of storytelling in the Dungeons & Dragons paradigm.

Chapter 6: Final Touches

This chapter talks about the placement of treasure, the creation of playbooks and consistent game rules, and several methods for testing your product.

Glossary

The following terms will find frequent use in the pages of this book.

- ***Adventure.*** A modular story, with threats and challenges, designed for exploration and play with the Dungeons & Dragons roleplaying game.
- ***Adventure Path.*** A series of related *adventures* designed for a campaign and intended for play in a prescribed order. An *adventure path* typically shares an overarching plotline, of which each *adventure* provides episodic segments.
- ***Branch.*** Part of a tree metaphor used to describe the *metastructure* of interactive stories, a *branch* is a major decision path navigated across multiple *text parts*.
- ***Binding.*** In adventure *mapping*, a *binding* ends a *branch* by routing the player onto another,

parallel *branch*. Multiple parallel *branches* often bind together into a single *branch*.

- ***Bottleneck.*** In adventure *mapping*, a *bottleneck* is a *text part* that the player must pass through, typically moving in one direction; the player cannot return to prior text parts through *recursive prompts*. *Bottlenecks* can refer to the *trunk* of a story or chapter, or to *text parts* that *bind* multiple *branches* together, even those a player can bypass on other *branches*.
- ***Campaign.*** A series of *adventures* put together to form an ongoing, episodic experience for a single character. *Campaigns* can be a single *adventure path*, a set of products designed for use as such. They can also be ad hoc combinations, even *adventures* not designed for use together.
- ***End.*** An *end* is a *text part* from which there are no *prompts* leading the player to further *text parts*.
- ***End, Dead.*** A *dead end* concludes the *adventure* negatively. It can be reached by bad player choices (decision ends) or by unfortunate die rolls (dice ends).
- ***End, Live.*** Opposite to *dead ends,* these *text parts* conclude a chapter or story positively. At the end of a chapter, they direct the player to the next chapter. At the end of a story, they direct the player to the adventure summary or to the next story.
- ***Gate.*** A requirement or prerequisite necessary for selecting an *option* from a set. A *gate* demands that the character have an item, feature, or specific roll result to use that *prompt*. Without it, the player must select another of the available options.
- ***Identifier (Unique Identifier).*** Each *text part* has a unique title called an *identifier*, typically a number but sometimes a codeword or a mix of letters and numbers.
- ***Leaf.*** Part of a tree metaphor used to describe the metastructure of interactive stories, *leaves* are discrete *text parts* or small collections of *text parts* accessed from a *branch*. *Leaves* represent a minor diversion and eventually return the player to the same *branch* to continue the story.
- ***Locational Mapping.*** This is a *mapping* technique typically used to describe a geographical region, like a building or a dungeon that has separate rooms, wherein the player may navigate back and forth, repeatedly accessing the same *text parts*.
- ***Mapping.*** The process and form of linking *text parts* to one another to structure a story or a portion of a story. This term may also apply to the act of diagraming *text parts*.
- ***Metaknowledge.*** Information a player can infer from the structural tools of your adventure, something the character would not know. Careless wording in prompts or instructive text can convey metaknowledge.
- ***Metastructure.*** The conceptual mechanisms and instructions that move the player between segments of text, creating an interactive experience. *Metastructure* is conceived of separately from *story structure*.
- ***Option.*** *Options* are provided in sets of two or more. They exist where a player has a choice of how to proceed. Each *option* contains its own *prompt*.
- ***Playbook.*** A set of information that assists the player in navigating the adventure without a Dungeon Master. A playbook might be just a few paragraphs in the book's introduction, or a complete chapter of *rules* at the beginning. It might also be an entirely-separate document that accompanies an adventure or an adventure path.

- ***Rule (New Rule).*** A pre-stated method of interacting with metastructure, created to help players navigate the adventure or to apply special restrictions. Player *rules* are only preferable to natural language instructions when they address complex or repeatedly-appearing scenarios.
- ***Prompt.*** A *prompt* identifies a new *text part* for the player to go to. A *prompt* names the *identifier* of the *target text* part and typically includes a hyperlink directly to it. Prompts appear inside *instructive text* or *options*.
- ***Prompt, Future.*** A prompt the player must make note of for later use. *Future prompts* often lead to isolated *text parts* (or to appendices) that do not redirect players back to their current text parts.
- ***Prompt, Recursive.*** A *prompt* that directs a player to a previously-read *text part*. *Recursive prompts* are usually found in *locational mapping* structures, as opposed to *tree mapping*.
- ***Story Structure.*** The story-based form of your adventure, which parallels the forms used in other mediums of storytelling. *Story structure* contemplates the separation of acts, rising and falling action, inciting events, and a climax.
- ***Text, Instructive.*** This text addresses the player rather than the character. It may call for the player to alter the character sheet or guide the player through resolving a challenge of some sort.
- ***Text, Narrative.*** This is descriptive prose, typically written in second-person form. *Narrative text* describes the protagonist's surroundings and activities, as well as the activities of supporting characters. It often resolves or answers a decision the player made to get to that *text part*, and it leads the player through the story to the next decision point.
- ***Text Part (Part).*** This is a discrete collection of text that describes locations and activities. It has a unique *identifier* and can be comprised of *narrative text*, *instructive text*, *options*, and other components.
- ***Tree Mapping.*** A metaphorical *mapping* technique used to organize *text parts* into *trunks, branches,* and *leaves*. *Tree mapping* is best employed where the story is unidirectional.
- ***Trunk.*** Part of a tree metaphor used to describe story structure, a *trunk* is the beginning of a story or a chapter. *Trunks* are often large, containing far more *narrative text* than other *text parts* because they introduce a coming chapter or story.
- ***Veneer.*** In *locational mapping*, when a *text part* constitutes a location that can be visited multiple times, a *veneer* is a separate *text part* for that location containing information relevant only to a first-time visit. All later visits route into a text part that reflects important events or features completed on the first visit.

CHAPTER ONE

CORE DESIGN

"There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed."

- Ernest Hemingway

IT BEGINS WITH AN IDEA. IN A TRADITIONAL TALE, the idea is usually a single concept or tagline. This is called a "prompt" or "seed." Adventure writing is no different, except that the idea is probably something adventurous! Adventures are prompted by monsters, treasures, heroism, exploration, discovery, or any of the exciting and fertile ideas in which DUNGEONS & DRAGONS thrives.

CORE DESIGN SUMMARY

This chapter covers the following topics.

- ***Story Prompts.*** How to plant a seed that will grow into an adventure.
- ***Outlines.*** Designing the major events and plotlines from beginning to end.
- ***Scenes.*** Conceptualizing whole scenes as waypoints and drivers of your story.
- ***Scaffolds.*** Preliminary adventure-writing in easy shorthand.

STORY PROMPTS

Your story is built on an idea, one which you will expand and polish, build an outline for, and detail with narrative prose. In a traditional tale, the initial idea is a simple notion or a question.

The best concepts include a nugget of drama or conflict. When choosing your story prompt, pick something that really excites. If it doesn't move you, it won't excite players.

EXAMPLE

Prompt: A group of goblins scrape up some gold to hire an adventurer, hoping to evict the monster that has stolen their home cave.

Once you have your story prompt in hand, polish it by considering a few parameters and limitations. It might need narrowing into a more manageable form, or expansion, giving it room to grow. Whatever refinement you add, the process of polishing your idea must necessarily contemplate several important factors.

PLACING A PROTAGONIST

Your story is not yours alone. It also belongs to the player. Standard story-writing requires the development of a protagonist, but in interactive games, that element is provided by the player. Someone else selects your hero, a character with dimensions that span a dramatic range of possibilities.

In order to fit the protagonist into your story, and fit your story around the protagonist, you must have an acceptable range of protagonist concepts in mind and write consistent for those concepts throughout the story.

CHOOSE A CAMPAIGN SETTING

The story you are writing takes place in a campaign setting. This codifies the character's local environs, the nearby people, and the features unique to the game's world. These will have a significant impact on your protagonist.

You can write your story for a generic fantasy world, or you can write it for one of the published settings.

Published Campaign Settings

At the time of this book's writing, published campaign settings in the current edition of Dungeons & Dragons include only Eberron, the Forgotten Realms, Ravenloft, and Ravnica.

When writing for one of these settings, it is important to know the world well. You must match and reflect the world's features in your story, and you must remain aware of the world's inherent expectations.

Eberron stories aspire to a pulpy, noire feel. The setting has magical features that are functionally reminiscent of post-World War I technology. A player in this campaign setting expects to encounter the themes of post-war recovery, political intrigue, and exploration of the type you might see in an *Indiana Jones* movie.

Similarly, players expect that stories written for the **Forgotten Realms** are detail-rich explorations of the features therein, complete with meddling from the various gods. Nearly every corner of the world has already-established lore, and players expect to see their favorite and well-known features and non-player characters represented.

To write in **Ravenloft**, your story cannot fail to include elements of gothic horror. A simple dungeon crawl or monster hunt will not do; players expect Ravenloft to contemplate notions of terror, mystery, and dark villains. These archfoes embody the humanity-challenging archetypes of classical monster fiction.

Nothing is normal in the city-plane of **Ravnica**, and nothing there will perfectly resemble the Dungeons & Dragons of more-traditional worlds. Players expect these adventures to be fantastical, the people and the monsters to be unique, and the politics to be decidedly guild-related.

For other worlds, take some time to identify the setting's core themes and expected experiences. Failure to meet the expectations of a setting can be a failure to inhabit the stated world, making it hard for players to feel immersed in it.

If you cannot identify the elements of a pre-made setting, try putting the adventure in a generic setting, one that the player can adapt to any world.

Generic Campaign Settings

A generic campaign setting assumes features common to most game worlds and avoids rare elements that don't exist in the majority of campaigns. Without a designated setting, the player is free to place the game into whatever context or setting is desired.

While avoiding a setting makes the story more compatible with those of other writers, using a generic setting is not entirely advantageous. A writer is sometimes constrained by what must be left out of the world, not just the elements that must be included. Some common features are absent in some worlds or, more likely, appear differently with different backgrounds, motivations, or applications.

Choose a Character

A writer must be mindful of the *character* of a character, particularly its distinct mental and moral traits. You will also need some insight into its capabilities. Without acknowledging that you anticipate a certain kind of character, you may have to compose a story in such a broad form that it fails to feel compelling and immersive.

Character expectations in this vein are necessarily minor. Players want to build their own characters with as little guidance as possible. However, some characters simply don't fit as protagonists in some stories. It is therefore permissible to define the player's character from the outset, at least in some small ways, in order to write a better story.

When you contemplate the protagonist, think of its along two axes, its motivations and its

capabilities. In imagining these, keep in mind the instructions you will give to the player at the product's outset, and how you will describe the characters that are appropriate to the adventure.

Motivations

Some characters aren't well-motivated to pursue some stories. In fact, some combinations are so incongruous as to make for a poor player experience. Motivation is therefore the most important aspect of the character to select for, and the most important limitation to convey to the player.

For example, a story that mostly involves intrigue and political dealings is going to play poorly if the character lacks subtlety and charm. The tactless barbarian, uninterested in city life or courtly affairs, will repeatedly fail to find immersion during your story since it lacks the motivation to pursue the hooks your story will offer. The story will feel forced and incongruous, or it will end before it truly begins.

To avoid such conflicts, it can be tempting to try to write for all character personalities and motivations. *This is not recommended.* Your story will quickly bloat with extraneous branches, each with no other purpose than to bring every character type along with the course the player has already chosen, that of playing through the adventure. Instead, acknowledge your protagonist's motivations up front and write for them throughout the story.

Capabilities

You must also consider the capabilities that your unknown protagonist might have so you can set appropriate challenges and manage the scope of the adventure.

Challenges. Players want to make their own choices as to the race and class they prefer, carry the equipment that seems right to them, and focus on the skills and feats they find useful. They do not want their chosen character excluded based on how the character sheet was written. You therefore cannot easily write for particular racial traits or class features when composing challenges for your protagonist.

Level (Story Scope)

Levels warrant separate consideration. Players never seem to balk at this important definer of their capabilities; they accept as a given that every adventure has level restrictions. A character's level is simply a temporary state of being, not something that constrains player choices.

Usefully, levels strongly define the nature of a character's capabilities. And capabilities are necessary to consider when writing. A story based on travel becomes a non-story if the character can simply teleport to the destination. A travel story should therefore not be written for characters of a level where long-distance teleportation is an option.

Selecting your protagonist's character level particularly helps you write your adventure because, if you keep it in mind, it will constrain your scope. The level-based tiers of play in Dungeons & Dragons are designed to reduce epical creep, the tendency to quickly escalate the importance of events until they reach epic proportions.

For example, the scope of a low-level character's adventures should cover a small area and achieve interesting-but-minor outcomes. Your protagonist should not be saving a large city from dire threats at 1st level; in this tier, the protagonist is no more powerful than the city's lowliest guards and no cleverer than the city's humblest bureaucrats.

A character in the ***local heroes*** tier (levels 1-4) might explore tombs and crypts, face low-level threats, and decide the fate of a village.

Upon reaching the ***heroes of the realm*** tier (levels 5-10), that character will have found a more important place in the story, venturing into dangerous wilds, confronting terrifying beasts, and vanquishing threats to entire regions.

Achieving the ***masters of the realm*** tier (levels 11-16) brings the character into contention with epic foes and thrusts it into uncharted regions or planar quests that change the fate of nations or whole continents. This character is a political force, or at least someone recognized by the relevant governments. The character is likely to rule over a stronghold, guild, or martial order and have minions or apprentices.

At the ***masters of the world*** tier (levels 17-20), the character is a legend that can influence events on a planetary scale and beyond. Such a character explores other worlds and fights forces that can threaten the existence of all things.

When designing your adventure, do not allow its scope to eclipse these expectations. Unreasonably-important adventures make players wonder why their characters are the ones facing them. They also limit the direction you can go with future stories. It can be a let-down going from world-saving hijinks in one adventure, to merely plucking kittens out of trees in the next.

Premade Characters

Using a premade character solves a lot of challenges you will face when writing for your protagonist. You can dictate the character's motivations and perfectly "anticipate" each of its capabilities. You won't have to worry about feature gates at all; you already know what the character can do so you don't have to study lists of class features in order to be ready for anything.

The downsides of using a premade character are several. Primarily, writing for a premade character is much closer to writing an interactive novel than a single-player game of Dungeons & Dragons. The feel of the adventure is very different. Creating, developing, and personalizing a character are large parts of what makes an interactive adventure enjoyable, and the primary reason players want to use the Dungeons & Dragons rules. Players want to play their own characters, not one of your characters.

Example (Setting and Character)

Prompt: A group of goblins scrape up some gold to hire an adventurer, hoping to evict the monster that has stolen their home cave.

Campaign Setting: Generic (any)

Character (3rd or 4th level): Anyone willing to work for goblins, either for their gold or because of sympathy. The best characters have a mix of capabilities.

Bound the Prompt

With your story idea polished and revised, and your protagonists and campaign setting envisioned, it is time to give initial inklings of structure to your prompt. Begin this process by assigning a start and an end to your story prompt.

The Start

Your story's start describes an event or encounter that kicks off the story. In adventure-writing, this is called a "hook.") It should be intriguing or exciting, and it should be something that strongly motivates the protagonist to participate in the story.

When your protagonist's call to action appears, the player should become aware (fully or partially) of what is at stake in the adventure, and that knowledge should naturally lead to engagement with the adventure's goals. This task is not as easy as it may sound.

Unfortunately, that which motivates one character might dissuade another entirely! Hooks are usually tailored to player characters, but your antagonist is mostly unknown to you. Instead, you must present a generic call to action that is as broadly-applicable as your story can support.

The End

Make a concrete decision about how the story concludes. The ending is usually easy to define;

you probably already have an idea of where the story is going. However, keep in mind that your story can (and probably should) have multiple endings. You don't need to worry about alternate endings at this point, but your story will be more interactive if you preserve the potential to have more than one "right" conclusion.

Example (Start and End)

Prompt: A group of goblins scrape up some gold to hire an adventurer, hoping to evict the monster that has stolen their home cave.

Campaign Setting: Generic (any)

Character (3rd or 4th level): Anyone willing to work for goblins, either for their gold or because of sympathy. The best characters have a mix of capabilities.

Start: While travelling, the protagonist is flagged down by a Small-sized creature in a dress wearing a pot helm. The goblin thinks this disguise will get her close enough to talk without being attacked on sight.

End: The protagonist reclaims the goblins' home and resolves their conflict with the nearby halflings.

Outlines

Your outline puts events in order and helps you build an expanding structure to advance your narrative. This method uses chapter summaries as a skeleton to support your larger outline.

Add Chapters

This method of outlining begins by adding a list of chapters between the start and end of your bounded story, with a short summary of each.

The Role of Chapters

In traditional story-writing, it is common to divide the narrative into structured parts. The three-act structure is an old one, described in Aristotle's literary treatise, *Poetics*. Similarly, Gustav Freytag's 19th-century pyramidal model proposed five stages of rising and falling action. These classical structures are used to set a meaningful pace and to create and resolve tension in an entertaining way.

The Solitaires method uses similar pacing tools, expanding the act structure of traditional story-writing into four adventure chapters. The four-chapter method particularly supports the session-measuring tools that Solitaires use to moderate character advancement and play time.

This method doesn't suit everyone; some writers prefer not to use chapters for various reasons. Even without chapters, it is important to be mindful of the elements each chapter in this method should provide and strive to include those elements where your story calls for them.

Chapter One

The first chapter lays the scene and provides an event that incites the adventure. By the end of the chapter, the character will have passed the point of no return, crossing a threshold that means commitment to the action.

You already have a start point for the adventure, which you can lay in the first chapter. If your starting point (and anything leadup to it) are not yet sufficiently-interesting, you will need to imagine some new events to expand the chapter. References or clues to events that will appear in the final chapter are ideal for this purpose.

A normal story would also use this chapter to introduce the protagonist and the setting. Your interactive adventure will necessarily have no description of the protagonist, since that is provided by the player. But you can write elements that support the *type* of character your adventure calls for.

For the setting, players will assume some generic fantasy tropes belonging to most generic campaign worlds. If using a premade, published campaign setting, there will be more assumptions about the world. Regardless, add to this chapter some observations or events that ground the story. In a generic setting, these can be everyday events that "humanize" the protagonist or make its baseline experiences relatable. For published campaign settings, a few references to the setting's unique features can transport the reader to that world.

Chapter Two

The second act of the three-act structure is usually half the story's length. For this format, we instead divide it into two parts, the second and third chapters.

The second chapter is where the player first struggles against the overall threat, conflict, or challenge of the story. While the first act introduced what is at stake, the second chapter takes the player into a direct conflict, the first of several. Perhaps the main antagonist realizes the character is on the case and sends minions to interfere.

This chapter is best described as "reactionary." Events happen and the character responds. It is a chance to meet supporting characters and features of the story. At the end of chapter two, the protagonist also has a more-complete understanding of what is at stake.

Midpoint. Traditional storytelling models also call for a dramatic event or setback at the "midpoint" of the story. In this structure, you can place such an event at the end of chapter two.

An example event is a twist that threatens or rolls back some of the character's progress, or something that drives up the stakes. Perhaps the second part of the antagonist's plan unfolds, or another mysterious murder occurs. Perhaps the antagonists reveal that they know what the protagonist is up to or the player learns that the protagonist was acting upon a misunderstanding of the threat. Perhaps the counted-on solution to the problem proves itself unviable or the character's allies are lost.

Whatever the case, the midpoint changes a protagonist's approach to the overall conflict, sharpening the upcoming climax.

Chapter Three

The third chapter gives the character a chance to react to the midpoint event. Whatever the setback, the character starts clawing back from it.

In this chapter, the story tends to shift from reactionary to proactive. The prior chapters drew the protagonist along, but now the protagonist begins driving the narrative. In terms of interactive adventures, the options in the text parts change their temperament. They go from asking the protagonist's reaction to events to asking for the methods of engagement or for further-reaching strategies.

Chapter Four

The concluding chapter does two things. It wraps up the overall conflict and it lays out the aftermath of the adventure.

The final conflict is often preceded by a low point. The main antagonist reveals how strong it truly is, perhaps showing itself to be a demon for the first time or literally drawing back the curtain to reveal a powerful bodyguard. The low point can also be a morale-affecting setback; perhaps discovering that an ally was secretly working against the protagonist the whole time. Whatever the case, the protagonist finds out that the final confrontation will not be as easy as anticipated.

In the Dungeons & Dragons Roleplaying Game, the final conflict is universally a "boss fight." A different sort of conflict is possible but that constitutes a very risky design choice. Although the game purports to use three "pillars" of player experience, these are not equally important; combat defines most of the characters' features and encompasses most of the game's dice rolling.

The final fight must be the story's grandest, largest, and deadliest combat with the most

interesting terrain or circumstances. It can occur in phases or use whatever other dramatic tools are needed to make it the most memorable combat of the adventure. Anything else defies player expectations for the climax, the literal definition of "anticlimactic." If an earlier fight is more exciting, you must correct that disparity!

The second part of this chapter is the aftermath. The villain is defeated, at least for now, but you must also deliver on any promises made in the earlier chapters. You must wrap up loose ends and resolve minor plots or conflicts. If your player is invested in your story, it is because you provided an interesting hook and made the player care about the things that were at stake. Do not leave unexplored the resolution for any of those elements. Players want to receive accolades and otherwise experience the fruits of victory.

Finally, if the story calls for it, chapter four is a place where you can drop leads to your next adventure. Perhaps the villain escapes to fight another day or reveals that he himself is but a minion for a larger monster or more-insidious threat. Be careful with these leads; you want to *foreshadow* the next adventure, not overshadow the current one. "To be continued" should not feel like the player hasn't resolved the main arc of this adventure's story or ruin its sense of conclusion and completeness. Nor should a revelation force the protagonist into immediate action.

Example (Chapter Prompts)

Prompt: A group of goblins scrape up some gold to hire an adventurer, hoping to evict the monster that has stolen their home cave.

Campaign Setting: Generic (any)

Character (3rd or 4th level): Anyone willing to work for goblins, either for their gold or because of sympathy. The best characters have a mix of capabilities.

Start: While travelling, the protagonist is flagged down by a Small-sized creature in a dress wearing a pot helm. The goblin thinks this disguise will get her close enough to talk without being attacked on sight.

Chapter 1: The protagonist is approached with a sympathetic story, offered pay (much of which is in the caves), and introduced to some goblin characters.

Chapter 2: The protagonist must rescue four missing goblins from various predicaments to "put the band back together" before heading to the goblin caves. Each goblin rescued helps in the effort by providing something unique.

Chapter 3: The protagonist plumbs the depths of the goblin caves, destroys the foes lurking there, and resolves some construction problems with the caves.

Chapter 4: A new threat arises; warriors from the nearby halfling village come to threaten the goblins. The protagonist has to talk through and resolve the accusations the halflings make, exploring each goblin's past to uncover the truth. Finally, the protagonist will have to duel the halfling leader to convince the more recalcitrant members of that warband to back down. This halfling is the one who lead that now-evicted monster to the goblin caves!

End: The protagonist reclaims the goblins' home and resolves their conflict with the nearby halflings.

Chapters as Meter

The four-chapter model of SOLITAIRES calls for each chapter to provide about one hour of play. This structure ensures that normal adventures are worth four checkpoints for character advancement purposes. (See chapter 6.) This method invokes the shared campaigns rules of *Xanathar's Guide to Everything*.

SOLITAIRES use the four-chapter structure as an interchangeable module in a more free-form story. Where other single-player adventures tend to want the player to move exclusively to the successive adventures in their own product lines, SOLITAIRES envision an environment of adventures that are interchangeable, allowing the player to move between the products of different creators. This goal requires the writer to be a bit subtler with any hooks that point at the other adventures, making them less pressing or demanding.

If your adventure anticipates a later, related adventure, try to achieve your foreshadowing without an immediate call to action. Perhaps there are intervening clues that need to appear before the next leg of that journey can begin. Leave room for the character to make use of downtime actions and to explore other adventures. Don't leave players with timed deadlines or drop them in isolated locales right beside your next adventure.

Adventure as Outline

In place of a traditional outline, you might try writing out a traditional adventure and using that as your model for a single-player version. In this case, your adventure notes, along with your first playtest with a player, forms the basis of your outline and "core" path through the adventure.

Using this technique helps you foresee the important forks in the story, the places where players are able and likely to make important decisions that will change the course of the adventure. In the end, you will probably have to translate these notes and experiences into the forms previously described in this product but using one of your adventures as the basis for an interactive story can make the work stronger.

Creating a standard adventure for your outline, even if it is a simple one, has the added benefit of being something you can include as an appendix to your product. Sometimes people want to run your interactive adventures as standard adventures, and such an appendix can be a big help in that effort.

Scenes

Each chapter should contain a number of scenes. The notion of a scene is hard to define or constrain. Think of a scene as including all the action that takes place onstage between set changes. In storytelling, a scene represents a location or ongoing activity connected by a unifying purpose, regardless of time or space.

For example, a scene could be an ambush in the wilderness, the exploration of a dungeon, a visit to the duke's court, a chase across miles of countryside, or an investigation that spans an entire city and takes weeks to conclude. You may conceptualize a scene as everything needed to convey an important piece of the story, or to stage an event or a series of closely-connected events.

In many areas of your story, a scene can be thought of as modular. Some player decisions or powers may turn events so dramatically that an alternate scene is called for. When you write scenes, you will probably already have alternate scenes in mind and be anticipating the decisions that can lead to them or bypass them. The classic example is a fight scene that the protagonist may avoid with some fast-talking.

Create Scenes

The process for creating scenes reflects the process for creating chapters, only on a more granular level.

To define scenes, start with the chapter description you already have. Contemplate the goals of the chapter—what should occur and why—then decide the order and manner of laying that out through different scenes. Add scenes that include exposition and events that will create those desired outcomes.

The Pillars of Play

Remember that Dungeons & Dragons prescribes three pillars of play: combat, exploration, and social interaction. When picking scenes, be sure to cover at least some aspects of each pillar.

If you find that your adventure focuses mostly on a single pillar, forecast that in your adventure's description. You want players to know ahead of time what to expect and what kind of character is best-suited to your adventure.

Scene Purposes

In normal story-writing, scenes should each exist for a specific purpose that advances the story or exposes its secrets to the reader. Sometimes the purpose is simply to set the pace of the adventure. This is mostly true for adventure-writing too.

For each of your scenes, be sure to note its purpose as you conceptualize it. If you find that a scene has no purpose, change the scene or change the story to give the scene purpose.

Categories

A scene's purpose generally falls into one of three categories, milestones, exposition, or consequences.

In most cases, the scene advances the story by providing one of the series of connected events that leads to the story's end. For example, the protagonist observes enemy forces moving into a mountain village, threatening the border with the neighboring nation. This milestone escalates tension between the nations, a conflict to be resolved at the story's end.

A scene's purpose can also be expository. Exposition reveals motivations or past events that are driving the current narrative. For example, reading the queen's diary and discovering that her sister was assassinated can explain why the queen's armies are on the march.

Particularly important in interactive adventures, a scene can also reveal consequences of prior decisions. The purpose is therefore immersion—reinforcing the idea that the character is experiencing an interactive environment with actual consequences—or it is a fulfillment of past promises.

Example (Single Chapter)

Chapter 2: Protagonist must rescue four missing goblins from various predicaments to "put the band back together" before heading to the goblin caves. Each goblin rescued helps in the effort by providing something unique.

Scene 1: Stribly has become lost in a nearby forest area. The protagonist must utilize outdoorsy skills and features to find and rescue him.

Scene 2: Gantonis was captured by guards at a town by the river and the protagonist must convince the folk to let Gantonis go.

Scene 3: Hirva abandoned the quest to find help and joined some "mean" goblins in a neighboring band. The protagonist must fight to make these goblins release Hirva.

Scene 4: Dritch sought to steal an artifact of power from an abandoned wizard tower and now it controls his mind. The protagonist must overcome some magical hazards to free Dritch.

Minor Purposes

Even action scenes contribute to the story and can have a higher purpose to them. For example, an ambush by the Cardinal's guards might reveal nothing new. However, it reminds the protagonist (and the player) that foes are close by and that the mission is pressing.

For the most part, defining purpose should be easy, even when the scene you want doesn't immediately suggest its own purpose. In an adventure, a scene's purpose might simply be to fulfill game expectations or tropes, reminding the player that this is a roleplaying game rather than a novel.

Scene Pacing

Like purpose, the pace of a novel relates almost entirely to the development of its own story. The pace of events creates a timeline of rising and falling action that heightens tension and drama. The high points of action are called *upbeats* and the low points are called *downbeats*.

When you place scenes, whether upbeats or downbeats, pay careful attention to their order. Several upbeats in a row can set the stage for a disappointingly-long series of downbeats. Better to intersperse the highs and lows to regulate expectations and give the player (as well as the character) a chance to recover from the action.

Adventure Pacing

Adventurers expect to encounter pacing in a non-traditional way. The mechanics of the Dungeons & Dragons Roleplaying Game are such that many character features are exhaustible resources that must be used or saved with care and strategy. The classic example is spell slots, but other features (including hit points) are also reduced as the adventuring day progresses. In story terms, adventurers expect to encounter an unknown number of consecutive upbeats, challenges that tax their resources, before having a downbeat in which to recover their power.

The pace of scenes in an adventure is therefore different from a novel's expected pace. When your adventure includes all the scenes it needs to meet its story purposes, you will probably find that its pacing is insufficient to meet player expectations. This is where the needs of your pacing can defy the dictates of purpose, allowing for additional scenes that may or may not be related to the overall quest.

Random encounter tables are a classic feature of Dungeons & Dragons adventures and a classic example of how a scene can help structure your pacing without contributing to the overall advancement of the story. The purpose of such scenes is to challenge the character, particularly in the context of its exhaustible resources. It also reminds players that they are just small components of a larger world, and that not everything they encounter is about them or their quests.

Likewise, players also expect scenes where they haggle with merchants, banter with gate guards, and rest at strategic times. These tropes of roleplaying games give the player a chance to spend wisely, pack efficiently, or plan safely. As downbeats, they also act as counterpoints to the highs and, in some cases, prepare the adventurer to better manage those highs.

Type and Order

In addition to mixing upbeats and downbeats, it is important to vary the nature of upbeats so that the experience is does not become monotonous. This means using and mixing the three pillars of the Dungeons & Dragons experience.

For pacing purposes, your combats are always upbeats, in part because they have potential lethality, but also because they might exhaust some character resources.

Social interactions are downbeats unless you anticipate that they might affect character resources in some manner. For example, a negotiation where the player must expend spell slots or healing potions to help a group of

travelers is a downbeat for story purposes, but an upbeat for adventuring purposes since character resources may be spent.

Exploration can go either way, depending on the presence of environmental hazards. Ironically, getting lost—perhaps the worst danger of pure exploration scenes—is a downbeat because being lost is boring. It is also a downbeat because being lost expends only rations and the lack of action gives the protagonist a chance to recover character resources.

Mixing these types is not always easy. As a general rule, follow a long narrative sequence with *action*. A long sequence is a trunk text part or a lengthy piece of exposition (a wall of 150 or more words). Placing immediate action after exposition is a standard tool in story-writing. It is no less important in adventure writing, but an adventure calls for an extended tempo of upbeats. A quick battle (combat), followed by a chase through back alleys (exploration), followed by another fight (combat), then a harrowing negotiation as the city guards try to figure out who to arrest (social interaction). Afterward, the protagonist gets a downbeat, resting at an inn or in the city jail.

This mixed order of scene types serves both the story's expectation of upbeats and downbeats, and the game's expectation of an extended adventuring day punctuated by rests.

Rests

Because of the exhaustible nature of a character's resources, you must consider whether any given lull is sufficient to provide a short rest or a long rest and specifically identify it as such.

Players will almost always seek to rest if possible and may interpret any lull in the action to be a rest-taking opportunity if you are not explicit. Alternately, your lack of explicit treatment of resting may result in a failure to rest when you intend one.

Being proactive about noting rest opportunities preserves an important tool for you to maintain control of the pacing. If you want to restrict resting so that your protagonist's resources remain thinned, increasing the tension of further encounters, you cannot do so simply by failing to note an opportunity to rest. Because players want to immediately recover any and all expended resources, even innocuous moments between scenes may be interpreted as a short rest possibility. Therefore, you must use tension to color even your moments of transition between scenes.

The methods to maintain tension and disrupt resting potential between scenes are the same methods that Dungeon Masters use in their regular games. Either make the location unsafe or inhospitable or provide some time-based pressure that requires immediate transition into the next scene. This can be as simple as reminding the player that the antagonist is still active and may achieve even a minor goal if the action is not pressed.

Properly applying this tension prevents you from losing control of the resting sequence. If you describe rest-appropriate transitions between your scenes without giving the chance to rest or an explanation as to why a rest is not possible, expect players to take matters into their own hands and calculate a rest anyway, thinking you have simply forgotten or worse, thinking you are not writing rationally.

When rests are possible, be proactive in declaring them or offering them. If your sequence has an extended lull or series of downbeat scenes, like several days of travel, announce up front that the character gains the advantage of a long rest prior to describing those days. Answer that question right away. Don't distract players with the unresolved notion of whether a rest is possible when you want their focus to be on your upcoming narrative.

Number of Scenes

A typical chapter should contain between three and five scenes, depending on the size of the scenes.

However, a chapter can have as few as one scene, particularly in a location-based sequence. A large "dungeon" or similar area is one such example. Dungeons tend to have their own self-contained collections of upbeats and downbeats, conflicts and apex events, and a sufficiently-complex purpose that can fill an entire chapter.

The Final Scene

There is probably only one version of your final scene, no matter what routes the character takes to get through the final chapter. That scene probably has a climactic battle, plus elements of exposition and resolution for your story. This method is formulaic, but it works well.

Design it First

You already decided how the adventure should end when you were polishing your story prompt. Translate that notion into a scene by determining what events lead to or create that ending.

The final scene is the most important one to conceptualize. Your other scenes will all point to the final scene and, without know where you are going, it can be easy to get lost or to have your story change course during writing.

Changing course like that can devastate your production timeline. In a novel, evolving the story as you write only affects a single chain of events, mostly relating to future writing. But in an interactive adventure, alterations that affect the final scene probably also affect other branches, potentially invalidating (or requiring updates to) a lot more of your material. Knowing your final scene helps you stay on course and prevents expansive revisions.

Thinking through your final scene also helps you constrain other scenes and avoid epical creep. It can be dreadfully easy to escalate the importance of events in a story if you are making it up as you write. Eventually, lowly starting characters are saving the country or performing other events that would grant the importance and fame that are rightly reserved for much higher-level characters. Since your final scene is the story's climax, knowing its parameters ahead of time can remind you to write within the expectations of the four tiers of play.

Avoid Binary Results

Through its interactive nature, your story represents an accumulation of player decisions. If your story has only a binary outcome, success or failure, those decisions lose meaning and nuance.

Although you probably have only one final scene, try to give it variables that will reflect the major decisions made in the course of getting to it. Additionally, try to make your story answer more than one question. For example, while the battle in the final scene represents an apex event of your story, other events orbiting the final scene can create a more complex, multifaceted outcome. This can be as simple and interrelated as the classic adventure formulation of "defeat the monster *and* rescue the villagers" (one or the other is only a partial victory), or it can be more complex, like resolving the different problems of each of several opposing factions and soothing the tensions between them.

Combat

The final scene should contain, or appear in proximity to, a final battle. This is the most difficult battle in the adventure, but it should be more than that. The final battle represents the peak of the adventure's combat difficulty, but it also represents or foreshadows the resolution of your story. For a satisfying climax, the final battle should therefore resolve something essential.

The final combat resolution is so important to your story arc that the battle should never seem like an accidental encounter. Everything is building to this. Nor should it be something that the protagonist can simply avoid. For example, the final battle should finish off the archnemesis,

defeat her trusted lieutenant, or stop a major portion of her plans. And in doing so, it should measurably prevent the spread of evil.

If you create a final scene that has the potential to bypass the final battle (or reduce its difficulty), allow this only as the culmination a series of correct choices made throughout the adventure. Optimally, these choices are gated to favor less combat-viable characters, allowing traits and features that enhance exploration or social interaction to play into the final confrontation.

Denouement

The final scene is the one where players expect to find the greatest expository payoff. They learn who the murderer is, discover the depth of the conspiracy, or unravel the villain's mysterious plot.

Although some writers like to leave a few questions unanswered and mysterious, this can be a frustrating experience for players. Likewise, while you might think a story thread is trivial, your players might not. They will be interested in different plot elements to different degrees, and a point you leave hanging may be exactly what a player is watching to see concluded. Unless you have a particular purpose for it, try to make sure the player gets the answers to all the mysteries, motivations, and other questions your story presents. If you have not done so by the final scene, make sure to do so in it or immediately after.

To make sure you meet this expectation, you should continually return to the notes about your final scene to list any mysteries you write along the way. Let this serve as a checklist. If information is revealed elsewhere in the story, you can cross off these notes; they exist only to remind you what you have yet to reveal by the time you get to fully writing the final scene. Particularly if earlier information is gated such that some players will miss it, use the final scene to reveal everything to everyone.

Scaffolds

With your finished outline in hand, it is time to create scaffolds. A scaffold is a chapter of your story written in notes, incomplete sentences, and shorthand. It walks the character to and through every scene in the chapter, listing chronologically each action or event that occurs.

Scaffolding helps lay out your story in a way that facilitates adding metastructure and that controls the story's expansion. The process represents a middle ground between outlining and writing. Scaffolds are easier to create and recreate than full, narrative prose, something that will save you time during the inevitable periods of rearranging and rewriting that come with creating interactive stories.

Central Scaffold

Your first scaffold for each chapter represents a single (usually "ideal") playthrough. You will later break this scaffold into parts, allowing you to add options that will change the route the player takes through the story.

Write in Shorthand

The first step to creating a central scaffold is to write out the chapter's actions and events in shorthand. Put yourself in the protagonist's shoes and note what you experience and how you react to it.

This step is easy to describe, but it can be a lengthy process. Don't be afraid to make bad character choices as you go and don't worry too much about changes you will make later. Particularly if your story ideas start evolving as you write, be aware that this central scaffold doesn't have to provide exposition or resolution for everything you envision.

Note Forks

As you write your central scaffold, make notes for each fork you anticipate as you encounter such opportunities. It is important to be aware of

possible branches and alternate scenes. This knowledge can affect the scope of your scaffold and prepare you to write alternate routes in the future.

Forks are Necessary

Do not fail to provide forks where obvious and essential actions could be taken. If an obvious and important forking point appears, with no option to pursue a different course, the player will feel railroaded. This is particularly frustrating when the provided options seem like bad choices or are incongruous to the character's motivations.

On the same subject, ignoring a character's features can ring just as discordant as ignoring its good judgment. You must be aware of racial traits, class features, and other effects that could create forks in the narrative and add those where appropriate. Chapter 3 provides a list of "gate keys" for you to review periodically. These effects are the sort that can create important but sometimes unanticipated forks in your story.

Spotting forks in your central scaffold may sound easy, but you will find that you often miss some important ones. Therefore, in addition to the forks you identify initially, prepare to incorporate forks identified by your playtesters. (And be sure to ask playtesters to specifically identify where they would want to make important choices that weren't offered to them.)

Forks Are Meaningful

Writing interactive adventures requires careful attention to player agency. This doesn't mean giving the player every option you can imagine at every point along the way. Instead, agency requires both the ability to choose, and some meaningfulness in the choices made.

"Meaningful" in this context doesn't necessarily mean "big" or "dramatic." Small choices can have meaning and be felt by the player; some small choices can be more character-defining than larger ones. However, beware of choices that exist only to express fashion sense, character attitude, or other defining points that will not affect the adventure. While you want to the player to be able to roleplay these things, it's a good idea to combine them with outcomes that have at least a small impact on the course of the story.

Forks are for Branches

Forks exist to support branches, not leaves. A branch is a major route of character activity. Branches lead to alternate scenes or express significantly different modes of experiencing scenes.

Forks are not concerned with mere leaves. A leaf is a small addition to an object or scene, or a minor variance in how the character interacts with or perceives events. A player that reads a leaf text part has not made a significant change in routing through the story. Leaves are therefore left for later construction.

Forks are Limited

Carefully consider the number of forks you provide as you go. Every time you create a fork, a branch will appear to route the player away from your central scaffold. In some cases, that branch will not rejoin the central scaffold until the end of the chapter. The length of each branch therefore represents a measure of additional story you will have to write, parallel with the central scaffold. Each of these branches can themselves have forks, multiplying the amount of effort your story requires to produce and reducing the percentage of your story that the player will experience. The more of your text that is route-specific, the more of your writing that goes unseen and unappreciated by the reader.

In addition to the added logistics of creating so many branches, extraneous forks can also overwhelm a player with choices. Imagine trying to find your way through a maze of rooms, and each room has a dozen paths leading away from it. Since your player is experiencing the maze by reading text rather than actually encountering it with the five senses, disorientation is heightened and the ability to judge potential outcomes for

each choice is reduced. It is better for you and for the player to keep your number of forks in check.

For interactive adventures, forks should normally provide no more than three decision-based options. Additional feature gates that fork into alternate branches usually won't contribute to overwhelming the player with choice but beware that they still create additional writing requirements.

Limiting yourself to three branches at a fork is also a useful way to set up control points for later adjustment. If your story ends up playing too quickly, despite your high word count, it means you have too many branches and should prune some of them. Cutting a few branches can give you time to write a longer adventure, rather than one with more optional routes. Because you are probably producing in an electronic medium, too-large page counts aren't really a worry. However, pruning entire branches can reduce the amount of prose you must write to polish those scaffolded text parts. Fewer branches means you can afford to develop longer stories.

Cut to Parts

When you reach this stage, your central scaffold is a single list of actions and events interspersed with notes about potential forks. Begin this step by inserting blank lines of space after each fork note, cutting the scaffold into separate pieces of text.

These pieces are your first "text parts" and you will need to do some organizing to keep track of them.

Initial Identifiers

To each text part, add a unique identifier in the space immediately above it. This is not the identifier that the text part will have when your product is concluded, meaning it is acceptable—even useful—to apply any identification system that makes sense to you.

The best system is one that conveys information to you about the text part, and that keeps its separate from other text parts and other branches of text parts. Here's a useful example:

▷ Part 01-002: Forest Entrance

This example is hyphenated to track both the branch and the part within the branch. Alternately (or additionally), hyphenated numbers can serve to identify chapters.

The "Part 01" identifies the branch numerically. In this case, every text part in the newly-separated scaffold starts with "Part 01." Additional branches will start their text parts "Part 02," and so on. Following that, the "-001" is the part's number in the branch.

Finally, "forest entrance" is a short phrase that identifies the content of the text part. Although it seems like very little information, the amount of work you will do with your text parts in the next step means you will soon be able to instantly recognize each part by their title word or phrase.

Use Exact Identifiers

To facilitate later steps, make sure your identifiers are exactly the same everywhere they are used. For example, don't prompt to "forest floor" and then label that text part "forestfloor." The different spelling will prove troublesome when revising your identifiers and prompts later. Likewise, make sure your current naming convention for text parts is nothing like the system you will use in the final product, lest you create confusion when renumbering text parts in the final step.

Add Prompts

A prompt is an instruction to the reader to go to a particular text part. Adding these prompts now will keep your newly-separated text parts from losing cohesion.

Forks Become Prompts

Your text parts end with forks because that is where you cut the scaffold to separate parts. Turn each fork into a prompt with a new-numbered scaffold for you to write later.

Once forks are converted, look for the original linking action or activity, the one that would keep the player on the original scaffolded branch. Turn that into a prompt too, directing the player to the next text part.

ORIGINAL SCAFFOLD (VERSION 1)

You walk toward the river bank
You hear your pursuers closing in behind
You steal a small boat to cross
Fork: You swim across the river
You reach the other bank, dodging arrows
You run into the trees

CUT INTO PARTS (VERSION 2)

Part 01-007: river crossing
You walk toward the river bank
You hear your pursuers closing in behind
You steal a small boat to cross
Fork: You swim across the river

Part 01-008: far bank
You reach the other bank, dodging arrows
You run into the trees

WITH PROMPTS ADDED (VERSION 3)

Part 01-007: river crossing
You walk toward the river bank
You hear your pursuers closing in behind
~~You steal a small boat to cross~~
~~*Fork: You swim across the river*~~
- *To steal a boat for crossing, go to **Part 01-008: far bank.***
- *To swim the river, go to **Scaffold 02**.*

Part 01-008: far bank
You reach the other bank, dodging arrows
You run into the trees

When your prompts point to new branches, don't lose track of the new scaffolds you will have to write. Mark these distinctly, perhaps highlighting them or noting them with a brightly-colored font. Alternately, keep a list of unwritten scaffolds to check off later.

ADD STRUCTURE

With your central scaffold complete and cut into text parts, and with your forks identified and fleshed out, build the remaining branches of your story by expanding the scaffolds.

SECONDARY SCAFFOLDS

Each fork is the starting point for an additional scaffold. These secondary scaffolds extend from their initiating forks until you terminate them, binding each one onto another scaffold or dead-ending it.

This process works just as it did for your central scaffold. Write the action out in shorthand, noting any forks that may appear along the way. Then cut the scaffold into text parts and polish up the new forks as usual. Repeat the process until all forks are fully scaffolded and every route through your story is fleshed out.

The length of your additional scaffolds, and the number of text parts used, will vary based on your adventure's mapping structure, and the length and the depth to which you intend to write the adventure.

REVISION

At this stage of the process, it is important not to over-write your text parts. They exist in shorthand form for good reason.

As you study the coming chapters, you will learn the tools for making your adventure truly interactive. Once you absorb the information in the coming chapters, you are likely to reform the scaffolds significantly. Moreover, you are likely to alter many of the forks and interactions the

protagonist can experience after playtesting the adventure.

These revisions are easier to do with shorthand scaffolds than with fully-written text parts. Waiting till the end of the process to flesh out the prose will prevent a lot of wasted work.

Final Arrangement

When all scaffolds have been fully created—when every text part is written—the resulting collection of text parts will naturally appear in a vaguely-chronological order. As a final scaffolding step, this order should be altered to avoid imposing unwanted clues upon your players.

Without purposeful rearrangement, metaknowledge will be present at some forks. Where the decision in one text part directs the player to the very next text part, it will be hard for the player to avoid glancing down and seeing the result of the decision about to be made. Therefore, no text part should be left to appear on the same page as any text part that prompts to it.

Arrangement by Chapter

The first text part of an adventure or chapter should appear first. Likewise, the last text part of an adventure or chapter should appear last. But each part between should appear somewhat randomly, and somewhat distant from any prompts that lead to it.

If your adventure is structured with chapters, as suggested in this book, keep all of the text parts for each chapter within the relevant chapter. The chapter arrangement is important to reflect the pacing of the story. In addition to providing you with the normal story-writing tools of rising action and denouement, it signals to the player where the protagonist is in the course of the adventure.

Knowing when the final chapter is at hand can also prevent the anticlimax of a surprise ending. Because text parts are not chronological in any configuration and are probably quite random in their order of appearance, you will have no other tools than the narrative itself to prepare the player for the conclusion.

Rename Parts

Once your text parts are placed in their final arrangement, alter their unique identifiers to reflect the new order and strip them of metaknowledge. As you take this step, be aware that you may have to repeat it in its entirety if you add or remove text parts during revision.

Numbers, not Names

The publication version of each text part's unique identifier should be a number. Ideally, it will be a compound or hyphenated number with a simple prefix.

Although giving each text part a title name was helpful during the creation process, it can convey unwanted metaknowledge to the player. For example, if the choice to climb a cliff prompts the player to a text part named "Splat," the player may be discouraged from trying that option. Even the less-dramatic names can betray more information than you intend.

Searchable Parts

Because you are trying to keep identifiers unique, the best practice is to use a hyphenated or compound number for each identifier.

A compound number helps you and the player to keep track of text parts by chapter. Even if you are not using chapters, use a "neutral" word prefix for each identifier. For example, use something like "Part 03-001" or "Text 214." This makes your text parts truly-unique and allows the players to find them by using the search function of their document-reading programs. Players will have to search the document like this when accessing future prompts or encountering broken hyperlinks, when the document-reading program crashes, or when coming back to the adventure (reopening the document) after taking a break. Using a prefix expedites such searching.

For example, a prefix or compound number allows the player to search for "Part 12" rather

than just "12." The latter will provide too many results. It will show page numbers (like page 1**12**), other text parts (part 3**12**), street addresses (No. **12** Rue Deville), treasure awards (like 1**21** copper pieces), and more. The prefix gives your players truly-unique identifiers to search for.

Find-and-Replace Process

Once your text parts are arranged, renumber them one at a time. Use the find-and-replace function of your word processing program instead of manually changing each text part.

For example, when a text part titled "103-15 forest floor" is your seventh text part, don't just change the name to "Part 7." Instead use the find-and-replace function to replace all instances of "103-15 forest floor" with "Part 7." This will rename not only the text part's title, but all the prompts that direct the player to it.

Chapter End Note: Reverse-Engineering Illustrations

The steps in this chapter can take your initial story idea and build it organically into a fully-structured single-player adventure. However, this process ignores a reality faced by most amateur creators, the inability to budget for the right art assets.

Illustration, particularly cartography, is very expensive. This is rightly so. Good pieces are made by professionals who have invested significant time into learning their craft. They deserve to be compensated for their hard work, and they are unlikely to work for royalties stemming from an amateur (or semi-professional) product. This often means that adventure creators must simply work with the limited body of art that is free to use commercially.

Chief among these free assets are the art packs provided by Wizards of the Coast for use on the Dungeon Masters Guild. However, you may notice that these packs rarely illustrate the people, places, and creatures that populate your adventure. Moreover, the best pieces in these art packs have already been used ad nauseam, such that their inclusion is more distracting or off-putting for regular Guild consumers than it is illustrative. This reality does not make those assets useless.

If your production budget does not allow you to commission sufficient art assets for your project, go through the available free assets *before you begin creating*. Pick out a bunch of little-used pieces that can do well in the right context. Then create that context. Use these pieces as inspiration for your adventure, from the initial story seed, to the placement of events, scenes, social interactions, and combat encounters. Interesting and unique monster illustrations can particularly help you set milestones that you can later drive your scaffolds toward, even if they only represent "random" encounters. If you find enough illustrations of one type of creature, these could represent the major, recurring threat your protagonist will face. Similarly, if you find compelling pictures of people or places, build your adventure to use them, rather than trying to get art that matches the people and places you might envision on your own.

Cartography options are fewer, so take care creating scenes that require maps. For any project, first check the many maps that Dyson Logos generously provides free for commercial use. The options and license can be found here: https://dysonlogos.blog/maps/commercial-maps/

CHAPTER TWO

METASTRUCTURE

"Style and structure are the essence of a book; great ideas are hogwash."

- Vladimir Nabokov

METASTRUCTURE REFERS NOT TO THE narrative structure of the book; it has nothing to do with the story's plot, theme, or resolution. Neither is it the outline or the organization of the book's content.

Metastructure is instead the collected elements that facilitate the "interactive" portion of your product. These include symbols and formatting that signal the player to apply special rules not found in other adventure types. These elements also contemplate the tools that connect interactive elements in ways both visible and invisible to the player.

METASTRUCTURE SUMMARY

This chapter covers the following topics.

- ***Page Planning.*** How to organize text within the adventure, using consistent rules to meet player expectations.
- ***Story Routing.*** Designing the routes through the story that players will use.
- ***Diagraming.*** How to keep track of text parts and link them together, with extra software or without.

PAGE PLANNING

This section presents a methodology for consistent format, style, and layout of interactive adventures. In doing so, it merely describes how text might appear on the page; it does not refer to what the text will say.

TEXT PARTS

In a novel, all text is linear and unidirectional. It flows unbroken from the beginning to the end. The reader cannot choose how the story unfolds and has no control over its events. Only by breaking up a story can the reader interact, becoming a "player.

A player can select discrete portions of the narrative from which to build a unique story. The "text part" is therefore the quintessential component of an interactive adventure. Having strong, consistent parameters for the presentation and function of text parts builds a reliable and useful foundation for the rest of the project.

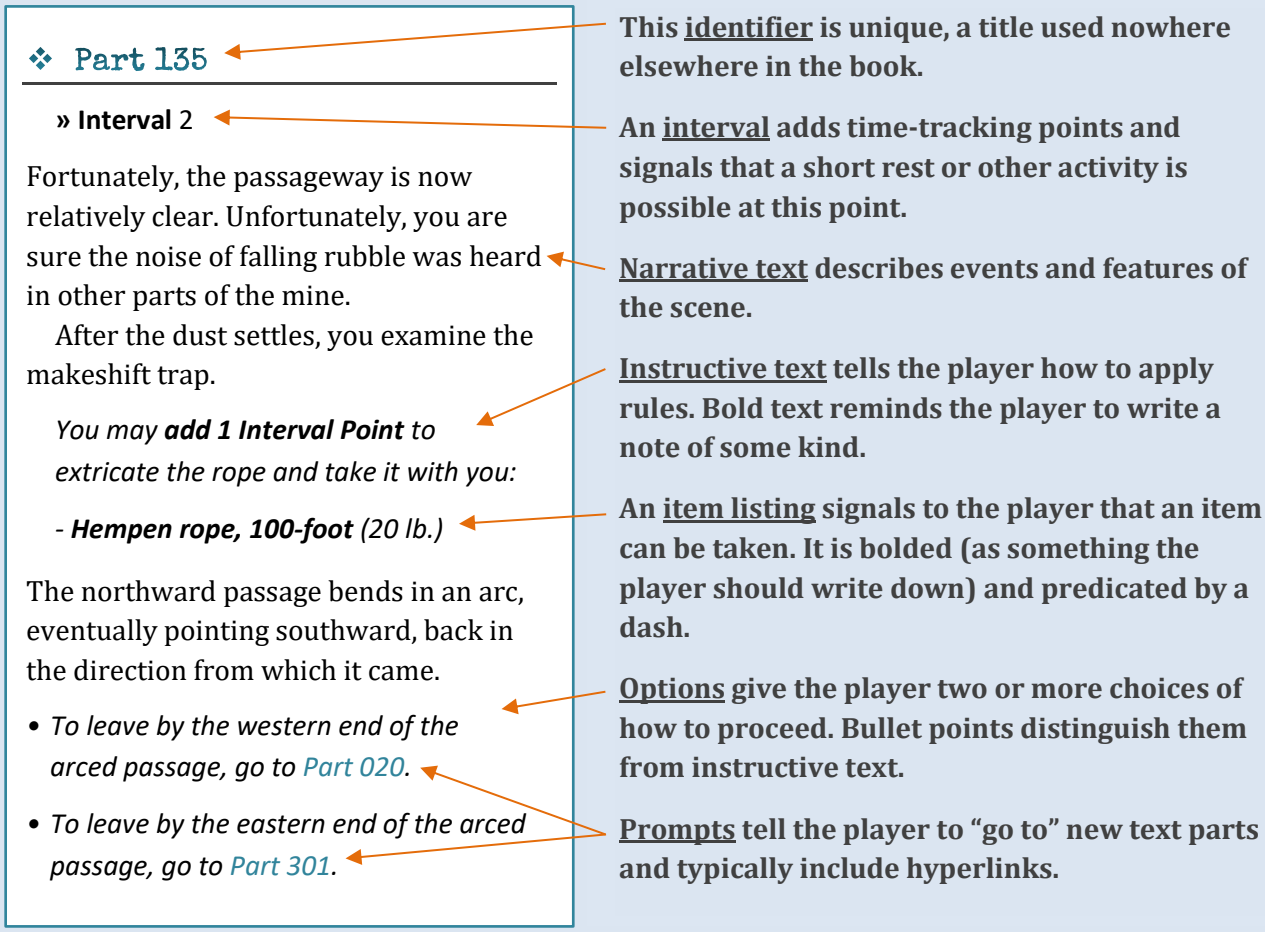
You have already created text parts in the previous chapter, breaking your scaffolds into digestible portions partitioned by sets of options. This segment walks you through formatting and arranging those text parts for optimal presentation.

COMPONENTS

Create consistent components for your text parts and tell your reader about them in your adventure's playbook. Your player must know how to consume the media you are presenting and shouldn't have to struggle to figure things out nor wrestle with inconsistencies.

The following components have worked well in the production of Wraith Wright's SOLITAIRES, but do not feel limited to use any or all of these.

Example Anatomy of a Text Part



Identifiers

Each text part comes with an identifier, a number, name, or title that identifies the text part. The identifier is the reference point that players use to navigate to the text part, so it must be unique. If the identifier is duplicated, players won't be able to differentiate the parts from one another.

Part Names. Assigning codenames to each text part is a useful mechanism when writing. As you build out the various text parts, a code name can give you an instant summary to help you remember the results you have assigned to each option without having to go to those options to refresh your memory.

However, code names have drawbacks when used as text part identifiers in your final product.

First, even if you alter code names before publication, it can be difficult not to forecast the results of a player choice by using any codename. You won't name a text part "poisoned" when it is prompted to by the option for tasting a potion. That forecasted knowledge ("metaknowledge") is undesirable to players. It is hard to make the code name meaningful without it also being revealing. Neither can you make codewords random, lest they confuse and distract the player.

The second problem with codewords is their organization. You can arrange the text parts alphabetically by identifier, but at that point, you might as well just use numbers. If you're revising in order to remove any forecasting, you are also revising those names in the prompts. It doesn't

really save effort or potential errors unless your names are vague from the beginning.

Part Numbers. Using numbers as identifiers has some advantages. Although numbers won't help you remember the content of text parts as you compose and arrange an adventure, they are more useful for your players.

Numbering allows players to navigate to text parts more reliably. In an ideal scenario, all text parts are hyperlinked correctly, and every transition to a text part can take place through a hyperlink. In reality, hyperlinking sometimes fails. Document-reading programs crash, or they get closed accidentally or between sessions of play. Whatever the reason, players aren't always going to be able to use hyperlinks to get to the text parts they need.

Using numbers allows players to scroll through their electronic document to the right place to find the desired text part. Even faster, players can use the *find* function of their document-reading program (Control + F in most PDF readers) to jump instantly to the desired number. However, for this latter use, all your numbered identifiers must be unique.

Unique in this sense means sequentially-unique. There will be a thousand uses of the number 1 in your document; from page numbers to text parts to various digits in the number of coins found, to enemy hit points, and other things. A player wishing to use the *find* function of their reader to jump to your first text part will be unable to do so unless you use multiple-digit numbering. For example, a search for "001" is only going to return a single result, taking the player directly to that text part.

To maintain this beneficial element, try not to repeat the number elsewhere. No three-digit number sequence should include a series that overlaps the number of text parts in your adventure. For example, if the player finds 114 copper pieces, that number will create a search duplicate of your 114th text part; a search for "114" will produce multiple results. You might prefer to write "11 silver and 4 copper" or to simply spell out the numbers that appear in narrative text. Even better, use a neutral predicating word with your numbered identifier, so the player can search for "**Part** 114."

Suggested Formatting. Identifiers should be used as titles for each text part. Titles should stand out, drawing the eye quickly to the start of each text part, because players will be scanning the pages to find them. To best accomplish this, use larger fonts, distinct fonts, or colors that stand out from the page. Humans filter for color very quickly at a glance, making strong, consistent colors the most effective method for drawing the eye.

Here is an example using larger and different font from the rest of the text on this page.

▷ PART 03-102

This format is easy to notice and can override the distraction of other text on your page. Your eye was probably drawn to this example line of text the moment you opened this page, even before your read any of the other text here.

INTERVALS

Intervals identify text parts where players can exercise a set of exploration options and add time-keeping "Interval Points" to an ongoing tally. This element of a text part is specific to certain SOLITAIRES, but other adventures use similar mechanisms.

Most text parts don't have intervals or interval markers. Intervals are used only when the immediate scenario calls for timekeeping. Something is at stake and the character is racing against the clock. Intervals and Interval Points are discussed in greater detail in the *Solo Players Guide*.

Suggested Formatting. Like instructive text, intervals should be formatted to set them apart from the other text. Wraith Wright's SOLITAIRES indent, bold, and use an alternate font. They also

use a horizontal double-chevron to predicate intervals like this:

» Interval 0

Wraith Wright's SOLITAIRES system also gives a number with each interval, an indicator of the number of Interval Points the player should note just for having moved to this text part from the last one.

NARRATIVE TEXT

The bulk of your text parts should be narrative text. This is the normally-formatted descriptive text for events and features of the player's environment.

Narrative text usually begins by resolving whatever choice led the player to that text part, revealing the outcome of that decision. If the prompt resulted from moving to a new area, it probably describes the new area. If it resulted from asking a question of a non-player character, it probably reveals the response.

Narrative text also drives the story by leading the reader to the next set of options. It begins by resolving the prior prompt, describes what comes next, and continues the story up until the player must again choose between prompts for new text parts.

Narrative text is typically first-person prose. It refers to the reader ("you") as the character, and it uses present tense for immediacy, to draw the player into the narrative. (For flashbacks, past tense can be used to reinforce separation from current events.)

INSTRUCTIVE TEXT

Instructive text is set apart from narrative text. It addresses the player, rather than the character, and provides instructions for how to apply rules, when to modify notes or the character sheet, or where to go when prompts aren't optional.

Instructive text uses natural language to direct you through certain steps for moderating systems or events. As a usual player rule, instructive text must be resolved as it is encountered, before reading further into the text part.

Because instructive text shifts focus from the character to the player, drawing the player out of the immersive portion of your writing, place it carefully. Whenever possible, avoid placing instructive text in the midst of narrative text, reserving it for after the narrative text is done.

Suggested Formatting. Instructive text should be heavily-emphasized through alternate formatting. Try an indented block of text, an alternate font, and italicization. For example:

> *If you previously encountered the Silver Circus caravan, go to Part 331. Otherwise, choose from the options below.*

PROMPTS

A prompt is an instruction to "go to" a new text part. Prompts can appear in instructive text, as illustrated above, or can appear in a set of options.

Gates. Many prompts include a gate, a prerequisite to be met for the prompt to be followed. In the example above, the prompt "go to Part 331" has an event gate; the player must first have encountered the Silver Circus caravan.

Some gates open options to the player, while others force the player along a certain route. A mandatory prompt appears in instructive text and does not give the player the choice to do anything other than follow it if the gate's prerequisite was met.

Gates are further described in a later chapter.

Recursive Prompts. Some prompts will direct the player back to a previous text part. These alter the flow of your story from the default of unidirectionality.

In tree mapping, these recursive prompts are typical of "leaves," short diversions from the adventure, typically used to reveal extra information in response to examining something or knowing the right language. Alternately, they can be nodes, opportunities to explore something

in short depth before returning to the same point in the story and carrying forward from there.

Recursive prompts most commonly occur in locational mapping, where the character can move back and forth between text parts that represent areas like rooms of a dungeon, forest clearings, or the like.

Future Prompts. Future prompts give the player a unique identifier to check at a later time. They might not include hyperlinks because they anticipate that the player will not use the prompt immediately.

The archetypical example of a future prompt is for a magic item, which requires time to investigate. If there is currently no time available, a future prompt, to be noted in the play journal, will guide the player to the magic item's details when there is time enough for an investigation. Here's an example.

> *You can **add 12 Interval Points** to spend an hour investigating this magic item. Alternately, you can discover its secrets immediately with an* identify *spell (or by **adding 2 Interval Points** and casting* identify *as a ritual). When you investigate the item, now or later, go to Part 341. Note your current text part before you do so; there will be no prompt to return to your current place in the adventure!*

Future prompts are often encoded, preventing a nosey player from checking the corresponding text part ahead of time. Encoded future prompts give only part of the information needed to access them, one of two or more clues that only reveal the text part's unique identifier when combined. Encoding is particularly useful when you provide multiple versions of the same clue and want the player to find different text parts based on those different findings.

Suggested Formatting. Prompts exist as part of instructive text or options, which are themselves formatted to stand out from the rest of the text part.

Within prompts, it is a good idea to differently-format the identifier for the text part the player should go to. This draws the eye to that crucial element of the prompt, the unique identifier, and reminds players that the text includes a hyperlink.

Although players will be able to navigate to text parts manually, they should not have to. Every prompt should be coded as a hyperlink.

Item Listings

Item listings use a formatting change to signal that a character can (or should) take one or more items, and that the player should note them on the character sheet. Calling these out is important because stories tend to gloss over items that appear in the narrative flow. Players might otherwise not know which items are "real" (important enough to be noted), and which exist as pure flavor.

For example, when paying for a coach ride, the coach driver hands the character a receipt. Should the player make a note of this receipt? Will it have a chance to come up again in the story? Will receipts be checked when riders return to the coach after each waystation stop? Or was the receipt just a flavor element in the story, not worth writing down? Making items stand out from the surrounding text part using consistent formats answers these questions.

Formatting Suggestion. Item listings should stand out from narrative text. This is important because items are likely to appear within narrative text or between segments of narrative text. You should therefore make such items particularly noticeable. Wraith Wright's Solitaires use a predicate dash but otherwise format items in the same way as instructive text. They also announce the weight of items in pounds, since players should be tracking that.

Optionally, item formatting could be as simple as using bold text for the item the first time it is named within the narrative text. In this case, it will be up to the player to figure out the item's

weight if it matters, or you could insert that information into the narrative text using brackets or parentheses.

Options

Options appear in sets of two or more, each of which contains a prompt. When options appear, the player must select from among them, going to the text part prompted by that choice. Because the prompts in some options are gated, a player may have no real choice as to which of them to use.

When composing options, make sure that there is always at least one that contains an ungated prompt or otherwise ensure that the character will necessarily qualify for at least one of the options.

Formatting Suggestion. Options should be formatted identically to or similarly to instructive text. They should use natural language to identify that their choices are optional to the player.

Wraith Wright's Solitaires use bullet points to identify option sets. This helps the player recognize options and distinguish them from instructive text.

Order of Text Parts

Text parts cannot be presented linearly; you cannot write them so that each text part prompts the reader to the very next part. That would mandate the reading of all text and thus not be an interactive adventure. Nor would such an organization be desirable if it was possible.

Placement

It is likely you are producing work in an electronic format. Therefore, hyperlinking and text-searching functions mean that no text part is any more cumbersome to navigate to than any other. There is no compelling reason to place linked text parts in sight of one another.

In fact, linked text parts should be placed purposefully apart, at least on separate pages from prompts that lead to them. Otherwise, a player reading a part might notice the related text part on the same page before selecting an option and get a glance at the option's outcome. For example, if a set of options includes one choice that directs the player to the very next text part, the player might be unable to avoid glancing down noticing a dead end.

Chapters

An interactive adventure can be written as a single collection of all text parts, or it can be organized into chapters.

Collecting text parts into chapters helps the player understand the pace of the adventure and anticipate their progress within it. However, collecting text parts into chapters should be done with the placement guidelines in mind; linked parts should still not appear consecutively or on the same page.

Appendices

Very large or recurring text parts can be placed in appendices. These final chapters of your product are the type that can be referenced from multiple locations in the product or can be noted for later reference whenever players want to refresh their memories. Alternately, they can appear in a playbook.

Likewise, combats tend to require full-page writeups that are cumbersome to insert among normal text parts. A set of combat writeups makes for the most likely appendix seen in a single-player adventure.

Important lore pieces also qualify, like the description of the character's home city or the history of an important magic item or faction. Putting such things in an appendix that can be referenced at any time simulates the character knowing that information intimately or otherwise being able to remember it better than the player can.

Story Routing

This section examines methodologies for linking text parts and routing players toward your

story's conclusion. It draws upon the techniques and terminology used to deconstruct traditional choice-based storybooks, with a focus on the tools most useful to writing character-based interactive adventures.

Mapping Modes

Mapping refers to the organization of your text parts, regardless of whether you build a map to illustrate that organization.

As a default, this product assumes that you will use tree mapping for the majority of your adventure, and locational mapping when exploring areas that allow movement back and forth, revisiting previously-explored locations.

Tree Mapping

This product suggests tree mapping as the default methodology for organizing the connection of text parts. Tree mapping uses a plant metaphor to describe the way text parts are connected.

Tree mapping is ideal for describing a flow of events rather than just movement between physical locations. The player's route through these text parts is essentially unidirectional. The character progresses in one direction through time and through spaces in the story. The recurrence of any text parts is rare.

Trunks

A trunk is a text part that occurs at the start of the adventure, or the start of each of its chapters. A trunk is generally large, including a lot of narrative text, because it introduces and sets the scene for the entire adventure or for an entire chapter. In many cases, a trunk will provide an overview of the prior chapter or of relevant events from prior adventures.

A trunk is almost always a bottleneck. Unless a trunk starts a chapter that has alternate entry points from the previous chapter, every player will have to route through that trunk during play.

Branches

This portion of the tree metaphor facilitates player choices. Whenever a player reaches a decision point along a trunk or branch, a fork occurs. From this fork, multiple branches can sprout, taking the player in whatever directions their choices allow.

Branches terminate at ends or bindings and can themselves have forks supporting ancillary branches. Ends conclude the story, either positively (at live ends) or negatively (at dead ends). Bindings reduce the number of possible forward paths by tying the player into a parallel branch. Conversely, forks split the story into parallel branches, expanding the possible routes going forward.

Leaves

A leaf is a minor detour off of a branch, one that does not lead anywhere else. Leaves rejoin their branches quickly, either with a recurring prompt that returns the reader to the same text part the leaf forked off of, or to a text part immediately following that.

A leaf typically exists to provide a piece of gated information while keeping the player on the same route. For example, a character encounters a room with an alter and several exits. The character can examine the alter by accessing a leaf. The leaf's narrative text provides details about the alter then its instructive text directs the player back to the text part that introduced the room and the alter.

The defining component of the leaf is that it is essentially recurrent, with no other outlet. Regardless of the number of text parts or the complexity of their configuration, a leaf always returns the player to the same part of the story from whence it came. A leaf can therefore take the track structure of a node (see Track Configurations, below). However, not all leaves are nodes since some are only a single text part deep, and not all nodes are leaves since some have other outlets.

Locational Mapping

Locational mapping typically describes literal locations, such as the rooms of a ruined castle or chambers in an old sewer network. It is characterized by the ability to revisit text parts, moving back and forth between them like walking between linked areas.

Tree mapping can flow smoothly into locational mapping and vice versa. To transition into locational mapping, a text part needs merely to include a recursive prompt that allows a player to revisit a prior text part.

It is just as easy to leave locational mapping. While exploring collected text parts multi-directionally, any text part can route the player back into a tree mapping structure by having no recursive prompts in it or down the route from it. The shift to unidirectional routing means that going to an "exiting" text part gives the player no option to return to the text parts of the locational mapping.

Directionality

The primary feature of locational mapping is the player's ability to move back and forth between the location-representing text parts. This multi-directionality usually allows travel between parts in any order, any number of times.

Areas that can recur must be described without reference to the player's entry point when there are multiple approaches. One-time events that occur at these locations must be carefully moderated through the use of veneers so that the character is not constantly stepping in the same bear trap, rolling to interpret the same clue, or otherwise processing location-based events that should occur only once.

Veneers

Location-based text parts can benefit from veneers, a mechanism to manage one-time events. A "veneer" is a text part that describe an area for the player's first visit. Thereafter consecutive visits to the same location are handled in "base area" text parts.

For example, a character enters a clearing in a forest and encounters two giant ants. The text part managing this first visit, including the combat, is a veneer. Later, the character revisits that clearing and does not have to fight the giant ants again because all links to that location now direct the player to a base area text part.

Veneers are applied in one of two ways. As a player transitions from a tree-mapping route into a location-mapped set of text parts, the player is prompted to the veneer. This is possible since there are no opportunities to have accessed the location previously in the story. For example, the option to enter a tomb (through its only entrance), directs the player straight to a veneer dealing with the tomb guardian. When the entryway is resolved, and the player moves on, any directional option that would return to the entryway links to the base area text part; there are no references to the veneer since the player had to pass through it already.

However, text parts that qualify for that treatment are uncommon. Instead, veneers are usually associated with an event gate, one that asks whether the player has visited that location before. Such an event gate can exist among options that prompt into the location. The more common configuration places the gate within the base area; upon reaching that location, instructive text prompts the character into the veneer if this is the first visit. Players that have already visited the location simply continue reading the base area text part.

For veneers' event gates to work, each location must be described with sufficient specificity such that players can easily identify locations they have previously visited. In a series of indistinguishable locations, the player will not remember which have been previously visited.

Time

Unlike tree mapping, locational mapping has a difficult time accounting for the passage of time. Because players can re-experience a text part repeatedly, events that note changes to the weather or the time of day should not be a part of the narrative text; you don't want the sun to rise every time the character walks past a particular window.

Time passage in locational mapping is better implemented with a time-tracking point system like the Interval Points described in this product. As players visit location-based text parts, pre-set events happen, like the setting of the sun, which then requires the character to use torches or darkvision to navigate.

Using time-tracking methods like this heightens the player's sense of dramatic tension and prevents too much resting. When characters have unlimited time, they will rest enough to be fully recovered before every fight, which degrades the challenge and thus the excitement of the game.

Loop Locations

This rare form of locational mapping routes the player through its areas in a set pattern that repeats. Although routing is unidirectional, a player can pass through these text parts repeatedly, escaping only by making different choices along the way or by having experienced different events. Escape options tend to be gated such that the player cannot escape the loop without passing through it several times.

Looping locational mapping can be applied to several scenarios, not all of them literally location-based. Time-loop scenarios probably come to mind, but also consider using looping direction structures to simulate repeated searching of an area to find and interpret clues, or for training montages.

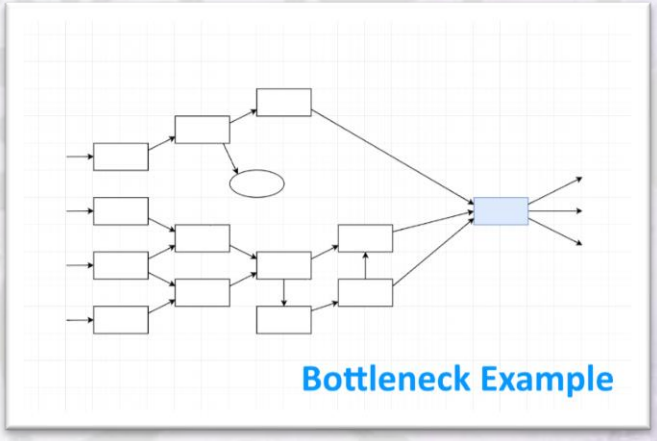
Basic Structures

The individual text parts in single player interactive adventures appear in a variety of configurations. Understanding these can help you use them to good effect.

Bottlenecks

Bottlenecks are text parts that the character must go through. No matter how far-afield the character wanders through various options, each bottleneck must always get routed through in the course of the story.

Every adventure has at least one bottleneck, its first text part. Most have a bottleneck at the end of the adventure too, the final text part, unless there are multiple live ends. Additional to these, most stories can benefit from bottlenecks throughout.



Uses

The primary benefit of bottlenecks is to pare down the number of options that must be written for. Unless the writer bottlenecks routes, tying them together, interactive adventures can eventually branch into an infinite number of text parts. Binding multiple branches together, eventually creating a bottleneck, brings the writer back to a controlled baseline from which to begin expanding the options once more.

The *Solo Creator's Guidebook* suggests a structure of chapters. Chapter force bottlenecks to appear at expected points, dividing story

progress into increments. Without this constraint, it is too easy to write two or three separate adventure tracks; if the main path branches in the first chapter, not to rejoin until the very end of the story, you have written a product that the player will only experience half of. It's great for replay-ability, if the player next time chooses the other route, but it probably should have been broken into two stories.

Event Placement. Bottlenecks facilitate one-time occurrences. They present opportunities to change the scene, the passage of time, or a companion's exposition.

Bottleneck events are particularly useful for introducing new characters to the story. Placing introductions at bottlenecks helps you avoid referring to the character prior to the introduction.

Bottlenecks serve one-time events because they are assumed to be unidirectional; the player cannot go backward in the narrative or loop around to reexperience them. If you write a bottleneck that is multidirectional, as in location-based mapping, be sure to exclude events like this. Because you might move events around during editing, it can be useful to note everything associated with a particular bottleneck on a diagram of text parts.

Tree Bottlenecks. Most tree mapping is unidirectional already. No backtracking takes the player to "prior" text parts. However, the ever-branching nature of tree mapping makes bottlenecks crucial for other reasons.

A bottleneck can occur in tree mapping if all the branches eventually bind into one another; the options are narrowed with each binding, until eventually the player must experience a single particular text part.

Locational Bottlenecks. Bottlenecks in locational mapping are often dramatic events that pull the character out of that location, preventing a return to the adventure's previous choice-of-directions structure.

Locational bottlenecks occur typically at a resolution point; the character has, through stealth and strength of arms, penetrated the villain's lair and made it to the secret laboratory where the villain awaits. Although the lair was explorable through locational mapping, the character cannot leave the island fortress without eventually coming to this laboratory, and once here, the character does not have the option to go back to exploration. The protagonist will have to fight the villain to the death before leaving this room and, if successful, narrative text will instead transition the story into the next chapter.

Drawbacks

Players can perceive bottlenecks as confining, or as having negated the effect of past choices because all players are eventually routed through those text parts. No matter what decisions the player makes, every character will have an identical experience passing a bottleneck.

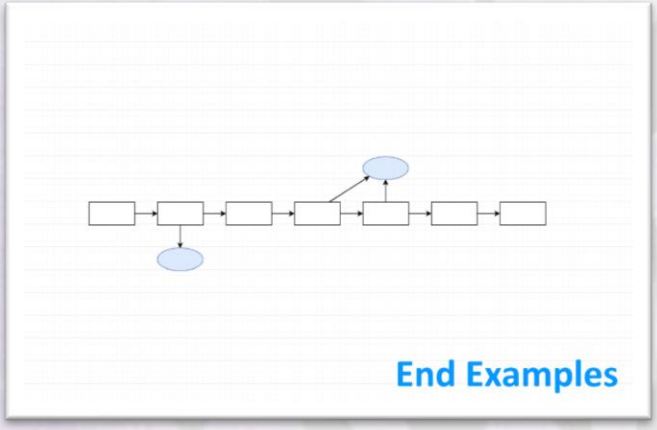
In normal interactive story-writing, decisions made prior to bottlenecks use state-setting techniques, what we call event gates, to carry the results of past decisions forward to the far side of bottlenecks. (Future options ask about the existence of past events.) However, the effect of past events on future ones is sometimes unnoticed during play. Therefore, it is important to give non-event bottlenecks low levels of visibility, making them less distinguishable from other branching routes, or to set bottlenecks only where expected such as at the start and end of each chapter.

Ends

Ends are text parts that have no prompts. Upon reaching one, the story ends, and the adventure is over. Ends can represent either negative outcomes (dead ends) or positive outcomes (live ends).

Dead Ends

Dead ends typically occur when the protagonist is reduced to 0 hit points after taking damage from combat, from traps, or from other hazards. These are also called "dice ends." Dead ends that result from poor choices are called "decision ends."



Dice Ends. Dice ends must be carefully scripted. Following combats, you must consider whether the player will get to roll death saving throws, or if there are circumstances allowing for the character's salvation or resurrection.

It is easy to forget, when applying small amounts of environmental damage, that these events should also spawn prompts to a related dead end. Although you may not anticipate that scraping against something sharp and losing 1 hit point could end the story, it is possible that the character had only 1 hit point at that time. Every infliction of damage or exhaustion must therefore have a prompt to a dead end. That prompt will be event-gated to the character having been reduced to 0 hit points or achieving the final level of exhaustion.

Decision Ends. A decision end is arrived at because of the player's choices. These should be used rarely and should never appear randomly or without warning. A decision end should be the terminus of a series of bad decisions. For best results, try layering choices that sound increasingly dangerous as the player progresses toward a dead end. Otherwise, the ending is arbitrary, just as likely to result from the writer's failure to convey the choice's danger as to result from the player's failure to heed that danger.

When writing a decision end, it is acceptable to use story information to give clues as to how to avoid the end. Particularly if you have given optional reading to the player, perhaps in an appendix, it is okay to reward the players who diligently examine those hints.

As a guideline, put no decision ends in the first half of your adventure. A quick failure makes the player feel cheated out of the experience of the product. It is better for failure to occur nearer to the quest's conclusion. Particularly avoid letting the player opt out of the whole adventure near its outset, leading to a dead end. Don't let the player choose to ignore the adventure's call to action. This old trope is entirely unnecessary; a player using your product has already selected a character that will bite at the hooks if you've properly labelled the adventure.

Death is Always a Dice End. Reserve dead ends for events that derail the quest, not ones that kill the character.

Although some events are understandably lethal-sounding—falling from an impossible height or consuming the un-survivable poison—this is a game of Dungeons & Dragons. Some characters will therefore be equipped to handle any ultra-lethal scenarios you devise. A character with the *feather fall* spell prepared will not die from falling, and there are several features or traits that convey immunity to poison.

In the case of a dead end that should result in the protagonist's death, dice out the death. Write, "You take 20d6 falling damage" rather than writing "You die from the fall." Then prompt for a dead end based on whether the character died.

Even if the "un-survivable" poison is so potent as to bypass the monk's poison immunity (*especially* if it might bypass it) don't use death as a decision end; invalidating the character's features and simultaneously killing the character is just stacking insult upon injury.

Live Ends

A live end likewise has no prompts. The story ends there, but in this case, ending in a way favorable to the protagonist, with the success of the mission.

Most adventures have only one live end, at the conclusion of the story in the final chapter. But some may include several live ends in order to regulate variable degrees of success and reward, or to address endings where multiple goals were reached in different combinations.

Track Configurations

Collections of text parts in single player interactive adventures appear in various configurations called tracks. This is true regardless of the mapping type used and regardless of whether the author recognizes the existence of these small-scale structures.

Tracks tend to fall into recognizable categories, each with advantages and disadvantages. A writer who understands these configurations can create and utilize them purposefully and to good effect.

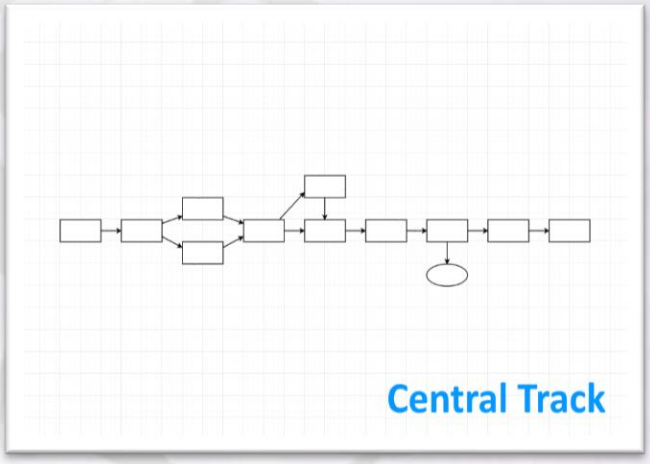
Central Track

The central track structure progresses along a single line of text parts. When deviations appear, they are leaves rather than branches, or they immediately route the player back to the central track. Every player has roughly the same experiences through a central track portion of the adventure.

Uses

These collections of text parts can easily support a strong narrative. The lack of decision points allows the story to remain central because there are few distractions. The long string of text parts can support a lot of narrative text without individual text parts appearing to be too long.

Additionally, this configuration is easy to write with. The metastructure is mostly nonexistent, so the writer can ignore most of the tools used to construct interactive adventures.



Drawbacks

A strong central story in this form means that the adventure's replay-ability value is low; the player will already have experienced everything the adventure has to offer, and the story will feel unchanged in later playthroughs. A central track configuration plays more like reading a novel, one that simply avoids describing its protagonist.

Because central track structures lack the capacity to change in response to player choices, they are also devoid of player agency. This is quickly evident to the player because the metastructure is hard to disguise; the player will soon realize that decisions are not affecting the course of the story or its outcomes. The reduced "interactive" nature of such adventures correspondingly reduces the player's enjoyment.

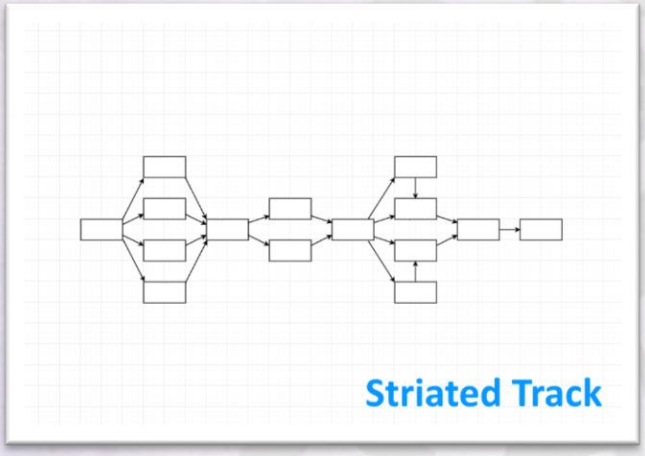
Striated Track

A variation of the central track, this configuration has more extensive leaves or it has forks leading in many directions, but these parts return quickly to bottlenecks.

Uses

This configuration allows the player to explore encountered elements without progressing the central storyline. The route returns to the central track before going too far, instead of moving toward the story's conclusion in parallel with

other branches. These explorations do not allow the player to miss any of the core narrative.



Drawbacks

This structure shares many of the drawbacks of a central track, simply in lesser degrees. In trade, the striated track enjoys less of the central track's advantages; it is less supporting of a strong narrative because it adds more distracting options.

Parallel Track

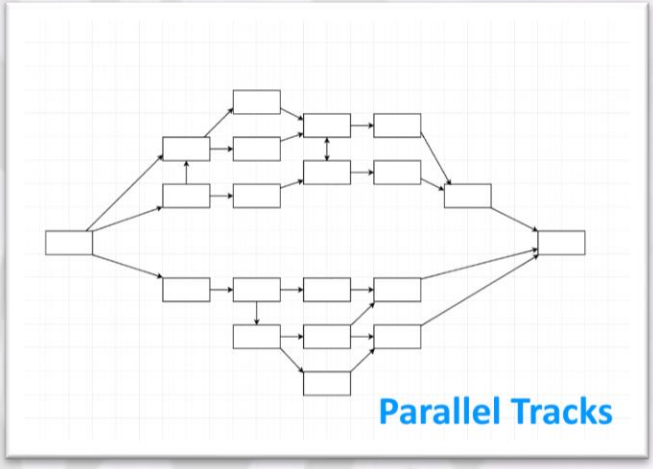
Parallel tracks maintain strings of text parts separate from one another, each advancing toward the end of the story. They may or may not rejoin at bottlenecks along the way.

An adventure composed entirely of parallel tracks creates as many distinct, separate adventures as it has parallel branches. For example, if your story splits into three branches right away, and each branch ends at the story's conclusion, you have effectively written three different adventures.

Parallel tracks appear more often in segments, with bottlenecks bringing the separate threads back together multiple times within a chapter. This is the most common configuration for single player interactive adventures, used in a variety of story situations.

Uses

Parallel tracks give significant meaning and effect to the player's choices, allowing those threads to go on to satisfying lengths. Because they run past other events happening on separate tracks, parallel tracks create meaning in player choices because they can both add events to and remove (bypass) events from the character's adventure.



Drawbacks

Every parallel branch represents a collection of text parts that the player can bypass on another route. When you create parallel tracks, you are creating experiences exclusive to the characters that route through them, experiences that will be missed by characters on other routes. Although these configurations are the hallmark of good interactive adventures, a writer must be mindful of how much of the adventure will be experienced by every player (as central or striated tracks) and how much can be skipped (on parallel tracks or in nodes).

Node Track

Node tracks have clusters of text parts, often extensive clusters. This structure allows in-depth exploration or conversation localized to one area of the story.

Uses

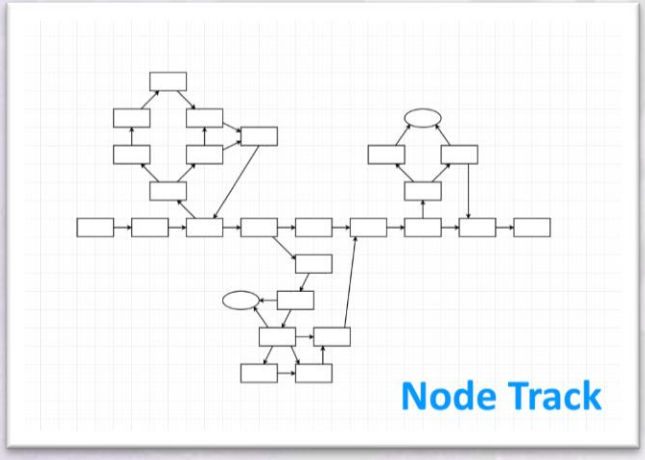
Nodes allow you to write significant deviations from the story's route, deviations that can be opted out of. These configurations are typically used to provide information to players that want to take the time to pursue it. These *exposition*

nodes make for excellent exposition or in-depth lore but are easily skipped.

For example, a library might give the chance to read through multiple books, each of which could have lengthy narrative text with clues that are useful later in the adventure. A player that wants to skip past this to the action can opt to skip this lore node by leaving the library and continuing with the adventure.

Expository nodes are particularly useful in the context of replay-ability. Nodes that offer only information can be skipped over by players that have already read them in prior playthroughs.

A popular version of this configuration is the *conversation node.* A nonplayer character might offer a chance for an extensive conversation, its text parts appearing in a node off the main route. Conversation nodes typically have a text part with a topic menu presented as a set of options. Each entry on the menu can lead to a leaf with a recursive prompt back to that menu or can lead to a sub-topic menu with more dialogue choices. The player can also opt to return to the main story route from any topic menu, ending exploration of the node.



Drawbacks

Divergences in this configuration usually exist for a reason, providing clues or otherwise preparing the protagonist for what comes later. If nodes are gated, they can represent significant segments of the adventure that are not accessible to the reader.

In the same way, if the reader does not diverge onto any of these node routes, the adventure will be significantly shorter than intended. This often occurs when significant confrontations or whole scenes can be skipped with a single Charisma-based check or some other quick bypass. If you allow the protagonist to talk its way out of every combat, the adventure becomes much shorter.

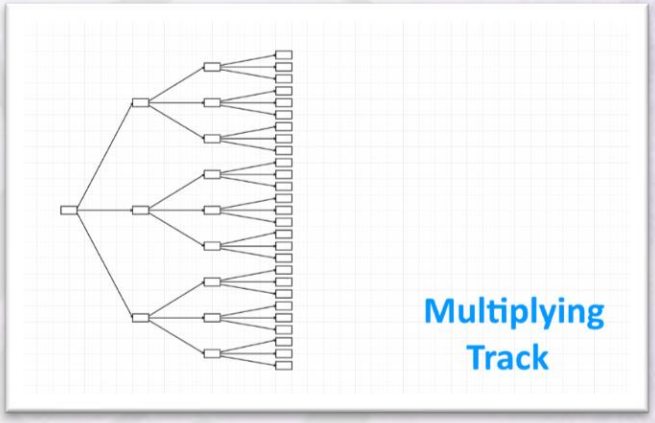
Multiplying Track

Multiplying tracks occur when one text part prompts into multiple new text parts, each of which prompt into multiple new text parts. This pattern can continue until the end of the adventure, creating a very broad but shallow route.

Uses

This configuration allows the writer to present and parse complex options (or sets of interacting options) within a narrow segment of the adventure.

Multiplying tracks also have the ability to give the player extensive agency; each choice leads to a text part that can only be reached by that combination of choices. Even a single different decision makes a playthrough unique as it routs through a zone of multiplying tracks.



Drawbacks

Although multiplying tracks give players many different experiences, most of those alternative

text parts exist later in the game. These structures are fundamentally narrower at the start and wider at the finish. Each replay therefore requires the character to go deeper into the story before seeing new text parts.

Multiplying tracks also present shallow, broad adventure segments. If each segment presents three options, one decision point requires writing four text parts, two decision points requires 12 more text parts, three decision points requires 39 text parts, and so on. The amount of writing quickly grows to an unmanageable load unless the multiplying aspect is cut off and text parts bottlenecked into one another. Otherwise, a full-size adventure of 350 text parts in a multiplying track might give the player only five decisions to make and a mere six text parts to read on each playthrough.

Diagraming

Diagramming is the process of mapping your text parts and their connections in a visual medium. A diagram lets you examine the connection of text parts to see where inconsistencies occur or where connections were forgotten.

Importantly, seeing a diagram also lets you identify routes that dramatically modify your adventure's intended length. Diagramming further lets you avoid errors in linear structure, particularly references to events that have yet to happen. A nonplayer character shouldn't say "we meet again" if that text part can be reached prior to meeting the nonplayer character for the first time.

Some writers may choose not to diagram. There are writing styles that support this approach, particularly those that use "analogue" methods, but such adventures tend to be simple and use few of the tools that make interactive adventures truly interactive.

Analogue Methods

In the 1980s, Joe Dever started his famous interactive adventure series, the *Lone Wolf* adventures. He used large, individual sheets of paper to contain each of his hand-written text parts and he linked them to one another manually using string, tape, and staples.

Modern "analogue" techniques are not so basic. Word processing software is so powerful and ubiquitous as to completely displace writing by hand or with mechanical typewriters. Instead, the term "analogue" refers to the placement of text parts without a diagram, without using data-mapping software or even a hand-drawn map.

Despite the usefulness and availability of such software, the configuration of many existing single-player adventures reveals that analogue diagraming methods remain in widespread use. For those writers not ready to employ data-flow mapping, the following methods may suffice for keeping track of text parts.

Basic Order

The creation and expansion of scaffolds naturally leads to a simple, chronological order of text parts. The basic order method calls for leaving these text parts where they appear, without other tracking methods, at least during composition. As you create and cut scaffolds, your parts stay in the order the player will encounter them, to the degree that intervening forks and branches will allow.

To maintain this structure, insert each new scaffold into the existing document of text parts, doing so in whole at the new scaffold's initiating fork. Then cut the scaffold into its own parts and note its forking points, if any. New forks within the new branch are ignored initially, then returned to for completion later, using this same method.

Advantages

The basic order's method allows you to compose everything using only a word processing

program. By carefully keeping track of which forks haven't been scaffolded yet and completing each scaffold before going on to the next, you are not likely to forget to write any of your adventure's routes.

The basic order method is a good choice for starting writers who are new to the process of structuring text parts in interactive adventures. It pairs well with simple structures and, when it reveals the challenges that better diagraming can avoid, it does so gently.

Disadvantages

The direct insertion of scaffolds creates a configuration of text parts that is hard to analyze. Using the basic order method, text parts initially appear in an order that makes sense. However, that structure quickly loses shape with the insertion of additional scaffolds.

This lack of observable structure can hinder your creation process. It obfuscates the pacing of the story and the timing of events relative to other events and routes. Moreover, because complex routes aren't well-supported in a basic order composition, this method encourages rudimentary configurations of text parts.

Chronological Meter

Without a diagram, you can keep track of text parts by assigning a phase to each. This lets you quantify where each text part appears chronologically in the story, something important to certain timing-dependent adventures. On a macro-scale, the use of chapters is one type of chronological meter.

Within chapters, phase markers can be created in a couple of ways. One method is to use separate pages to indicate the passage of time, however abstract. Use page breaks and conspicuous headings to partition these phases in your document. All events that take place at roughly the same time appear on the same page. (Note that phase "pages" often grow to be multiple pages in length.)

Another method is to simply add a separate indicator title for each text part, assigning it to a particular phase. For example, "Part **0010**-003" and "Part **0010**-215" both occur around the same time. When you write these text parts, you can look at every other text part prefixed "0010" and know exactly what is happening at the same time on different routes. Using this method, you should make a list of chronological events that serve as guideposts, pre-numbering your text parts around them.

Advantages

Chronological meter can be a powerful tool when writing parallel branches. It can help you track the pacing of your adventure, letting you know when to reconnect routes sensibly. It also helps to avoid advancing time at different rates on those parallel branches.

Disadvantages

Moving text parts around is a more cumbersome approach than the basic order method. Depending on the complexity of your branches, the number of text parts each includes, you may find this organization to provide more work than value.

Data Flow Software

Software easily replaces the tape-and-string methods of yesteryear. Electronic data mapping programs are easy to use and are often free or very affordable. While this product is not a survey of software, it does refer to serval easy options.

Software Possibilities

This product doesn't go beyond a few basic, easy-to-use software options. However, if you are willing to learn some new skill sets, perhaps some simple coding like Markup, you can leverage more powerful tools.

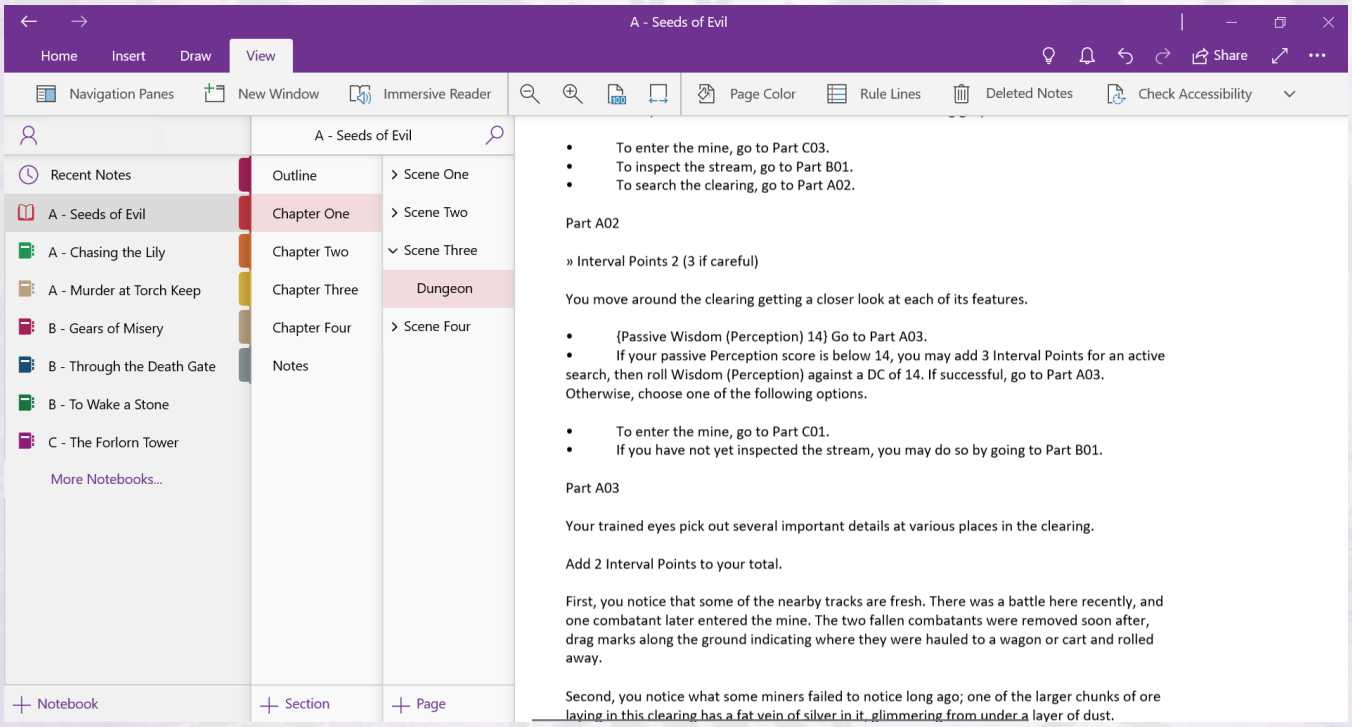
The majority of these programs are not designed to create character sheet-based interactions; most support simple, choice-based interactive stories without reference to character

states or sheets. Others just help you map data flows. Regardless, each can be useful for organizing and parsing your text or for testing the integrity of your story routes.

These example programs, presented alphabetically, provide a variety of tools for tracking your text parts: Adrift, articy:draft, Chat Mapper, ChoiceScript (or Chronicler), Inform, oStorybook, Playfic, Scrivener, TADS 3, TalkerMaker Deluxe, Twine, Undum, XMind, or yWriter 6. Some of these may have associated costs but many more of them (and similar programs) are available as free or open-source alternatives. The links here are just the tip of the iceberg!

For reference, most of the diagram illustrations in this product are screenshots taken of Draw.io, which has a free web application and desktop version.

Another popular tool is Microsoft's OneNote, an illustration of which is shown below. This program is useful for organizing information sets in a waterfall configuration, making it an easy first step when migrating from analogue methods to software-based architecture. OneNote for Windows 10 comes pre-installed on every version of Windows 10, and it's included in Office 365 and recent Office suites. Good alternatives include Simplenote and Evernote.



CHAPTER THREE

CHALLENGE GATES

"Nobody challenges me. I challenge myself."

- Shakuntala Devi

GATES ARE FACTORS THAT LIMIT THE ROUTING in your adventure. Like literal locked gates, characters cannot pass them without the applicable keys.

Because gates are generally overcome using character sheets, they are the distinguishing aspect of interactive adventures based on the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS Roleplaying Game. Without gates, your product is merely an interactive novel that branches without restrictions or prerequisites.

Gates particularly provide different experiences to players of different character types.

CHALLENGE GATES SUMMARY

This chapter covers the following topics.

- ***Gate Notation.*** Formatting gates and controlling how the player interacts with them.
- ***Basic Gates.*** A description of the several flavors of basic gates and how to use them in your adventure.
- ***Feature Gates.*** Designing gates that rely upon features of the character sheet to bypass, plus a list of keys that match these gates.

GATE NOTATION

The ability to access a gate usually gives the protagonist a new option for proceeding through the story. Alternately, what lies behind it is extra information, avoidance of harm or detection, or another benefit for the qualifying character.

A gate can also hamper a character. For example, the reader may be instructed to go to a particular text part if the character has established a hostile relationship with a nonplayer character. The door guard might, upon seeing the character approach, go inside and bar the door, then refuse to listen to any pleas for entry. This forecloses options that would be available to other characters.

A character qualifies for a gate in one of several ways. Commonly, a character passes a gate by making a sufficiently-high roll of some kind. Other gates allow access only to characters that possess a feature, trait, skill, spell, item, or other relevant effect. Finally, some gates are only accessible to characters that have experienced a specific event or encounter, like having found a codeword or, as previously-illustrated, having established a prior relationship with a door guard.

PRESENTING GATES

Gates are easier to process if they use a consistent appearance. This section covers the notation of gates, and how to handle complex gate scenarios, particularly when multiple gates exist or when multiple keys apply to a single gate.

Gate Forms

If an option has a gate, there are several ways you can present it.

Standard Form

An interactive adventure should develop its own style for gate notation. For Solitaires from Wraith Wright Productions, gated options are preceded by a stated requirement in {braces} using small caps. This change in formatting helps to draw the eye. For example:

> {Class Feature: Pact Magic} *Go to Part 017.*

Natural Language

Natural language can be useful for clarifying the intent of a gate. This is particularly true where the prerequisite cannot be stated in short terms.

The following example is a gate that selects for "primary" spellcasting classes and omits secondary and tertiary casters (paladins, rangers, arcane tricksters, and eldritch knights).

> *If you have the Spellcasting feature and it provides you with cantrips, go to Part 034.*

Combination

Where useful, you can combine both techniques. This can help if you normally use a notation form, but you encounter a prerequisite that needs natural language to explain. Examples:

> {Class Feature: Pact Magic} *If you gained magical capabilities from an otherworldly patron, go to Part 017.*
>
> {Class Feature: Spellcasting + cantrips} *If you have the Spellcasting feature and it provides you with cantrips, go to Part 034.*

Gate Priority

In scenarios with multiple gates, you might want to prioritize options, particularly when some produce better results or when you are using gates to differentiate character types.

For example, if a character has the keys to multiple gates, but one gate is more important for the character to select than the other, these techniques can help narrow or expand the player's choice.

Instructive Text

If you want to single out one gate and require the character to use it if possible, you can put that gate in instructive text rather than the normal set of options. This forces the reader to engage with the prioritized gate before reaching the alternatives in the option set.

The following gate options are designed to discover the best kind of armor the character can use. Of foremost importance, the writer wants to know if the character can use metal armor.

> {Class Feature: Druidic} *If you are forbidden from wearing metal armor by the pacts you made with forces of nature, go to Part 021.*
>
> *Otherwise, choose one of the following options.*
>
> - *If you are proficient with splint armor, go to Part 024.*
> - *If you are not proficient with splint armor but are proficient with a breastplate, go to Part 031.*
> - *If you are not proficient with a breastplate but are proficient with leather armor, go to Part 033.*
> - *If you are not proficient with any armor, go to Part 003.*

By placing the preeminent gate in the instructive text, a character with that key must use it. (Instructive text is always processed immediately upon reading it, before continuing through the text part.)

Layered Options

The prior example also uses layered options. These are gated options presented in order of priority. Each successive option gates out a character that could have used the prior option. Omitting prior options in a layered approach

usually requires natural language, or it requires combining natural language with standard-form gates.

Mixed Gates

Sometimes a gate is passable by multiple methods, making it a mixed gate. Notation can get tricky when trying to list all the requirements. Here is an example for a prisoner who has escaped from an isolated fortress and is wandering through the wilds without provisions.

> {Background Feature: Wanderer *or* Wisdom (Survival) DC 15} *To forage for food, go to Part 025. Reduce the Wisdom (Survival) DC to 10 and apply advantage if you have the Natural Explorer class feature related to "mountain" terrain.*
>
> *If you cannot successfully forage for food, note that you have missed 1 meal (or 1 additional meal) and go to Part 031.*

In some cases, the combination of prerequisites can get so lengthy or cumbersome that you might want to break them into multiple options. Prompting to the same text part multiple times within the same set of options is normally discouraged because it gives the impression that the player's choice is meaningless. However, this example is acceptable because it is not a case of negating player decisions; the outcome of finding food is obvious for these options, and the gates simply and clearly describe multiple approaches to reach it.

> {Background Feature: Wanderer} *To automatically forage for food, go to Part 025.*
>
> {Natural Explorer (Mountain) + Wisdom (Survival) DC 10} *if you have the Natural Explorer class feature related to "mountain" terrain, you can forage for food with this ability check, going to Part 025.*
>
> {Wisdom (Survival) DC 15} *If you do not have the Natural Explorer feature related to "mountain" terrain, you can forage for food with this ability check by going to Part 025.*
>
> *If you cannot successfully forage for food, note that you have missed 1 meal (or 1 additional meal) and go to Part 031.*

Notice that the third option uses language exclusive of the second option; you don't want a ranger to fail the first check and then get another chance to roll because you presented it in a separate option.

Further note that each of these options is listed in a logical order of preference to the player. The first is for automatic benefits, the second for an easy DC, and the third for a harder DC. The final option is the worst of all; automatic failure to forage. Being consistent with your order of preference helps players understand which of the presented options will be easier to use or will present better results, even if the options do not otherwise appear to be so stratified.

Basic Gates

Basic gates call for a single factor to bypass. They appear in three forms: event gates, roll gates, and feature gates.

Event gates are passed when a character that has undergone a particular event; something the player has seen or accomplished affects how the current scenario plays out.

Roll gates require a roll of some kind. They usually reward characters that are focused on the skills or aptitudes that modify the roll, but dice are fickle; these gates are perfectly capable of blocking those same characters.

Feature gates ask for some feature of the player's character sheet. Like roll gates, they tend to reward characters of certain types, but do so without the uncertainty of roll results.

Event Gates

Event gates are the simplest form of gates. They hide text parts behind the player's prior decisions, ones that led the protagonist through a previous experience or encounter. This type of gate makes no reference to the player's choices in character-building or to die rolls; it only matters how the player navigated previous text parts. For example, a character that failed to find the missing ruby will not be able to claim a reward when the option appears to hand over that gem to the authorities.

Disguised Gates

Some event gates are actually disguised versions of other gates. If the prerequisite experience or encounter was only possible because another type of gate was passed, it is actually a gate of the previous type.

For example, a gate that requires a character to have previously met a certain non-player character is normally an event gate. But if that non-player character could only have been noticed (and thus met) by succeeding at a Wisdom (Perception) check, the gate is instead a roll gate disguised as an event gate.

Disguised gates might incorporate the results of multiple gate types or exist at the end of long chains of disguised gates that began with something like a single ability check.

Story Summary

Using disguised gates can serve as a shorthand for having accomplished things in various different ways. Typically, it is only the results of certain events that matter. For example, if there were four ways to recover the ruby, each with a gate, the only thing that matters at this point in the story is the fact of the ruby's recovery.

These disguised gates fit easily into the natural flow of the narrative. Most disguised gates appear in a way that seems not to reference the underlying gate, but rather, what it led to. Perhaps a character found a clue and, when the time comes to apply that clue, the effect seems unrelated. The possibilities are myriad.

For example, a character learns from the Count's diary that pulling a wall sconce opens a secret door in a particular room. If the text part for that room simply provides an option to pull a wall sconce, the player will try it even without having learned the clue, as though pulling sconces is something the character does everywhere. However, asking for an event (having read the Count's diary), is just the same as asking if the character knows to pull the wall sconce. When the player passes that event gate, the secret door opens.

Challenge Gate

A disguised gate can also serve to purposefully obfuscate a prerequisite. If you want an option to hinge upon one of the character's assorted capabilities but you don't want the player to recognize the original gate, a disguised gate may serve that function. This usually takes the form of a feature gate that leads to specific information. When that information is later presented as an event gate, the disguise makes the result seem story-based rather than game mechanics-based.

This method is particularly useful if you are attempting to route characters into different branches based on their ability to manage certain challenges. If you want to reserve the toughest version of a fight to the characters that can handle it, you don't want to write a gate asking the character's Armor Class or number of hit points, particularly not when a combat seems eminent. Events in a story shouldn't appear to turn on such factors.

Instead, a prior gate might ask whether a character is proficient in shields when the character sees the prince's fancy shield. Behind that gate is information about the construction or emblem of the observed shield. Later, when the writer desires to put only heavy or medium-armored character classes onto a particular quest branch, an event gate based on observations of

that shield will exclude characters that are not proficient in medium or heavy armor since shield proficiency only comes with heavy or medium armor proficiency.

Special-Use Gate

Sometimes you want to create a branch that is exclusive to a specific type of character.

For example, only a wizard really cares about finding a spellbook. A gate that allows only wizards to see an arcane mark creates an event that can later be referred to when plundering an enemy wizard's lair. The wizard character, having seen the special mark, knows exactly how the spellbook is disguised. Excluded characters are routed onto a parallel branch and find a different treasure, perhaps just a rare book that can be pawned for gold, or something else more class-appropriate.

This type of gate appears in two or more parts. The first gate involves a decision or checks for a feature that sets a persist "state" or a "flag" for that character. Later in the adventure, the second (and later) gates refer to that flag using callbacks. The best flags to set are very memorable to the player. This is important because flags usually aren't noted on the character sheet as flags; they're just events the player will be asked to recall from earlier in the adventure. (These might even call back to previous adventures if you are writing an adventure path.) Flags should also be easy to summarize so you can write them simply into instructive text or options. "If you were able to read the wizard's notes in the forgotten tomb…" is probably not as memorable an event gate as asking if the character has interpreted the *unholy vermillion rune* hidden within those notes.

Part Numbers as Clues. Here is a more-complex example of a special-use gate. You previously set two gates for deciphering a diary that contains a safe code. The first gate checks for the Thieves' Cant feature. If the character doesn't have it, the secondary gate asks for a successful Intelligence check.

From the way the gates are written, the player gets the impression that Thieves' Cant simply bypasses the Intelligence check. However, a rogue will find a different code number than a character that makes the Intelligence check. Therefore, there are two possible flags that get set for later reference.

When it comes time to apply the code ("If you previously deciphered the safe code, add 20 to that number and go to the corresponding text part"), the rogue's flag is different and leads to a different outcome than other characters get; its code will produce a different sum and thus a different text part. The goal of presenting the gates this way is to hide the fact that the safe holds a rogue-specific magic item only when a rogue opens it. Very astute players may puzzle this out, but most will not.

Clue Gates

A variation of the event gate is the clue gate; the player has encountered an event (the presentation of a clue) but the player must interpret the information to make use of it.

A clue gate is typically described by narrative text, but it can also exist in an illustration. For example, a number hidden in a picture can tell the player which text part to navigate to when prompted.

A clue gate might be subtle, not much resembling a gate at all. The clue might just be information that allows the player to pick the best of several options. For example, a note that tells the character that the answer is "behind the red door; all others are trapped" can save a lot of suffering if the player interprets and applies the clue at the right time. Knowing the intended direction of travel is similarly useful if given a choice of crossroads. A character that doesn't know the overall direction to the castle (perhaps having not looked at the map provided) might choose the wrong path.

Note that clue gates aren't usually true "gates" because a lucky player can access the correct route simply by guessing.

Roll Gates

Roll gates require the player to achieve a result or range of results using a defined roll.

Random Rolls

Some roll gates call for fully-random results, with no modifications from character sheets or player choices. The writer sets the odds and describes the die roll accordingly. For example, the results of a gambling event, like a horse race or a dice game, may come down to a random result.

If you are seeking a truly-random roll, be aware that calling something a saving throw, ability check, attack roll, or damage roll, will allow it to be modified or re-rolled by certain effects like the Lucky feat or Great Weapon Fighting feature. If you want a roll gate to be untouched by such effects, do not categorize the roll as anything more specific than a die roll.

Ability Checks

Nearly all ability checks in the Dungeons & Dragons Roleplaying Game use skill-based bonuses. However, this is not always the case. Some activities in the standard rules have no associated skills. See the Key Checklist section below for a list of the non-skill rolls given in the *Player's Handbook*.

Commitment to a Roll

When you create a roll gate, you might have to consider whether the player will be allowed to roll before choosing that option. Usually it won't matter. A player makes a roll for the preferred option and, if unsuccessful, simply tries another of the provided options. However, sometimes making the check should commit a character to the result. Just making the check might take extra time in a scenario where time is being tracked, or it might impose a detrimental outcome if the roll is failed. In such cases, a character should first commit to the attempt and have no way to back out of it.

The writer controls commitment through the structure of text. Imagine this scenario. The player is given a choice to stop and disarm a trap while racing through a dungeon. Failure can slow the rate of progress and might spring a trap. To commit the player, the set of prompts would include the option to *attempt* the disarmament and give some idea of how much time it would take. The text structure calls for a check only after the player has chosen that option. That next text part would include prompts for success and for failure; at that point, the player will not be given the option to leave the trap alone.

Except when a good reason requires commitment to a roll ahead of time, standard Solitaires from Wraith Wright Productions allow players to roll every check in a set of options before choosing which option to take. This gives players the freedom to test how well their characters can meet gate requirements before choosing one.

Unreliability

Ability checks create unreliable outcomes because a d20 produces a random result within a range of 20 points. Even at their maximums, the ability check bonuses (ability modifier and proficiency bonus), stretch only about half the width of that variable.

This has two important implications. First, a high total bonus is only reliable against the very lowest DCs. Even a character competent in that field may fail an easy check. Second, a novice may also succeed against a DC established to challenge a competent character.

For example, if you create even odds for a competent character at low level (a DC at about 15), the novice still has about a one-in-four chance at success. Ability checks do not substantially distinguish character sheets geared toward their relevant activities.

This unpredictability means that a writer should hesitate to use ability checks as gates for anything that a skilled character *should* achieve or that an unskilled character *should not* achieve. Rather, ability checks should be applied to achieve random outcomes that markedly (but not overwhelmingly) favor characters adapted to their pursuits.

When gating to test for characters geared toward an activity, simply checking for proficiency in a skill or for a passive check result will create a more reliable test.

Avoiding Ability Checks

You might occasionally be tempted to create a roll gate that forces the character to "earn" story advancement through ability checks, particularly for mysteries or in puzzle scenarios. However, because you must also write the results of failing a roll, you will quickly realize that the story must have a progression path even when rolls fail.

Therefore, do not use roll gates when something vital is at stake unless a separate means of progression is available. Ideally, use several options so that players can approach problems from multiple directions. For example, a secret door that the character *must* find could require a Wisdom (Perception) check to notice, but a less observant character could instead learn of its presence through a conversation with the building owner or by having pilfered the building's floor plan from a wall safe. Adding multiple gates like this leads you through a creative process that adds richer detail to your adventure.

Particularly when you are leaving clues for a mystery, a riddle, or a puzzle that you want the *player* to guess at, do not gate vital clues behind rolls alone. Neither should the solution be purely down to the player guessing at solutions whose difficulties you cannot properly gauge because you already know the answers. A combination of story enigmas (testing player smarts), with a backup method of ability checks (testing character smarts), is often best. Even then, the story must have a route to progress through if both the player and the character fail.

Passive Checks

Chapter 7 of the *Player's Handbook* has rules for ability checks made without rolling. These passive checks are imposed at the DM's discretion, or in this case, at the writer's discretion. Passive checks are suggested to represent average results for repeated checks, or to moderate checks kept secret from the player. But in single-player adventures, passive skills take on a new, more-important functionality: imposing reliability.

A passive score can very-precisely gate for the type of character geared toward its relevant activity. This is particularly true when ability scores are generated using the point-buy or standard array methods. For example, in a starting-level adventure, if you want only characters focused on arcane lore to bypass a gate, you are looking for a passive Intelligence (Arcana) DC of 15. This assumes the character will have a 16 or higher Intelligence score and proficiency with the Arcana skill. There are essentially no other combinations that meet this passive DC (absent a sheet made with rolled ability scores). No dilettante will randomly roll past this static gate.

The "focused character" skill DC of 15 goes up as your adventure's intended character level goes up. Increase it by one at levels 4 and 8, when characters are likely to gain an Ability Score Increase in their most important ability, and at each of levels 5, 9, 13, and 17, when the level-based proficiency bonus rises.

If you want to increase potential access in minor amounts, you can simply decrement the DC point-by-point. This is more important to do with higher level adventures, since a truly "focused" character will have had to make several "correct" character-building decision to maintain the highest possible passive score.

Saving Throws and Attack Rolls

Like ability checks, saving throws and attack rolls use the wide-ranging d20 and so will not produce reliable results when used as gates. Neither do these have ready-made mechanics for testing flat bonuses like the passive ability check system, and only saving throws can gate based on a character's proficiency.

It is wise to reserve saving throws and attack rolls for gates that are strictly associated with their standard functions. A successful saving throw might be appropriate for a gate based on resisting a poison or disease, while multiple attack rolls might suit a gate based on winning an archery contest.

Feature Gates

Feature gates are bypassed with "keys." Keys are required class features, background features, racial traits, skill proficiencies, tool proficiencies, weapon proficiencies, armor proficiencies, languages, feats, spells, supernatural gifts, epic boons, marks of prestige, magic items, creature types and special traits, pieces of mundane equipment, alignment, or some other particular effect or capability that the player's character may possess or be defined by.

Gate Keys

Where challenges or threats appear in the form of gates, the effects or rolls that bypass them are called gate keys. If your story presents a gate for which a character has what should be a key, the inability to use that key is jarring. For example, not getting an option to fly out of a pit trap disaffects the player of an aarakocra and draws the player out of the story.

A comprehensive catalogue of keys appears in this section, below. As you write, it can be helpful to review the list to make sure you are not forgetting to facilitate any gate keys that could bypass the challenges or threats in your story.

Too Many Keys?

While writing a scenario, and having reviewed the checklist of gate keys, you might find dozens of viable ways for the protagonist to respond. Here are some approaches for handling scenes that want too many keys, scenes that might otherwise overwhelm the player with options.

Split the Scene

It can sometimes be helpful to backtrack the narrative and try to find a place where less has happened and thus fewer responses are called for. Finding that point, break the narrative text into two or more text parts to support fewer option prompts at the end of each. If you must, rewrite the events of the scene to make them more segmental or sequential, thus facilitating your ability to divide them into multiple text parts. The result is more text parts, but each text part provides a smaller set of options and thus asks for fewer keys.

Combine Gates

You can combine gates with roughly-similar keys, "genericizing" them. For example, you might modify the text of a single gate to be bypassed by multiple similar effects, like an ability check, a spell or two, and a background trait. Then modify the linked text part to read in a way that makes sense no matter which key was applied to the gate. Here is what that might look like:

> *You can stabilize Yves if you wish. Make a DC 10 Wisdom (Medicine) check, spend a healer's kit charge, cast* spare the dying, *cast any spell that heals hit points, use Lay on Hands or another healing feature, or administer any type of* potion of healing *by going to Part 101.*

A "genericized" gate looks more like this:

> *You can stabilize Yves if you wish. Make a DC 10 Wisdom (Medicine) check or apply some equipment or magic that automatically*

stabilizes or heals creatures by going to Part 101.

When the player goes to Part 101, the narrative text will not describe which healing method was used for the stabilization, only stating that Yves is now stable.

It will be rare that multiple options are so similar as those in this example, so you may have to work a bit harder to combine gates.

Eliminate Keys

If a large number of the possible responses to a scene could be foreclosed by adding a few details, you can winnow down the number of prompts you have to write and simultaneously ratchet up the stress and the stakes involved. To reuse the example above, perhaps Yves is bleeding out while in a zone of anti-magic. Suddenly, the only options are mundane, either to pass a DC 10 Wisdom (Medicine) check or to spend a healer's kit charge.

Use All Three

If the scene is calling for a particularly-excessive number of options, feel free to use all three tools; split the scene, combine gates, and eliminate possible keys.

Story-Breaking Keys

The key checklist below reminds you of the various features that characters might have so you can determine where those might break your story. This gives you a chance to restructure the adventure to compensate or to add branches that deal with unexpected keys.

Unfortunately, some keys are simply too disruptive to compensate for. A Dungeon Master in a normal campaign can alter the story for such features, but in this static medium, some keys would completely alter the adventure; you might find yourself needing to write an entirely-different version of the adventure to compensate for characters with one particular key.

For example, the Ghostly Gaze eldritch invocation allows a character to see through objects and use darkvision, up to a range of 30 feet. The number of scenarios this could alter is staggering, and the effect on the adventure could be extremely far-reaching.

Where this is the case, particularly when the feature belongs to a rare type of character that is extremely unlikely to appear, it is acceptable to omit options for that key. Although invalidating part of a character like this is undesirable, facilitating every key at the cost of the adventure is even less desirable. At some point you might just have to decide that the key is unmanageable and ignore its existence.

The higher the character level your adventure calls for, the more often you will encounter such story-breaking keys. Out of fairness to your players, make a note of all omitted keys and either name them specifically in the description of the adventure, or describe those features with general terms in the description. Let the players know that those features will not be usable. This is part of the essential information that tells your player what character types work with the adventure.

Key Checklists

These checklists ensure you have accounted for the various ways character traits and features can bypass your threats and challenges. The list lets you search through gate keys in just a handful of pages, instead of having to comb through every character option in every published book.

These checklists can also remind you to add gates for forgotten features, ensuring that your mixture of gates rewards a wide range of character types.

The list here contemplates all official 5th Edition books published at the time of this product's creation.

Un-leveled Keys

These are the most common gate keys, likely accessible by a large number of characters. They can be present regardless of the protagonist's character level.

Abilities

These usually apply to roll gates but merely checking for proficiency or the Expertise feature can serve as a feature gate.

Some of the tools listed might be usable with abilities different from the ones they appear with. Artisan's tools are omitted as they mostly apply to downtime scenarios rather than adventure gates.

Strength. Athletics; *force open a stuck, locked, or barred door; break free of bonds; push through a tunnel that is too small; hang on to a wagon while being dragged behind it*

Dexterity. Acrobatics, Sleight of Hand, Stealth; thieves' tools, land vehicles, water vehicles; *keep from falling on tricky footing, securely tie up a prisoner, wriggle free of bonds, craft a small or detailed object*

Constitution. *Hold your breath, march or labor for hours without rest, go without sleep, survive without food or water, quaff an entire stein of ale in one go*

Intelligence. Arcana, History, Investigation, Nature, Religion; forgery kit, herbalism kit, navigator's tools, poisoner's kit; *communicate with a creature without using words, estimate the value of a precious item, pull together a disguise to pass as a city guard, forge a document, recall lore about a craft or trade, win a game of skill*

Wisdom. Animal Handling, Insight, Medicine, Perception, Survival; *get a gut feeling about what course of action to follow, discern whether a seemingly dead or living creature is undead*

Charisma. Deception, Intimidation, Performance, Persuasion; disguise kit; *find the best person to talk to for news, rumors, and gossip; blend into a crowd to get the sense of key topics of conversation*

Race

Gate keys for racial traits are mostly confined to navigating odd terrain (flying speed, swimming speed, and water breathing) and immunity to certain conditions or environments.

Racial Traits. Amphibious (water breathing), Aquatic Heritage (swimming speed), Child of the Sea (swimming speed and water breathing), Darkvision (see without light), Fey Ancestry (immune to sleep), Flight (flying speed), Hold Breath (15 minutes without air), Mimicry (mimic sounds), Poison Immunity (immune to poisoned), Radiant Soul (flying speed), Silent Speech (telepathy if shared language), Speak with Small Beasts (communicate with Small or Tiny beasts), Speech of Beast and Leaf (understood by beasts and plants), Swim (swimming speed), Trance (immune to dreams and sleep), Warforged Resilience (immune to dreams and sleep), Winged (flying speed)

Creature

The special traits of creatures are listed here because characters may have animal allies like mounts, familiars, and beast companions. (Druids can also duplicate some of these special traits by taking animal forms.) This list is not exhaustive because there are so many potential animals.

In addition to the special traits below, a writer must be mindful that animal allies provide an extra set of eyes and ears, making sensory challenges much easier to overcome. They also create an additional layer of security when the protagonist sleeps.

Creature Special Traits. Amphibious (breath under water), Blindsight (detect what is unseeable), Darkvision (see in darkness), Detect Invisibility (see invisible), Keen Smell (detect unseen presence or track by smell), Keen Hearing and Smell (detect unseen presence or track by smell), Poison Sense (detect poisons)

Alignment

Alignment in particular is disfavored as a gate. Recent editions of Dungeons & Dragons have

moved away from the idea that alignment is discernable or has any mechanical effect in the game. In the current edition, there are barely any systems that utilize alignment. To stay consistent with the edition, avoid using alignment gates whenever possible.

Languages

Language-based feature gates control information provided by language-coded messages. An enemy might shout instructions to its allies in a rare language or otherwise betray clues as to its motivations through language-based gating. Likewise, some secret lore might only be available to a character that can read the literal writing on the wall.

The frequency of language gates should be sufficient to reward players' language choices. However, exotic-category languages should be treated as just that, exotic. Their gates should appear less frequently than standard languages. Additionally, be aware that some published campaign settings omit some languages, add new languages, change the rarity of languages, or combine languages.

When gating written languages, remember to identify the script in the gate. Only six alphabets are used across every standard and exotic language in the *Player's Handbook*, so a character is certain to recognize the alphabet even without being able to read the language.

Standard Languages. Common (typically spoken by humans, uses Common script), Dwarvish (typically spoken by dwarves, uses Dwarvish script), Elvish (typically spoken by elves, uses Elvish script), Giant (typically spoken by ogres and giants, uses Dwarvish script), Gnomish (typically spoken by gnomes, uses Dwarvish script), Goblin (typically spoken by goblinoids, uses Dwarvish script), Halfling (typically spoken by halflings, uses Common script), Orcish (typically spoken by orcs, uses Dwarvish script)

Exotic Languages. Abyssal (typically spoken by demons, uses Infernal script), Celestial (typically spoken by celestials, uses Celestial script), Draconic (typically spoken by dragons and their ilk, uses Draconic script), Deep Speech (typically spoken by beholders and mind flayers, has no written form), Infernal (typically spoken by devils, uses Infernal script), Primordial (typically spoken by elementals, uses Dwarvish script), Sylvan (typically spoken by fey, uses Elvish script), Undercommon (typically spoken by Underdark traders, uses Elvish script)

Feature Languages. Druidic is known only to druids, who automatically spot and understand its "written" hidden messages. Others spot the message's presence with a successful DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check but can't decipher it without magic.

Thieves' Cant is known only to rogues. It is hidden within the use of other languages. Its "written" form of signs and symbols convey only short, rogue-related information.

Personal Characteristics

This term applies specifically to the personality traits, bonds, flaws, and ideals of a background. Here it also applies to similar traits based on class archetypes or exotic races.

Personality traits are extremely difficult to gate for because there are a myriad of options and because players are allowed to customize their backgrounds. Any necessary test of personality traits can probably occur in the adventure's description instead, where the writer will explain which characters and motivations are suitable to the story.

Backgrounds

Background features often figure into compound gates, ones that could be passed by other means. These means tend to be payments or rolls. Accordingly, most background features fall into the pay category or the roll category.

"Pay" background features provide access to benefits that must normally be paid for. These

can be referenced where goods or services are accessed, rather than the gates that test for those goods or services.

"Roll" background features create outcomes that could be accomplished with the right ability checks. These can be added to gates where the feature-achievable outcome is normally tested for by an ability check.

Only a few background features apply to neither category. Such features are essentially impossible to reference or make use of in single-player interactive adventures.

Background Features (Pay). Bad Reputation (feared by people, won't be reported for committing very minor crimes like not paying for services), By Popular Demand (get free accommodations for performing, people recognize and like the character), Guild Membership (guild support, paid legal representation if needed), Heart of Darkness (commoners are courteous, will harbor and defend the character), Kept in Style (reduce lifestyle cost by 2 gp, cannot maintain less than comfortable lifestyle), Knightly Regard (shelter and succor from a knightly order and from its political and religious allies), Library Access (free access and preferential treatment at most libraries), Military Rank (influence soldiers, temporarily requisition simple equipment or horses), Respect of the Stout Folk (fine accommodations provided by shield or gold dwarves), Rustic Hospitality (sheltered from the law by commoners), Safe Haven [a.k.a., House Connections] (access safe houses, free room and board, and miscellaneous support), Shelter of the Faithful (free healing at shrines of the character's faith and free modest lifestyle from the faithful), Ship's Passage (free passage on ships)

Background Features (Roll). Adept Linguist (communicate with humanoids who don't speak any language), City Streets (navigate a city at half travel time), Criminal Contact (reliable and trustworthy contact with criminal network), All Eyes on You (gain the friendly interest of scholars, nobles, and everyday folk), Court Functionary (access records and inner workings of any noble court or government, know the movers and shakers), Ear to the Ground (a contact in every city provides information on the local people and places), False Identity (second identity complete with documents, ability to forge papers), Historical Knowledge (ascertain original purpose of a ruin or dungeon), Mercenary Life (identify mercenary companies and their emblems, history, and important members), Position of Privilege (welcomed in high society and able to secure noble audiences), Researcher (know where to go to research any piece of information), Uthgardt Heritage (double foraging results, sheltered by druids, barbarians, and other nature-oriented types), Wanderer (recall the layout of nearby terrain features and forage without rolling), Watcher's Eye (find local watch outposts and identify dens of crime)

Background Features (Other). Discovery (unique and powerful secret), Inheritance (possess important object), Retainer (three commoners accompany the character everywhere)

Feats

Feats are rarely used as gates because only a few of them create new functionality; most simply provide combat effects or modify die rolls. Moreover, feats are an optional rule, so your player might not be using them.

Actor (mimic speech and creature sounds), Alert (can't be surprised), Keen Mind (know which way is north, know the number of hours left before the sunrise or sunset, and remember the details of anything seen or heard in the past month), Linguist (create cyphers), Observant (read lips), Sentinel (might prevent an enemy's scripted escape from combat)

Equipment

This segment includes checklists for specific gear. Equipment keys can refer to possessing a piece of

gear, having proficiency with a piece of gear, or both.

Proficiency. Armor category (light, medium, heavy, shields), weapon category (simple, martial), or a specific weapon or tool.

Player's Handbook *Gear.* Block and tackle (raise very heavy things), chalk (mark terrain features to avoid getting lost), disguise kit (change appearance), forgery kit (forge documents), herbalism kit (process herbal concoctions), grappling hook (climb obstacles), lock (lock some doors or chests), miner's pick (dig through cave-ins), poisoner's kit (harvest poisons), pole (find floor traps), rope (climb down things, tie things), shovel (burry or dig things up), sledge hammer (break through barriers), spikes (spike doors closed), spyglass (see distant things more clearly), steel mirror (deal with gaze attacks)

TCEM *Gear.* Equipment in the following paragraph is specific to a third-party supplement, the *Comprehensive Equipment Manual*. (It is included because all supplements from Wraith Wright Production are designed so they can be used together.)

Ashiaro (leave different tracks), bell kit (create bell trap), cold weather clothes (avoid arctic penalties), diver's kit (canister with extra lungful of air), falling sail (parachute), periscope (peak around corner while maintaining full cover), shikaro (create spyhole in thin wall or door), snorkel (breathe while submerged), snow shoes or skis (traverse deep snow), sprayer (deploy aerosolized alchemies), water shoes (traverse still water)

Leveled Keys

Leveled keys are those class features, spells, and magic items that won't appear before your protagonist reaches their associated levels. If you're writing for a certain level band, you won't have to worry about checking anything listed in the bands above it, as those will not be accessible to a character in your story.

Spells. These lists include illusions because they are particularly difficult to write for. They attempt to deceive a nonplayer character with a semblance of something uniquely imagined by the player, something the writer cannot anticipate.

Where a spell is marked with an asterisk (*), it can be cast as a ritual; players will use these spells by passing time rather than expending resources.

Where class features and magic items duplicate spells, check the listed spell keys for any disruptive potential.

Magic Items. The magic items here are level-listed because the *Dungeon Master's Guide* associates item rarity ratings with character levels. (See also, *Xanathar's Guide to Everything*.) Unlike class features and spells, it is possible for characters to achieve magic items that exceed the level restrictions, meaning that magic items may appear prior to their classifications in the leveled lists.

Due to their rarity, sentient items or artifacts do not appear on these lists, nor do these lists include epic boons, supernatural gifts, or marks of prestige.

Level Band A

These are accessible at 1st and 2nd level.

Class Features. Artisan's Blessing (can convert wealth to any mundane object worth 100 gp or less), Aspect of the Moon (no need for sleep), Awakened Mind (telepathy), Devil's Sight (see through all darkness), Divine Sense (detect celestials, fiends, fey, and undead), Eyes of the Runekeeper (read any writing), Ghostly Gaze (see through objects and walls), Gift of the Depths (swimming speed and water breathing), Master of Intrigue (unerringly mimic speech), Natural Explorer (can't become lost), Read Thoughts (read emotions and surface/active thoughts), Voice of the Chain Master (can perceive through the senses of an invisible familiar at any range), Wild Shape (become CR ¼ beasts without

swimming or flying speeds, change size, access special traits)

Cantrips. *Control flames* (manipulate fire), *druidcraft* (sensory effects, light candles), *gust* (manipulate wind), *mage hand* (small levitation), *mending* (small repairs to items), *message* (secret communication), *minor illusion* (illusion), *mold earth* (manipulate minerals), *prestidigitation* (light candles, clean objects, tiny illusions), *shape water* (manipulate water, change water environs), *thaumaturgy* (distractions)

1st-Level Spells. *Alarm** (get warning of intrusions), *animal friendship* (bypass natural beast threats), *beast bond* (communicate with friendly beast), *charm person* (create friendly interaction), *comprehend languages** (understand any languages), *detect evil and good* (detect aberration, celestial, elemental, fey, fiend, or undead), *detect poison and disease* (identify toxic threats), *disguise self* (fast disguise), *faerie fire* (find invisible), *feather fall* (avoid falling), *find familiar* (persistent ally, spy through familiar's senses), *silent image* (illusion), *speak with animals* (question unanticipated "witnesses")

Uncommon Magic Items. *Amulet of proof against detection and location* (avoids plot-based scrying and similar fiats), *boots of the winterlands* (no special measures needed for arctic survival), *broom of flying* (flying speed), *cap of water breathing* (breathe under water), *deck of illusions* (random effects, illusions), *eversmoking bottle* (unlimited smoke screen), *immovable rod* (block doors, prevent crushing weights), *mariner's armor* (swimming speed), *necklace of adaptation* (breathe anywhere), *potion of water breathing* (breathe under water), *ring of swimming* (swimming speed), *ring of warmth* (no special measures needed for arctic survival), *ring of water walking* (traverse water), *robe of useful items* (instant door, ladder, pit, or rowboat), *slippers of spider climbing* (climbing speed), *wand of secrets* (detect secret doors), *winged boots* (flying speed)

Level Band B

These are accessible at 3rd and 4th level.

Class Features. Detect Portal (detect portals within 1 mile), Divine Health (immune to disease), Pact of the Blade (weapon available anywhere), Primeval Awareness (detect aberrations, celestials, dragons, elementals, fey, fiends, and undead within 1 or 6 miles), Ranger's Companion (player-controlled ally), Subtle Spell Metamagic (undetectable spellcasting), Weapon Bond (weapon available anywhere), Wild Shape (become CR ½ beasts without flying speeds, change size, access special traits)

2nd-Level Spells. *Alter self* (fast disguise, water breathing and swimming speed), *animal messenger** (tiny beast carries 25-word message for up to 1 day), *arcane lock* (lock some portal and control who bypasses the lock), *augury** (test a choice for good or bad outcome), *beast sense** (perceive through willing beast's senses), *detect thoughts* (know surface thoughts, motivations, and emotions), *earthbind* (negate flying), *find traps* (locate traps), *invisibility* (avoid detection), *knock* (bypass locks), *locate object* (find hidden items), *rope trick* (hide from encounters), *see invisibility* (find invisible), *spider* (climbing speed), *suggestion* (control nonplayer character actions), *zone of truth* (negate intrigue)

Level Band C

These are accessible at 5th and 6th level.

Class Features. Land's Stride (unharmed and unhindered by nonmagical plants), Storm Guide (change weather in small radius)

3rd-Level Spells. *Clairvoyance* (perceive through invisible sensor), *counterspell* (negate scripted spellcasting), *dispel magic* (remove plot-related magic effects), *fly* (flying speed), *gaseous form* (bypass physical obstacles), *Leomund's tiny hut** (create impassible dome), *major image* (illusion), *nondetection* (foil plot-related divinations), *remove curse* (negate "plot device" curses), *revivify* (reverse scripted death of nonplayer character), *speak with dead* (question

unanticipated "witnesses"), *speak with plants* (question unanticipated "witnesses"), *tongues* (speak and understand any language), *water breathing** (breathe water), *water walk** (traverse liquids)

Rare Magic Items. *Bag of beans* (random unmanageable effects), *chime of opening* (unlock and open things from a distance), *cloak of the bat* (flying speed), *Daern's instant fortress* (impregnable fortress, unlimited-use 10d10 area damage effect), *folding boat* (aqueous transportation), *horseshoes of the zephyr* (traverse liquid, lava), *periapt of proof against poison* (immune to poison), *Quaal's feather token* (aqueous transportation), *ring of x-ray vision* (see through obstructions), *wand of enemy detection* (detect or identify enemies nearby), *wand of wonder* (weirdly-random effects), *wings of flying* (flying speed)

Level Band D

These are accessible at 7th and 8th level.

Class Features. Aura of Devotion (immune to charmed), Ethereal Step (early access to 7th-level *etherealness* spell effect), Stillness of Mind (cancel charmed or frightened on self), Wild Shape (become CR 1 beasts, change size, access special traits)

4th-Level Spells. *Arcane eye* (scout with invisible sensor), *control water* (large-scale water manipulation), *dimension door* (bypass obstacles), *divination** (get advice from deity), *fabricate* (create item on command), *freedom of movement* (immune to paralyzed and restrained, unaffected by physical impediments like manacles or water), *greater invisibility* (avoid detection), *hallucinatory terrain* (illusion), *Leomund's secret chest* (access the contained items anywhere), *locate creature* (find creature), *Mordenkainen's private sanctum* (secure a structure), *polymorph* (become beast), *stone shape* (bypass stone obstacles like walls)

Level Band E

These are accessible at 9th and 10th level.

Class Features. Aura of Courage (immune to frightened), Elemental Wild Shape (become CR 5 air, earth, fire, or water elemental, change size, access special traits), Divine Intervention (deity acts on character's behalf, as powerful as any cleric spell), Insightful Manipulator (learn target's Intelligence, Wisdom, Charisma, or class levels), Nature's Ward (immune to poison, disease, and being charmed or frightened by elementals or fey), Purity of Body (immune to disease and poison), The Third Eye (see into the ethereal and read any language)

5th-Level Spells. *Awaken* (animal or plant becomes intelligent creature), *commune** (three yes/no questions answered by deity), *creation* (create an item), *dominate person* (telepathically control someone), *dream* (send messages in dreams), *geas* (long-term control of nonplayer character), *mislead* (invisibility and illusory double), *modify memory* (reshape a creature's memories), *passwall* (bypass barrier), *Rary's telepathic bond** (telepathy), *reincarnation* (reverse scripted death of nonplayer character), *raise dead* (reverse scripted death of nonplayer character), *scrying* (spy on others), *seeming* (illusionary disguise, even on the unwilling), *teleportation circle* (create teleportation point), *transmute rock* (bypass stone obstacles), *tree stride* (bypass obstacles)

Level Band F

These are accessible at 11th and 12th level.

6th-Level Spells. *Arcane gate* (far teleportation), *Drawmij's instant summons** (access an item anywhere), *druid grove* (fortify an area), *find the path* (know quick, direct route to something), *guards and wards* (fortify an area), *magic jar* (possess and control nonplayer character), *mass suggestion* (control multiple nonplayer characters' actions), *programmed illusion* (illusion), *soul cage* (interrogate newly-dead), *transport via plants* (far teleportation), *word of recall* (far teleportation)

Very Rare Magic Items. *Carpet of flying* (flying speed), *cloak of arachnida* (climbing speed), *Nolzur's marvelous pigments* (create any inanimate object or terrain feature), *potion of longevity* (turn nonplayer characters into teenagers), *rod of security* (up to 200 creatures visit a paradise)

Level Band G

These are accessible at 13th and 14th level.

Class Features. Alter Memories (make creature forget periods of time), Dragon Wings (flying speed), Imposter (unerringly mimic speech, writing, and behavior), Otherworldly Wings (flying speed), Tongue of the Sun and Moon (speak any language), Use Magic Device (use even plot-controlled magic items), Unerring Eye (sense you are being tricked by illusion, magic, or shapeshifting), Vanish (can't be tracked by nonmagical means)

7th-Level Spells. *Etherealness* (bypass challenges on the material plane), *mirage arcana* (illusion), *Mordenkainen's magnificent mansion* (create stronghold), *plane shift* (leave current plane), *project image* (perceive through senses of distant illusion of yourself), *resurrection* (reverse scripted death of nonplayer character), *teleport* (far teleportation), *temple of the gods* (create stronghold)

Level Band H

These are accessible at 15th and 16th level.

Class Features. Timeless Body (can't be magically aged), Witch Sight (see through disguises of illusion, transmutation, or shapeshifting)

8th-Level Spells. *Antimagic field* (block and suppress even plot-scripted magic), *clone* (create character duplicate), *control weather* (change plot-foreshadowing weather), *demiplane* (access private plane), *dominate monster* (control enemies' actions for an hour), *glibness* (evade truth-magic), *mighty fortress* (create stronghold), *mind blank* (immune to mind affecting/sensing effects), *telepathy* (communicate at any range)

Level Band I

These are accessible at 17th, 18th, 19th, and 20th level.

Class Features. Saint of Forge and Fire (immune to fire), Soul of Deceit (immune to telepathy and truth-detection), Stormborn (flying speed), Visions of the Past (know past events relating to object or area), Wind Soul (flying speed, immune to thunder and lightning)

9th-Level Spells. *Astral projection* (access astral plane), *gate* (access other plane), *mass polymorph* (enemies become beasts), *shapechange* (become non-construct, non-undead creature), *time top* (act uninterrupted for several rounds), *true polymorph* (become, or make others into—something else), *true resurrection* (reverse scripted death of nonplayer character, even centuries-dead historic figures), *wish* (miraculous effects or any spell up to 8th level)

Legendary Magic Items. *Apparatus of Kwalish* (underwater travel), *deck of many things* (random game-derailing effects), *sovereign glue* (unbreakably bond two things together), *sphere of annihilation* (annihilate anything)

CHAPTER FOUR

COMBATS

"Perseverance is also key to success in any endeavor, but without perseverance in combat, there can be no victory."

- Jocko Willink

FIGHTS ARE AN EXPECTED PART OF DUNGEONS & DRAGONS, something that most features of most character sheets are designed to overcome.

Combats can be their own stories, with their own heroes and villains, with lessons to learn and drama to experience. They deserve their own chapter, with special instructions for how to create, place, and manage them.

COMBATS SUMMARY

This chapter covers the following topics.

- ***Using Combats.*** Using fights to emphasize conflict, raise stakes, and pace your story.
- ***Combat Notation.*** Suggested methods for standardizing the way battles appear in your adventure and implementing combat efficiently.
- ***Combat-Adjacent Text Parts.*** Using text parts to lead into combat dramatically and to parse events mid-combat. This segment also helps to manage the outcomes that appear on the far side of each combat event.
- ***Balancing Combat.*** Making combats exciting but fair when faced by a lone adventurer.

USING COMBATS

Combats serve an array of functions. While they can share some uses with gates, they are more often placed to control pacing or illustrate the stakes of an adventure.

EMPHASIZING CONFLICT

Nothing substitutes for combat when it comes to illustrating raw, violent conflict between competing factions or creatures.

WHAT WE FIGHT FOR

Combats ratchet up the tension, usually putting the protagonist's health at serious risk. They represent highest-stakes conflicts that cannot be approximated with symbolic or proxy challenges.

In some cases, these fights have no meaning, except perhaps to affect pacing. More often, a fight is one battle in a larger war, or a representation of a larger conflict. To use this storytelling tool, make sure that individual fights include elements of the larger conflict. The more your fights reference the overall conflict of the story, the more personal and engaging the story becomes.

PLAYING TIME

Also important from a creator's perspective, combats represent a significant portion of the adventure's playing time. Without sufficient combats, the adventure is either too dull or goes by too quickly.

One of the metrics that consumers prejudge products by is the estimated play time, and this time is deeply impacted by the number and nature of the adventure's combats. Without these

aspects, a fast reader will power through your adventure at a much-faster rate than you advertise.

Additionally, when players re-engage with (replay) a single-player interactive adventure, there is an interesting phenomenon that occurs. Most narrative text gets skipped in favor of reading only instructive text and options. A player that reads the options at the end of a text part can very-accurately remember the story and make the right choices for those options. For replayability, the only thing that slows the player down is the combats, and to a lesser degree, other rolling-intensive segments.

Pacing

Like an adventure novel, a violent conflict can punctuate long stretches of exposition and exploration, particularly at the story's conclusion. When applied selectively, these tense moments can provide upbeats of action between downbeats, a pacing technique we have discussed in a previous chapter.

Combat as Action

Combat is important for more than its dramatic invocations. It also affects the pacing of your story. Along with other actions scenes, it is an important tool for subtly raising tension and providing a meaningful climax to your story.

For good pacing, each chapter of your adventure should have between one and three action scenes. These scenes may include fighting, but some of them could deploy other complex struggles where injury and death are possible. An action scene might also be a tense or hostile social encounter. Not all action scenes need to escalate into combat; the mere possibility is often dramatic enough.

Because some combats will appear only in certain branches or locations of the story, and because others might be avoided by player decisions or rolls, expect to build between 8 and 12 combat encounters. Place these throughout the adventure at points that will ensure the player finds an appropriate number of fights.

> **Suggested Number of Combats**
>
> For a four-chapter (four hour) adventure, try to route the protagonist through 4 to 8 combats, including the final battle. The adventure will likely contain more fights than this, but each route should interact with only the right amount of them.

Adventure Climax

Your adventure will probably culminate in a final fight. This is an enduring expectation for action storytelling, one that transcends genres and mediums. If you do not plan to have a final fight in your story, you are probably doing it "wrong."

In some cases, a creator may wish to end an adventure on a cliffhanger. (Cliffhangers are discouraged in Solitaires, due to the need for interchangeability between adventures.) If you are planning a cliffhanger ending, you can still insert a climactic combat just before that point. For example, if your main antagonist gets away, have an ending battle with a powerful lieutenant instead.

The climactic battle should also be expositive or otherwise dramatic, meaning it is more likely to use combat-adjacent text parts.

Combat Notation

Combats require complex notation to convey their myriad factors. Their writeups are large, calling for a large amount of space to manage them. They are too unwieldly to insert among normal text parts. Moreover, they are distracting when placed within normal text parts, potentially revealing unwanted metadata at a glance, particularly if illustrations or battle maps are included.

These factors suggest that combat writeups should be relegated to the pages of an appendix

in your adventure. This product proposes two forms, traditional sets and narrative sets. Both options are presented here in ways that will fit a combat appendix at the end of your product.

Option 1: Traditional Sets

Traditional sets are composed of usage data and one or more stat blocks. These replace the decision-making process that a Dungeon Master normally performs during combat, as well as the general information about the antagonists that a Dungeon Master would reference for this task.

Usage Data

In a normal game, every aspect of a creatures' behavior remains unwritten. Its round-to-round choices are left to the whim of the Dungeon Master. Because there is no DM to moderate a single-player adventure, traditional combat gates supply "usage data" to replace the role of the Dungeon Master in this gaming medium.

Tactics

Usage data includes any tactical instructions for running the combat. This could mean descriptions of monster's actions round-to-round or more-general instructions. However, monster tactics are probably better controlled by default modes, a set of simple, standardized monster combat behaviors described in your adventure's playbook.

Tactics data can also change the parameters of a combat gate or direct the player out of it and into another branch of text parts. For example, a monster vulnerable to fire may change its tactics entirely or flee if the protagonist inflicts fire damage. Prompts that address such events appear within the usage data.

Outcomes

Combats are usually concluded by winning a fight, but some are concluded by losing or fleeing from the battle.

You can save space by assuming (stating up-front) that failure in battle ends the adventure with the protagonist's death. If the player loses, nothing more is said. However, that approach ignores the potential for storytelling inherent to losing a fight or fleeing from it. Better to have a separate text part describe the fallout of a lost battle, even if it simply describes the protagonist's death. In solitary play, abrupt, unwritten ends do not create a satisfying gameplay experience so they should be avoided.

If choosing to flee is one of the combat's possible outcomes, you will need to determine the risks, costs, or consequence. If this allows the protagonist to "fail forward," passing the gate anyway, carefully consider how a character is better off by winning the combat. Failure should have consequences, but those consequences don't always have to result in the death of a character or the failure of its quest.

Other Information

Usage data is a great place for other information that applies to a combat gate. This can be incidental to the specific gate, or the type of information you want to apply in all of your combat gates.

In the full-page example of a traditional set writeup (below), the usage data includes instructions for running the combat in the case of a second character. This facilitates a standard feature of Solitaires; the system has general rules for playing with two players, or for one player to use two characters.

Stat Blocks

Stat blocks are the collected mechanical features of monsters and non-player characters. They include critical information necessary to understand creatures' combat capabilities. Some combat gates will involve more than one type of creature and thus will note more than one stat block.

Official publications typically add art and flavor text to accompany a creature's stat block.

Together, these elements provide what the DM needs to run these antagonists.

The stat block format is used in all official products. Although other formats are possible, this is the notation system that D&D players understand and expect. Creators should adhere to the normal appearance and configuration of stat blocks, *to the degree that doing so is practical and legal*. Some deviation is expected, and may be necessary, but the overall form should remain recognizable.

Legal Use (Dungeon Masters Guild)

The terms of publishing on the Dungeon Masters Guild require that *Monster Manual* stat blocks appear only in abbreviated form. This restriction includes monsters otherwise useable under the Open Gaming License (OGL). It controls all monsters from all official sources, one of the few instances where the Dungeon Masters Guild is more restrictive than when publishing under the OGL. The Guild's guidelines prefer that you direct players to the *Monster Manual* instead.

Unfortunately, single-player adventures play differently from normal ones and have particular needs that are in conflict with this guideline. In a traditional adventure, the Dungeon Master can reference the *Monster Manual* without completely giving away all the antagonists' information. This includes artwork and flavor text that may be too revealing. In single-player adventures, using the *Monster Manual* is therefore an impractical option. Here are some approaches to convey monster data safely within the market's rules.

First, use summary stat blocks, as the guidelines suggest. What "summary" means is an open question, one that has been the subject of some debate on creator forums. While we don't know what "summary" means, we do know that the restriction has a history of being enforced. Some creators' works were temporarily removed from the market in 2018 until they cut out monster stat blocks. Interestingly, these inclusions might not have been contrary to any of the creator guidelines that were in effect prior to the "clarified" rules that appeared at around the same time as the enforcement.

Necessarily, a "summary" is some degree of information less than what appears in official publications, and that degree is probably not a small one. Therefore, make your summaries omit every single article of extraneous information and hope that the Guild's enforcement mechanisms find this sufficient. Moreover, try wholly-altering the stat blocks; instead of copying, rewrite everything in your own words. While this only technically complies with the "don't copy" instruction, it will also help you rearrange information for smaller, more-efficient summaries.

Additionally, use your own monsters and non-player characters of various races. Create unique and interesting antagonists that do not borrow from the Dungeons & Dragons intellectual properties. Alternately, use modified monsters that are sufficiently-deviated from their sources as to require their own new, unique stat blocks.

Editor's Note: Stat Blocks Used on the Dungeon Masters Guild

The Dungeon Masters Guild has guidelines for using stat blocks from official products. As of this date, the FAQ states:

You can include information like summary stat blocks of monsters from the Monster Manual *in your adventure. Similarly, you can include spell effects and other useful information as needed to make running your adventure an easy and streamlined experience. Please note that sometimes it's just as easy to refer the Dungeon Master to the* Monster Manual *or other core rulebook instead. In short, avoid copying large sections of Wizards titles. Stick to summary information needed and not easily referenced.*

EXAMPLE OF COMBAT GATE NOTATION: "TRADITIONAL" SET

Appendix A-11

You have encountered a kruthik hive lord. This creature is hostile and will attack immediately. There is only one apparent exit from this room.

LOCATION

The room is rectangular, 40 feet wide and 80 feet long. The walls reach 30 feet high.

Your enemy begins 55 feet from you. Even if you back away from it, your enemy can probably reach you in one turn, perhaps using the Dash action instead of attacking.

SECOND PLAYER

Instead of doubling the number of creatures in this combat, add 2 adult kruthiks. These creatures will follow the same Skirmisher tactics, described below.

OUTCOMES

- *You can try to flee after 3 full rounds of combat. To make this attempt, go to* Part 076.
- *If you win this fight, go to* Part 390.
- *If you lose this fight, go to* Part 119.

KRUTHIK HIVE LORD

Large monstrosity, unaligned

AC 20, **HP** 102, **Speed** 40 (burrow 20, climb 40)
STR +4, **DEX** +3, **CON** +3, **INT** +0, **WIS** +2, **CHA** +0

Senses Darkvision 30', tremorsense 60'
Languages Kruthik

Keen Smell. Advantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks that rely on smell

Pack Tactics. Advantage on attack rolls if at least one ally is within 5' of the target

Tunneler. Can burrow through rock at speed 10, leaving a 10' diameter tunnel

Multiattack. 2 stab attacks or 2 spike attacks

Stab. *Melee (10'):* **+7** to hit, **1d10 + 4** piercing

Spike. *Ranged (30/120'):* **+6** to hit, **1d6 + 4** piercing

Acid Spray (Recharge 5–6). Each creature in a 15' cone emanating from this creature must make a DC 14 Dexterity save, taking 4d10 acid on a failure or half as much on a success

TACTICS (SKIRMISHER)

This foe will attempt to close to melee range, using ranged actions while closing. In this environment, the foe will be able to make melee attacks on its **2nd** turn.

If this foe lacks ranged attacks, it will use its action to dash, reaching melee range in **1** turn.

Special. The kruthik hive lord will use Acid Spray on its first turn within melee range and again each time the action recharges.

Whatever the case, the less information you include about monsters, the safer your product will be in the Dungeon Masters Guild. Just be mindful to include sufficient information for a single player to run a combat using your antagonists. If you find that you must send the player to an official sourcebook, be mindful of the information that will appear on those pages and the degree to which metaknowledge from "spoilers" may alter how your adventure is played from that point forward.

The full-page example in this chapter, the kruthik hive lord battle, represents a traditional set combat writeup. It includes a standard monster from *Mordenkainen's Tome of Foes*, but the information in the text block is summarized, with as many omissions as possible. However, keep in mind that this summarization may still fall short of what the Dungeon Masters Guild requires.

Option 2: Narrative Sets

Narrative sets take an approach that is very different from traditional sets. They walk the player through the combat as it unfolds, sometimes round-by-round, providing options and instructions at each step along the way.

An entire narrative set can resemble a collection of text parts much like the combat-adjacent text parts described previously. Unlike combat-adjacent text parts, the player never gets into the combat proper. Instead, these parts continue, strung together until the encounter is complete.

Unique Identifiers

The text parts used in narrative sets often call for more-complex identifiers as titles. Because they still fit into a combat appendix, they should also appear chronologically, to the degree that branching options allow, unlike normal text parts.

For example:

▷ Appendix A-02, R-04.3

In this example, the unique identifier tells us that we're in an appendix (Appendix A, which happens to be our combat appendix), and on the second page or info set, which in this case means the second combat of the appendix.

None of that is new, but now we're adding the round number (round 4), plus a parallel point in that round (the 3rd variant of what could happen in this round, based on the events of prior rounds).

These text parts can appear chronologically, ordered by round number and round variants. In the example below, there are three separate text parts for round 2, each of which is a numbered variant representing a different enemy tactic. Each variant in the example is a consequence of what happened in round 1.

▷ Appendix A-02, R-01.1

▷ Appendix A-02, R-02.1

▷ Appendix A-02, R-02.2

▷ Appendix A-02, R-02.3

▷ Appendix A-02, R-03.1

▷ Appendix A-02, R-04.1

▷ Appendix A-02, R-04.2

▷ Appendix A-02, R-05.1

You don't have to use round-based numbering on your text parts in narrative sets, but it can be particularly useful when initially structuring the combat. Like the Basic Order method of diagramming text parts discussed in chapter 2, this can help you keep track of every option and route during creation, even if you rename the identifiers later.

Initial Information

A combat writeup in the form of a narrative set starts with important initial information. This includes some description of the terrain and the antagonists, some initial information of what

would appear in usage data for a traditional set, as well as some of the antagonists' defensive numbers.

Because most of the instructions for running antagonists are going to appear in round-by-round text parts later, only the instructions and defenses needed up front are placed in the "initial information" text part.

Although a narrative set may have a small stat block at its outset, it probably looks nothing like the familiar stat blocks used in the *Monster Manual*. The attack rolls and tactics are omitted here; only the creature's hit points and defenses need to appear at the outset.

▷ Appendix A-02, R-01.0

You have begun a combat with a maddened fomorian.

You are in a roughly-circular chamber, about 50 feet in diameter. The ceiling is 15 feet high.

This Huge giant has a 14 Armor Class and 149 hit points. It has the following saving throw modifiers: STR (+6), DEX (+0), CON (+6), INT (-1), WIS (+2), CHA (-2). If you reduce the maddened fomorian to 0 hit points at any time in the coming combat, ignore further prompts within the appendix; go immediately to Part 319.

Roll initiative for yourself. The maddened fomorian has a pre-rolled initiative result of 4. On the maddened fomorian's first turn, go to Appendix A-02, R-01.1 to process its first action.

Round-by-Round Action

The text parts in narrative sets sometimes batch rounds of combat together in one part; they need not lay out each round as a separate text part. For example, after text parts that handle a foe's un-rechargeable features, protective spellcasting, potion-drinking, and other one-use preliminary actions, a single text part might lay out the foe's normal round-to-round attacks, to be repeated until combat ends. Sometimes these text parts add variety, like substituting a dragon's breath weapon each time it recharges.

Note that this description does not include every possible combat scenario. While it may allow more control of the combat round-by-round than a traditional set writeup, you can never write enough text parts to cover everything that could happen in the battle. The player may still be required to self-moderate to a significant degree.

▷ Appendix A-02, R-03.1

With its Curse of the Evil Eye *expended, the maddened fomorian will use Multiattack to apply one use of its regular* Evil Eye *trait and a greatclub attack on each of its turns.*

- *Greatclub.* Melee Weapon Attack: *+9 to hit, reach 15 ft., one target.* Hit: *19 (3d8 + 6) bludgeoning damage.*
- *Evil Eye. Magically force seen protagonist to make DC 14 Charisma save. Failure = 27 (6d8) psychic damage. Success = half damage.*

If the maddened fomorian cannot see the protagonist, it will instead attempt two greatclub attacks.

Continue this combat round-by-round to its conclusion. If you are reduced to 0 hit points, go to Part 450. If you reduce the maddened fomorian to 0 hit points, go to Part 319.

Advantages

The primary advantage of narrative sets is that they don't risk clearly identifying the creature or proving too much metadata by referring the player to the *Monster Manual* or another official sourcebook. They also mitigate the risk of over-copying and offending the guidelines of the Dungeon Masters Guild.

Additionally, these text parts can be interspersed with normal text parts in the same chapter, without having to direct the player into an appendix. However, the appendix option is still recommended to avoid distractions and inadvertent metadata. Of additional advantage,

keeping the whole combat in an appendix means the player doesn't have to skip around in the product while also trying to track combat data.

Notation Efficiencies

Consider implementing these antagonist-affecting tricks to make your combats run more smoothly.

Abridge Stats

Particularly in traditional sets, don't include any of the enemies' characteristics or traits that are irrelevant. For example, it is almost never useful to note a monster's alignment. Likewise, a special trait that benefits the monster when it is adjacent to its allies should be cut from the stat block if the monster is alone. The kruthik hive lord example above includes its Pack Tactics special trait only because of the option for additional adult kruthiks to appear alongside it.

Premeditate Decisions

Adventures run smoother if most Dungeon Master decisions are automated or pre-determined. The player should only self-moderate when absolutely necessary, a fact that suggests you should make important decisions ahead of time.

This technique applies mostly to an antagonist's use of limited powers. If a creature's most powerful attack has a recharge roll, it will probably use that power whenever it is ready. However, it is more difficult for the player to decide when the antagonist resorts to using a healing potion or which tactics it prefers when multiple options are equally likely to succeed.

For best results, pre-make as many of these decisions as you can without overwhelming the player. This premeditation is more easily facilitated by notating combat in narrative sets. In traditional sets, making too many decisions ahead of time will bloat your usage data to a point where the player will forget the instructions in the heat of battle.

Pre-Roll

The fewer rolls the player must make on behalf of antagonists (or supporting characters), the better.

For example, you can pre-roll a monster's initiative and put the result in the combat writeup. Listing the result takes up no more space than listing a bonus, and it keeps the player from having to make yet one more roll. However, not all roll types work so efficiently. This technique is easiest to apply in combat-adjacent text parts and in combat writeups noted as narrative sets.

You can also use pre-rolling to put your thumb on the scale of combat outcomes. By dictating a few roll results, you can make the monsters act faster or hit harder, or you can make them weaker.

Alternately, you can regulate extremes by dictating average roll results. This system is already in use in 5th Edition Dungeons & Dragons in the form of average damage mechanics. *Monster Manual* stat blocks give Dungeon Masters the option to use average damage or to roll damage. These damage notations appear as a flat number followed by a die set in parentheses, like "16 (2d6 + 9) slashing damage" or "88 (16d10) lightning damage." If you "pre-roll" average results, on damage rolls or other roll types, you can use the same notation. You can even give the player the option to use the stated result or to roll, selecting this mode of difficulty increase at the start of the adventure.

Maps

If your combat writeup uses a map, mark the starting locations of all the actors. However, make these marks subtle so they're not distracting once the combat begins. A small or a light marking is best.

Combat-Adjacent Text Parts

This section talks about the text parts leading into combat, and those parts routing the player out of combat, either mid-battle or at the fight's conclusion. Pre-combat text parts are those that directly impact the conflict. Mid-combat and post-combat text parts are prompted to from within the combat writeup, leading to events that trigger during or after the battle. Post-combat outcomes only occur at the end.

Pre-Combat Phases

This option exists primarily to give effect to surprise and ranged combat tactics. It also allows for combat to be processed round-by-round so that you can narrate various events or allow a villain the chance to monologue as the combat unfolds.

Surprise

You can use a pre-combat text part to check for surprise. (You can instead insert surprise calculations into a combat writeup, but the particulars tend to take up too much space to make that practical.)

When creatures are attempting to be sneaky, you can determine that the scenario gives the protagonist or the antagonists a chance to be surprised by one another. Surprise is a (surprisingly) complex mechanic to employ in a single-player interactive adventure. Remember that it only happens when you decide that conditions are right for it.

For foes to be surprised, the protagonist must make a Dexterity (Stealth) ability check. The result is compared to the passive Wisdom (Perception) scores among the antagonists. Those antagonists whose scores are met or exceeded by the roll are surprised.

To be surprised by the antagonists, compare the protagonist's passive Wisdom (Perception) score against the foes' rolls of Dexterity (Stealth). The protagonist is surprised if all the foes rolls equal or exceed that passive score. If a protagonist has an ally along, perhaps a ranger's beast companion, it is possible for the ally to be surprised while the protagonist is not, and vice versa.

Finally, remember that it is possible in some scenarios for both sides to check for surprise. This can make the scenario far more complicated, further justifying placing surprise mechanics in a separate pre-combat text part.

Here is an example of a pre-combat text part used to check for surprise. Because the protagonist is off the path and the goblins are waiting in hidden positions, only the goblins get a chance to check for surprise. Note also that these DCs were set by pre-rolling the goblins' Dexterity (Stealth) checks, an efficiency technique described earlier in this chapter.

> **Part 221**
>
> You feel a sense of trepidation as you enter the darkened forest. The path narrows and the trees become thicker, blocking out much of the sunlight. As the wind shifts, the strange smells of the forest waft over you.
>
> *Calculate your passive Wisdom (Perception) score. If that score is 11 or higher, go to Part 292. If it is 10 or lower, go to Part 224.*

Ranged Combat

The ranged phase is so named because ranged combat is the primary function of this pre-combat allowance. However, depending on your wording, the protagonist can use this lead time for other activities. Ranged combat is only the descriptor for this phase because it is so often overlooked in interactive adventures.

Your default monster tactics will probably be little more than moving into melee range and attacking all-out. Melee is the expected mode for

most battles, which leaves ranged characters at a disadvantage.

Particularly if you use battle maps instead of *theater of the mind* systems, you may notice that a typical one-inch grid map that conforms to a single book page creates a very small fighting arena. Unless you are providing a fold-out map or a separate image file that exceeds the size of a page, mapped battles probably begin in very tight quarters, meaning characters that rely on ranged weapons and spells don't get a good chance to make use of their preferred features.

A ranged phase gives the protagonist a chance to make a ranged attack even before initiative is rolled. This text part states the range and instructs the player to track and carry over any damage inflicted for when the combat begins. (You will need to list the target's Armor Class and saving throw modifiers, as well as any resistances, immunities or special traits that might come into play, like Magic Resistance.)

Ranged phase opportunities should be expressed in allowances of attacks, actions, or turns. Because ranged combat is only one of the many activities these options allow, the name for these pre-combat parts is something of a misnomer.

Full Turn

Turns maximize player agency. Anything less than a turn limits the player's options and should only be used when justified by the circumstances.

However, because movement of various kinds is possible, you will need to be mindful of how this might affect distances between foes when the combat begins. Allowing movement can particularly disrupt the starting positions you want to dictate if you are providing a battle map rather than using *theater of the mind* mechanics.

A player may also wish to begin escaping combat, if you allow escape in that scenario, and expect some sort of advantage based on movement in this extra turn. Avoiding a combat at the outset is best handled by a pre-combat gate to bypass it. Once the character has gone beyond such a possibility, any escape options in the combat writeup should not apply to a ranged phase.

Single Action

If you allow an action (but no regular movement, bonus action, or reaction), the protagonist can substitute a spell of the right casting time whether offensive, defensive, or investigative, or may do something else like drink a potion in preparation for battle.

Note that an action cannot be used to simulate a bonus action, so a character could not, for example, cast *shield of faith* in moment. You may therefore wish to vary this option, allowing an action or a bonus action.

Also keep in mind that, unless you state otherwise, an action can be used to Dash. This invokes the complications of movement and starting placement applicable to full turns.

Of additional importance when not allowing the protagonist a full turn, you must specifically allow for an item to be interacted with; you must let the protagonist draw the bow that will be fired or pull out the potion that will be consumed. Because a character's free interaction with an object is allowed as part of a turn, not an action, you must specifically provide it as additional lest the character be stuck with nothing in-hand to use in that moment.

Single Attack

If you allow only a single attack in this phase, the character will be unable to cast spells, move, or perform other actions in that time.

The single-attack option also presumes that the character has a weapon in hand, so the ability to draw a weapon should be stated as additional. Alternately, you might route this ranged phase through a branch that has the protagonist's ranged weapon already in-hand. This option effectively simulates the Ready action, limiting a character to a single attack triggered by stated circumstances.

Here is an example of a ranged phase using the single action option.

▷ Part 292

Your keen senses detect the presence of goblins lying in ambush. You detect them before you are in their close striking range. As you hesitate, you see the ambushers rise from their hiding places, preparing to charge.

You can perform a single action prior to combat beginning. If you need to draw a weapon or another item to perform this action, you may do so.

The goblins, numbered 1 through 4, are all 50 feet away from you. Each has a 15 Armor Class, 7 hit points, and the following saving throw modifiers: STR (-1), DEX (+2), CON (+0), INT (+0), WIS (-1), CHA (-1). If you target the goblin with the glittering headdress (number 4), it instead has 12 hit points and is immune to the charmed and frightened conditions.

When your pre-combat action is resolved, go to Appendix A-09. Note any damage or other lingering effects upon the numbered goblins there.

Duration

Some ranged phases may last more than one round, depending on encounter distances. Enemies might use their own ranged attacks during this phase or might be unable to return fire based on their equipment or other capabilities. These factors can potentially complicate a ranged phase, even to the point where the antagonist can be defeated before proper combat begins.

Gates

You can gate a ranged phase behind a Wisdom (Perception) check to spot a distant enemy or a Wisdom (Insight) check to realize that a creature is already hostile as it approaches. Failure to pass such a roll gate starts the battle in close quarters. By placing the ranged opportunities into combat-adjacent text parts, the combat gate notation doesn't grow too complex with these details. A character that sees the chance to make ranged attacks will eventually get to that close-quarter moment when initiative is rolled. This is where the combat gate notation takes over, and where a less-alert character will have begun the battle.

Bypass

You may want a text part to give the option to entirely avoid a combat using stealth, guile, or other tactics. This is not a pre-combat phase; it is instead simply a text part with a gate, as described in the chapter 3.

Exposition

Pre-combat phases are useful for adding drama to the encounter. Sometimes you'll want to reveal information in the early rounds of combat. Perhaps the main antagonist wants to reveal her plans or her tragic motivations, or she simply wants to goad the protagonist. Alternately, you can dramatically shift the environment or reveal clues as a battle unfolds; perhaps a running battle moves through a dangerous tunnel system rife with traps or into a back room where the hostages are being held, upping the stakes.

Expositions in this style can enhance the storytelling in your adventure, mixing it with the excitement of combat. The typical form of exposition appears in a text part with a monologue or narration. Alongside it will be instructive text that allows the protagonist to attack or cast a spell. These might appear as a series of text parts in similar form, allowing the antagonist to reveal a few sentences of information between each round.

Although it is normally a pre-combat device, expositive moments can also appear after the combat begins, using devices described in this chapter. (See Mid-Combat Events.)

Here is an example of exposition used in a pre-combat text part.

▷ PART 224

As you stroll blithely down the forest path, three black arrows come whizzing at you from the underbrush.

These attacks are aimed at you. They hit Armor Class 17, 17, and 8, respectively. Each hit inflicts 5 (1d6 + 2) piercing damage. Because you are surprised, you cannot use reactions in response to these attacks. If you are reduced to 0 hit points, go to Part 450. Otherwise, read on.

From behind a tree, a tall goblin appears wearing a glittering headdress. It speaks sternly, in Common, "This fate befalls all who would defile our shrines and sacred caves! Kill this one in the name of the Bitter Eye!" Three more goblins materialize out of the underbrush, eager to do their leader's bidding.

Go to Appendix A-09.

A couple of things are going on here to make note of. First, it is the *antagonist's* ranged phase being facilitated, not the protagonist's, because the protagonist was surprised. Second, if the character survives, it does so with new knowledge of the goblins' motivations and the name of their leader. This expositional dialogue would not have been possible by routing the player directly into a combat writeup.

TRACKING SUCCESS

Combat-adjacent text parts that occur interspersed with chances to attack or cast spells have immersion-breaking potential. If you fail to account for the fact that the antagonist might die, perhaps from an arrow's critical hit or a powerful spell, you can wind up with dialogue or developments nonsensically produced by a dead antagonist.

To avoid this paradox, remember that any chance the protagonist has to injure or otherwise affect an antagonist might lead to immediate victory rather than decrementing what you think is the antagonist's large number of hit points. Whenever such a chance is presented, always list an alternate prompt for the event of the antagonist's demise. Here is an example of such instructive text.

If the total damage you have inflicted upon the knight is 154 or more, go to Part 031. Otherwise, continue the battle by going to Appendix 053.

MID-COMBAT EVENTS

For various reasons, you may wish to supply intervening events or opportunities around and among the rounds of battle. For these moments, consider using mid-combat events.

Mid-combat events (and post-combat outcomes) must have notation that the player can remember and reference during a combat. When battle begins, your player will normally step away from the realm of your concise control, rolling dice and noting hit point losses round-by-round until the fight is done, without any further reference to your text. Unless you strongly signal when (and how) a mid-combat event occurs, the player is likely to lose track of this special instruction. This is particularly true if you have listed multiple lines of tactical instructions and unusual outcome prompts. Therefore, use mid-combat events sparingly and carefully, and apply notation that is hard to forget.

Consider also the complexity and likelihood of your triggers. Don't forget to inform your player of the precise condition under which a mid-combat event occurs. Also be mindful of triggers that may never occur. For example, an event that occurs "at the start of the third round" or "when the priestess is reduced below half hit points" might never occur if the combat ends in the second round or the priestess gets killed outright. If the mid-combat event is critical to you story but its trigger is tenuous, consider recasting it as a pre-combat phase or a post-combat outcome.

Examples

Sometimes, a battle can change dramatically part-way through. For example, a fight in a sinking ship might, after the third round of battle, find the combatants dramatically hampered by waist-deep water. An antagonist might take a healing potion, try to flee, or otherwise change tactics if reduced to half or fewer hit points.

In the usage data of a combat writeup, you can seed prompts that take effect under certain circumstances. Events like these need a trigger, a contingent phrase in the form of *"If X condition occurs, then Y event occurs."* Try to keep these prompts simple and easy to remember. Because the reader is no longer looking at your instructive text while running the battle, be aware that complex conditions might be forgotten until the player completes the battle and returns to reading text parts.

Here are a few examples of instructive text that would appear in the combat writeup's usage data.

If you incapacitate the hobgoblin outrider or reduce it to 0 hit points in three or fewer rounds, you can push off from the dock and escape the creature's slower allies, going to Part 199. If the hobgoblin outrider is above 0 hit points and is not incapacitated at the start of the fourth round, two additional hobgoblins join the fray. Each has the same statistics as the outrider. When this happens, you will not be able to escape until the combat is over.

If this battle lasts longer than two rounds, the rising water turns the entire map into difficult terrain for the third and later rounds.

If you reduce the darkling queen to 40 or fewer hit points without killing her, she will use her next action to cast dimension door *and escape to an area you cannot see. If you are unable to prevent this action, the combat ends early; go to Part 033. Otherwise, fight on.*

If the battle reaches the fourth round, the dragon will say something in Draconic on its turn. If you understand that language, go to Part 319 at that time. (Part 319 will provide a translation and then return you to this appendix page to continue the battle.)

Post-Combat Outcomes

Combats resemble complex gates because they invoke multiple rolls and features, and they can halt the protagonist's progress through the story. However, combats are not gates; they have different purposes and functions. Success in combat can feel like bypassing a gate, but in fact every combat is passed in one way or another. Following a combat, the player will always progress further, even if it is only to reach a brief text part that describes the protagonist's death.

All combats route the player into one of three possible outcomes: success, escape, or failure. The conditions for these outcomes, and the prompts to them, appear in the usage data of a traditional set or in the initial information text part of a narrative set. Alternately, a narrative set will re-present them in each text part as the combat unfolds.

If you use a mixed format or one of your own design, be sure to place these prompts prominently, where the player will not have to search for them.

Success

The prompt for succeeding should be easy to manage. Consider these points for clean transitioning between the combat writeup and the text parts that will continue the story.

Define Success

Avoid nebulous phrases such as, "if you win the combat," unless you have defined what winning means in your playbook. The trigger for success should be as succinct as possible and should

include as many possible outcomes as are reasonable to contemplate.

- ***Success:*** *If you kill the Baron or reduce him to 0 hit points at any time in this combat, ignore further instructions and go to Part 311.*

One Success is Best

Try to avoid cluttering your usage data with multiple or complex success outcomes. For example, try not to use two prompts to route the protagonist into different text parts based on how quickly the combat unfolded or whether a prerequisite event occurred earlier in the story. Particularly avoid this if your usage data included mid-combat events or tactical instructions for the antagonists. Instead, wait until the next text part; after routing through the success prompt, the resulting text part can be a short one that gates the protagonist based on such factors.

When you must use multiple success options, probably because the triggers for success are different, remember to prioritize these and write them as mutually exclusive of one another to avoid confusion. For example, the following option set is for a duel where success triggers from "defeating" the foe or disarming him.

- ***Success:*** *If you kill the Baron or reduce him to 0 hit points at any time in this combat, ignore further instructions and go to Part 311.*
- ***Success:*** *If you disarm the Baron according to the terms of the duel, and the Baron still has 1 or more hit points, go to Part 324.*

Note that the second option is written to be usable only if the first is not achieved. Otherwise, a character with the Disarming Attack maneuver could both disarm and kill the Baron in one roll, leaving the player uncertain as to which option to pick.

Treasure

Remember that many players will be very interested in taking antagonists' weapons and pocket money after a fight. While you don't need to allow this to occur in every instance, don't fail to consider what the protagonist has time to pick up after the battle. Even a monster-quality weapon (one with no resale value) can be of use to a character that didn't bring a better weapon on the adventure.

When noting loot, you might efficiently include it in a combat writeup that isn't already too cluttered. However, it is more likely that a post-fight looting moment works better as a later text part.

Escape

The escape prompt triggers from a mid-combat event. It typically has prerequisites, like this:

> *In the third or later round of combat, you can attempt an escape action using the systems defined in the playbook. If you succeed, go immediately to Part 318. Otherwise, continue the combat.*

Writing for the protagonist's escape requires you to decide between "failing forward" or "failing backward." Such failure states can be either literal or figurative. Fleeing from a guardian that blocks a tunnel could result in the protagonist running past it (failing forward) or running back (failing backward). However, a combat might instead have some other goal, like delaying the king's pursuers, that can be achieved by fleeing after four rounds (failing forward) or failed by fleeing within the first three rounds (failing backward).

Failing Forward

An option to fail forward doesn't require anything extra when "forward" is a literal, directional factor. The protagonist simply moves on as though the battle was won. For some reason, the antagonists are unable or unwilling to pursue the fight. The player avoids the risks of a longer battle but loses the chance to loot fallen foes or recover spent arrows.

If the combat's goals are not literally directional, failing forward probably means the protagonist fled after achieving some goal, something less than killing every antagonist on the field. Perhaps the Duke's brother was killed as intended, and the protagonist doesn't want to risk a protracted fight against the remaining guards. Failing forward in these circumstances probably requires more parsing, either with different escape options or perhaps a later event gate that, for example, simply asks if the Duke's brother was killed in that fight (rather than checking for whether the protagonist "succeeded" in the battle).

Failing Backward

The player's route through the story is more dramatically affected by failing backward. The fleeing outcome probably resembles the combat's failure outcome, except that the protagonist survives. If you allow this to occur, you will need to create a new approach to the scenario or a way to bypass it.

Of foremost importance is whether the battle must be fought again. Can the protagonist rest up and return to the fray? If so, will the antagonists also be healed? Will their dead members be brought back to life? There is no way to accurately guess the antagonists' post-combat state of health, meaning that routing the player back through the same combat requires some kind of explanation as to how the bugbear's hit points have returned, how its dead goblin minions were cleared away and replaced, etc.

These justifications can become so convoluted and irrational as to suggest that you not allow a character to refight the battle. Instead, finding a way around that conflict is preferred. Because repeating the battle is discouraged, your decision about failing forward of failing backward should instead focus on the stakes of the conflict.

A backward-failing escape option should come with a tangible penalty. It might be a setback in the quest, the loss of time and treasure, or some other penalty that the player can feel.

Because failing backward should require an alternate route and a tangible penalty, the usual approach is to route the protagonist through an arduous or costly journey before continuing on the quest. For example, the character leaps off the ferry to avoid a battle and is then swept down the coast by currents. The protagonist must now journey back through the wilderness to get to the destination port, fighting or sneaking past gnoll tribes along the way.

Failure

Victory is the expected outcome of combats in Dungeons & Dragons. A combat scenario that reliably kills the player characters is considered too hard, counter to the game's design. Although some degree of risk is necessary to challenge the player characters and to justify their rewards, rarely will a retreat be necessary and rarely will a party member die. However, a solo protagonist's chance at survival is much more tenuous. Because failure in combat is more likely, there are particular complexities to consider in single-player adventures.

Conditions

Failure usually means the protagonist is reduced to 0 hit points. It can also mean instant death from massive damage or automatic death imposed by exhaustion, spells, or other game effects.

Reaching 0 Hit Points

A player character reduced to 0 hit points normally gets to make death saving throws in an effort to stabilize. However, you must first decide whether stabilization is possible in the particular encounter.

When adventuring alone, stabilization is unlikely. With no allies to defend the unconscious protagonist, an intelligent enemy will perform a *coup de grâce* to ensure death; each of its attacks now have advantage, automatically count as

critical hits (potentially inflicting instant death), and automatically impose a failed death save. An unintelligent monster is likely to begin feasting on the protagonist's flesh, to the same ends. Usually, the combat writeup's "failure" option will direct the player to a (dead end) text part that describes the protagonist's demise.

Stabilizing

Sometimes, reaching 0 hit points is not a death sentence. Perhaps the bandits only want the gold and don't care if the protagonist survives. Perhaps the feral bull was only interested in a fast-moving target and has no interest in trampling the protagonist's limp body. Perhaps the antagonists want to capture the protagonist alive and choose to administer bandages or spells to ensure this outcome.

Left alone, a player character that is at 0 hit points can make death saving throws as normal. However, be sure to condition this option on the protagonist being alive. Dead characters don't stabilize. This may require you to provide two failure options in the combat writeup. Alternately, the text part lead to by the writeups failure option could itself gate out dead characters before allowing saving throws.

You have been defeated by the Blue Leopard, your body slashed and mangled by its claws.

- *If you were reduced to 0 hit points without being killed outright, you can attempt death saving throws to recover. If you stabilize, continue your adventure at Part 606. Add 1d4 x 20 Interval Points to your total unless a death saving throw result of 20 (or some feature or magic you possess) allowed you to recover instantly.*
- *If you were killed outright during the battle or you die from failed death saves, go to Part 619.*

Dying

Because a solo adventurer otherwise has no friends to arrange a resurrection, consider these "fairness" tools to prevent death from completely ending the protagonist's story.

Failure. As a consequence of death, the protagonist fails the adventure. Any penalty short of failing the quest, except for extremely unusual story purposes, creates a game without consequence, where success and failure are immaterial. This means that a text part describing the character's death is a dead end, even if it allows resurrection.

Resurrection. We recommend that you allow the player character to be found and resurrected after death in most circumstances, with costs as discussed below. Death is rarely final in Dungeons & Dragons, and to do otherwise is to penalize solo play too much.

In the text part attached to the combat writeup's failure option, you can describe the events that led to the protagonist's return to life, and the costs associated. These factors determine the costs to return from the dead.

Costs. Returning from death is never free. Even an allied spellcaster must pay the material components of the spell. The cost is based on the magic necessary, which in turn depends on the facts of the protagonist's death and the nature of the corpse's recovery.

It is unlikely that the protagonist will be administered to quickly enough for a *revivify* spell, unless adventuring with non-player character allies. A *raise dead* spell is more likely, but certain conditions, like the loss of limbs or a recovery that took longer than 10 days, necessitate a *resurrection* spell. In the case of the protagonist' body being completely destroyed or its being converted to undeath, a *true resurrection* is the only cure.

Each of these spells lists its component cost in the *Player's Handbook*. You decide if additional fees are necessary for the spellcasting service based on the character's possible allies, ties to local temples, or other factors. A character that cannot pay the cost out of ready coins (or

diamonds carried for that purpose) must do so by selling possessions.

Debts. If selling possessions does not suffice, you can impose a debt upon the player character. First, the protagonist loses all wealth and magic items, the value of which is subtracted from the debt. Future earnings must go to pay back whatever person or organization is responsible for the protagonist's return to life until the debt is paid.

Since the adventure is effectively over, imposing a debt requires the player to be willing to track these figures in the next adventure. This is easier to do in a continuing adventure path, when you can actually identify and recur the supporting characters to whom the debt is owed. You can even use event gates to write debt-specific scenes in future adventures where "collectors" visit to remind the protagonist of the debt.

Balancing Combat

As the creator of an adventure, you take on many of the functions of a Dungeon Master. This includes the responsibility to make interesting challenges and to set them at appropriate difficulty levels.

For combats, you must be mindful of the peculiarities of this medium and how a lone character changes the dynamics of the game. Chapter 6 addresses some of the ways you can manage a lone character's vulnerabilities, but the bulk of that management takes place here, during the designing process.

Antagonists

A character adventuring alone has no margin for error. Therefore, the foes you select need careful consideration, particularly to address the fact that the protagonist faces them without the aid of an entire party.

Challenge Rating

The Dungeons & Dragons Roleplaying Game has a system for rating challenges, but it makes a poor yardstick for gauging the difficulty of single-player combats. The Challenge Rating system can provide a useable starting point, but it is inadequate to fully measure single-player adventure challenges for two reasons.

First and foremost, the system is directed at parties of multiple adventurers. Certain creature traits, particularly those that incapacitate a single character—just a fraction of a party's fighting force—are game-ending powers when facing a lone protagonist. Other factors, particularly extremes of hit points or Armor Class, innate defenses, resistant or immunity to non-magical weapon damage, and the like, are balanced against the assumption of a full party. A group of adventurers is likely to have a variety of tools to meet challenges that are immune to one particular tool or another. If an antagonist is resistant to the smaller range of features available to a lone adventurer, the difficulty of the encounter spikes dramatically.

The second way that the Challenge Rating system fails is that, for balance purposes, it assumes characters meet every encounter completely fresh, with all of their various resources and features available. A weakened party can choose to withdraw and find a place to camp for a long rest. The party is not expected to rest before every fight, but it can usually do so if it must. At the very least, it has a Dungeon Master to referee further interactions if the party cannot withdraw. Conversely, in single-player adventures, the placement of long rests relative to combats is dictated by the story's creator. A player usually cannot withdraw from the flow of the story to take a long rest; this storytelling medium is insufficiently flexible to insert major events like this.

The Challenge Rating of antagonists should therefore earn very little consideration in the course of balancing combat gates.

Enemy Damage

One of the most impactful components of an enemy's stat block is the breadth of its damage capacity. If all of an enemy's attacks hit and then roll unfortunately-high damage results, the adventure can end based on some very bad luck. Even if a creature has only one attack, having a large damage range can be instantly lethal in the case of a critical hit. While a certain degree of luck is desirable, truly-high damage spikes are far deadlier in a single-player scenario than in a normal game. You should therefore select and design enemies being mindful of the maximum damage they can inflict each round.

In order to reign in outlying damage results, consider using average damage results for antagonists' attacks. These numbers are already listed in the *Monster Manual*, making them very easy to implement. You can omit the dice from monsters' stat blocks, or you can include them for players that want to use them for a more "hardcore" playing experience.

Incapacitations

Spells and special traits that can incapacitate the protagonist should be avoided, even if those effects call for easy (or multiple) saving throws. Rather than just being difficult, there is a serious risk that a bad roll or two with such effects will end the adventure, no matter how tough the character or smartly it is played.

Generally, this means leaving *hold person* off the enemy cleric's spell list. Conditions are bad news for single players, creating situations that immediately spiral out of control. Effects that inflict blinded, frightened, or poisoned are incredibly dangerous. Effects that impose incapacitated, paralyzed, petrified, restrained, stunned, and unconscious are essentially "save-or-die" powers in this environment.

If you particularly want to use a monster that could normally incapacitate a player character with a single roll, you might simply excise that power from the stat block. For example, if you want to use a rampaging basilisk, you can alter it for use in the single-player environment, perhaps reasoning that the creature is rampaging because it lost its Petrifying Gaze to old age, or had its eyes clawed out in a battle with another monster.

Number of Enemies

One of the problems inherent to the challenge rating system is the difficulty of rating an encounter's strength when adjusting the number of monsters involved. There are several important factors to be aware of, some in the protagonist's favor and some not.

First, dividing the encounter's strength into more (weaker) enemies, rather than fewer (tougher) enemies requires the player character to use more attacks to bring down the foes. Each killing strike against a weaker foe wastes the damage inflicted in excess of that enemy's hit points. More monsters also fill the terrain more effectively, making it harder for the character to flee or to stay hidden in light of the enemies' many Wisdom (Perception) checks.

Second, placing all of an encounter's strength into a single monster makes the scenario more vulnerable to particular character features that might easily negate the threat. For example, a flying creature could easily overcome a pair of carrion crawlers by staying above their reach. However, a carrion crawler and a few hidden piercers among the stalactites is a harder matchup to steamroll. A trait that effectively negates one monster's threat might not work as well on others.

Third, try to remain aware of common features, particularly those at the pinnacle of character capabilities within your adventure's level range. These can vary dramatically in effectiveness based on how many foes are faced at a given time.

Types of Enemies

Encounters should employ monsters of different types. A single type of monster is prone to creating a consistent advantage or disadvantage for certain characters, one that lasts for the entire adventure. For example, an adventure stocked entirely with undead might give a cleric too easy a time. A yuan-ti pureblood might skate through an adventure where the majority of monsters' attacks inflict poison damage or the poisoned condition. A creature resistant to the charmed condition might not fear the fey.

Mitigating Threats

You can mitigate the risk of intemperate dice in several ways. Bad luck should not be the end of the adventure. Instead, the player should feel that the adventure afforded decision-based chances to succeed and rewarded good choices made along the way, decisions like whether or not to drink a healing potion after the previous battle.

The subtlest approach is to apply a non-lethal outcome if a combat is failed; if the monsters disable the protagonist but do not outright kill it. The outcome of losing the overly-difficult combat is that the protagonist has another chance to live, perhaps rolling death saves, getting captured for ransom, or otherwise suffering setbacks that are less than lethal.

You can also add other circumstances, magic items, friendly creatures, or even interactive rules to protect against death by a tragic outlier. While you should endeavor to avoid changing the balance of combat with such measures, you can make certain combats lets risky—less prone to swingy die results—by having an effect that will, under the right circumstance, negate a bad saving throw or leave a character with 1 hit point after an attack instead of 0. Further possibilities like these are discussed in the next chapter.

Supporting Characters

The easiest and most-affective way to compensate for the solitude of the protagonist is to include creatures or characters that fight as allies. Perhaps the protagonist is adventuring with a non-player character companion or even in an entire party of non-player character adventurers.

These scenarios are tricky. You should avoid making the player control non-player characters in battle. Each ally that the player must control in combat ratchets up the complexity of the task. Controlling the protagonist, additional allies, and all the opponents in a battle is almost certainly too much to ask of your player; studying each participant's features and tactics will probably take far more time than the combat itself. However, that does not mean that allies should be avoided. They still make wonderful tools for mitigating the risks of adventuring alone. Allies can easily be used without adding complexity.

The best way to use allies in a battle is to separate the protagonist into its own individual combat, facing off against the most interesting of the foes. Narrate the allies into their own combats that occur at the same time. This allows you to run a combat with just the player character, narrating the results of the other contemporaneous fighting.

If the player character wins the fight within a certain number of rounds, narrate the character as coming to the aid of the allies and finishing their separate combats. If the battle goes longer than a set number of rounds, the reverse can happen, with the allies narratively finishing the battle by coming to the protagonist's aid. And, if the player character is reduced to 0 hit points during its fight, you have the freedom to continue the story since the allies can win their separate fights and revive the protagonist after the dust settles.

Stage and Scene

The protagonist's surroundings can deeply affect the course of a battle, as can the number and nature of fights that have already occurred in that adventuring day.

Environments

Be mindful to change the terrain from time to time, presenting a variety of environments in your combat writeups. Identical surroundings can be boring and will benefit or penalize certain character types too much.

For example, if all encounters are in lightless chambers, a gloom stalker ranger is forever invisible. Or if all the encounters take place in bright daylight, characters with the Sunlight Sensitivity trait are always suffering that weakness. Of particular importance to track, games entirely in tight tunnels make flying characters lose their major advantage.

Resources

The protagonist has limited hit points, and limited uses of features that refresh after a rest. Other limits, like reserves of ammunition or healing potions, can also impact how difficult a combat is based on its proximity to the previous resting point or marketplace.

As a general rule, expect a character to *safely* fight one or two times between each short rest. At three or four combats between short rests, the character is probably low on hit points and other resources and may have exhausted any healing potions or other single-use recovery items.

Particularly in the case of your adventure's final combat, make sure the protagonist has had a long rest immediately before it, or no more than one fight prior to it. In this way, you can afford to make the final combat challenging with the knowledge that the character probably hasn't wasted too many resources already.

The number of combats a character can endure between rests varies to some degree. Different classes refresh their rest-recovery powers at different intervals (short vs. long rests). Some classes have spells or features that allow for in-combat or between-combat healing. Adjusting for these resources' recovery rates is difficult, requiring extensive playtesting of different classes.

CHAPTER FIVE

WRITING

"No, no! The adventures first, explanations take such a dreadful time."

- Lewis Carroll

YOUR SCAFFOLDS DESCRIBE THE STORY'S EVENTS and environment with placeholder text, but this is not the finished product. Scaffolds need novel-like writing to cover their bare bones, prose that will engage the reader, creating tension and a sense of excitement.

In a normal game of DUNGEONS & DRAGONS, a Dungeon Master supplies most of the story, narrating the events. To assist this process, some standard adventures write area introductions in boxed text to be read aloud. But in a single-player medium, *everything* narrative is "boxed" text; the whole adventure needs to be written out in full.

WRITING SUMMARY

This chapter covers the following topics.

- ***Text Parts.*** Converting scaffolds into fully-written sequences of text parts and instructions for the various components of complete text parts.
- ***Metaknowledge.*** Writing in ways that prevent giving the reader too much information about the story or the underlying mechanics of routing.
- ***The Protagonist.*** How to write about a completely-unknown character and how to avoid common pitfalls in the process.

TEXT PARTS

The story in your single-player adventure will look more like a novel than a standard adventure module. Simultaneously, its prose must provide all the elements that a Dungeon Master would otherwise narrate. Thus, the focus of this section is upon narrative and instructive text.

NARRATIVE TEXT

Narrative text is where your writing skills come into play. It is the primary element of your text parts and constitutes the majority of your adventure's writing.

CONVERT SCAFFOLDS

Like the bones of a creature you are building from scratch, your naked scaffolds need covering with the flesh of your narrative text.

Here again is the sample scaffold from chapter 1, with a conversion example.

WITH PROMPTS ADDED (VERSION 3)

Part 01-007: river crossing
You walk toward the river bank
You hear your pursuers closing in behind

- *To steal a boat for crossing, go to* ***Part 01-008: far bank.***
- *To swim the river, go to* ***Part 01-023: wet arrival.***

Part 01-008: far bank
You reach the other bank, dodging arrows
You run into the trees

SCAFFOLDS CONVERTED (VERSION 4)

Part 01-007: river crossing

You walk quickly toward the river, staying to the shadows as much as possible. You wonder how long it will take the guards to notice your absence.

Your question is soon answered by a distant shout from the camp behind you. Your heart leaps and you sprint down to the shore where you find a pair of old wooden rowboats beached near the fast-moving water. The sounds of your pursuers are growing louder.

- *To steal a boat for crossing, go to* ***Part 01-008: far bank.***
- *To swim the river, go to* ***Part 01-023: wet arrival.***

Part 01-008: far bank

You push one of the rowboats into the river, diving in as the current pulls the old boat downstream. In the dim moonlight, you see the guards reach the river and begin searching. You've nearly reached the far shore when your boat is spotted. Arrows start to rain down around you. You leap the last few feet to dry land and run for the trees. Arrows strike a nearby trunk as you plunge into the cover of the tree line, finally out of reach of your pursuers.

MATCH YOUR FORKS

If, as you replace scaffolds with narrative text, you reach a fork that creates too few branches to satisfy the narrative you are writing, you will need to fix this problem.

You must either rewrite the narrative text to narrow or redirect the focus of the story into the branches you have scaffolded, or you must go back to the scaffolding process to create new branches. The first is preferable at this stage, since new routes call for new rounds of testing and can require too much additional labor.

INCLUDE BOTH FUNCTIONS

Your narrative text has two fundamental functions, revelation and inquiry. It does these things simply by describing the environment and actions taking place therein.

Narrative text's first function is to reveal the results of a prior prompt. For example, the character has taken the left-hand tunnel described in the last prompt. In the current prompt, the narrative text describes the tunnel and what waits at its end, thus revealing the results of choosing to turn left.

Just as importantly, narrative text sets the stage for player agency, foreshadowing the decisions the player must engage with in the options. It leads naturally to the inquiry, the moment when you ask the player, "what do you do?"

HOW TO WRITE

Following are a few guidelines for how to write your narrative text.

PROPER FORM

The form of your narrative text is second-person present-tense.

Second person perspective is uncommon in novels but expected in single-player adventures. It is characterized by such second-person pronouns as *you*, *yours*, and *yourself.* Address the reader ("you") directly, as the protagonist in your writing. This is a powerful tool for immersion.

For the same reason, write your narrative text in the present tense. Present tense implies an immediacy (in time and location), whereas past tense takes the reader back a step to observe events from a distance.

Although present tense is preferred, past tense can still have a place in adventures; it can be useful when describing past events, perhaps when writing a flashback.

Describe One Thing

With all the action you are sure to be writing, it can be easy to gloss over the environment and the interesting objects within it. This can lead to a bland narrative.

As a guideline, make sure to call out one interesting feature of the environment at every large text part. If possible, describe something with a sense other than sight. A single interesting feature, particularly one that engages the other senses, is often enough to enliven the world without overwhelming the reader.

The one-description guideline also serves as a key to help players remember locations. This is particularly important in locational mapping, when players are often asked if this is their first visit to an area. Without a distinctive feature to the area, it can be hard for players to answer this question accurately.

Keep it Short

Rich descriptions are important, but they should be kept short. Too much detail in the environment can overwrite what the player is already imagining and reduce immersion rather than enhancing it.

Another drawback to over-describing is that players will fixate on details you can't anticipate and will want to interact with them. Limiting the interactable things around the protagonist is one of your most important tools for keeping players on track and minimizing the number of leaves and branches you have to build out from each scene. If you write a detail that interests the reader and then fail to allow interaction with it, your adventure will feel unnecessarily constrained.

Short descriptions are also best when it is battle you are describing, rather than the environment; less is more when it comes to writing, particularly with action scenes.

The maximum amount of text your players want to digest in one text part is about 150 words. You should rarely exceed that number. Even in an action scene, you can use all the tools of this section in text parts of 75 words or less.

Seed Clues

Narrative prose need not be a mere layer of gloss. You can incorporate important clues that will matter later in the story. A player who diligently absorbs the narrative might be better equipped to make decisions later. For example, knowing that you need to go south to reach your destination can help you determine which path to take at a crossroads.

However, be aware that players sometimes ignore narrative text altogether. Most stories of this nature can be navigated by reading just the options and thereby extrapolating a general impression of the story. Players do this when they don't feel engaged with the story, when they feel excited or rushed to get through something, or when faced with a wall of text that doesn't promise to be worth reading. For this reason, it is a good idea to avoid making narrative text-based clues necessary to the later completion of an adventure.

Writing Well

The skill of writing is not something a Dungeon Master uses in a normal game; running a game combines storytelling and speech, not storytelling and *writing*. Interactive adventures in this medium are different. Without a DM to narrate your adventure, the player must experience it through the prose you write. In this medium, good writing is therefore a necessary element for an excellent adventure, and editing is what makes it good.

Successful writers tend to have imagination, technical proficiency, and practice. Imaginative content captures the reader's attention, while proficiency with the language reduces errors that would distract the reader. With practice, a writer's style improves, allowing more complex ideas to be conveyed with shorter, more-elegant writing.

Fortunately, you don't need to be a great writer to create enjoyable interactive adventures. Unlike reading a novel, playing DUNGEONS & DRAGONS comes with the expectation of sharing the imaginative process. It is a cooperative storytelling experience.

The other ingredients, the technical proficiencies of writing, come with time and study, or they can be borrowed from others who review and correct your writing. You really only need the ingredient of imagination; without a good story, no configuration of words will make the adventure enjoyable.

Interactive adventures do not require a high level of proficiency to write. They are a good medium to practice your writing in, since most of your text will simply narrate the direct action of the protagonist and other actors. Even if your syntax and style are clumsy, if you lack proficiency with your chosen language, there are a few things you can do to accelerate your learning process.

If you are worried about your skill, start writing now! Don't let proficiency concerns get in your way. You have to start somewhere; the sooner you get writing, the sooner you'll get to the level of skill you are seeking. This advice applies if you are a poor writer, or if you are one of the many mediocre (or even great) writers who underestimate their skill level.

INSTRUCTIVE TEXT

Writing instructive text is simple. It doesn't need to capture the reader's imagination, it simply tells the reader what to do. Its greatest challenge is avoiding the problem of ambiguity, which will be addressed in Chapter 6. You don't want your instructive text to have more than one viable interpretation.

OPTIONS

Your options will appear where you have noted forks in your scaffold. Options follow naturally from the narrative text, giving them a precise nature and number.

THE NATURE OF OPTIONS

Options offer the player action or decision-making. They ask a question in the style of, "what do you do?"

In a normal game of DUNGEONS & DRAGONS, this question is essential for the Dungeon Master to ask a player. It transitions the focus of the game from the DM to the player, requiring the player to exercise agency and engage with the story, even if to do nothing or to move away from the story.

TASK AND INTENTION

"What do you do?" is a question that has two parts, checking both "task" and "intention." The DM wants both the action and the goal in order to overcome any ambiguity in the player's response. A stated action can be imagined as playing out very differently based on the player's intentions.

This structure of inquiry is important to be mindful of when writing options for interactive adventures. Ideas conveyed with text are particularly prone to ambiguity. The discordance between an option as stated and the result as provided is usually small. But all too often, an option's resulting text part can make the player question whether the option was misread, or the hyperlink was misdirected. Therefore, whenever possible, options should be worded to include both a task and an intention.

Intention may seem obvious from the text, but it is never as obvious as the writer believes. Ambiguity is hard to perceive by a person who already knows what is meant. Where intention is not necessarily obvious, options should be stated in the "outcome/action" form, first stating the protagonist's goal then the activity to reach it. Here is an example of an option written in the "outcome/action" form.

- *To prevent Maktos from coming aboard, you can push away from the dock. Go to Part 416.*

Sometimes this combination can be conveyed with ability or skill gates. Two dialogue choices with identical text can take different tones if they require a Charisma (Intimidation) check or a Charisma (Persuasion) check. In the two examples below, the first clause of each sentence can be replaced by the syntax of an ability check gate.

- {Charisma (Intimidation) 12} *~~If you wish to frighten club owner~~, you can tell her that cooperating with the authorities is good for her business by going to Part 392.*
- {Charisma (Persuasion) 12} *~~If you wish to build rapport with the club owner~~, you can tell her that cooperating with the authorities is good for her business by going to Part 317.*

Telling people that something is good for them often carries the subtext that the alternative is bad. In the first example, placing the Charisma (Intimidation) gate signals that the option will convey a threat of interfering with business, without having to write it out in natural language.

The Number of Options

When options appear in a text part, they appear in sets of two or more. (A prompt by itself, with no alternatives, is just instructive text.)

Numbers Set by Scaffolds

If you are following the creation process described in this book, you have already determined the number of options while writing forks and adding branches to your scaffolds.

Unfortunately, the process of adding details often illuminates additional options that seem obvious in hindsight. You will frequently want to add new scaffolds at these forking points.

Resist that temptation.

The best thing to do in these cases is to alter narrative text to fit your predetermined options. You are already beyond the scaffolding and initial testing; restructuring now can introduce even more unforeseen problems or necessitate the repetition of your lengthy development process. Re-writing your layer of narrative text is better than redeveloping your underlying structure.

If you do need to add additional options, prompt them into leaves or nodes, or use short branches that bind into existing branches as quickly as possible.

One Open Option

Normally, each set of options has at least one ungated option that players can take if they fail the other gates' ability checks or lack the features or experiences necessary to bypass those other gates. Making sure one option in the set is ungated is a good guideline to avoid accidental ends.

A set of options that are all gated raises a red flag, calling for careful inspection. If you find yourself writing a set of options that are all gated, take time to examine why and how this impacts player routes. This formulation typically applies when the writer perceives that every character will fit at least one gate, but it is easy to overlook some exceptions.

If you anticipate that the protagonist will qualify for one of the gates, no matter what, try to envision how that might fail. Particularly, if the gates are experience-based, consult your diagram to determine if there are any routes to reach this point in the story without having encountered one of those prerequisite events.

Gated option sets that shouldn't worry you are binary positive/negative gates based on a single event. These take the form of "If you have encountered [X event], go to Part 714" and "If you have *not* encountered [X event], go to Part 733." This seems like you are simply leaving one open option, the negative gate, but in fact, by the negative reference to the event, you are preventing the player from choosing that option if the protagonist has encountered X. In this way, a binary set of gated options closely resembles instructive text, with no decision being made by the player.

Metaknowledge

Metaknowledge is information inadvertently revealed to the player through your use of routing tools and metastructure. Because the player infers this information from game systems, something not perceptible to the character, it puts the player in the hard position of having information that the character does not.

Try to avoid conveying metaknowledge because it hurts the play experience. Seeing behind the curtain reduces immersion. Players feel immersion when they can suspend their natural disbelief of the unnatural. Immersion allows players to experience more-realistic feelings in response to events in your game. Restricting metaknowledge is one of the few ways to improve the players' immersion and thus their experiences with your product.

Good players will try to prevent metaknowledge from influencing the choices they make as their characters, but this is not an easy burden to carry. The player already has enough information to keep track of without having to remember what was learned in-character and what is known only to the player. Reducing metaknowledge helps to alleviate this burden.

Controlling Signals

Metaknowledge of events occurs when your tools convey information that should not yet be known or that allow players to accidentally notice information that could be hidden by pagination. Such metaknowledge encourages players to make decisions or take actions they otherwise wouldn't if they didn't have that information.

Providing an option to check for traps, in an adventure where searching has never before been offered as an option, is an example of metaknowledge in the form of a revealed event. It reveals to the player the presence of a trap, which will spring if not found and disarmed.

Hide Keys

When the prerequisites for a gate will forecast the result of using that gate, you can use a bit of obfuscation to prevent metaknowledge.

Let's look again at the example of a trapped door. The options allow the protagonist to use the door, search it for traps, or leave the room. The option to search has a roll gate that forecasts the result and can influence the player's decisions. Even the Difficulty Class of the ability check reveals a lot and can dissuade the player from trying such a difficult task.

- *To leave this room the way you first entered it, go to Part 411.*
- *To open the mysterious door, go to Part 255.*
- {Intelligence (Investigation) 20} *You can search the door for traps. If you succeed, go to Part 011.*

Assuming this isn't a bluff (that there is actually a trap on the door), you can avoid forecasting by hiding your gate in the next text part, presented after the player has committed to a search. (This tool is like the veneers and base rooms used to parse location-based events in locational mapping.)

- *To leave this room the way you first entered it, go to Part 411.*
- *To open the mysterious door, go to Part 255.*
- *To examine the mysterious door more closely* ***add 1 Interval Point*** *and go to Part 216.*

This change does a few things. First, it doesn't talk about traps at all. A player might expect to find some hidden writing that reveals the door's purpose, dust and cobwebs indicating no recent use, or maybe a trap. Offering a prompt for simply examining the door doesn't forecast the risk so strongly.

Second, a cost was applied to the search option. Given a choice of being careful without penalty,

the player will probably always choose caution. However, if there is a cost, hurrying has a quantified advantage.

Third, the roll gate was moved to the next text part, appearing only after the player has committed to that route. The player will not know what kind of check, if any, will be necessary for the search.

The non-narrative text of the next part looks like this:

> *Make a DC 20 Intelligence (Investigation) check. If you succeed, go to Part 011. If you fail this check by more than 5 points, go to Part 202. If you fail this check by 5 or fewer points, choose one of the following options.*
>
> - *To leave this room the way you first entered it, go to Part 411.*
> - *To open the mysterious door, go to Part 255.*

Note how this configuration puts the ability check in instructive text, meaning it must be resolved before contemplating the options that follow it. The player is locked into the examination, having made that decision in the prior text part, and cannot now choose to skip the ability check once its nature and difficulty are revealed.

Moderate Unique Identifiers

The way text parts are named and placed can strip the mystery from the play experience. Therefore, use identifiers that do not convey metaknowledge and do not tempt the player to glance at extraneous information.

Use Eye-Drawing Identifiers

The human eye is better-drawn to certain aspects of grouped objects. Cognitive experts tell us that humans can scan for certain traits of collected objects more easily than others. Color and shape are more distinguishable than words, even simple ones. Therefore, make your identifier fonts larger, bolder, and differently-colored than the rest of your text. Your goal is to draw the eye to the identifiers, rather than allowing it to snap up any other short, offset bits text that are so common and eye-catching in other text parts.

Use Numbers, not Names

This product assumes that the unique identifiers for your text parts are numbers, not names, due to reasons previously stated. However, because some writers prefer the advantages of word-based systems, particularly during adventure creation, this is a reminder to revise any that include metaknowledge, particularly when such names reveal the results of prior decisions.

Metaknowledge from text part titles is not limited to the information of those parts. When multiple text parts appear on the same page, the player will necessarily scan those titles to determine which is the one being sought. If the name of another nearby text part conveys any information, even scanning over it might reveal information about the future of the story.

Avoid Proximity of Parts

When a set of options is prompting players toward two separate text parts, don't put those prompted parts on the same page of your product. Players may be tempted to glance at the outcome of the other option if it is visible, gaining metaknowledge of their choices' alternatives. It is hard, particularly while reading small segments like text parts, not to scan titles on the same page or peripherally notice a few lines that stand out.

By preserving the secrecy of alternate choices, you are preserving the mystery and replayability of your product.

Take Care with Prompts

Even the identifiers named in your prompts sometimes convey information you don't want to give away. This particularly occurs in a couple of ways.

Use Neutral Identifiers

If, as some writers do, you want to begin every chapter with an anticipatable number, like making 301 the first text part of the third chapter, a prompt that sends you to part 301 signals the start of a new chapter. Depending on the importance of the options this prompt appears in, knowing that one prompt successfully transitions the character onward can convey unwanted metaknowledge. Avoid any prompts that constitute vital decisions from leading directly to the story's conclusion or the chapter's conclusion.

Similarly, if the prompts within a set of options direct the player to the *same* text part, the player will immediately recognize that the decision is meaningless, without any effect on the course of the story. If you must create illusory choices, do so in a way that isn't forecasted.

Make Future Prompts Derivative

If you give players a future prompt, one meant to be checked at a particular point later in the adventure, don't provide the unique identifier for the text part to be checked. This is part of a larger, general rule: Don't tempt the player with metaknowledge.

If players are reading a text part that appears next to your future-prompted text part, they might remember that number and their eyes may wander down the page a bit too far, revealing the mystery.

To avoid this temptation (or accident), you can also use the Part Numbers as Clues method found under special-use gates.

The Protagonist

The protagonist is the central character of your adventure, yet its abilities and proclivities are entirely unknown to you. Writing for a mystery character can be challenging but the task is not insurmountable. Doing it right requires special attention to factors that might inadvertently characterize your protagonist.

Illusory Control

As the adventure's creator, and despite indications to the contrary, you do have some ability to define the protagonist. However, that ability is limited to your introductory material, trying to convince the player to play a character that is compatible with your adventure.

Be aware that this power is illusory. You can describe whole realms of specificity for players' characters, all the way down to providing a pre-made character. Just know that players will often ignore your instructions and use whatever characters they want.

The only thing you can count on when it comes defining the protagonist is that your players will rarely appreciate the effort. The degree of your intrusion into this traditional player role will be inversely proportional to the players' feelings of agency and thus their enjoyment. Efforts to illustrate the protagonist are mostly ineffective and are starkly counter-productive.

Identity

Your goal is to give the protagonist no identity that is discernable in your writing. Identity is supplied by the player, and any indicator contrary to the player-built identity is deeply immersion-breaking. This is true on a roleplaying level and, if the player identifies strongly with the character, it strikes a discordant tone on a personal level.

Most unintended markers appear in observations of the protagonist, or in observations from the protagonist's point of view. It is important to control for both types, but this is not always easy. Identity markers are often subtle and are supplied by the writer subconsciously. They often stem from the writer's own expectations, from the tradition the writer learned to write in and the background from which the writer comes.

No Personality

Personality is a strongly-defining element of a protagonist's identity. It is inadvertently signaled in various ways, but mostly in misguided attempts to mold the character's personal growth. Your story is situational, not character-driven. Your protagonist therefore has no character arc.

This is the obvious reality for single-player interactive adventures and, while it deviates from all the best advice given to story writers, it is necessary in this environment. Your protagonist is a mystery, and its development depends on the reader rather than the writer.

Character Arc

This maxim is offended when a writer tries to give the protagonist internal or moral struggles, some sort of personal journey to undergo or character growth to achieve.

Because the player has already defined every relevant aspect of the character, from its background to its internal conflicts, a writer-supplied character arc can only distract and disappoint. It is acceptable to suggest arcs and write moral dilemmas, but never expect that any development options will resonate with the player or otherwise stick to the protagonist.

For example, some of the dialogue or other options you offer, perhaps near the resolution of your story, can reflect exceptional degrees of maturity, forgiveness, or stoicism in the face of the nemesis' ongoing antagonism. However, if you force the player into these responses, you risk redefining that character contrary to the player's desires.

Character Voice

A character's voice reveals another aspect of its personality. Engaging dialogue can be entertaining in various media like novels and film. However, there is little more that is protagonist-defining than the exact choice of words that the character will use.

Therefore, when writing dialogue for the protagonist, whether inserting words into narrative text or providing dialogue options for the player to choose from, do not use exact quotes. The more generic or glossed-over the protagonist's speech, the better.

For an example of narrative text, when passing a rider on the road, don't write that the protagonist greets the rider saying, "Nice horse, mister." Neither should you write generically that the protagonist compliments' the rider's horse. Both of these methods ascribe personality and functionality to the character. (Remember, some characters communicate only via telepathy!) In such scenarios, it is best to use the simplest of terms to indicate that the protagonist generated any mode of communication, preferring instead to focus on non-player characters' words.

For dialogue in prompts, don't write out exact sentences for the protagonist to say. Just as importantly, don't fail to make conversation outcomes match the player's expectations for the prompts that lead to them. If an option calls for persuasiveness, don't write the resulting text part as the protagonist being intimidating. This often happens when writing overly-specific results for generic prompts.

The best approach for dialogue is to use vague, generic prompts and vague, generic outcomes for them. Otherwise, too much specificity can give protagonist a voice the player does not agree with.

Action and Agency

Successful novels that don't have character arcs have something else in common; they focus on action. The protagonist reacts to tough circumstances or chooses action to influence others and the environment. While character agency is paramount in interactive adventures, be aware that the manner in which you characterize these choices can be as protagonist-defining as speech can be.

This over-specificity may often occur when writing overly-descriptive combat results. A well-written adventure finds the careful balance between exciting descriptions of combat and non-defining descriptions. Particularly, be mindful that a gruesome killing stroke written into the combat aftermath can paint the character as violent or delighting in cruelty, something likely for a raging barbarian but not a stoic monk.

Similarly, proper writing for agency allows the player character to remain central while not being too definitive. The character is the hero, not a spectator. Its personal decisions matter, and it should be able to finish quests in a variety of ways.

No History

Avoid referring to any choices made for the protagonist during character creation. This probably seems obvious; it takes very little work to avoid describing a character's race and class, but other aspects of the character sheet are harder to filter out.

Background

It is usually easy to remain neutral of implications that might define a character's backstory. A generic approach is inclusive of all backstories except those few rare ones, like being raised by wolves.

In the case of outliers like that, it is acceptable to write with the assumption that a character can get by in normal society; a player makes such an exotic choice with the expectation that it will contrast the story and break immersion from time to time.

To help you be more inclusive of various backstories, read through the backgrounds in this product's list of feature gates to see if there are any standard versions that your story might not yet allow for.

No Sex or Gender

Although this advice applies to any writer, the history of profoundly-male viewpoints in fantasy literature necessarily focuses this discussion on the male perspective.

Even with a rising number of female protagonists in popular culture, the male gaze still influences many writers; it affects what details draw their protagonists' attention and thus who appears in their protagonists' proximity. In this way, fantasy literature mimics the too-common focus of fantasy art, repeatedly invoking the male-serving stereotypes of physically-potent men and young, attractive women.

Fortunately, these viewpoints are easy to identify and correct for.

What is Seen

One prominent marker of a character's sex is its attraction to other characters. Even if the protagonist does not express attraction, any description of another character as "attractive" overwrites that neutrality.

Although this tendency is not specific to Dungeons & Dragons, the game's historic propensity was toward describing almost all female characters as "attractive." On top of this ubiquitous label, descriptions of women tended to be much longer than those of men, giving greater focus to the shape and features of women's bodies.

Revelation of these details occurs with the assumption that the viewer cares about (or is attracted to) such things. Aside from the obvious societal ill of objectifying people, writing attraction creates an identity marker that might run counter to the identity the player has established for the protagonist. Although attraction is not universally binary, the sexual interests of the character are the player's alone to design or to leave undefined.

Therefore, in all cases, avoid describing non-player characters in terms of attractiveness. Creating attraction to any sex, fantasy race, physical characteristic, or to other things creates

an identity for the protagonist that may intrude upon the player's imaginative territory.

What is Not Seen

A subtler indicator of a male protagonist, one common to fantasy literature, is the nature and number of female characters seen in the environment. In fantasy literature, no less than in other storytelling media, female characters tend to appear only as Type A (young and attractive) and Type B (old and wizened). This is an issue that uniquely affects women's appearances; popular media more readily affords space to male characters of all ages.

The failure to see middle-type women creates a distinctly-male view and marks your protagonist with that identity. To avoid this, create female characters in a variety of ages and appearances, including middle age. Additionally, place women in roles of varying prominence, not merely in supporting roles. Let the protagonist see women in your world that reflect those in reality. For inspiration, you can model female characters on the real-world women in your everyday life, in politics or in business, and even as the passersby on the street or in the market.

Belongings

Equipment is often identity-defining because choices of what a protagonist carries reflect its interests and capabilities. References to the character's gear should therefore be minimal and careful.

Action-Related Items

Writing evocative prose calls for details that enliven the world or the actions taking place therein. Particularly in battle sequences, you might be tempted to reference the pommel of the unknown protagonist's weapon, the flight of its arrows, or the impact of its plated boot.

No matter the reference in this vein, it will be wrong. Some of your players' characters will lack weapons with pommels, use ranged cantrips instead of arrows, and wear slippers rather than boots.

There is no single piece of equipment that characters universally carry, except those pieces that you mandate through story tools. If the monster can only be slain by a particular magic weapon, *and* you have given the character the weapon already, *and* the character has had no real chance to get rid of the weapon, then you can safely describe it's use or appearance.

Otherwise, avoid casual references to anything the protagonist wears or carries.

Wealth and its Uses

Dungeons & Dragons stories like to include taverns or inns, just as writers like to assume that characters have coins and are willing to spend them casually for drinks, food, and lodging.

While it may be tempting to gloss over these small accountings in the same way that Dungeon Masters often hand-waive them during adventures, this is counterproductive. Even offhand mentions of spending during the narrative text will cause fastidious players to try to account for the cost of such fare. Ignoring costs for room and board is particularly troubling when the character doesn't have any pocket money, a common scenario at 1st level when players tend to spend every copper of their starting wealth on weapons and adventuring gear, intending to sleep outdoors until their adventures turn profitable.

However, that is not to say that you should avoid such scenes entirely. There are several ways to write them without a stated or implied expense. You could simply have the character visit the tavern without drinking or eating. The protagonist takes care of any business or information-gathering and leaves. Along the way, the character could have the option to spend gold pieces—perhaps a round of drinks loosens the tongues of the patrons and gives advantage on Charisma checks—but the expense is not mandated.

Another approach is to simply require an expenditure and note that a character without coin must instead give the proprietor items worth at least twice the expense. Only a wholly-ascetic monk would have no coin or possessions, so this approach is a safe one if the expenses are small enough.

Alternately, you can make up some reason for the character to get free fare. Perhaps the protagonist resolves a conflict that was brewing in the entryway and the tavern keeper is grateful for the intervention. When this is the case, make it explicit that the character pays nothing for those drinks you narrate.

When these scenes start to accumulate, particularly when the character is travelling along established roadways with inns, it is better to avoid narrating the protagonist through overnight scenes indoors. With long travel between locations, skip over how the character spends nights or give an option for the character to camp outside rather than stay in paid lodgings.

Travel Moments

Dungeons & Dragons adventures often include segments of travel, sometimes extensive segments, which often reference the protagonist's belongings.

Horses are a common feature of travelling scenes. It may be tempting to expect the player to have one, but horses are expensive, particularly early in an adventurer's career. It is rare for characters to own mounts other than magical, spell-acquired mounts. Additionally, the expense of a mount is usually unwarranted for a lone adventurer who will have to leave the creature tied up somewhere while plumbing the depths of a dungeon or ascending the heights of a ruined tower. Therefore, either don't use mounts during overland movement, or give players another travel branch if they do have mounts of some kind.

Another common error in narrating travel is to ascribe a bedroll, blanket, or even a tent to the character. This comes into play when writing about the crisp morning air, the soaking rain, or the biting winds. Although descriptions of the environment and weather are great, be watchful for assumptions about equipment or weather-appropriate clothing that slip into those descriptions.

Animal Allies

Player characters sometimes have mounts, pets, or other allied creatures. A familiar or a small (pocket-portable) creature probably doesn't raise an eyebrow, regardless of where the protagonists goes. But larger beasts don't travel well in busy cities and wouldn't be welcome in most indoor scenes.

Mounts and large pets particularly present problems. What does a cavalier do with a warhorse while staying overnight at an inn? Stabling could be available, but does the character believe this crucial ally will be safe while separated for so long? Can a beast master "stable" a bear or leopard ally? When the character goes places the animal cannot, which types of animals can be allowed to roam the wilderness unsupervised in particular environments?

The issue of animal allies is not limited to rare character types; anyone can buy a horse and become deeply invested in keeping that mount safe and nearby. This is not an issue easily ignored and there are few solutions to the conundrum. This is yet another reason to gloss over the lodging situation in most travelling scenes. But the problem also hampers scenes or whole stories set in cities or inside buildings.

It is a good idea to deal with the large-creature conundrum simply and up-front. Tell the player in your introductory materials whether there is room for large animals to accompany the protagonist. Additionally, when a scene will require a character to go somewhere that an animal cannot go (or should not go), assume that the player character owns a horse at least and

include a sentence that states A) where large creatures go, and B) when such creatures will return to the player's side. For example:

> *A mount or other creature larger than Small may not accompany you into the duke's court. Your ally Rudovar can watch over a horse or similarly-sized animal ally until you return to the hunting lodge.*

For extended city-based segments, you can write an optional scene allowing a horse to be stabled until the protagonist leaves the city. Ideally, the facilities would also be suitable for wilder animals like wolves, the type of facility distinct to fantasy settings. Expenses should be minimal, and alternatives should be offered for those who can't pay the coin.

This is an extremely difficult situation to write for. Fortunately, players who choose characters of this type, those with animal companions, probably already understand the conundrum and are willing to accept any plausible explanation for their pet's whereabouts during such adventures.

CHAPTER SIX

FINAL TOUCHES

"Finishing food is about the tiny touches. In the last seconds you can change everything."

- Mario Batali

THESE IMPORTANT COMPONENTS SHOULD BE worked on at various times in your product's creation. As ongoing considerations, they cannot be inserted into the previous steps. However, the balance of their implementation should occur toward the end of your process.

The elements of this chapter constitute optional advice; not every product needs these things. They include the use and placement of treasure and other rewards, the creation of adventure statements for single adventures and whole adventure paths, and an assortment of quality control techniques to hone your product.

FINAL TOUCHES SUMMARY

This chapter covers the following topics.

- ***Seeding Rewards.*** Guidelines for using different types of treasure, placing it, and keeping its value within the game's intended distribution rates.
- ***Playbooks.*** How to present new rules and world information, particularly in light of multi-adventure campaigns based upon these shared features.
- ***Quality Control.*** Methods for testing your product, managing outside test resources, and using test results.

SEEDING REWARDS

This section addresses game rewards and the methods for their placement and balancing. In addition to mundane wealth and magic items, non-concrete rewards are also discussed, like character levels, reputation points, and other things of value.

Where regimentation of rewards is expected, these suggested rates use the Shared Campaign rules from *Xanathar's Guide to Everything*.

CHARACTER LEVELS

Class growth represents the ultimate award for success and survival. Most existing single-player adventures that use the *Dungeons & Dragons* rules grant the protagonist a character level at their conclusions. The SOLITAIRE system maintains that tradition but suggests a variation where the adventure's play time must justify the award.

CHECKPOINTS

The single-player interactive adventures sold on the Dungeon Masters Guild have established several "industry standards" that coincidentally mirror the checkpoint mechanic from *Xanathar's Guide to Everything*. Checkpoints form the foundation of several systems in this section, including the leveling system.

Existing adventures tend to estimate four hours of play time, and they tend to grant a single character level at their conclusions. Under the Shared Campaign rules, an adventure grants 1 checkpoint for each hour of play time. Achieving 4 checkpoints grants a character level, up until a character reaches 5th level, matching previously-established expectations for the genre.

Thereafter, 8 checkpoints (two standard-sized single-player adventures) are needed to gain a character level.

Play Time

Even regular adventures commonly list their expected play times in hours or sessions. However, anyone who has compared actual play time to expected play time cannot escape the conclusion that the estimates are meaningless. Different groups focus on different aspects of play, some of which take more time than others. Estimated play time therefore has time has no real meaning in standard adventures.

Conversely, play times for single-player adventures are very important. These products take much less time to consume than an adventure played around the table with multiple players, and without other players to endlessly banter with, play time is more easily measured. Your product's purchasers will be very aware of their start and finish times, typically experiencing both in a single evening, which makes real play quantifiable and estimates subject to comparative scrutiny. Therefore, when stating your adventure's expected play time, do not guess at this number and do not inflate it. Instead, try the baseline formula in the sidebar in order to conform with other adventures in the genre.

Solitaires equate 1 hour of (estimated) playtime to 1 checkpoint. Checkpoints form the foundation of several systems in this section, including the leveling system. Under this system, 4 of which equate to one level's increase for a first-tier character. At 5th level and above, characters require 8 checkpoints to advance a level.

You can write adventures for the Solitaire system that do not provide 4 hours of play time. These are simply not worth a full level's advancement for completing. But who says gaining a character level should the norm? Players can enjoy other rewards provided by your shorter adventures, including story exposition for an ongoing adventure path, opportunities to improve reputations with factions and important non-player characters, and additional chances to acquire magic items, both major and minor.

Shorter adventures are also more-easily inserted into long campaigns that players string together. Particularly when playing an adventure path of connected adventures, a character may fail a mission and stop the adventure early, receiving fewer checkpoints. Adding in a short adventure can help to level the character before proceeding along that adventure path.

Formula for Play Time Estimates

Multiply your total word count by the percentage of the text parts that the player will necessarily read through. Assume one hour of play for every 8,000 words or so. Note that your entire product may have a large word count but, if the player is only expected to encounter 10% of the text, the adventure will play much more quickly than the total word count would indicate.

For each combat the player will likely encounter add 10-15 more minutes of play time. (If your combats are taking much longer on average, you might be making them too complex.) You can also add 10-15 minutes for other scenarios of extended rolling, perhaps if you use complex skill challenges or puzzles.

Treasure

From money to magic items, from fame to favors, these assorted rewards each have different effects upon the character and the campaign. The primary focus of this section is balancing these rewards.

You might ask yourself why treasure distribution rates matter. In many ways, treasure "balancing" is a very small problem, particularly in the way the current edition of Dungeons &

DRAGONS maintains its power equilibrium. However, in single-player interactive adventures, where there is no Dungeon Master to moderate the strength of challenges versus the power of particular adventuring parties, the problem is much magnified.

This issue is one that hearkens back to the earliest editions of Dungeons & Dragons, where the portability of characters between campaigns was an assumed feature of normal play. Everyone had stories about that one Dungeon Master who showered players with magic items. The term "Monty Haul" comes from the name of a gameshow host of the time, a beloved character who liked to surprise guests with wondrous prizes. That host's name (in homophone) is a reference applied to DMs who can't stop themselves from over-rewarding their players, like bad parents trying to buy their children's love. Characters so enriched were not well-received at other Dungeon Masters' tables.

While it may feel good to give Monty Haul-scale rewards, and it may seem like an easy way to raise player satisfaction with your product, it is ultimately counterproductive. You will have inflated player expectations for your future products, and you will need to present extreme challenges in those products to balance the overpowered mess you have created. Further, it diminishes compatibility with the work of other creators who adhere to the game's intended rates of treasure distribution.

For these reasons, the following guidelines are recommended for seeding rewards of various kinds.

MUNDANE WEALTH

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS has a long history of motivating adventurers with the lure of treasure. Finding gold is an expected aspect of the game, one that gives players a sense of accomplishment. Wealth also helps players customize their characters through equipment choices, and it lets them meet challenges that a poorly-equipped character could not.

Coins, trade bars, and gemstones constitute a primary form of mundane wealth in D&D. These items are easy to carry and spend; seeding them does not (normally) risk encumbering your protagonist, nor does it create extra hurdles to overcome while trading at the market. For additional information on these types of wealth, and inspiration for their use, consider Wraith Wright's *Comprehensive Wealth Manual*, which lists a number of interesting ideas for mundane wealth in various forms.

HITTING TARGETS

Xanathar's Guide to Everything suggests treasure rates for shared campaigns. It calls for seeding a set amount of gold pieces per level. The amount of wealth goes up at each character tier but is otherwise consistent at each level within a tier.

Single-player adventures made with the SOLITAIRE system can more-precisely parse these numbers, breaking them down by checkpoint. This is preferable because some adventures might be worth only a fraction of a level. Creators can meet these collaborative targets based on their checkpoints, without having to worry about matching what other writers are putting in their adventures.

MUNDANE WEALTH BY LEVEL

Current Character Level	Wealth Multiplier
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10	20 gp
11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16	70 gp
17, 18, 19, 20+	700 gp

For each checkpoint in your adventure, seed the wealth on the Wealth Multiplier column that matches the adventure's character level. While you cannot control exactly how much of the wealth in your adventure that the protagonist finds, try to ensure that no more than 25% of that wealth is "difficult" to find. And even if the player carefully seeks out every possible scrap of wealth

in the adventure, try to ensure that this total does not exceed the adventure's intended total by more than 25%.

Placement

Meeting treasure targets is about more than the totals listed throughout the adventure. Totals are not relevant if characters cannot possibly access all of it because they route through mutually-exclusive branches.

General Wealth. General wealth is mundane wealth that appears in trunks or other bottlenecks. It is easy to keep track of and balance because everyone is assumed to get it, regardless of gates bypassed or routes taken.

You should prefer to seed about half of the adventure's mundane wealth as general treasure. This will establish a minimum baseline reward for the adventure, assuring that the protagonist is not deprived of a usable amount of wealth because of bad decisions or an unfortunate character design. Treasure in the form of quest payments is particularly suited for such purposes.

Variable Wealth. Other mundane wealth may be placed in various branches, in gated leaves, and whatever other routes you imagine. This wealth often takes the form of hidden treasures, wealth in enemy combatants' pockets, and contract bonuses for meeting additional objectives.

The protagonist may recover all, some, or none of the variable wealth. A character that makes no effort should acquire little or nothing beyond the general treasure. A character that makes the extra effort, plays smartly, and has good fortune, should acquire the remainder of the treasure target, maybe even a bit more.

Magic Items

Magic items exist in two categories, major and minor. These categories are named explicitly in *Xanathar's Guide to Everything*, but in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, they are only differentiated by the different Magic Item treasure tables. (Tables A-E are minor items and Tables F-I are major items.)

Minor Items

Minor magic items are consumables, items like potions and scrolls, regardless of their rarity ratings. The also include a few of the weaker permanent magic items, like every common-rated magic item and a few of the uncommon-rated items too.

Solitaires treat minor magic items as interchangeable with mundane wealth, since those are not the sort of items that significantly impact a character's power, regardless of their numbers. To manage these, determine a reasonable gold piece price for each, using the suggested value ranges that the *Dungeon Master's Guide* applies by item rarity. (Remember to halve the value of consumable items like potions and spell scrolls.) Use the resulting value to account for part of the protagonist's mundane wealth income for the level in question. (Alternately, use the exact magic item prices listed in Wraith Wright's *Comprehensive Wealth Manual*.)

Do not seed minor magic items of rarity ratings that exceed the protagonist's matching character level, according to the restrictions in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*:

- Common-rated and uncommon-rated items can appear as soon as 1st level
- Rare-rated items at 5th level
- Very rare-rated items at 11th level
- Legendary-rated items at 17th level

Major Items

Permanent magic items fall into the major magic item category (except those that are already rated as minor). These are the items that deserve the most attention when it comes to controlling their distribution.

Prior to *Xanathar's Guide to Everything*, a Dungeon Master would have to perform a lot of math to determine the game's intended rates of distribution by averaging results of the Treasure

Hoard Tables. Now, *Xanathar's Guide to Everything* includes a Magic Item Rewards by Rarity table showing target distributions for an entire party of adventurers. From these books we learn that, across a career of 20 levels, a character should expect to acquire only four or five major magic items. This expected rate of distribution creates difficulties for single-player adventures. If multiple creators' works are used together in a player-compiled campaign, how should creators decide whose adventure gets the rare honor of granting a major magic item?

Rather than trying to regulate this answer, the SOLITAIRE system goes around it. SOLITAIRES expect that every protagonist will be overloaded with major magic items, so they limit the amount the protagonist can bring into the adventure. These level-based limitations are stated on the Wealth Rubric table. (See the *Solo Player's Guidebook*.) The player chooses at the start of each adventure which major items will come along, and which will be left somewhere for safekeeping or placed into the hands of allies. If players permanently give away major magic items, rather than leaving them in a pool that is interchangeable between adventures, you can give other rewards for this sacrifice, probably renown points.

To keep things from getting out of hand within your own adventure, limit the protagonist to gaining no more than a single major magic item. If you want to grant additional magic, you can present the opportunity to trade a magic item for another specific magic item. This lets you introduce something new without further upsetting the intended treasure distribution rates.

For example, an adventure might seed a *+1 shortsword* in an ancient tomb. Upon returning to town, the local temple offers the protagonist a few options to trade the sword for.

This is a great way to seed magic items suited to the protagonist; give an opportunity to trade something for a short list of items that are preferred by (or specific to) certain classes.

Referencing the table, seed 1 major magic item of the listed rarity in your adventure. You can do this safely knowing that the character will only be able to carry forward around one-eighth of these items if using the SOLITAIRE rules.

MAJOR MAGIC ITEM SEEDS

Character Level	Magic Item Rarity	Character Level	Magic Item Rarity
1	Uncommon	11	Rare
2	Uncommon	12	Rare
3	Uncommon	13	Very rare
4	Uncommon	14	Very rare
5	Uncommon	15	Legendary
6	Uncommon	16	legendary
7	Rare	17	Very rare
8	Rare	18	Very rare
9	Uncommon	19	Legendary
10	Uncommon	20	Legendary

PLACEMENT

The locations where magic items appear differ based on the items' types and the writer's strategies for their use.

Minor Items. Minor magic item rewards are best placed strategically, either as contextual to proximate threats or positioned for player selection.

Because most minor magic items are single-use, they are most valuable when seeded near scenarios that call for their specific functions. For example, a *potion of fire resistance* is most valuable in the context of challenges that might inflict fire damage. (Seeding mundane tools contextually, like ropes near a cliff, can have the same strategic effect.)

Contextual placements of this sort should be uncommon. They are particularly useful when the protagonist *must* overcome a particular challenge and you worry that it may not have the right tools for the job.

Most strategic placements of minor magic items should be where players can select for the particular things that might aid them. For example, a magical merchant might sell a wide variety of beneficial items. A fighter might wish to buy healing potions that a cleric has no need for. Conversely, cleric might want spell scrolls that the fighter cannot use. Inserting player choice is one mechanism to offset the lack of feature versatility that a single adventurer has to deal with.

Player-choice placement also gives the player something to do with earned wealth, converting it into useable magical effects. You can meet varying degrees of need to reduce the protagonist's wealth reserves by adjusting the prices you set.

Major Items. The major magic item you place in your adventure should be in a location where the protagonist is very likely to find it. It's okay if your protagonist fails to find the item or makes choices that prevent the item from being taken. It's also okay to put the item at the end of the adventure, a treasure discovered after the final battle.

Likewise, if placing an opportunity to trade a major item for another, do so at a time and place where the protagonist isn't likely to miss the opportunity, but also make sure that this comes after the protagonist is likely to have found the major item in your adventure. It is otherwise possible that the protagonist has nothing to trade with, so cannot benefit from this opportunity.

Other Rewards

Aside from character advancement and material rewards, adventuring can win other advantages for the player character.

Inspiration

Inspiration is a small reward you can give the protagonist. It represents a simple, mechanical benefit, worth having but not overpowering.

Because there is no Dungeon Master to apply inspiration, consider giving it out when the protagonist solves a problem in the "best" possible way or acts selflessly, particularly doing so at some real cost. Alternately, use inspiration to reward whatever player behavior you would like to encourage in your adventure.

An adventure may present several opportunities to earn inspiration. You can't give out too many because a player can only have one inspiration at a time.

Renown

Renown and faction rank usually have no bearing on single-player adventures. However, in a series like an adventure path, where the protagonist engages in long-term enterprises, interacting with the same people and factions repeatedly, renown becomes a useful tool for scoring adventure success and rewarding social conformity. You can even apply renown to organizations of the smallest size—a single person—making renown an effective indicator of relationship strength with individual non-player characters.

Single Adventure

In a single adventure, one not part of an adventure path, you can still grant renown points. However, these are probably more easily represented with an abstract series of gates. Rather than scoring the protagonist for having done or not done certain things, and granting advantages or insights thereby, your one-off adventure can simply use event gates that call to the same events and which provide those desired rewards.

Story Benefits

When faction ranks are used, they make excellent feature gates dealing with organizations. You can also advance the story by gating small, expositive leaves behind renown totals or faction ranks.

In addition to the advantages suggested in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, you can write whole

branches to effectuate the player's degree of renown. In an adventure path, you can make faction rank as central a factor to the story as you want.

Access and Opportunity

The regular advantages of faction ranks fit nicely into the systems this product recommends for other reward types.

For example, faction rank may expose possible magic items to acquire in lateral trades. These can be tuned to match your protagonist based on the faction in question. Renown with two competing factions can measure how the character has been played, or what features or aptitudes it prefers. A character that picks a bunch of locks and thus completes objectives for the thieves' guild may discover that ranks in that guild give access to rogue-benefiting magic items.

Factions can also facilitate different downtime activities. From training in particular tools to the use of a grand library for research, these benefits can be as varied as the factions you present.

Downtime

Time is a treasure like any other. In the 5th Edition, each day can be coined for a reliable amount of gold, based on the protagonist's skills and proclivities. When the player chooses an unpaid activity, like training, the loss of those days' professional income is an opportunity cost paid to seek the alternative activities.

Playbooks

Each single-player interactive adventure has a "playbook." This is an introduction to the story and a set of instructions for navigating the adventure. Playbooks typically stand in for a Dungeon Master, providing guidance and world information that would normally come from the DM.

A playbook can take several forms, from just a few paragraphs in the book's introduction, to a complete rules chapter, to an entirely-separate document that accompanies an adventure or a whole adventure path.

Adventure Statement

A useful playbook includes information about the adventure and the world. Collectively this is called an adventure statement, and it takes several forms.

Narrative Description

The narrative description gives useful information about playing the adventure, an overview of its story and the background or themes required for character played in it.

Story Summary

A story summary tells the reader what the adventure is about. In addition to piquing player interest, a good summary says a little bit about the adventure's beginnings and the possible hooks that might draw in a protagonist. It also lays out the scope and the end point of the adventure. This information lets players determine if the adventure is right for their needs; the start and ending points are particularly useful when designing campaigns of interconnected adventures.

World or Setting

Setting information includes any important or useful information about the game world. If you are writing for an official, published campaign setting, like the Forgotten Realms or Ravnica, let the player know that up front.

Knowing the setting helps the player know if the adventure will be suitable to the character and campaign being contemplated. For these purposes, the most useful settings are generic because those fit into any game world. However, don't let that stop you from writing for official settings. Published worlds have fun and interesting features that can justify writing adventures that are exclusive for use in those settings.

Setting information also includes any consistent details that will apply across multiple adventures if your playbook is designed for an adventure path. Because adventure paths use shared motivations or hooks, and many details will remain consistent across the entire path, the playbook can be a great place to lay those out without having to repeat them in each product.

Character Description

Along with the story summary and its hooks, be direct about the sort of protagonist that will fit the adventure. If your story will be of no interest to a character motivated only by profit, say so in the adventure description. It makes little sense to include an altruistic adventure in the midst of a mercenary character's campaign of self-interest and bounty-hunting.

Beyond simple motivation, the character description is a good place to mention incompatible character types. Perhaps a particular class archetype has a feature that instantly cuts through the mystery and invalidates most of your adventure.

In addition to disqualifying aspects of a character, you can also talk about features that will allow characters to excel or to have a hard time in the adventure. This is different from defining compatible or incompatible characters, but only by a matter of degrees.

Level Requirements

The expected character level is one of the most important parts of an adventure description, and for good reason. A character's level tends to make the greatest impact on its overall power. Other aspects of a character sheet would have to be far out of balance to eclipse the power-variance created by differing character levels.

Fortunately, character levels are universally understood as inherent limitations in adventures. It is the standard practice of adventure writers to state a character level suitable for their adventures. Just by stating a level requirement, creators are tapping into a shared compatibility mechanism and abiding by its expectations.

All other character requirements in this section are strongly encouraged but are not strictly necessary.

Mundane Wealth

A protagonist's equipment is typically addressed in two modes, mundane wealth and magic items.

If you anticipate that excessive mundane wealth could greatly change the course of your adventure, feel free to limit it. Perhaps you have a major market and are worried that the protagonist could buy too much helpful equipment like dozens of healing potions. Perhaps a series of gates can be bypassed by bribing guards and you don't want the player to be able to afford every opportunity these afford.

Restrictions to mundane wealth are probably related to thresholds you set arbitrarily. It is otherwise up to you to decide how much wealth puts your player at too much advantage based on how wealth can be used in your adventure. Characters aren't otherwise overpowered until they're carrying many hundreds of gold pieces, not until gold has lost all luster in their eyes.

Magic Items

More impactful than mundane wealth, a glut of magic items can alter the protagonist's power to a degree that unbalances your adventure's challenges, challenges you must create without foreknowledge of what the protagonist carries. If you are not writing for the Solitaire system, feel free to make it an inherent limitation in your rules, whether you justify this by story-based reasons, or you simply wish to tell potential players that the rule exists for balance reasons.

Restrictions to magic items can be general, as in a maximum number, but usually they are more specific. You might forbid particular items like a *ring of x-ray vision* or *sphere of annihilation*, items that are too disruptive in your adventure. You can do this even when those items' rarity ratings

make them viable options for the stated character level.

The goal of limitation is to make adventures compatible. Therefore, if you tell players they must pare down their major magic items, allow them to get the items back at the end of the adventure. This is useful if the character is going to be played again in the same series where it acquired the excessive treasure; the protagonist might well depend on that number of magic items to survive in said adventure series!

Character Descriptions for Solitaires

Level Bands

Instead of a single level, you can set a two-level band for your adventure. In Solitaires, a level band is expected.

Level bands allow players to be more flexible in the order they play your adventures in. They work because major increases in character power tend to happen at odd-numbered levels. Particularly note that access to new spell levels, which equates to new functionalities, occurs at odd-numbered levels.

Level bands are laid out in the *Solo Player's Handbook*. These bands (and their associated levels) are also provided under Gate Keys, earlier in this product.

Wealth Rubric

Solitaires use a table for limiting the protagonist's mundane wealth and magic items. This "Wealth Rubric" is described in the *Solo Player's Guidebook*. It can be a useful reference when crafting the treasures in your product.

The Solitaires style of play expects players to use the adventures of different creators interchangeably. Unfortunately, many great adventures remarkably over-reward the protagonist, to the degree where later adventures are overwhelmed by the resulting power. The Wealth Rubric filters out excess treasure so you can reliably balance the challenges in your adventure.

On the Back Cover

The adventure statement includes the sort of details that potential players should know up front, before they engage with your product or purchase it. Therefore, in addition to putting it in your playbook, place the full adventure statement, or an abridged version of it, on your product's cover. Alternately, in the case of an online market like the Dungeon Masters Guild, place it on the product page or in whatever other location product details are normally provided.

Game Rules

Players of these adventures expect to use the normal rules of the Dungeons & Dragons Roleplaying Game. In addition, new rules are necessary where they relate to the player's interaction with the story and the metastructure of your adventure. Without a Dungeon Master to moderate the adventure, you will need to provide the guidance, moderation, and limitation a DM would otherwise provide. This is accomplished by the interaction of your metastructure, the standard rules, and the new rules you provide in the playbook.

Rules in your playbook generally appear in two forms, necessary rules that allow the player to play alone, and helpful rules that make the single-player experience more enjoyable.

Necessary Rules

These are the rules that are needed for the character to properly navigate your single-player adventure.

Necessity will vary based on the nuances of your design. Here are several necessary rule examples used in SOLITAIRES from Wraith Wright Productions.

Prerequisite Checks. If one or more options in a set of options has a prerequisite roll of some kind, you can attempt each roll in that set before deciding which option to choose.

Instructive Text. Always resolve instructive text as you encounter it, prior to reading further into the text part.

Attitudes. When your interaction with a non-player character indicates an addition or reduction of attitude points, you must track that non-player character's total attitude points in your play journal.

HELPFUL RULES

Helpful rules are those that ease the difficulty of playing an adventure alone. They particularly accommodate the smaller size of the adventuring party, the lone player.

For example, the standard foraging rules take an hour and produce food for multiple adventurers; a single-player version might reduce the time needed since only a single character needs feeding.

SINGLE-CHARACTER SURVIVAL

Adventuring alone is dangerous. Very dangerous. Of all the possible "helpful" rules you can write, this product strongly suggests that you add a gratuitous mechanic to increase your hero's survivability. Although playing without such a safety net can be exciting, having one vastly increases the range of challenges you can write for your protagonist. On a more basic level, a rule that ensures the character will survive until its initiative order on the first turn of combat can help to reinforce the player's sense of agency.

A survival rule can take many forms, from a change in rules to a magic item or supernatural gift. Here are some options.

Hit Point Increase. To make the protagonist more survivable, you can apply a rule to give the protagonist the maximum possible hit points for each of its levels. Alternately, you can double or triple the character's normal hit point maximum. This is perhaps the simplest such rule you can apply.

The downsides of this rule are several. By changing a permanent aspect of the character, you are requiring the player to keep track of two hit point maximums, one for your adventure and one for any other adventure the character is played in.

Additionally, this protection only offsets damage; it does not guard against any of the other threats particular to a lone adventurer. While you need not address any other dangers, doing so gives you more flexibility when designing threats.

Magic Item. An item of power grants protective benefits to the player. Perhaps it stores spells, like *cure wounds*, *shield*, and other protective magic. Perhaps it revives a character with 1 hit point upon making any successful death save.

The advantages of a magic item include the versatility of its power; you can customize the benefit of a magic item without being bound to existing systems. This also lets you apply benefits without changing the core mechanics of your player's DUNGEONS & DRAGONS experience.

The downside of using an item is that your cocky protagonist might try to sell it off for gold. If you use this mechanism, you might want to include story factors or magic that prevent the item's sale. You will probably need another limitation to keep the item from being used elsewhere, in the adventures of other creators.

Supernatural Gift. Your protagonist is employed by an individual being of great power, a temple, or some other magical organization that can bestow blessings upon its servants. Like a magic item, these powers can be highly

customized with their own benefits and limitation.

Supernatural gifts simultaneously avoid some of the drawbacks of magic items; they can't be sold, and you can more easily limit their benefits to the times (the adventures) when the protagonist is in service to that employer.

Story Elements

A playbook is also an excellent place to locate important pieces of your story. These pieces are discussed here in three modes: prologue, continuity, and world building.

Prologue

A story introduction serves a couple of purposes. It can set the stage by describing events, large and small, that will matter for the upcoming adventure. But why place it in the playbook? The answer is "pacing."

It may seem natural to place your stage-setting in your adventure's first text part. However, you can accomplish some useful things by putting it in your playbook instead. Prologues often take a page or more of text, which pushes the limits of player attention when it comes to text parts. Players expect an interactive experience, not a novella, even at the story's start. The first text part should hook the player in; it doesn't have to be *in medias res*, but when getting to the action and player choices, sooner is better than later.

Of course, the player will have already read the prologue, so you are not shortening the amount of text processed. However, placing it apart from the action allows the story to "start" well. When the prologue also appears early in the playbook, before the listing of rules, it further serves to modulate the pace of those rules. A player first steeped in the adventure's prologue will find the rules and play instructions to be less dry.

Continuity

This segment addresses only the aspects of continuity that cannot be maintained with an ably-built prologue. These aspects include important or common fixtures in the world. Such things might need their own pages for reference. If they are very important, these pages might need to be referred to later during the adventure, perhaps appearing as part of an appendix to the playbook.

Continuity information is especially useful when writing adventure paths. The same people, places, and things can appear in a recurring fashion, across multiple adventures, and may need individual descriptions in the playbook.

For example, if your protagonist bears a magic ring that drives the story, the ring may need its own page of flavor text, not just a mere mention in the story's narration.

World Building

Particularly when using a generic setting, your playbook may need to introduce regular aspects of your world that may come up. A generic setting might also demand explanations for where the adventure might fit when deployed in various officially-published settings.

Quality Control

The need for quality control is greater in single-player adventures than in standard adventures. The reason is simple and stark; without a Dungeon Master to moderate errors and correct them as the adventure unfolds, a mistake can render a single-player adventure literally unplayable. Even problems that don't stop the adventure can be jarring without a Dungeon Master to apply the correct rule or to explain the necessary details at the right moments.

This section covers how and where to focus testing, recommending an order and methodology for the process. If you are not used to managing quality assurance efforts, this section may be of particular use to you.

Your Testers

You are the primary tester of your product. However, by virtue of being the creator, your testing efforts have certain weaknesses. You must therefore get outset help in order to achieve the best testing results.

Self-Testing

You will find yourself testing your product at every stage of its development, consciously or unconsciously. Because you will provide yourself with the most feedback, it is essential to identify the weaknesses inherent to your own feedback. The primary problem of self-testing is that you know what you mean to say and how you mean the various parts of your adventure work.

Ambiguous Text

One way this problem presents itself is in instructive text and complexly-worded options, where ambiguity is invisible to you. As the writer, you know what your words mean. If there is another interpretation to the words you used, you won't see it because you already know what you meant. Your brain will supply the correct meaning as you read, without worrying about other interpretations. Ambiguity is particularly dangerous in instructive text and in complex options.

To reduce ambiguity, use short, direct sentences. Then do your own reviews after waiting a significant time period, purposefully attempting to read ambiguity into it.

Additionally, where you suspect ambiguity may linger, make a note to have your other testers keep an eye out for the meaning of those particular passages.

Typographical Errors

The same principle of knowing what you meant applies to other errors too. Reading for errors while in chronological proximity to having written them is inefficient. Your brain will refuse to register misspellings, missing words, and similar failings of text if it recognizes a sentence processed recently. This cognitive miracle can be overcome by putting significant time between writing and reviewing.

Story Problems

By virtue of your closeness with the material, you will also find that you overlook story possibilities too, usually in the form of missing character motivations, insufficient player options to match the listed environmental stimuli, and paradoxes of various kinds.

Overestimating protagonist intuition is another problem that stems from your closeness to the material. It is easy to underestimate how difficult a particular leap of logic might be to a player who is not you. The answer to a riddle may seem obvious, but you can't properly judge because you already know the answer. Even if you puzzled out something like that in the past, there is no telling whether a riddle will be too easy or two hard for another player until you have others examine it.

There are no true cures for these weaknesses in your self-reviewing capabilities, but there are some techniques for mitigation. Such weaknesses are the primary reason that your product requires outside testing.

Other Testers

Other testers fall onto a spectrum of professionality, from your close friends that you press into service, to community/forum members interested in your product, to amateur or professional testers who you pay or otherwise compensate.

Although it takes some work, almost anyone can find people willing to look at a product. Querying related groups on collaborative writing forums or asking your own friends on various social media platforms might be enough to connect you with interested persons.

Remuneration

Do not be dismayed if you cannot afford to pay testers. Some people will be interested in helping even if you cannot give them cash.

Being upfront about this information is important. Unless you have a budget that includes paid testers, be sure to mark requests for help as unpaid. Acknowledge that what testers give you is valuable, even if you cannot properly compensate them for it.

There are things you can do for your testers that aren't financial. First, remember to thank everyone you work with; even the smallest contributions of people's time and ideas can make your product better. Don't get distracted by the magnitude of your own work that you fail to recognize the people who help you. Further, don't make the mistake of thinking that "practice," "exposure," or access to early versions of your material is a form of compensation.

Importantly, everyone who contributes something in the way of time and energy should get a mention on your credits page. Each person should first be asked whether they wish to be excluded from the credits or appear under a pseudonym or working name. And try to attribute each person's work accurately and specifically, preferably using industry-standard terms for the work they've done.

Scope of Testing

When recruiting testers, be sure to convey your expectations (or hopes) for the kind of feedback they will give. Every player has something to contribute, even if it's just a "I liked it" or "it was boring." But testers can provide so much more detail. Supplying your desired expectations in writing can turn a simple response into an informative report with complex feedback. Most of the people you recruit won't have quality assurance backgrounds, so won't know what feedback is useful until you spell it out in exacting detail.

The most successful method of getting feedback is by questionnaire, directly targeted at the information you are seeking. Questionnaires are best when built specific to each phase of the projects, as described in the next section. Try to make questions open-ended and non-leading. (Let testers provide their own feedback without having to do so through a narrow lens.) Numerical rating systems are mostly useless at this scale of adventure design.

Three-Phase Testing

It is important to test at different phases of your adventure's creation. Otherwise, errors discovered late in the process can require you to change deep, structural elements upon which rest a great deal of labor that will need redoing.

This product suggests three distinct phases for testing, each with its own area of focus. These phase descriptions address how to approach testing, what to look for, and how to direct outside testers to the areas you need the most help with. Each phase also talks about how to integrate feedback from that round of testing.

Scaffolds

The first significant point at which testing can be useful is when the scaffolds are complete. At this point, your shorthand test parts should exist in a single document, arranged in the order they will appear in the final product, with hyperlinks completed too. You and other testers can generally navigate the adventure fully, even though the adventure is written in shorthand.

Self-Testing

For self-testing, focus first on updating and finalizing your diagram of text parts. You have probably made significant changes to the diagram since you began using it in chapter 2. If you have not created a diagram, you should strongly consider doing so at this point since it is the most effective tool for testing the integrity of your story routes. A methodical check of every text

part's prompts and hyperlinks will ensure that you have the best possible scaffolds ready to go to your outside testers.

Other Testers

This is the hardest phase in which to recruit other testers. A player is not getting the full game experience since everything is written in shorthand, and the excitement of combat is probably not there yet either. Interest from potential players will therefore be low, and their testing will be a less enjoyable process than in later phases.

Other creators, those working in the same or similar genre, are your most likely testers. The way to get these testers onside is to engage with the community, build relationships with other creators, *and test their stuff when they need testers too*. Collaboration takes a commitment of time and interest in your fellow creators, but the benefits go far beyond testing assistance.

The best elements to direct testers toward in this phase are whether the ideas are interesting ("I don't like goblins!"), which forks are missing ("Can't my aarakocra just fly out of this pit?"), and where the routes are broken ("Where's the missing text part to go to after this prompt?").

Integrating Results

Integrating these results is harder than it sounds. Adjusting scaffolds is where the majority of your systemic (routing) errors will be introduced, thus you should do it as little as possible.

The most important advice for integrating tester results is to wait for all the feedback on each round of testing before you look at any of it. Changing scaffolds often means deep, structural adjustments that are time-consuming. You don't want to recreate a scaffold only to have another tester point out something that requires the same scaffold to be adjusted again. All feedback should therefore be considered together, and all resulting changes considered at once.

Any time you change a scaffold from here out, you must do so with great care, referencing and updating your diagram as you do. If you make a lot of changes, your scaffolds will lose the benefits of having been tested by outside testers and may require another round of testing.

Do not send out your scaffolds for testing in anything less than full rounds, where every tester gets the new material with instructions to start over if testing was not complete on the previous version. Further, instruct the testers to delete the old material. You cannot risk having your testers testing different versions at the same time, lest feedback be more confusing to you than helpful.

Combat Writeups

When each of your combats is fully (or mostly) fleshed out, it's time to do some stress testing. Fighting is such a critical aspect of the D&D experience that it is worth testing in its own phase. The testing cases described here are called combat runs.

A combat run is the sequence of combats a protagonist will face between long rests. Your adventure might include only one combat run, but it probably has several. It is important to test these sequences together, because your story is not flexible enough to allow the character to insert long rests where it needs them; unlike in a normal game, your protagonist will be stuck with the combat sequences you dictate.

To identify your combat runs, first find each opportunity in the story for a long rest. Between these events, list every combat a character may get into, including those that could be bypassed by other means. Where multiple branches take the protagonist through different combat sequences, mutually exclusive of one another, each sequence is its own combat run even if some of the fights are shared among multiple routes.

Within each combat run, assume that every opportunity for a short rest has been taken. This will mean a lot for character types with short rest-refreshing abilities, but less for characters whose features are recovered only after a long rest.

Self-Testing

For your own testing purposes, create a series of characters, at least two, which span an array of combat-readiness. Put each character through each of your combat runs and examine the outcomes.

At its simplest form, your character set should include a "strong" combat-ready character and a "weak" character focused on non-combat capabilities. The size of your set of test characters directly relates to the effectiveness of your overall combat testing. The best set of character sheets includes a variety of capabilities. For example, a spellcaster plays differently than an archer or lancer, even if they are all "strong" characters.

Other Testers

Present your combat writeups to your outside testers along with clear instructions for what sequence the fights appear in and when a short rest can be had between particular fights.

It is important that you don't hand-hold your testers during combat runs, nor should you act as the DM for such testing in order to save time. Part of the process is testing the understandability of your combat writeups when playing alone. If a player, newly introduced to your mechanics for self-moderation, cannot use them in their current form without further explanation, you need to know that! As the creator, you might make a lot of assumptions about how things work or forget to include steps that, while in your head, fail to make it into the text. You cannot risk tainting the tests by inserting yourself (and your assumptions) into the process.

Avoid asking combat testers to play through the combat runs with more than one character. Truly-interested helpers may do so on their own, but combat runs are sufficiently tedious when decontextualized from the story that asking players to double or triple the experience can cause burnout.

The best elements to direct testers toward in this phase are whether combat systems were difficult to understand, whether any of the combats are too complex or have too many moving parts, whether the combats were too easy or too difficult, and how much time each combat took. If you can get it, a round-by-round description of what occurred (character and monster actions, plus dice results) is ideal. Particularly ask testers to call out when a feature or trait allows the player to utterly dominate a combat or makes the player utterly powerless to defeat it.

Integrating Results

Integrating feedback here is usually a matter of tuning the power of enemy creatures (replacing too-strong monsters with weaker versions), shoring up unexpected weaknesses (adding something with a ranged attack to challenge flying protagonists), and altering the availability of healing (more rest opportunities or healing potions to be found along the way).

Remember that some of the adjustments you make to a combat can appear in the form of pre-combat parts to bypass battle rather than weakening the fight. Particularly for a protagonist with a non-combat focus, alternate ability check roll gates can make your combat sequences more manageable. The "weak" (non-combat focused) characters you use in your test run might give you clues as to which features could be the key to getting around a particular combat.

Gauging combat difficulty is a tricky business in single-player adventures. When you adjust a combat round, send it out for another round of testing. Particularly make sure that testers get a chance to re-test adjustments based on their own feedback and try to get an update as to the effectiveness of such changes.

Writing ("Editing")

Testing your writing is sometimes called "editing," a practice for which there is a whole

lively industry that goes beyond the spellcheck button. Our approach considers this testing, since writing quality is one of the features that will affect your product's success.

Testing your writing is a method that takes two forms. The first is determining if your story elements are engaging, or whether they are tired, lifeless tropes. This is often just called "editing." The second is correcting for errors of typography and syntax. This is often called "proofing" or "proofreading." Some editors will test for both, and others will test for only one of these factors.

Self-Testing

In order to self-test (edit) effectively, make sure to allow time to pass between writing and editing. Self-testing should occur only after two or three days of not looking at the text, or after several weeks if your production schedule allows for such gaps. Otherwise, residual understanding of what sentences are supposed to mean will block your ability to read them for what they really say.

Other than time away from the project, there are several ways you can force your brain into proper editing mode. First, try changing the medium in which you read the work. Many experienced editors prefer to print out a document and mark it up with a red pen. You can achieve similar results by reading your work on your smart phone instead of your desktop screen. Experiencing the data in a new way requires your brain to reset expectations and process on a deeper level.

Some people like to read their work backwards, starting with the last sentence and reading each in reverse-order. In addition to avoiding your brain's shortcutting processes, this can also help you spot inconsistencies in syntax and style.

Verbalizing can also force your brain to more-accurately process every word in the sentence rather than skipping over fast-processed data. If you are composing in Microsoft Word, your version might have the Read Aloud function (Alt + Ctrl + Space) that will read your work back to you. Other word processors may provide similar functions. This can be far more effective than trying to read your work aloud by yourself; it takes intense concentration to read slowly enough to notice errors but quickly enough to avoid losing focus.

While self-testing your own writing, you can improve your editing and your future writing by keeping track of your errors. For example, if you see an incorrectly-used homophone, do a word search through your document to see if it was used incorrectly elsewhere, and make a note of the error somewhere, perhaps another document that tallies the errors you want to avoid in the future.

For best results, do not edit your document all at once. When you get bored, your brain starts to disengage, and you miss things. Instead, designate blocks of text for testing (perhaps individual chapters) and proofread them in between other activities. If you are short on time, prioritize recently-written information, as it will be the least-processed work, the most likely to contain errors.

And finally, know where your style is weak and forgive yourself for errors that persist even after editing. Do not over-edit your own work. It will never be perfect, and you can find yourself wasting a lot of time for achieving very small (or diminishing) returns with additional editing passes. You are better off producing more products than you are trying to make every product absolutely perfect.

Other Testers

Players who pay money for your adventure can be demanding; they will expect a somewhat-professional product. If you can afford it, hire a professional editor for this phase of testing, someone in the creator community or otherwise. The return on such an investment should not be underestimated.

For non-professional testers, the best ones are those you have not involved in the other phases of testing. Having already consumed your story in its shorthand form, testers might tend to gloss over story text when they should be focusing on it for this phase.

Whatever the case, this is the phase during which outside editing is the most valuable, and you should not pass up any opportunity to hear feedback or get fresh eyes on your product.

Outside testers should be directed based on their intended roles. A copy editor, one who only tests for spelling, grammar, and style, might be better deployed reading all of your text parts in the order they are given, completely decontextualized from the distraction of the story. This approach is faster and makes better use of the editor's time, something particularly important when paying a professional. Although editing contracts are often word-based, making an editor go through your parts in "play-order" may require some text parts to be processed multiple times (at higher cost) and will probably overlook other text parts.

A tester who edits for story and design will need more collaborative instruction. Expect a lot of back-and-forth as you convey your vision of the product. At this point in the testing, your work is almost entirely finished. There will be no need to direct testers toward certain aspects (and thus away from unfished aspects), so nothing more is needed beyond the general instruction to test the "writing" of the product.

Integrating Results

This is usually the easiest phase for which feedback can be integrated. An editor, particularly a professional who corrects for grammar and style, may simply return a fully-edited version, or return a document marked up with editing notes or change-tracking features.

Feedback on the story itself can be more involved. It may come down to adding additional exposition at key points on your map of text parts. Or it might require you to change the observations or point-of-view expressed by the protagonist to make the character more neutral.

The most complex integrations here are those that call for a change in pacing, since these far-reaching changes can affect all the underlying structure of scaffolds and gates.

■

Sow the Seeds of Adventure

This guide helps creators design the stories and underlying systems necessary for exciting single-player interactive adventures.

Build your story from the seed of a single idea, growing its branches into a fully-developed, exciting single-player experience.

Create and moderate challenges, rewards, and character growth. Test and improve the quality of your work on your own and provide a useful environment to facilitate outside testers' feedback.

Create adventures of your own style or use the SOLITAIRES system to make adventures compatible with those made by other creators.

For use with the 5th Edition *Player's Handbook* ®, *Monster Manual* ®, and *Dungeon Master's Guide* ®

Best when used with these additional supplements: *Sword Coast Adventurer's Guide* ®, *Volo's Guide to Monsters* ®, and *Xanathar's Guide to Everything* ®

Wraith Wright

GUILD