CREATING ENJOYABLE PUZZLES FOR ROLE PLAYING GAMES

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Michelle (The Game Master): *The last skeleton drops to the floor, destroyed! Nice work. Catching your breath, you look around the room and see both a wooden door to the west and an ornate door leading north.*

Eric (The Dwarven Cleric): *I want to check out the ornate door.*

Mikal (The Elven Thief): *Yeah, it's got to be all fancy for a reason.*

Vanessa (The Half-Gnome/Half-Troll Barbarian): *Sure, let's look at the door.*

Michelle (The Game Master): *You approach the door, and a mouth magically appears and bellows, "All those who pass through me must answer now my riddles three!"*

Vanessa (The easily-distracted 27 year old): *...Oh. You know, I think I'm gonna get a drink.*

Eric (The frustrated father of two): *Yeah, Mikal... you're the puzzle guy, right? I gotta take a smoke, anyway.*

Mikal (The suddenly lonely): *Um. Okay. So what's the riddle?*

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*F*antasy roleplaying games are an extension of classic mythology and literature. They present an opportunity to create stories like the tales of fantasy and adventure found in Tolkien and the ancient legends. It's no wonder that riddles and puzzles have become a staple of classic adventure design. Few DMs can resist the thought of stumping their players with a brain-teaser that rivals the Riddle of the Sphinx. After all, history has as much a place in high fantasy as swordplay.

The difference between solving puzzles and triumphing in combat is one of player skill versus character ability. Your players don't have to be experts at sword fighting to cleave a dragon in two. Dice, combat mechanics, and special powers are able to

model heroic battles. This is probably for the best—it would be difficult to find players if they had to pass a physical exam before getting to sit at the table.

However, a character's ability to think through puzzles and riddles cannot be satisfyingly modeled by dice. Puzzles in roleplaying games will be solved by players, not characters. A puzzle or riddle is a metagame challenge that requires a careful DM and interested players to work. Many players decide they can't figure out puzzles before even trying, and give up immediately.

Good puzzle design challenges these impulses. It gets players interested in the solution before they even know they are looking at a puzzle. Presented in this article are three ways to make players enjoy solving every challenge you throw at them.

MAKE ORGANIC PUZZLES

When designing adventures, it's imperative you create a reason for the puzzle to exist logically in the environment. Why did the dungeon's creator build a door with three concentric puzzle rings, instead of just rigging another spiked pit trap? A puzzle which isn't integrated with its environment disrupts the flow of gameplay and breaks immersion. Instead, allow your players to explore the site in which the puzzle exists, possibly with the promise of reward already in sight. Let them discover the room's secret. The search will pique the players' interest long before the words "riddle" or "puzzle" ever reaches their ears.

For example, instead of a *magic mouth* guarding a riddle-locked door, imagine a room with no discernable exit but the door the players entered through. A statue in the center of the room points to the brick wall, and is holding up three fingers. This esoteric environment contains an unusual spectacle that will hopefully encourage your players to dig deeper. Why is the statue pointing to a blank wall? Why is it holding up three fingers?

Here's the solution. If your players search carefully, whether through skill checks or by asking you questions, they can reveal that the large bricks in the wall are stacked to the ceiling five high. This information is an audio clue; you have now attached a number to the bricks, just like a number was attached to the statue's fingers. Auditory connection is a useful way to link clues to each other. The answer to this particular puzzle is to go to the wall where the statue is pointing and push on the third row of bricks, revealing the secret treasure hidden inside the brick wall.

ERR ON THE EASY SIDE

It's very easy to make hard puzzles—even unsolvable ones—because puzzles always seem easiest to their creators. Many GMs, thinking that their riddles are too simplistic, try cram in countless complications and red herrings to conceal its "easy" solution. It's important to remember that the creator of the puzzle is looking at the answer from the inside out. Since the GM holds all the cards, they can draw conclusions from clues the players might never learn. The players will only get information in small portions, and they will probably gloss over vital facts if they're presented too obliquely.

Even an overly simplistic puzzle can be fun. Players like to win, and an easy victory can always be tempered by a

diabolically difficult encounter later on. It's far better than stopping the game's action dead in its tracks.

Preparing clues to help solve your most difficult puzzles is also worth consideration. It may seem tempting to have players roll Intelligence checks to receive these clues, but remember that a failed check backs you into a corner. You *want* them to solve the puzzle, and introducing luck into the equation probably won't make your brain-teaser any more enjoyable. Simply providing a clue when needed, either through the aid of a helpful NPC or an out-of-character discussion, is almost always a better alternative.

don't set your solution in stone

Most Game Masters feel an urge to give their puzzle only one "correct" answer, denying any other plausible answers their players provide. This is possibly due to embarrassment; they may not want to admit they hadn't considered all the possibilities.

Don't. If the PCs have a spell, a class feature, or a magic item that allows them to solve the puzzle in a way you didn't predict, just roll with it. Let them succeed, and applaud their creativity. This sort of ingenuity is what sets tabletop games apart from all other kinds of gaming. Revel in it.

example puzzle

Michelle, the example GM presented at the beginning of this article, unintentionally created a pretty lackluster experience for her players. The door outright presented itself as a puzzle. There was no environment to explore, and no promise of reward or any type of benefit to solving the puzzle, other than to continue exploring. "In order to keep playing, you must solve my riddle."

The puzzle presented below follows the three puzzle-making tips discussed above. Going forward, the puzzle in the beginning of this article will be referred to as the "riddle door puzzle" and the following example as the "alphabet puzzle."

"You enter the wizard's study. At the far end of the room is a large desk, covered in weathered parchment. On top of the stack of scrolls is a silver hand mirror. To the left of the mirror is a metal box the size of a treasure chest, without hinges or a hole for a key. Beside the desk is a bookshelf with 26 books. Each book has a letter of th alphabet on it, and they are arranged in reverse alphabetical order, starting with Z at the top left and ending with A in the bottom right.

The immediate difference between the riddle door puzzle and the alphabet puzzle is that the alphabet puzzle does not introduce itself as a puzzle. It may be somewhat obvious, based on the elements in the room, but it's less overt than a talking door. Player characters are instead presented with an environment with some interesting elements to pique their curiosity.

Second, the alphabet puzzle includes the promise of a reward. The players' only reason to solve the riddle door puzzle was to progress deeper in the dungeon, but the alphabet puzzle deliberately shows the players a metal box "the size of a treasure chest". If the promise of treasure doesn't catch your players' attention, experiment with other rewards. There are many ways you can make the reward obvious in the puzzles that you create.

The papers on the desk are all written in Common, but are written backwards. The mirror hints that the players should read

the text in reverse. You can also create props to make the puzzle more immersive. For example, a sheet of alchemical ingredients with all the text reversed might serve this puzzle. Allowing the players to study a physical artifact will help visual thinkers wrap their heads around your puzzle.

At this point, the players will understand they are solving a puzzle, but hopefully are curious enough to keep even the least puzzle-centric gamers interested. The adventurers now have backwards notations, as well as a bookshelf with backward alphabetical books. To put it simply, they will overthink the puzzle immediately. Let them. If they come up with a solution more interesting than yours, all the better.

The "real" solution to the alphabet puzzle is in the bookshelf, not the backwards letters. If the players investigate the bookshelf, they find that the books are unable to move away from the bookshelf—in fact, they are part of the bookshelf itself, carved from the wood. Touching a book causes the letter on its back to glow with magic light for 10 seconds. If more books are touched, the light glows on each book, and all books remain illuminated until 10 seconds after the last book was touched.

This presents the mechanic of the alphabet puzzle: the bookshelf is magical and the letters glow and time out when pressed, but they are linked together. This is demonstrated by the first letter continuing to glow as others are activated.

The alphabet puzzle is solved by activating the letters N > E > P > O, which is simply OPEN spelled backwards. Though this may seem like an easy password, the point of the puzzle is not to guess the specific password, but to figure out the trick to solving it. If your players have figured out the trick, but are struggling to guess the password, consider allowing any cogent guesses (like "Y > E > K" or "K > C > O > L > N > U") to open the box.

PUZZLE RESOURCES

Game Masters who want to create better puzzles have many resources to draw on, even outside the world of roleplaying games. Anthologies of puzzles, riddles, and logic problems can be mined for inspiration, and many puzzles can be stolen wholesale. Riddles from fantasy literature and mythology can also be used, but might be too obvious, since many gamers started roleplaying because of fantasy books.

Point-and-click adventure games, like Roberta Williams' *King's Quest* series, have an abundant wealth of puzzles, already designed for gamers. The website http://www.adventuregamestudio.co.uk/ is an online collection of fan-created puzzle games, many of which can be directly imported into your home campaign.

FINAL WORDS

Puzzles can add a lot of fun to your tabletop sessions, and can be one of the most rewarding things to design when building adventures. It can also be frustrating to take the time to create puzzles that your players end up not enjoying. It is a wise decision to start small, designing a small amount of puzzles that may seem too easy. This will help gauge the table's interest in this sort of addition to the game.

Ultimately, there will be some groups that simply don't enjoy puzzles. Try not to force the issue, it won't end well. The game belongs to the whole table, and it will be more enjoyable for everyone involved if you facilitate play that interests all of your players. Just don't forget to have fun yourself. Try and find a happy medium between catering to your players and indulging your own interests. And be patient—learning how to make a table of gamers happy might be the toughest puzzle of them all.