HOW TO WRITE ADVENTURE MODULES THAT DON'T SUCK

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Autographs

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How to Write Adventure Modules that Don't Suck

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Introduction

What you hold in your hands is a very unique product. This is the codification of some of the best ideas of the world's finest role-playing game designers in what they think is important in putting together an encounter.

Not only are their articles a must read for the new game designer; the example encounters they present offer the best in cutting edge game design.

This is the primer that every game designer needs to have on his bookshelf. I've been in the role-playing game design industry for over forty years. In many of those years my products were the best selling products out that year. I learned many new things from this set of articles. Things that have improved my design skills; so I know they will improve yours as well.

I know you will find yourself mining this product over and over again for fresh ideas.

James M. Ward

Summer of 2016

Table of Contents

Adventures in Context

by Jobe Bittman

Now that I have a number of published credits under my belt, I find that some overarching ideas about adventure design have come to roost in my brain and refuse to leave. In particular, the concept of context demands attention with its endless tongue-clicking and chatter. However, I should probably first elucidate what I mean by context as it pertains to adventure design.

Adventure context is the description of the circumstances that surround and tie together the disparate elements in an adventure. This context comes in the form of rules and descriptive text. Non-player characters are contextualized by backstory. New game rules included in an adventure can offer context for interpreting the story within a game system. Someone coined the terms "crunch" and "fluff" to describe this dichotomy, where crunch refers to the essential game mechanics and rules, and fluff is the non-essential description of the non-player character motivations, the backstory, and the events leading up to the actual adventure. My concern is mostly in gradations of fluff. How much backstory is useful? What is the story of the adventure? And whose job is it to tell the story anyway?

As adventure writers, we have a very unusual relationship with our narratives. I've been toying with the idea that all writing has some degree of separation from the narrator. At the base level, there is the abstract story, the imaginary or real series of events that is being interpreted. Fiction writing occurs at the first degree of separation. It's pure context. The fiction writer dictates the narrative directly to the reader who reimagines the story in his or her head colored by individual experience. The reader is directly immersed in the story.

A playwright or screenwriter works at the second degree of separation from narrator. After the screenplay is written, it is interpreted by a director, cast, and crew to the television audience. As the narrative passes through each individual, there is a creative or imaginative transformation of the story. For example, the set, lighting, and camera angles work together to color the perception of the narrative, just as actors imbue their characters with life through facial expressions. voice intonation, and body language. The people involved in the production create context for the audience that is out of the writer's control.

Adventure writers operate at a level three times removed. The adventure's text and game mechanics are studied by a referee who interprets the story elements at the game table. Referees might regurgitate the adventure text and story elements as written, or they might resynthesize the narrative on-the-fly as their skills of improvisation and reading comprehension allow. After the referee speaks the narrative aloud, the players voice the actions of their characters as dictated by their imaginations, bounded by game system rules and the randomization of dice. Player responses are directly incorporated into the narrative or reintegrated by the referee's running commentary on the action in a feedback loop of context.

Non-player characters are contextualized by backstory. New game rules included in an adventure can offer context for interpreting the story within a game system.

Why is any of this important? I think adventure writers need to better understand their roles. Most inspiration for games comes from fiction, so it's hard to keep yourself from supplying context, but restrain yourself you must. You have no direct control over the actions of the players who are your adventure's protagonists. This is what makes your job distinctly different from that of the playwright and fiction writer. A good adventure should build an imaginative space for game participants to play out their unique stories. Focus on creating intensely visual descriptions of person, place, and thing. Lay down the broad strokes of the narrative and set up the basic motivations of off-screen interlocutors. You are

setting a stage upon which unknown actors will improvise their myriad struggles.

As a game designer, I receive a great deal of satisfaction from reading gameplay reports of my published adventures. I judge the success of a design by noting which game elements resonate between reports. Delivering game elements from the abstract story in your head into the interpreted story as it plays at the table is a difficult job, but should be your primary goal. The best way to accomplish this is to concentrate on context.

Context is a spectrum, and you must find the frequency that matches your design goals. Old Judge's Guild adventure modules, such as Tegel Manor, fall on the low-end of this spectrum. These modules read more like campaign notes than full-fledged adventures. Typically, they have a detailed map, sometimes a summary of major characters, and an index of keyed locations with notes about monsters and treasure with little rhyme or reason. Why is that hydra cohabitating with a band of orcs?

On the upper end of the context spectrum, we have the modern "adventure path" which is a serialized adventure. Most of the adventures released today by Paizo and Wizards of the Coast fall under this rubric. A serialized adventure has a high amount of context. The plot lines are fully formed and do not give the referee much leeway to improvise. Player choice is also negated because each adventure presupposes the scripted conclusion of the previous one. As a narrative framework, I find the adventure path abhorrent. We should strive to be adventure writers, not authors of fiction. The sweet spot lies closer to the low end of the spectrum.

Striking the right balance is tough. Reviewers often criticize adventures for having a backstory that players will never know. Gratuitous fluff is likely to bore your readers (it sure annoys me). It might be interesting to know that Prince Vreelun was secretly sired by a vampire (perhaps the youth has become gripped with strange desires that the players eventually learn), but no one probably cares about his father's lineage or the hierarchy of vampire society unless it is pertinent to the story. Adventure text should be concise and useful in play. If a player will never know the information, it's safe to exclude. Set the stage, and gracefully bow out before the curtains rise.

Exeunt.

Encounter: "Dead Man's Chest"

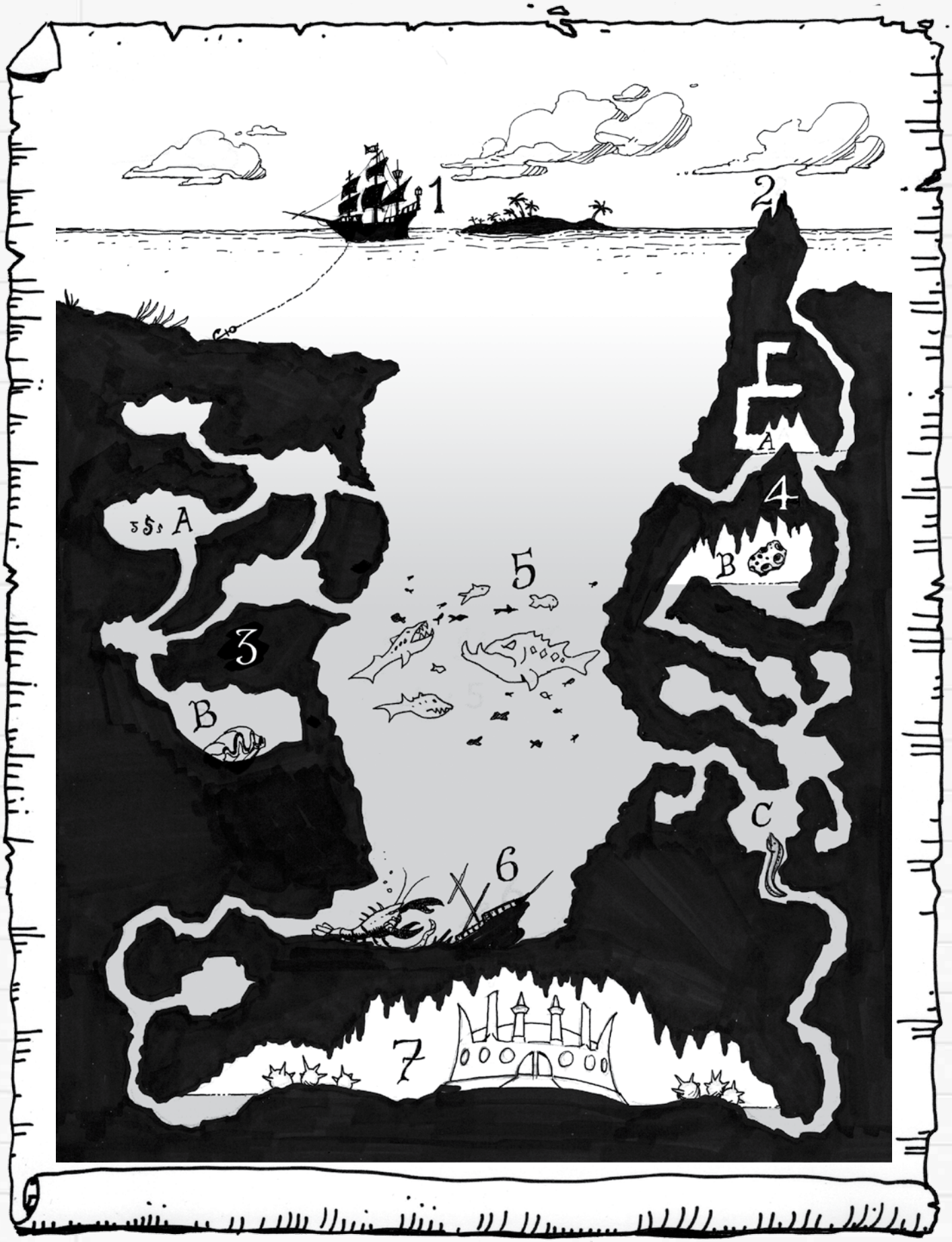
A level 1 adventure

by Jobe Bittman

Bor squinted in the light as he stepped on deck. "Flake out the anchor, boys," the captain bellowed down from the aftercastle. "This is the place." The deck heaved as salt spray showered the groggy adventurer. "Get your men up here, Bor. It's show time." Other than his brother, Shan, Bor wasn't sure he could count on a single member of the cutpurses and mercenaries he managed to enlist. They glumly trudged up the stairs. Shan was convinced the dwarf would be able to sniff out the treasure, but Bor argued the dwarf's nose would be worthless underwater.

Once Bor's men assembled, the captain again recounted the story of the night the *Damsel Rose* sank: the haunting song from Siren's Rock over yonder, all hands lost, the hold fat with golden doubloons. "Recover those chests and you'll have your shares equal to the crew." The captain motioned to crates nears Bor's feet. "Each of you put on a **weight belt**. It will help you reach the bottom faster." The quartermaster handed Bor several dull rods. "These are **glow rods**. Strike them against a rock and they'll light up like torches." Finally, the bosun, Smee, snapped open a small leather case. Several **iridescent scales** shimmered inside. "As long as you keep a scale under your tongue, you won't need air and the pressure of the deep sea won't hardly bother you."

"You've got three days. Three days until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we pull anchor."

1. **The Salty Bastard**: The ship is anchored a safe distance from Siren's Rock. Sailors on watch rotate every 8 hours. The guard fires bolts at anything that approaches the boat other than the PCs. A heavy winch is bolted to the foredeck. Its reinforced rope, tipped by a hook, can extend the 200 fathoms to the bottom of the trench to recover booty.

Sailors (54): Init +0; Atk cutlass +1 melee (1d8+1) or crossbow (1d6); AC 14; HD 1d8; hp 5; MV 25'; Act 1d20; SV Fort +1, Ref +1, Will +0; AL N.

2. **Siren's Rock**: Man-eating, corrupted mermaids entice passing vessels to dash themselves on the shoals (starboard on map). These warped mermaids are known as melusine. They have two tails, jet black, saucer-like eyes, and poisonous claws. Above water, melusine enchant the minds of men with an alluring siren's song. Failing one save, the victim is charmed. Failing thrice, the victim is bound to servitude until the melusine is slain.

Melusine (1d3): Init +1; Atk claw +3 melee (1d4 plus poison); AC 14; HD 2d6; hp 7; MV 5' or swim 40'; Act 1d20; SP poison (DC 10 Fort save or paralyzed 1 round), siren song (100' out of water only, DC 15 Will save or charmed 1d3 rounds); SV Fort +0, Ref +2, Will +0; AL C.

3. **Merfolk Enclave**: The stoic merfolk defend their ancestral caves, but are not aggressive. They allow free passage through their caves if the PCs agree to infiltrate the Siren's Lair and destroy the Singing Stone that has corrupted their maidens. 2d6 mermen guard each entrance. and 1d6 merfolk inhabit each chamber. **(A)** Trained seahorse mounts (swim 60') and lances can be acquired here. **(B)** A huge black pearl (200 gp) rests inside a giant oyster. Reaching inside causes the bivalve to rapidly close (DC 20 Ref save to snatch pearl, else DC 15 Ref save to avoid 1d6 damage). Merfolk will not allow the oyster to be smashed open.

Merman: Init +0; Atk trident +2 melee (1d10) or fishing net +1 melee (immobilized until DC 10 Reflex save); AC 13; HD 2d8; hp 9; MV 5' or swim 30'; Act 1d20; SP telepathy, fish command; SV Fort +1, Ref +2, Will -1; AL N.

4. **Siren's Lair**: The Singing Stone, a sentient meteorite from Aldebaran, commands this area. The alien stone emits malign radiation that has transformed the mermaidens into melusine thralls. 2d8 melusine guard each entry, and 1d4 melusine infest each watery cave (see Area 2 for stats). **(A)** Seamen not immediately eaten are brought here to work as slaves in the chambers above. The topmost chamber contains a cache of 2,237 sand dollars, a fortune in currency of the sea kingdom, yet worthless on land. **(B)** The Singing Stone floats in here, attempting to dominate anyone who enters. **(C)** An enormous eel glares from a hole in the cave floor. The eel won't attack those who cling close to the walls above. Slaying the eel allows entry to the secret passage to Area 7.

Melusine: Init +1; Atk claw +3 melee (1d4 plus poison); AC 14; HD 2d6; hp 7; MV 5' or swim 40'; Act 1d20; SP poison (DC 10 Fort save or paralyzed 1 round), siren song (100' out of water only, DC 15 Will save or charmed 1d3 rounds); SV Fort +0, Ref +2, Will +0; AL C.

Singing Stone: Init -2; Atk force bolt +4 missile fire (range 60', 1d4+2); AC 16; HD 3d8+8; hp 24; MV fly 30'; Act 1d20; SP corrupt (DC 15 Will save or charmed 1d6 rounds + 1 minor corruption), immune to sleep, poison, and mind-altering spells; SV Fort +6, Ref -2, Will +5; AL C.

Giant Eel: Init +6; Atk bite +6 melee (1d6+2); AC 14; HD 3d8; hp 14; MV swim 40'; Act 2d20; SV Fort +3, Ref +7, Will +1; AL N

5. **Deadly School**: Fanged, predatory fish patrol this area for fresh meat. Swimmers attract 1d3+1 speartooths. In every combat round that a PC is wounded, another larger speartooth joins the fray. Added fish have +1d8 hp than the previous fish.

Speartooth (1d3+): Init -2 Atk spear +2 melee (1d8+3); AC 13; HD 1d8+2; hp 7; MV swim 40'; Act 1d20; SV Fort +2, Ref +3, Will -2; AL C.

6. **Sunken Ship:** The *Damsel Rose* rests on her side with a hull breach large enough to swim through. Unfortunately, her fabled charms have been plundered by the denizens of Area 7. A trail of gold and silver coins leads into a nearby cave. A 30' long goo goo muck lurks within the murky opening, all clacking crab claws and undulating tentacles. The beast is too large to get into the

Damsel should the PCs hide there.

Goo Goo Muck: Init +5; Atk bite +6 melee (1d8) or pincer +4 melee (1d6 + grab); AC 16; HD 6d6+6; hp 27; MV swim 40'; Act 2d20; SP squid ink (darkness, 40'); SV Fort +5, Ref +6, Will +4; AL C.

THE END

Jobe has worked as a freelance RPG writer and game designer for a while now. His writing has appeared in publications by Wizards of the Coast, Goodman Games, Lamentations of the Flame Princess, and Kobold Press. Jobe has been privileged with the opportunity to work with professional writers and gaming legends, such as James Ward (*Metamorphosis Alpha*) and Steve Crompton (*Grimtooth's Traps*). Goodman Games recently allowed Jobe the chance to help with a new RPG adaption of Jack Vance's *Dying Earth*.

Players Make Your World Go 'Round!

by Mike Breault

For my money, nothing kills a gaming session faster than a game master who isn't dedicated to engaging and entertaining his or her players. Every adventure, every encounter, every minute of a gaming session should be crafted with your players in mind. Player engagement is what keeps your friends clamoring for you to GM your group's next session. Fail on that implicit promise and the requests for your services will die out to a reluctant whimper.

"How to deliver on that promise, session after session and week after week?" you cry, eyeing the Black Pit of Design Despair under your feet. That depends a lot on your players and your understanding of what they want in a gaming session. So, first of all, what sorts of players are you creating adventures for and what do they want?

The Four Types of Gamers:

In any group of gamers, there is a healthy mix of interests and a variety of rewards those players want out of a gaming session. In the mid-1990s, game designer and researcher Richard Bartle proposed that video game players fell into four primary categories – Achievers, Explorers, Socializers, or Killers. Read the descriptions below and you will see that these categories work just as well for players of pen-and-paper RPGs.

Achievers like to gain levels, scarf up equipment, and boost their stats. If there is a way to demonstrate their skills and accomplishments, to show they are better than other players, they are all over it. They jump at any opportunity to gain slightly better weapons or armor or to bump up a stat that gives them even a tiny advantage in gameplay.

Explorers enjoy poking into the nooks and crannies of a game world, uncovering every bit of lore and information, no matter how trivial. They yearn to see places that few if any have seen before them. No villager is too boring for an Explorer to pass up a discussion.

Socializers are gamers whose primary interest is interacting with other players. Sitting around the gaming table, these folks prefer to interact (negatively or positively) with their fellow gamers rather than the NPCs populating the game world. Everyone who plays face-to-face RPGs has some Socializer tendencies.

Killers are the final category, but that name is a little misleading. This group includes not just gamers who love to cause grief to other players but also those whose primary goal is to help other players learn the game and succeed. Griefers and evangelists both fit into the Killer category. Players who want to do nothing more than kill monsters and NPCs in games fall into this category as well.

While Bartle created this list to describe the

players he encountered in digital games, these categories describe the players in face-to-face gaming groups just as well. Think about the people you game with; chances are they all fall into one or more of the above groups.

But these categories are not exclusive; no one is 100% Achiever or Explorer or Socializer or Killer. We are all a mix of these four player types, though in different proportions for each of us. Not only that, but this mix can vary from session to session, depending on the player's mood and who else is sitting around the gaming table that night.

So my first suggestion for adventure-creation success is to keep these four player types in the forefront of your mind as you write your adventure. Every encounter you design, ask yourself which player type(s) will enjoy it. Keep a record as you write, tracking how many encounters and events in your adventure will appeal to each player type.

Give Achievers items to find, buffs to their stats, accomplishments to boast of. Tuck away hidden areas and hard-to-find items in your adventure that only Explorers will locate. Ensure that the challenges your adventure presents give plenty of opportunity for Socializers to interact with their fellow players, arguing, cajoling, and rejoicing. And while Killers often make their own fun, build in plenty of opportunities for them to engage in wanton mayhem and even betray (or rescue) their party mates.

By consciously creating your adventures to cater to the desires of each player type, you will find yourself deliberately designing with your players in mind. This will greatly increase the engagement and excitement players feel while experiencing your designs. While this may seem like obvious advice, it always surprises me to see designers who consider only what *they* want in an adventure, presenting players with a monolithic experience that caters to just one gameplay style. Building your adventures for everyone is one way to ensure they don't suck.

And when you are done, review your design with an eye toward how much is there for each type of player. At one game company where I worked, we gave a name to each player type (Bob the Explorer, Janet the Killer, and so on). When we reviewed our work, we asked questions like, "What is there for Bob here?" and "How much would Janet enjoy this part of the adventure?" Concentrating on player types really helped us focus on what our players wanted. Try it; it will help assure that each player will leave your games feeling satisfied.

Encourage Player Interaction

You may have heard that the most interesting conversations (whether in real life, movies, novels, or games) are confrontational ones. No one wants to hear two people blandly agreeing with each other. But start a good argument and we are all ears. Conflict is engaging; agreement is boring.

Employ the same principle when designing your adventures. Always look for ways to design in opportunities for player interaction. You are not looking to start fistfights or Mountain Dew-spraying incidents, just to stir up healthy debate among your players. If players are disputing which way to go or which option to choose, that says you are presenting them with intriguing options that are worth arguing over. Good work!

Once again you must keep in mind the different players types and think about how they fit with your gaming group. Set up situations to offer options that will appeal to different players. If one path or choice appeals to Explorers and Achievers, while the other appeals to Killers and Socializers, you have the makings of an interesting discussion that will engage everyone. We will explore this in more detail in the encounter that accompanies this article.

Your adventures should encourage player interaction not just during non-violent situations, but also during combat. Make at least some of your battles exercises in tactical cooperation by players. Ambushes that require instant reactions from players are always good crucibles to test player cooperation and decision-making. There is nothing like two players simultaneously screaming for help to get the party's blood boiling. That is when players find out who their real friends really are. The post-battle discussions after these sorts of encounters are engaging for all concerned.

Another great way to encourage player interaction during battles is to let players get the jump on

their foes. Let them hear voices arguing from the woods off the path. If they are smart (and of course your players are), they will send someone to sneak up on the enemy and scout them out. That player will come back with a report on the situation. The group will discuss tactics, actively engaging with each other in figuring out the best way to tackle the problem. Successfully executing those plans is a great exercise in team building.

Also, be sure to vary the foes present in enemy groups. A uniform group of 50 generic goblins is really nothing more than a chore for players to hack their way through, with little sense of achievement or reward. But a group of 30 goblins being whipped forward by three orcs on wargs and directed by an ogre mage with a two-headed troll bodyguard is another thing altogether. When there are a variety of foes to battle, players have to make fast tactical decisions about who to tackle first and how to go about it. This requires speedy consultation and cooperation, all in the midst of the pressure-cooker of battle. Do we get rid of the cannon fodder first and hope the ogre mage doesn't turn us all into slugs? Or do we assault the leaders of the horde and leave the underlings for later? And good God, who's going to take on that troll? These are the times that try players' souls; make sure you have lots of them!

Having varied groups of monsters with definite social structures not only makes your monsters feel like a realistic part of the game world, it also gives you reasonable holders of the best loot. Those goblins might not have much more than a stale, half-chewed piece of bread each, but that ogre mage is sure to have some goodies. And do not leave treasure determination to a random roll after the monsters are dead! There are few things that ruin players' suspension of disbelief more than being told they found +5 chainmail on an orc but for some reason he was not wearing it. Figure

Everything was going exactly as Gerald had forseen.

out what loot makes sense for the members of that horde, give it to them, and make sure they use it during the battle.

This is not to say that all your battles have to be carefully choreographed. There is certainly a place for the mindless charge into combat, senseless hacking and slashing, and unrestrained hooting and hollering after foes' heads have been detached from their bodies. Vary the complexity of your battles for greatest effect. Effortlessly hewing a pack of giant rats into spatters of gore can be great fun. But 10 consecutive encounters like that is a recipe for player boredom and an early end to the gaming session. Use those sorts of fights as palate cleansers to set the stage for the battles that will really test your players' smarts and cooperation.

Give Players Choices

Offering players choices goes hand-in-hand with encouraging player interaction. Any time a party reaches a decision point, that is an opportunity for a lively discussion. If you offer your players multiple paths to take or strategies to choose from, and you make each choice equally attractive, then you have created an interesting situation. The GM can present the choices to the players then sit back and grin while the players debate, argue, and hurl Cheetos at each other.

Again, craft your adventures with player types in mind. If a party comes to a fork in a forest path, the players have a decision to make. Ensure that it is an intriguing one. Perhaps down one path they see the outskirts of a small village, while down the other are hints of ancient ruins. Which path to take, or do we split up and explore each? Socializers and Killers will likely want to head to the village, for very different reasons. Explorers and Achievers will argue for the path to the ruins. Depending on the level of amity and cooperation among your players, they may compromise on one path or the other, or they may decide to split up and venture down both.

Keep your players' experience at the forefront of your mind when designing dungeons as well. Do not settle for the standard 10-foot-wide corridors stretching out in mind-numbing, orthogonal symmetry with doors off to each side at regular intervals. You can stretch your dungeon-design muscles in lots of ways.

Vary the widths of your corridors. Your players have gotten used to the standard 10-footers? Have them turn a corner and see a 20-foot-wide corridor stretching in front of them. Now they have to adjust their marching order to cover that added width, putting more of the party at risk and increasing the tension and danger for everyone. Toss in some 30-foot-wide (or wider) corridors and some 5-foot-wide ones as players venture deeper into your dungeon and you have a group that's never sure what they'll see around the next corner. This uncertainty ratchets up the tension and encourages player interaction, as they discuss how to handle each new situation.

Vary the experience further by having corridors connect to huge rooms with multiple exits. Clutter these cavernous spaces with debris, statues, etc. so that line-of-sight is limited. Anything could jump out at players as they explore. Make them choose from among several attractive paths that engender indecision and discussion. Design your dungeons to deliver player choice and to produce the player interactions that are at the core of every fun gaming session.

Always look for ways to design in opportunities for player interaction. These are the times that try players' souls; make sure you have lots of them!

When you give players interesting choices to make ... the adventure feels more like a collaboration between the players and the Game Master.

When you give players interesting choices to make – which path to take, how to react to a certain character or situation, and so on – the adventure feels more like a collaboration between the players and the game master. Players are much more engaged in a gaming session when they feel their decisions affect the course of the story and adventure.

Bring On the Challenges

Think about the opening sequence to the first *Indiana Jones* movie. Indy lusted after a golden statue legend placed in an ancient temple deep

in the jungle. He hacked his way through the trackless jungle and found the temple. Then he had to navigate the traps set by long-dead priests to finally reach the storied idol. He cleverly tried to substitute a bag of sand for the idol on its pedestal, but the ancients outsmarted him and their final, deadliest trap was sprung. Indy escaped with the statue at last, only to have it taken from him by a rival waiting outside the temple entrance.

Indiana Jones had to be quick thinking and fast on his feet. He used his brain and his body to reach his goal. Demand the same of your players. Any game master can just hand out treasure and items to players, in stereotypical Monty Haul fashion. But if you make your players work for it, think for it and struggle for it, then you will have created an adventure they will remember and rewards they will value.

Every worthwhile treasure your players gain should be pried from your grasp with great effort. If it gives them a noticeable benefit, then it should be acquired only after risking life and limb. Make sure that only the toughest monsters have your best loot. Force your players to be clever and work together to survive.

The challenges players talk about for weeks are those that combine all the elements mentioned above. Situations that require both brainpower and brawn get players firing on all cylinders. Present players with challenges that require quick thinking and rapid negotiations in order to decide upon tactics. Then they wade into the thick of things, with might and magic, to defeat the enemy. Put pressure on the group to cooperate to overcome the challenges and battles you send their way; make them collaborate or die.

As you design your adventures, creating obstacles and challenges, always think of Indiana Jones. You want your players to feel the tension he felt during his adventures, as well as the exhilaration he experienced after overcoming each danger.

In Conclusion

To make exciting adventures that engage all the players in your group, focus on the experience you are creating for them. Always keep your audience in mind as you write. Tailor your adventure to your players, give them lots of opportunities for decisions and interaction, present them with intriguing choices, and challenge their skills and minds at every turn. You will end up creating adventures that players will remember for a long, long time.

Encounter: "The Doom of Riego"

by Mike Breault

Background

This encounter is set in the Forest of Riego. The forest is surrounded on three sides by unclimbable mountains. On the fourth side is a swamp that stretches to the south of the forest, passable only via a narrow track that winds its way through a mile of dangerous bogs before finally ending at the village of Vaara, just under the eaves of the forest.

The village consists of about 25 rough huts, a small tavern, and a run-down smithy. It contains a total of about 100 inhabitants but only 10 or fewer are evident at any time. The muddy streets suck at boots and horses' hooves. Children dressed in rags run between the houses.

Faint traces of many more huts can be seen extending far beyond the current extent of the village. All have succumbed to nature, some swallowed up by the dismal wetlands, others overrun by the encroaching forest. Vaara has been in decline for decades, ever since the fall of Castle Riego.

For over 700 years, the Riego clan ruled the lands between the mountains and for leagues south of Vaara. Their castle stronghold stood proud and tall in the midst of airy woodlands. The forest was tame then, cut back 500 paces from the castle walls and regularly culled for firewood and building materials. Legend says the forest was more like a park in those days and the swamp had been drained to make way for fields that fed Vaara and the castle.

Clan Riego met its doom 100 years ago. None alive today can tell how it happened, but those who will talk about the old days (the tavernkeeper is one, with the proper encouragement) say that the end came suddenly. They hint at a curse, perhaps a demon, maybe a fell disease. Wild guesses are all the players will hear. Since the clan's fall, the forest has grown back with a vengeance, the swamp drowned all the fields, and Vaara declined as folk fled the region.

This background can be conveyed only by the tavernkeeper in town, and only if the players purchase ale in his tavern (see below).

The party has been drawn to this long-neglected part of the world by a rumor overheard in a tavern in a far-distant city. A crowd of adventurers gathered around an inebriated man in a scholar's robes as he entertained his listeners with tales of the treasures to be found in an ancient fortress deep within the accursed Forest of Riego. The scholar knows no details of why the forest is cursed, just that all agree upon this.

The Village:

As the adventurers approach the forest, describe for them their passage through the swamp and their approach to the village of Vaara in the shadow of the forest.

They find the village adults sullen and unwelcoming. Most take one look at strangers and step into their house, quickly locking the door behind them. No one speaks to the players if they try to engage in conversation. No doors open if knocked upon.

The smithy's forge is cold and filled with debris. The cobwebs and dust that cover every surface attest to the long absence of the shop's former owner.

The only open door players find in the village is that of the tavern. Inside, the low-ceilinged room is dingy, smoky, and dank. Mold and water stains have long since become the dominant wall decorations. Gray smoke wafts out of the inadequately ventilated fireplace to join with the haze from wall torches and cast a pall over the room. A few sullen patrons huddle over their mugs, sitting alone at various ill-crafted tables. They glance up at the PCs then determinedly stare into their ale, ignoring the party.

The tavernkeeper ignores all queries unless the party members purchase large quantities of ale. Then he curtly answers questions and relates the above backstory while wiping dented mugs with a dirty rag. To questions about how to reach the castle, he spits and says that a path leads into the forest from the northern edge of the village. He glares if asked about treasure in the castle ruins, refusing to answer. He is equally obstinate if asked about the dangers of the forest. The info about the path to the forest is his sole concession toward aiding the players.

The Forest:

The travelers' first impression of the forest is one of gloom. A closer look adds decay, foreboding, and a grim silence to that initial feeling. A perpetual twilight rules under the canopy of the massive, gnarled trees. No birdsong breaks the silence, though furtive sounds from unseen creatures come from the dense undergrowth.

The path into the woods from the village is more of an animal trail than a human pathway. Travelers are forced to march single file as the tree trunks and underbrush press in closely. Line of sight along the trail is never more than 50 feet, often much less. Every so often, a dry watercourse cuts across the path. In these places, a stone roadway has been revealed by rain runoff that washed away a century's worth of dirt.

The GM is free to add random encounters with large animals during the party's time in the forest. Deer may unexpectedly leap across the path, the howling of wolves will sometimes be heard, and an encounter with a large bear (perhaps triggered by the appearance of a cub) may also occur.

Two hours of travel along the path finds the party deep into the Forest of Riego. The gloom is suddenly relieved by the path widening and the trees falling back to either side. The party has come to a three-way fork in the path. The paths forward quickly diverge and all three vanish into the dense forest growth after only a few dozen feet. The leftmost path seems to head slightly downhill, the middle one looks fairly level, and the rightmost trail heads slightly uphill.

Leftmost Path:

If one or more of the PCs take the left path, they find it winds around, going gradually downhill and generally northwest, for 30 minutes of travel before arriving at a charcoal burner's hut. Sitting by the mound of dirt within which wood burns into charcoal is an old, toothless man. He is startled to see the party, but unlike the villagers is only too eager to talk. He says his name is Farum Riego, the last living member of that clan. He can tell them any of the history of the forest listed in "Background" above, adding that his father told him that a curse struck down the Riego Clan in a single day, wiping out half the population of Vaara as well.

If the PCs tell him they are looking for the castle ruins, he shakes his head and warns them away. If they insist, he tells them they can either continue on the path or they can go back to the three-way fork and take the rightmost path.

Continuing past the coalburner takes the PCs on a long curve to the right that connects to the rightmost path at the fork, just before the bridge (see "Rightmost Path" below).

Middle Path:

The middle path meanders northward for about two miles. At this point, the PCs begin to hear growling and see brief glimpses of gray shapes in the underbrush. If they continue down the path, 15 minutes later they are attacked by a pack of gray wolves led by a giant alpha wolf. The number of wolves is left to the GM but should be commensurate with the strength of the party. This should be a dangerous encounter. Party members should need to cooperate and coordinate their efforts to avoid being overwhelmed.

If the PCs survive the ambush, continuing a little way down the path leads to the wolves' den. Outside the den are piles of bones, mostly deer but some human as well. If the piles are searched, the PCs find a scattering of coins of various denominations as well as a couple of unbroken potion bottles, several somewhat damaged coats of chainmail armor, and a sword of minor magical ability.

Past the den, the path gently curves to the right and eventually connects to the rightmost path at the fork, just before the bridge (see below).

Rightmost Path:

This path rises gradually over the next two miles. At that point, it intersects a deep chasm with a river flowing far below. (Just before this, the two other paths join this one.) The only way across the 100-foot gap is via a rickety wood and rope bridge. There once was a stone bridge that spanned this gap but it has long since collapsed, leaving only the abutments on either side of the chasm as a memorial to its existence.

No animals will cross this bridge, so any horses, mules, or other beasts of burden must be left on this side. If they are left alone, tethered to trees or such, the PCs upon returning find the tethers broken and the beasts (and their burdens) gone, carried off or run off by unknown agencies. If an NPC guard is left with the beasts, that NPC is discovered dead and the beasts gone upon the PCs' return. If a PC is left as guard, the beasts are safe upon the rest of the party's return and the PC reports wolves prowling around but declining to attack.

The PCs need to cross the bridge one at a time. If more than one PC attempts to cross the bridge at a time, emphasize for the players the dangerous creaking and groaning noises emanating from the flimsy bridge. If they persist in crossing together, all is fine until they pass the halfway mark. Then the bridge collapses, sending anyone on it plunging to his or her death, unless a magical means of avoiding this is employed.

Even solo crossings should feel dangerous to your players. As each crosses the bridge, roll a d10. A result of 1 causes a board to break under that PC's foot. Another roll of a 1 on a d10 causes that PC to plunge to his or her death (magical means of saving not withstanding). Any other roll means the PC recovers and can safely cross to the other side after this scare.

After the excitement of the bridge, the path delves deeper into the forest. In another mile, if the PCs didn't take the middle path and encounter the wolf pack, that encounter occurs here. Again, after the attack is settled (assuming the PCs survive), they find the wolf den a little farther along the path and can discover the same items if they rummage around in the bone piles.

Finally, after crossing a shallow stream in another mile, the group sees the outskirts of the castle ruins. The ground here is marshy. A thick mist rises from the damp ground, limiting vision to about 30 feet. Within the mist, sounds are amplified; the PCs hear movement all around them.

Note that the castle is inhabited by a variety of undead guardians. Suggestions for these are given below, but adjust the monster types and numbers to fit the strength of your players' party.

As the PCs approach, they see a low wall ahead, the fallen remnants of the castle's outer fortifications. Just outside the wall is a small graveyard containing a few dozen cracked headstones that lean at all angles like an array of broken teeth. If any of the PCs explore the graveyard, they are attacked by three ghosts that rise from the graves.

The outer wall is seldom higher than three feet tall nowadays, the ancient stones mostly tumbled into unruly piles that have been smoothed over by a century's worth of dirt and turf. The PCs can cross this low mound at any point.

Inside the remnants of its walls, the castle presents a desolate appearance. All the wooden outbuildings have long since disintegrated into moldering piles of fungi. In the center of the ruins stands the castle keep, a square building 50 feet on a side and 30 feet high, its stone walls still mostly intact though covered in vines and lichen. A gaping hole shows where the keep's door once barred entry. The upper floor and roof have collapsed, letting in light and creating irregular mounds of detritus across the keep's stone floor.

If the PCs enter the keep, five ghasts or ghouls arise on all sides and attack. When the party has dealt with them, investigation of the keep reveals piles of rust where weapons and armor once adorned the inner walls. Above a debris-filled fireplace, the name "Riego" is carved into the stone wall above the clan's coat of arms – two wolves rearing on hind legs and howling at a full moon above them.

Exploring the keep uncovers no treasure, but in one corner of the room, a PC hears a hollow sound as he or she walks over the floor. If they investigate, digging through six inches of debris reveals a well-preserved trap door. Lifting it requires two strong PCs; it rises very reluctantly.

A set of stone stairs is revealed, descending into the darkness. A wave of dead, foul air wafts out, setting all present to coughing. If the party has no torches, crude ones can be made of bundles of dead branches gathered from the forest. The steps lead down into the keep's dungeon. A dozen small cells line a corridor that ends in a set of double metal doors.

The cell doors have long since disintegrated and a skeleton can be seen lying inside each cell. As the PCs walk toward the doors at the end, the dozen skeletons rise up and surge toward the party. After they are dispatched, searching the cells reveals a few coins but nothing else.

The double doors at the end of the corridor are held shut by a thick metal bar laid across brackets built into the doors. Removing the bar allows the PCs to open the doors but before they can do so, the doors are thrust open violently from inside. Two ghouls rush out, followed by a lich. Screeching their hatred of the living, all three attack.

The lich is wearing a suit of plate armor emblazoned with the Riego family crest; it wields a sword that glows faintly in the gloom. If the PCs survive this assault, they are free to examine the room beyond the doors. The room is roughly 20 feet square. Every inch of the walls and the inside surface of the doors is marred by thousands of claw marks from a century of futile undead rage.

A couple piles of gold coins and a small pile of gems and jewels can be found among the room's moldering furnishings with a determined search. Adjust the amounts to the economy of your campaign and the efforts the PCs expended to reach this point. The lich's plate armor and sword are magical; their potency and value are left to the GM to determine as befits his or her campaign.

Epilogue:

The PCs have ended the curse that destroyed the Riego clan and blighted the forest and village. If they tell the charcoal burner of their deeds, he thanks them profusely and claims that he feels the change in the forest's spirit. If they return to the village, all is as before. No one but the

tavernkeeper will speak with them. That worthy stares disbelievingly at their tale, spits, and demands that they buy some ale or get out of his establishment. Life in Vaara goes on as always, unfortunately.

THE END

Mike Breault began working on RPGs in 1984 when he was hired at TSR as an office boy. Over the next eight years, he delievred mail and served coffee and biscuits to more than 80 of TSR's most talented staff. He later went on to help out designing computer games like *Pool of Radiance*, in 1987, and almost 40 more video games since then. His most recent digital RPG work was for the *Elder Scrolls Online* game in 2014, so we thought we'd give him a chance.

Listen! Do You Smell Something?

by Anne K. Brown

Great game design and gamemastering depends upon a lot of elements—plot, villains, heroes, motivation, storytelling, setting, magic, monsters, and more. One of the more overlooked components of gaming, though, is the prose itself. No matter how amazing the scenario seems in the gamemaster's vision, without the ability to communicate those images to the players, the rooms, characters, and creatures will be flat and ordinary. Gamemasters can learn a lot from the craft of fiction, so let's borrow a few ideas from some classic advice extolled by fiction editors and authors.

> *"You're sitting in a pub. A stranger in a hooded cloak approaches your table and pulls up a stool."*
>
> *"The secret door swings open and a flight of stairs leads upward into a forgotten attic."*
>
> *"Running from the goblins, you veer down a tunnel and the floor suddenly slopes downward. You slide into the blackness and tumble onto the floor of a cave."*

What do these three descriptions have in common? They're not very interesting. They depict just another stranger in a pub, just another dark passageway, just another cave. Let's try that again.

> *"You're sitting in a noisy, crowded pub eating your evening meal. A stranger in a dark brown cloak approaches you, the hood pulled down around his face. With some effort, he drags a stool over to your table and sits down."*
>
> *"The wooden bookcase swings open to reveal a hidden space. Dim, filtered light reveals a crude flight of stairs leading upward into a forgotten attic. Cobwebs drape the steps and handrail."*
>
> *"Running from the screaming goblins, you veer down a tunnel that narrows suddenly, and you're forced to jog single-file. The floor becomes slippery and then abruptly slopes downward. You slide into the blackness for perhaps ten heartbeats and tumble onto the floor of a cave. You hear your companions thump to the floor alongside you."*

A little better, right? More details and better descriptions have helped add some color to these locations. But we can still do better. Let's give it one more try and really attempt to paint a picture.

> *"You and your companions are jammed around a small table in a pub. Every seat in the establishment is filled with diners and drinkers. The air is heavy with pipe smoke and the floor seems to have been repeatedly washed with ale. Although you bump elbows with your comrades, the food is worth the bother—the roast venison, caramelized carrots, and fresh sesame bread are the best meal you've had in weeks. At one end of the room, a bard with a lute sings a bawdy tune about a pirate and a lady Minotaur, while*

at the other end; several tables of gamblers erupt in a roar amid rolling dice. As you scrape your plate, you notice a figure in a dark brown burlap cloak pushing toward you. The wearer's face is hidden by the hood, and you can see that the stranger has a limp. With some effort, the newcomer pushes a stool next to yours and sits down, breathing heavily. The sleeves of the cloak are stained and the garment carries the odor of horses and leather."

"The carved bookcase filled with leather volumes swings open with the sound of wood scraping wood, and a gust of dry, dusty, warm air billows out around your group. Dim, filtered light reveals a crude flight of narrow stairs leading upward into a forgotten attic, the passage festooned with cobwebs. As the first member of your party ascends, each step creaks, then each creak crumbles into the splintering of dry rot. The cobwebs form a coif around your leader's head despite attempts to brush them away. Cobwebs and dust float on air currents made by your passing. The ancient dust coats the inside of your mouth and nose—your companions cough and spit to clear away the dryness."

"From behind you comes a surge—dozens of leathery goblin feet slap their way quickly along the tunnel. Then the unnerving sound is almost—but not quite—drowned out by many voices squealing a goblin war cry. You veer down a tunnel—the walls are more roughly hewn here—and after about thirty paces, the passage narrows and your group is forced to jog single-file.

"Your feet begin to slip as the floor becomes slick and slimy, and before you can call out a warning, your path abruptly slopes downward. You slide into the blackness for perhaps ten heartbeats and tumble onto the floor of a damp cave, landing in a puddle that smells like a stagnant swamp. You hear the clang of armor and weapons as your companions thump to the floor alongside you."

Now that's better, isn't it? In these last scenes, the locations have come to life. So aside from more words creating longer descriptions, what's the difference? And why should we care?

One of my favorite quotes about writing is one from William Somerset Maugham: There are three rules about writing a novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are.

So what does any of this have to do with being a gamemaster? Well, just as in a fiction novel, the storyteller or gamemaster needs to paint a picture. Sure, it's possible to hack and slash through one dungeon room after another, but the nature of the game—the *role-playing* game—is about becoming immersed in a setting and a story, so players can guide their characters through an exciting adventure filled with mood, suspense, and danger.

Aspiring writers are continuously asking published authors for advice. What's your secret? Where do you get your ideas? How can I learn to write like that? Everyone is searching for that one trick, that one bit of magic that will produce the next bestseller.

But as I've just shared with you, no formula or rules exist that guarantee brilliant prose. Disappointing, isn't it? Well, wait just a minute. Although there may be no rules that promise genius as a writer, I can think of two guidelines that the really great authors have developed into an art form. These guidelines work just as well for the gamemaster as the fiction author. The first is *Show, don't tell.* And the second is *Humans have five senses. Use them all.*

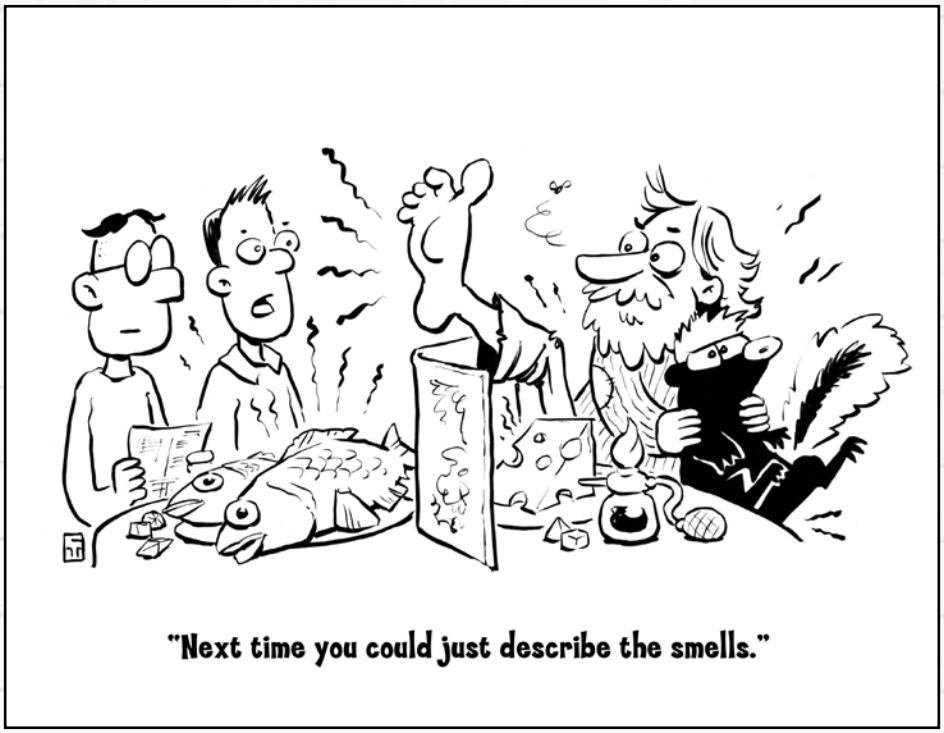
Show, don't tell is quite possibly the most common piece of writing advice that editors share with authors, and it can be confusing at first. It's simple to understand, but not always easy to execute. In the first scenarios that opened this piece, I *told* you about a pub, an attic, and a cave—but I didn't *show* you. In the second set of scenarios, I showed you a little bit—the stranger who struggles to drag a stool (it would have been less interesting had I said the newcomer was weak), cobwebs (I could have merely said the stairs were abandoned, but the cobwebs are spookier), and sliding into the blackness for ten heartbeats (I could have said fifty feet, but that breaks the mood, plus the characters don't have a tape measure).

Think of it this way. The most succinct and

masterful advice I've found about showing, not telling, comes from Anton Chekhov: *Don't tell me the moon is shining. Show me the glint of light on broken glass.*

Sources disagree as to whether this is a direct quote from Chekhov or a paraphrase of his correspondence, but the message is still incomparable. Talking about moonlight isn't nearly the same as sharing an unexpected flash and glimmer in the darkness. Let's go back to the third set of scenarios above, and although they won't come close to Chekhov, we can still examine them for *showing* compared to *telling*.

Notice that the pub feels crowded, but that word is never used—instead, characters are jammed together and every seat is taken. Likewise, the meal might have been delicious, but rather than using that word, the reader sees roast venison, caramelized carrots, and fresh sesame bread. And the stranger's limp and stained cloak tell us part of his story—even though we don't know what that is yet—much more intriguing than conveying that he's injured and poor.



In the subsequent two scenarios, compare what is *shown* to the simpler *telling*:

. . . carved bookcase filled with leather volumes = the house and contents are expensive

. . . each creak crumbles into the splintering of dry rot = the stairs are old and dangerous

. . . dozens of leathery goblin feet = a goblin army . . . before you can call out a warning = suddenly

Whether you're a gamemaster, storyteller, or aspiring author, the art of showing rather than telling is the most powerful way to bring a scene to life. I even use this in my work as a grant writer; my job is to raise money for a charity. Read these descriptions and think about which cause would make you open your wallet:

> *"We serve individuals seeking safety during difficult times."*
>
> *"We provide hot meals, clean clothing, and warm beds to homeless men and women."*

If you're like most people, you'll donate your hard-earned dollars to the second cause—because this description tells you who needs help and what your money will do. The cause has become tangible to you. I've shown you exactly where your cash will go.

Sometimes, the best way to learn how to do something is to learn what *not* to do. During my time at TSR, we saw some really great freelance submissions—and some pretty miserable mistakes. For some reason, two phrases kept showing up over and over again: a *wicked-looking* blade and an *impossibly huge* creature or cavern. The trouble with them is that "wicked-looking" doesn't tell us what the blade looks like—is it curved, pointed, barbed, forked, inlaid, blackened, antique—or something else? Likewise, "impossibly huge" leaves the reader to guess just how large that is—would the cavern contain a small village or a small planet? Is the "impossibly

huge" creature big enough to step on an elephant, or a large sailing ship? These examples demonstrate the weakness in phrases like these.

Now that you have a firm grasp of the art of showing rather than telling, let's try something a little easier: writing with the five senses. Most descriptive writing will rely heavily on visuals, because humans gather most of their information through the sense of sight. Sound, touch, taste, and smell can also carry important information and powerful imagery.

Returning to the scenes at the beginning of this discussion, read through the third set of descriptions again and pick out each instance of sensory information. The list includes pipe smoke, a floor washed with ale (likely sticky and smelly), venison with carrots and bread, a bawdy tune, the uproar of gamblers, scraping the plate, a burlap cloak, and the odor of horses and leather. You'll also notice wood scraping wood, creaking stairs, dust coating the character's mouth and nose, a war cry, a slimy floor, a smell like swamp, the clang of armor and weapons, and more.

Some senses, such as sound and smell, are easy to incorporate. Noises and scents are relatively easy to describe. As you design a scene, close your eyes and visualize the location—then pause and ask yourself what sounds and smells will be present. What will we smell and hear in a forest (damp earth, flowers, crunching leaves), a church (incense, candles, prayers), a stable (straw, manure, the jangle of a bridle), or a wizard's laboratory (lavender, oils, bubbling potions)? How can we describe the scent and sounds of a baby (wet diaper, cooing), a wolf (fur, growling), a giant eagle (feathers, screeching), or a dragon (sulfur, claws on stone)? Fortunately, describing sound has the benefit of the onomatopoeia—words that sound like what they are. If you're ever in a writing jam and desperate for some flavor in your scene, grab onto words like crash, sizzle, scrape, buzz, thump, and creak. Sprinkling these words into your descriptions is like putting butter on your popcorn.

Touch and taste are the more difficult of the five senses to convey. Characters don't go around licking rooms and monsters, nor do they touch other people's clothing or the skin of an attacking creature. It's easy to forget that touch can tell us that a floor is sticky or slippery, that bumping elbows means a room is crowded, or that a coin sack that's heavy is probably valuable. When we describe a garment as being made of silk or velvet, or a creature's skin as rubbery and warty, we still rely on the sense of touch. Taste, on the other hand, is limited to what we can put in our mouths. Gamemasters can describe food and drink, a salty taste after falling in the ocean, or a stink so intense that we can almost taste it. We can also have fun describing a potion as bitter, sweet, creamy, curdled, fishy, fruity, smoky, acidic, or any flavor that comes to mind such as dirt, chalk, coffee, herbs, or rust.

If this sounds daunting, don't let it scare you. Remember that the goal is to have fun and make scenes and monsters more lifelike for your players. There's no need to stress over every encounter and pack each one full of images and senses—in fact, it's possible to do too much and overdress your scenes. A good way to start is to pick one or two critical scenes and spend time really dressing them up, and to sprinkle some sounds, smells, textures, and tastes into other descriptions. Overdoing it can be just as bad as underdoing it—the adventure will bog down and players will become bored. I'm reminded of another passage submitted to TSR by a freelancer. The author wrote an unusually long description of a door, describing the wood, the carving, the hinges and lock, and other intricate details. Then the text said that the area around the door was under a permanent darkness spell that could not be dispelled. The author had spent half a column describing something the players would never see.

Humans have five senses. Use them all.

Writing isn't as easy as it looks—in fact, sometimes it's downright difficult. But I hope that these classic writing components—showing, not telling, and incorporating the five senses—will make your writing and gamemastering a little more interesting and a lot more fun.

And as a footnote, the title of this article is one of my favorite quotes from *Ghostbusters,* spoken by Ray Stantz.

Encounter: "Follow Your Nose"

by Anne K. Brown

The breeze rustles the leaves high overhead and afternoon sunlight flashes like a kaleidoscope on the forest floor. In a small hollow, cup-shaped mushrooms like scattered orange peels surround a fallen log draped in a luxurious mossy carpet. Chipmunks chitter and birds flit past you without a care. The scene would be purely idyllic if not for one problem: You and your group are completely lost. The sun is halfway between noon and setting, but in this deep woods, darkness will come quickly.

Bruised and sore from battle, your hardtack and beef jerky almost gone, you stare out at the forest in all directions, but not a single landmark is in sight. Your cleric suggests that everyone stop, listen, and concentrate, in case some clue is willing to present itself.

No one protests the chance to drop backpacks and weapons and sit for a few moments. After the thuds and clangs of settling gear subside, your companions become one with the landscape, sitting silently, ears alert.

The cool breeze is soothing and the murmur of aspen trees is a lullaby. The chipmunks race past your statuelike companions—you are surprised that you can hear their tiny feet clicking on the stones. All is peaceful, then the elf in your group snaps everyone to attention. "Water. I hear a stream—in that direction." She points, stands straight up, and starts gathering her gear.

Some of the group also stand, but the dim-witted one of your party blinks his eyes. "A stream? So what?" he asks.

Your leader hesitates, then smiles. "For one thing, our canteens are empty," he explains. "For another, we can walk downstream. The sunset is to the west, and the stream will keep us from going in circles. We're likely to reach a farm or a village before long."

Your companion nods at this sage-like wisdom and rises to his feet. The elf sets out toward the stream, her keen eyes finding a path around lichen-covered boulders, fallen trees, and thickets of brambles.

A quarter-hour later, the bubbling, tumbling sound of water flowing across rocks reaches your ears, and you suddenly realize that your tongue feels like a dried-out shoe. Your friends must hear it, too, because all at once, the rustle of each pair of feet becomes urgent. Your group surges forward and after much huffing and puffing, you stand at the edge of a stream. The water looks to be about waist-deep in the middle and you could lob a rock to the other bank with a hard throw. The same idea strikes all of you at once; backpacks and weapons again thunk to the ground, buckles jangle, and clothing is peeled off. Within moments, you are waist-deep in the cool stream. The water is fresh and cool, and you gulp large swallows to revive your body and heal your wounds.

After perhaps half an hour, your group is again on the bank with canteens filled, wringing out clothing and wiping down dusty armor and weapons. Your stomach growls and you glance around for anything edible that the woods might offer.

"Smoke," blurts out your wizard. "I smell smoke." He lifts his chin and turns slowly in a circle. "Not the forest, thank goodness," he adds. "Not pine, but hardwood—some of it damp—some hickory—and pig! Without the shadow of a doubt—someone is roasting a wild boar!"

The remaining gear is gathered, weapons are sheathed, and wet garments are tied to backpacks to dry in the breeze. As the sun slips lower, you trot after your leader down the bank and toward the smell of pork ribs and crispy pigskin.

You and your companions follow the stream bank, at times skirting large boulders and climbing over fallen trees. Some stretches of the route are clear, with smooth sand and rounded pebbles lining the water's edge, the stream itself gentle and placid. The smell of wood smoke and roasting pork becomes stronger as you travel, and the promise of a good meal propels you forward. After perhaps twenty minutes, you spot a path rising from the stream bed upward to a cottage. A cooking fire crackles gently—a bed of hot, glowing coals as deep as your knees. A wild boar roasts on a spit, and from the golden brown

color of the skin, it appears to be ready for hungry diners.

"Hello there!" calls a gravelly voice. With the sun fully set, you almost didn't notice the fellow with the white beard standing near the spit. He stands to greet you, a wiry frame rising to become a tall silhouette in front of the coals. The man wears homespun trousers and a long-sleeved tunic the color of wheat. "Loretta!" he calls toward the cottage. "Come and see! We have lost travelers!"

The half-door of the cottage swings open and a woman steps out, smiling. Her long gray hair hangs in a braid down her back, and she wears a simple shift the same color as her husband's clothes. "My, my," she says. "It's a good thing dinner is ready. You all look like you're starving! Come and sit down. We were just about to eat."

"I'm Pensiff," says the man. "This is my wife, Loretta. Would you care to join us? It's been a long time since we've had visitors. If you have any stories to tell, it would fill our evening with cheer."

Without waiting for an answer, the man and woman each grab hold of an end of the spit and lift the crackling boar off the fire. Several steps away, they hang the spit on another rack where they begin to carve their dinner. Pensiff sharpens a large knife on a whetstone and Loretta holds a platter. Within a few minutes, all of you are seated near the fire with plates of steaming boar. Loretta places a basket of sliced bread within reach for all to share. The meat is juicy and slightly smoked, the bread is crisp and buttery, and cold water from the stream helps wash it down. You gaze at the flickering coals as crickets fill the night air with their harmony. The day has been long, the journey exhausting, and your sore muscles seem to throb in rhythm with the crickets.

The next thing you know, you wake on a stone floor in utter darkness, the sounds of ragged breathing all around you.

THE END

Anne K. Brown began her career at TSR, Inc. as Assistant Editor of *Dragon* magazine, then was lured into the Games Division by dark lord James M. Ward, where she remained for eight years. She was heavily involved in the worlds of *Spelljammer, Greyhawk, Ravenloft,* and was the lead editor for the launch of the *Birthright* setting; her favorite projects were *Tome of Magic* and the *Masque of the Red Death* boxed set and accessories. She is the author of ten books and editor of nearly 100 volumes, and has extensive experience writing marketing materials and grants for nonprofits. As an author, Anne considers her dictionary to be an enormous toy box, and enjoys the chance to collect and play with new words.

Logical First Contact: Inventing Intelligent Science Fiction Aliens

by Timothy Brown

A good science fiction alien is more than a guy in strange make-up.

Humanoid aliens who appear to be otherwise utterly 'Terrene' leave me cold. You've seen them in every sci-fi television show. They've got two sexes. Ho hum. They get excited or jealous or irritated in the same manner as humans. Yawn. Their motivations, desires, fears … all indistinguishable from their human companions. Boring. Okay, actors are human, and making them aliens with exotic makeup is how television and movies are made, I get it. But we're role-players, and we can do better.

Don't get me wrong. Human actors can portray compelling aliens. We've seen it.

Spock's eyebrows, pointed ears, and green lighting are not what made him an iconic character. One fundamental tweak to his 'humanness' – his cultural aversion to emotion and devotion to logic – opened a floodgate of story telling possibilities that enriched dozens of episodes and hundreds of novels. One tweak. How special would Spock have been without it? He'd have just been a pointy-eared guy at the science officer's station, and what a loss that would have been. Add to that the complications of his human half – another simple tweak – and the depth of his alien-ness feels even more real, more compelling, and more interesting.

Fortunately, in role-playing settings, we can let our imaginations run completely wild, unfettered by the need to cast someone or film the scene or create it in exotic computer graphic imagery. Our aliens need not be remotely humanoid. They don't have to be mammals or air breathers or bipeds. No, they can be absolutely anything you can dream up, without limitations.

What are the initial seeds of your inspiration? Why, every science fiction novel, movie, and television show you've ever experienced. Mix that with your own creativity – you're a role-playing game master, so by definition a creative thinker – and you're well on your way. What role do you want this new creature to play in your setting? Is it a threat? An ally? One of these and then the other? A victim? A helper? A source of information? It's your story … and it's a science fiction story. Tell it using science fiction tropes, in this case a believable, exotic, intelligent alien that can take center stage and drive your story forward.

But where to start? Inventing a truly exotic alien with no background or logic to its origin is almost as intellectually criminal as making your alien a guy in a rubber suit. Well, don't worry – just take a brief journey through the critter's origin, evolution, and emergence into intelligence and culture. Sound tough? At first blush, it may seem like a lot, but not really. Let the depth come later, as you play with your alien in your sci-fi setting, and maybe even let player characters immerse themselves in its strangeness. To begin, get the basics together, set up a believable foundation that sets the stage for your alien's appearance in your universe.

Home World

What sort of world is your alien from?

If you want it to move and act freely in a human-friendly environment, like on Earth or in a human spacecraft or habitat, then it's probably from an Earth-like home world (or must have gear or other adaptations that make such free-action possible). No problem here – most science fiction settings postulate lots of near-Earth worlds sprinkled around the galaxies. Some cautions here, though. First, a close-to-Earth home world means just that: most planetary characteristics will fall right in line, and a lone extreme aberration is unlikely. It's not likely to be just like Earth but with a massive gravity, or with a super dense atmosphere, because if it did other factors would be way out of whack, as well.

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Ask yourself this: what do you want your alien to be particularly good at? You already have some idea the role it's to play in your campaign, so turn to that. Do you want it to have a rock-hard exterior impervious to lasers and common weapons? Then maybe it's a creature evolved upon the surface of a collapsed star. Is it supposed to have massive mental control powers? Perhaps, then, it's the master race on a planet composed, atmosphere to core, of corporeal creatures. Does it experience time differently? Then maybe its home world is deep in an enormous gravity well. Consider the creature's role in your story and work backwards to postulate its point of origin.

Your alien might not be native to its origin world, either. Perhaps it was transplanted there, willingly or by force. Generations on a world only partially suitable might have transformed it into something

more ferocious or more deadly. A terraformed world might still host native life forms, now no longer suited to their own world at all and forced to find other comfortable locales in the vastness of space. Refugees seeking suitable worlds might be conquerors or superior negotiators or even humble wonderers trading knowledge for territory. Human cultures patiently waiting through the generations while their world-in-progress finishes 'cooking' might resort to a variety of genetic or cybernetic transformations to adapt themselves to less-than-ideal conditions, sacrificing human-ness for survival.

Of course, there's no reason your intelligent alien must have a home world at all. Exotic creatures of deep space might be especially strange – deriving sustenance from gravity waves and spawning in clouds of dark matter. Creatures of pure intellect might appear as nothing but pure energy or pure thought. Transdimensional aliens might ignore the strong and weak nuclear force but master other fundamental physical building blocks nearly unimaginable to the human mind. Your creature could be a neutron star or a singularity, or just a remote portion of such lost or imprisoned away from its point of origin.

Maybe your alien is a one-shot encounter in your science fiction game, and that's fine. But if it opens a more compelling avenue for your campaign, its home world may become relevant. Player characters have a way of determining for themselves what is worth investigating, after all.

Ecological Niche

You've got some idea what your intelligent alien is going to do in your adventure. Now work backwards through its ecological evolution to justify that expected behavior. Is it going to take an aggressive posture? Then perhaps it's a pure predator. A more passive role? Then maybe it's a herbivorous grazer. But there's no reason to restrict your thinking. There are times when predators can be quite passive (own a cat?) or a herbivore can be ferociously aggressive (threaten a horse's foal sometime). And again, it's science fiction, so toss your common conceptions of ecology out the airlock if you're so inclined!

The basics are a good place to start. An ecological niche is where our creature finds sustenance and environment such that it can survive and thrive. Its competition can be ferocious – and probably is – as species compete for the home world's limited resources. Hunters compete with other hunters, grazers with other grazers. Does your creature need scarce hydrogen to float in the clouds? Then it's competing with every other creature on the planet that also needs that helium. In these competitions are clues to behavior and abilities. How does your creature naturally drive off rivals? Fang and claws? Perhaps, but something more exotic is always more interesting. Piercing noise, horrid odor, or psychically induced fear could be a lot more compelling in your adventure.

Consider your alien's natural diet. Anything above a plant must ingest something to survive, to derive chemical energy for locomotion, bodily functions, reproduction, and so on. Is its food passive and easily obtained, or is it well protected and scarce? Given its natural diet, you need to decide what else it also considers to be edible. Maybe it finds humans in space suits potentially delicious. Can it consciously distinguish from what is appropriate food and what isn't?

Your alien's disposition with regard to others of its own kind may be important, as well. Does it prey upon its own kind? Intraspecies competition may compel it to treat other intelligent beings it encounters similarly. A stronger racial consciousness, though, may be such that they never consider each other as competitors.

What about reproduction? Does your alien survive in its niche by producing copious offspring that scatter everywhere far and wide? Or does it have relatively few offspring that demand considerable attention for assured survival? Your alien may need a mate to reproduce, or it might do so hermaphroditically. Perhaps reproduction calls for special expenditures of energy that must be amassed immediately prior. The disposition of young may be integral to your story. Is your alien mature and child bearing, or is it immature and still learning? Perhaps your alien has no distinction between young and old.

Keep technology out of the equation while you consider the alien's ecological niche. Presumably, it evolved without significant technology, and nature molded it into the sort of creature it is today. It may have plenty of gadgets to sustain

its present interstellar lifestyle, but these only enhance its natural tendencies.

Impetus Toward Intelligence

Why is your alien intelligent in the first place? If we presume that most random alien life is not particularly intelligent – everything from pond scum to random tentacle wildlife – then there must be some reason the alien you're inventing emerged from among its competitors eyes bright and neurons abuzz. What was it?

Evolutionarily speaking, survival is the common impetus for change. If your alien arose from a more primitive, less intelligent form, then it did so in order to adapt to changing conditions. What happened? Did the planet change in some way, perhaps from a comet impact, a change in its star's characteristics, someone else's war, or some other catastrophe? Was the change sudden, like a rapid plague, or gradual, like an emerging ice age? Such changes put pressure on the entire ecology, and only those that adapt survive – as presumably your alien did. And what, exactly, did emerging intelligence lend to the species to make it more successful? Better communication to improve the hunt, or the use of basic technology such as shelter, clothing and fire to widen their habitat? Did intelligence allow them to avoid the worst plague regions, or share that information among themselves more easily? Ultimately, what you postulate here helps define your alien for its present situation, when your players encounter it in your sci-fi universe. If you want the alien to have exotic communication skills, for instance, then build that into its evolutionary history. Similarly, it might have innate biological senses or rapid natural toxin identification, radiation resistant shells or coverings, photosynthetic structures to exist in pure sunlight … the universe is the limit!

Intelligence suggests several other characteristics. Memory, for instance. Does your alien have a sharp memory for details, a greater recall of particular events, or a more aloof attitude toward past circumstances? What about its connection with time? Are its rhythms remotely earthlike, or more exotic? It could have either no concept of the passage of time or one completely alien so that it has difficulty dealing with time-obsessed humans. Then there's emotional and morale issues. Your alien may have human-like compassion or none whatsoever. Woe to the scientists who get to figure that out!

Also, your alien might have no evolutionary history at all, emerging on the scene in its present, intelligent form. It could be a biological construct, purposed for combat or exploration or grunt labor, brought into existence with exactly the intellect required for its task – no more and no less. It might be cross-dimensional, having emerged into this universe fully formed and ready for action. Perhaps it is a product of 'reverse' evolution, having started as an intelligence that later had to evolve means for locomotion, reproduction, and survival.

Regardless, why your alien became intelligent dictates the strengths and weaknesses of its intellect. It might be a great communicator but a poor problem solver. Perhaps it's got a computer-like recall but cogitates at a glacial pace. Balance a strength with a weakness and let your players figure it all out for themselves.

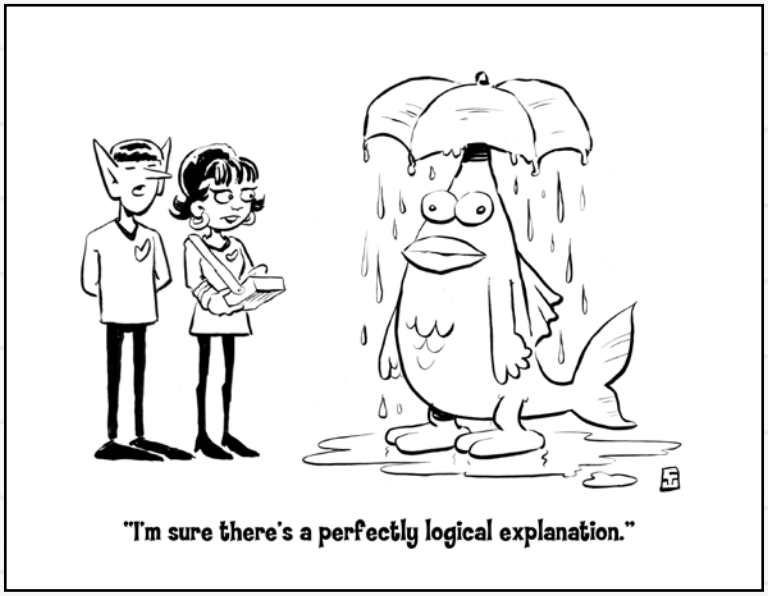
Impact Upon Culture

Your alien has a point of origin and a logical evolutionary history up to its present, intelligent form. So, what sort of emergent culture can you envision? After all, your critter does not exist in isolation, even if your players encounter just one of them at their first meeting. It has roots in a civilization that may or may not be immediately visible. How has its evolution shaped that culture? In turn, how has that culture affected the alien itself? Ultimately, its culture will be as important to its behavior as its evolution, perhaps even more so.

Feel free to borrow heavily from human analogies. Need a primitive culture as a basis? We've got plenty to choose from: Bushido, Aztec, or Ptolemaic. Emerging industrial? Elizabethan or Wild West. Colonial? Belgian Congo or Polynesian Pacific. Authoritarian? Fascist Italy or isolationist North Korea. Aggressive? Golden Horde, Alexandrian, or Zulu Kingdom. Then give it a twist or two. Or if you would rather, journey through your science fiction library for cultural ideas. There are plenty to choose from: Puppetteer, Spacing Guild, neo-Chimp or neo-Dolphin … if your reading list is as extensive as

mine, there's a lot to mine there. Again, make it your own, give it a nudge here or there, and put your alien into the middle of it.

Now pick one or two key points where your alien's physiology and psychology either match that culture head on or oppose it dramatically, and key on those as the essential 'alien-ness' you're after. An aggressive hunter-killer alien in a bushido-style culture is a natural. How has it taken that martial philosophy even further? Similarly, a circumspect, long-living grazer in a Vulcan-style logical haven – that's win-win. Conversely, you can make more out of the contrasts. The hunter-killer gone emotionless? How does it manage that and keep its destructive instincts under control? The grazer turned dedicated martial warrior? Where does it muster that sort of unnatural aggression? You get to decide – and that decision has everything to do with what makes your science fiction campaign more interesting and exciting for your players.



Cultural differences, barriers, and misunderstandings are grist for the science fiction mill. Embrace them, even seed them into your campaign. Your player characters meet the alien (and possibly his several companions), and the blood-chilling discovery begins. What are the alien's intentions? Why is it here? Is this alien just one of many, and where is its civilization? Could it be the first or last of its kind (mathematically unlikely but dynamite storytelling in sci-fi)? Does it embrace its society, or is it perhaps rogue or displaced?

A quick analysis of its technology might be telling. Is any of its tech obvious, like a spacecraft or body suit to withstand the rigors of deep space or an alien environment? Weapons, sensors, computers – these are the sorts of things an alien might carry everywhere. Maybe they're gadgets, but they might be biological, implanted, or otherwise difficult to detect. Don't make it easy for your players. Let them sweat inside their helmets.

Finishing Touches

The purpose of this exercise is to create a deeper, richer alien that makes some sense in the context of your science fiction universe. Your players will appreciate it, believe me. And you'll be so much better prepared for the inevitable questions from curious players: where did this alien come from, and why does it act the way that it does? You'll have all that info at the tip of your fingers all because of some good prep work before that particular game session began. You've set the stage for a terrific first contact adventure, and if you play your cards right you can let that build in whatever manner the player characters desire. If they want more, you're ready to introduce it.

Of course, the first-contact adventure should be fraught with tension. A casual meeting, shaking hands or tentacles or whatever and getting down to mundane human-centric business is exactly what you're trying to avoid. Ideally, your players won't even realize they're headed toward an extraterrestrial encounter at all – let the element of surprise make the situation even more surprising and unsettling. Set the mood. The strange smell of the thing, its unusual environment and temperature and humidity, bizarre lighting and odd gurgling, wheezing, or popping. Check the mundane at the door – your characters are about to come face to face with something truly otherworldly!

Post encounter, the characters find themselves in the company of an exotic alien with which they are unfamiliar. Maybe library data can clue them in to some good advice for dealing with

this particular species – or, better yet, it cannot because the players are the very first bipeds to come across them. Let the players take full advantage of whatever assets your alien has to offer. Does it have natural navigational skills? Let that come into play in either a critical or more mundane instance. Would its luminescence come in handy in some dark environment? Then let it.

Of course, the flip side is far more likely: the alien is something of a burden, and whatever eventual benefit it provides may come with a heavy price. It probably requires difficult-to-provide accommodations on a ship, as well as diet or energy necessities. Communication is either difficult or hard to verify – does this thing really understand us, or we it? Its motivations may be entirely uncertain, keeping the players guessing if they have an ally or a deadly opponent on their hands. Is it, by its nature, attracting other more deadly enemies, or seemingly harmless attention that could put the entire mission at risk?

The idea is to create a compelling first-contact adventure that feels exotic. Watch the progress of the adventure, and if the situation starts feeling a bit ordinary – like the players might be dealing with an insurance salesman rather than a smart extraterrestrial – then it's time to shake things up. Refer to your notes about its origin, history, psychology and culture, and toss a 'hey, this is an alien' grenade into the room.

Encounter: 'Feeding Time'

by Timothy Brown

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DEEP SECTOR REPORT
STAR SYSTEM HG-2797
CONTRACT STATUS: OPEN
CONTRACT SUMMARY
INVESTIGATE DAEDLOUS RESEARCH STATION
ALPHA-ONE. ALL COMMUNICATION LOST.
REPORT DISPOSITION OF STATION AND
PERSONNEL.
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It's a quick contract, it's on your route of travel, and it pays pretty well. Besides, three of the people on your team have worked for Daedlous before and this counts as points on their retirement packages. Alpha One's a standard research station that's either had its comm link go down or all the personnel have gone native. There's probably nothing to it. Drop out of trans-light speed, land near the station, check things out, then dust off and report. Simple Simon.

System: HG-2797 is nothing special. It's a G8 star with seven identified planets, including a gas giant for frontier refueling, should that be necessary. Just one planet worth anything, a 12,000-mile diameter, dense-atmosphere planet. Some big, swampy continents, hot, high gravity, so nobody's ideal colony world, but with a lush native ecosystem worth studying. Just the kind of place where a company like Daedlous can set up a research station, examine the local flora and fauna, and extract any profitable findings. No name. Just HG-2797-4, or Four for short.

Approach: Alpha-One's orbital uplink satellite remains functional, its transponder lights up loud and clear. From orbit, scans of the research station show no immediate signs of trouble: the power plant is still running and electrical activity is modest but still present. There's no outgoing radio traffic, though, and no one there answers a hail on any frequency. Alpha-One is near the coast of an algae covered sea on a northern continent, easily located and confirmed. The dense atmosphere is normally stormy and turbulent, but easily negotiated by a skilled pilot. The research station's landing pad is dirty and partially overgrown with spikey native vines, but that's not surprising. Such research stations get thrown together quickly and are soon abandoned, so nobody bothers to keep them too neat. The escape shuttle is still in place, also half overgrown, so none of the researchers left that way.

Inside the Station: From outside, the station appears normal: a half dozen pre-fab residence capsules around a central lab structure, all beneath a clear dome streaked grey-green from native slime. The airlock responds normally. Inside the dome the atmosphere is more human

standard. Nothing outside the buildings betrays anything has gone wrong here, but there are no researchers to be seen. The residence capsules are devoid of inhabitants, but their personal effects are all still there: clothes, video systems, food and housewares.

Inside the laboratory station is another story. The stench of rotting carnage is overpowering. Smashed lighting flickers feebly over eviscerated human corpses – the researchers are all here, all dead – mingled with the smashed corpses of dozens of native creatures, all tentacles and fangs. Containment tubes are smashed open, some still intact with their specimens dead inside – creatures that fought to get out of their tubes so violently that they killed themselves in the effort, limbs and fangs bloody. Everything here is dead, with a single exception.

In the laboratory's center is a single, pristine, newly built specimen tube with a single occupant:

The last living occupant in Research Station Alpha-One is a coiled deep-sea creature resting beneath a couple of meters of brackish ocean water contained in a two-meter clear plexi-glass tube. Vaguely octopus-like, its many tentacles are thinner and irregularly 'hinged' at various elbows and wrists where they branch into smaller tendrils. A ring of centimeter-wide black orbs alternating with pulsating, bright turquoise sphincters encircles the top of its central body segment, from which its many tentacles emerge. The thing is clearly alive, its tentacles ambulating randomly, its sphincters opening and closing, drawing in and expelling water evenly, calmly.

Summary of Previous Events: The deep-sea creature is native to this planet, discovered by the researchers and brought to the research station for analysis. However, unbeknownst to them, the creature is intelligent and exudes an emotional turmoil that, until then, was unleashed only in the deepest oceans and never before unleashed upon HG-2797-4's surface creatures. Its presence drove all the native creatures in the research station, and even the researchers themselves, into a chaotic slaughtering frenzy, the results of which are in clear evidence everywhere. If the new explorers of this place do not recognize that, figure it out, or take steps against it, they too will fall into a killing rage and *right soon*.

The Creature: HG-2797-4's most intelligent species exists in large numbers on the ocean bottoms. It first evolved as a carrion scavenger on the ocean floors, feeding on the detritus of other ocean life sinking to its depths of millennia. When that sea life thinned due to a variety of planetary changes, the creatures adapted themselves, evolving both the emotional turmoil effect (forcing nearby creatures to attack and destroy each other and in-so-doing enrich the immediate area with their flesh and gore) and the intelligence to not over use it and deplete their ever-dwindling food supplies. The creatures are only semi-intelligent, perhaps equivalent to a dog or low primate, but can be reasoned with.

Computer Semi-Malfunction: Clues to the creature's nature and the unfortunate events leading up to the carnage left all of the research station can be found in the computer record. Unfortunately, the station's computers were damaged in the fighting and must be repaired to read the data appropriately. Someone with electronic or computer repair skills must make a series of three critical fixes, each one taking roughly 5 minutes. When all repairs have been made, records can be brought up that show:

- The researchers realized that the other study animals were being affected by something strange.
- That the researchers themselves were also being affected.
- That the odd behavior coincided with the arrival of the deep-sea creature in the station.

Unfortunately, while in the research station, the creature's emotional turmoil is unwittingly having an effect on each character. Every one of them must make a successful check against their mental willpower or succumb to the urge to destroy their companions in the most brutal manner possible. Common weapons are left unused in favor of whatever blades or bludgeons might be at hand – the more carnage the better, per the creature's unintentional but ever-present bidding.

Increasing Problem: The explorers get caught up in their own crisis fairly quickly. One by one, they succumb to the creature's influence and plunge into savage destructive behavior. The first to do so should alert the others that there is something

otherworldly going on and they are in the middle of it. It may not be immediately obvious that the creature is the source of the problem. However, if the characters are watching the readings on its containment vessel, they seem to calm and stabilize with each new enraged victim. They can determine this through some sort of psychic link, as well, should one be established.

Solutions: The exploring characters have four basic options in dealing with the creature: get away from it, feed it, reason with it, or destroy it.

Getting some distance is easy enough, with just a couple of complications. First, any affected characters do not want to leave the vicinity of the creature (though they don't exactly know why, and this may be misinterpreted as a desire to simply stay at the research station for some reason). Second, affected characters do not want others to leave, either, and will do everything in their power to keep people close to the creature.

Feeding the creature may not be obvious. Anyone with medical or xeno skills monitoring its readings in the containment tube can figure out that the creature is at a low energy state, probably due to lack of nourishment. Feeding it is simple. The equipment is still functioning so that a nutritive solution dispenses into the water tank by a simple command. Otherwise, any bit of blood or flesh tossed into the cylinder will also suffice. Once fed, the creature stops its emotional outreach and affected characters come back to their senses.

Reasoning with it requires communication, and none has yet been established by the research station personnel. It may be that the characters have some device or artifact that gives them universal understanding of the creature's state of mind. Or, a psychic link could yield the same results. Ultimately, such a process reveals that the creature is hungry, but nothing more – its emotional outbursts are unconscious and it does not really understand the effect it's having on other beings.

Destroying the creature is easy enough. It's fairly vulnerable, especially if its containment vessel is destroyed and its ocean water drained. It has no defenses and cannot move about easily on the surface. It primarily raises an ethical issue among the exploring characters. Do they have the right to destroy the creature, some may pose, putting them at odds with those who seek self preservation. This creates an interesting role-playing situation, an urgent argument in the midst of inexplicable infighting and destruction.

THE END

Timothy Brown is a veteran role-playing game designer, having worked for Game Designer's Workshop, TSR, and FASA, among others. He is the co-designer of the *2300 AD* and *Dark Sun* game universes, and has written for *Traveller*, *Space: 1889*, and various *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* settings including *World of Greyhawk*, *Ravenloft*, and *Spelljammer*. Timothy has been Director of Creative Services for TSR and is presently Studio Director of Ulisses North America, publishing the role-playing games *The Dark Eye* and *TORG Eternity*.

There Are No Empty Rooms in the Wilderness

by Stephen Chenault

The key to running a good adventure is keeping the players engaged, *all of them*. You never want to have a table where one or two of the players are doing all the action and others are sitting around partially engaged or worse, not engaged at all. Bored players make for distracted players which in turn drives them to their phones or into other conversations, which in turn disrupts the game and knocks the whole table off kilter. And before you know it you have a table full of YouTube watching, drunk-on-Dr. Pepper jokesters who care little for the bugbear with his blood-soaked, blunt and all-too-notched

battle axe coming at them.

To keep players engaged is fairly simple. They have to have something to do. And wilderness encounters offer a plethora of things for all the classes and all the races to do. Whenever a game slows or too much focus falls on one player, it's best to pick up the pace. To do so the Castle Keeper (ed. note: *game master*. Stephen is using the term utilized by Troll Lord Games) needs to inject some type of conflict into the game. Whether this is bone-grinding action, or nail biting suspense, or even simple confusion doesn't matter; what does matter, is that the players stop what they are doing to listen to what is happening.

Before embarking on the encounter make brief notes about what you would like them to encounter. This can be almost anything, but should be something simple that allows the party to have an objective. There are many rumors of an old tree whose bark, once boiled and eaten, imparts wisdom to a druid. A lion, escaped from a circus, runs amok beyond a village walls. A treasure, left by some giant, remains buried beneath a willow on the bank of a creek where it forks. Any objective works.

To keep players engaged is fairly simple. They have to have something to do.

Once an objective is decided on, map the type of terrain out very briefly. Is it a forest, desert, swamp, or mountain encounter? Once the terrain is decided, do a little reading on it: what kinds of trees grow in the woods, or what rock formations are commonly found in the hills. These types of details, when thrown out in some descriptive text, really help bring a feeling of reality to a game. If someone sees a few trees blocking a path they imagine just that, but if an old elm, whose branches are laden with spring rains and gnarled bark, blocks the path, it's a wholly different matter. A few minutes' reading can make a world of difference in what the players feel and see in their minds eye. The same goes for animals. Find out what kinds of birds occupy the terrain and mention a few by name.

The time of year and climate are important as well. Pick the weather so you can plan for some, whether it is cold or hot. Allow the characters this knowledge so that when you pit them against the weather they may, if they were smart, have the equipment to fight.

Begin the adventure however most adventures begin, it doesn't matter. Because now, by using the outdoor wilderness environ you can turn the whole world, the journey to and from, into an encounter. Everything comes alive for the characters and you can always keep the pace just where you want it and the players engaged.

There are five major tools in the Castle Keeper's bag of tricks to keep the pace up and the players engaged: monsters, NPCs, weather, terrain and an encounter area that can turn on a dime.

The first and easiest tools are monsters and NPCs. Planned encounters are fine and for their own part allow the CK to know what is coming and better control the action. However, when players are bored and the CK needs the pace to pick up it's easy enough to pull a monster or NPC out and have it waylay into the party whether in full combat or role playing mode. It's the easiest and in some ways cheapest trick in the book. In the wilderness encounter it's even easier to do because the numbers of beasts, magical and mundane, and possible NPCs are huge, and aside from a few climatic restrictions pretty much anything goes. Having a giant boar burst through the brush and fall upon a party debating the relative merits of the latest Britney Spears video will quickly bring everyone back to the table.

Where wilderness encounters begin to differ from city and dungeon is in the terrain itself. For anyone who has spent any time outside they know how challenging moving down a mountain pass, through a thick forest, or over a rock-filled creek can be. Simple movement becomes a challenge for the party. Crossing a hedge-row may slow the party down immeasurably, allowing a pursuing monster to overtake them, building suspense. And it changes quickly. It is easy enough to cross the hedge-row, tumble into a ditch and guide one into a root-tangled gully. All of these motions require attribute checks, instantly engaging the players in a task, even if is simple. Such encounters almost always bring the player to the table as they figure out how to negotiate what

is set before them. Night or day the terrain offers a whole new list of things to engage everyone at the table.

Weather falls into the same category. Where terrain can shift and change as the CK needs, weather can as well. Sudden wind storms, squalls, heat waves, or even calms can bring suspense and challenges to the table. Forced to secure equipment from damage or loss the characters have to actually take action to keep themselves together. But as importantly the weather offers the CK another tool to set the mood, change the tone or shift the focus. Characters caught up in a long discussion about which direction to take, over or around the hill, are easily redirected when a sudden wind drives them down off the hill top.

It's important to note that weather and terrain, as fun tools to redirect and set small challenges out for the party, should not be overused. Long drawn out encounters with a wind storm can bore people quickly. Getting lost in the woods is about as fun as getting lost anywhere. It's not. The CK should be judicious in how much time they spend on either. A few minutes to half an hour is usually more than enough to ground an encounter in the realities of life in the wilderness and in the weather and keep the players at the table.

But no matter what happens, planned or sudden encounters with monsters or NPCs or weather and difficult terrain, the real key to the wilderness encounter is the malleable nature of the wilderness itself.

There are no bounds in the wilderness. Animals and monsters travel great distances every day. Weather develops, terrain changes. And in worlds where magic is prevalent the land and nature itself can be a living, sentient thing. Everything is in the hands of the Castle Keeper. And this is the most valuable tool one can have. It allows the CK to change the direction of an adventure on a dime. A group of characters who have taken the wrong path are easily redirected by a swollen stream, or a tree that has grown up and blocks the path.

As an example image the CK caught up with two players, a ranger and a druid, as they track some monster over the lip of a path. The CK looks up and a few players are bored, as the wilderness characters attempt to unravel the mysteries of the tracks. Bored characters are bored players, so the CK asks them to both make a quick spot check: they spy a loose shelf of rock on the ledge ahead. Suddenly they are engaged and allowed important information, germane to the success of the mission, and are back in the game. The joy of the wilderness encounter is that there are literally a limitless number of encounters that can engage the players.

The malleable nature of the wilderness encounters goes even a step further. They never end. One can clear out a dungeon, or take over a castle, but the wilderness is vast and the paths uncounted. From the swamps of some southern land to the frozen wastes of the frost giants, anything goes. It doesn't end when they cut the bark from the tree and boil it for its wisdom. The adventure is as long as the road they travel and a swollen river can be as deadly and as challenging as an encounter with a manticore, or a bugbear with a blood-soaked, blunt and all-too-notched battle axe.

There are no empty rooms in the wilderness.

Encounter: "Four Arrows And A River Running"
A Castles & Crusades Adventure

by Stephen Chenault

This adventure is designed for a group of low-level adventurers and should have 3-5 players. The adventure takes place in a forested environment and involves the party traveling to a river, crossing it and retrieving four arrows from a body, all for a purse of gold. Any class or race will fit, but as with any outdoor encounter, it is good to have at least one that can swim, and in this case, perhaps more than one.

Introduction

The Cocklebur Inn & Tavern is the largest structure in the small town of Ends Meet and it's not a very large structure at all. Here all manner of wanderers, adventurers, brigands, and other such people come for the stout brew and the warm food. Their cheeses are well known and there is almost always roasted boar on the table.

The characters find themselves in the Tavern either after a long journey to get here, or a long adventure in the Darkenfold itself. A number of other patrons are here as well, many enjoying the benefits of a meal well cooked. In the midst of the crowd is an archer who is regaling the tavern with an epic arrow dual he had with an orc on the banks of the Mistbane River.

Read or paraphrase the following:

> *"The orc and I had it out for many an hour just this side of the ford, even as the river slowly rose before us…spring melt don't you know. We took our time with each shot, waiting for the opportunity to strike a blow that might end the duel. Three of his comrades I shot down and he winged me in the face as you can see the bloody trail marked on cheek. But in the end, when I was down to my last 5 shafts, and blood redded shafts they are, fashioned in the Rhuneland so far away, I at last hit him in the shoulder and he fell back from the willow he had taken refuge behind. My next shot I sent into his leg, for I could not tell what metal he wore beneath his leather coat and I wanted to forestall his flight. He fell then against a large rock on the river's edge and I sank two more shafts into him. He died there and died well for one of his kind! But damned if I didn't lose those arrows for I cannot swim and would not dare the river's crossing even if I could for his comrades were hot in the ears for the death of their beloved archer. I'd pay good money to any bold enough to cross the river and fetch me my Rhuneland arrows."*

If he spied the party he'll offer them the job, 25 gold pieces to go to the Mistbane and fetch his arrows.

Note: The following encounter takes place whether they take up the archer's mission or not. Move it to where the characters are and whenever they need to cross a river. It can be any time of day or night, any season, changing the melt with other natural storms to cause the river to rise.

The journey to the river from the Inn is little more than a few miles and shouldn't take but a few hours.

The weather is cool, about 80 degrees, and a little rainy, though the rain is more of a mist than an actual rain. As the party travels water gathers in drops on their leather cloaks and in hair and beards. It makes the journey both pleasant and annoying for the water is cool and in some ways refreshing, it tends to get in the eyes, soaks into cloth and dribble down between flesh and armor.

That said, thunder rumbles in the north and threatens fresh rain. In fact the whole trek is one made in the shadow of the storm.

River Running

The path is easy going and brings the party to the Mistbane River, which is swollen, much as the archer said, with spring melt. The river is broad and deep. The ford that normally crosses the river now under several feet of swift-moving water.

The body of the orc is plain to see. It floats in the water, on the far side of the river, face to the sky, the four arrows that ended its life still protruding from his blood drained body. The river however has seized him and though the corpse clings to the far shore it is only a matter of time before it is released by its rocky tether and tossed into the flow to follow what paths destiny has laid out for the cold dead.

Note: At any point that the CK wishes to make the crossing more challenging, allow the storm to break and the rain to begin falling in torrents, obscuring vision, making everything a little more difficult (increase CLs accordingly) and throw in the aggravation of water-soaked clothes and armor.

The characters have about 2 hours to get across the river and to the orc to retrieve the body before the stream picks it up and carries it south.

There are no boats in the vicinity. The river is 100 feet wide at its narrowest and about 3-4 feet deep where the ford is. The ford is clear for any to see for the road enters it on both sides of the river. The water is moving relatively swift.

Walking across the river will be difficult and require a dexterity check (CL 8). Swimming it is possible too, and requires an attribute check (of the CKs choosing and should be different for each character if necessary, CL 5). However, any attempt to swim will carry the swimmer downstream 10 feet every round they are in the water, bringing them up 40-50 feet south of the body.

Attempts to shoot the body with an arrow with a rope attached to it should be made at an AC 19.

Building a single-rope bridge is possible but challenging as the party will have possess several hundred feet of rope and someone will have to cross to secure the rope on the far side. Allow for this and give any attribute checks a CL 3-6 as seems appropriate.

The Hill Giant

On the far side of the river is a hill giant. He's camped himself beneath an over-hang, waiting for the gods only know what, as hill giants have few desires and less plans. He sits and is eyeballing the orc. He is not particularly well hid but his grayish skin and the weather give him some natural camouflage. Anyone looking in that direction from the far side of the river requires a spot check to see him (CL 8).

The giant is little aware of what the party is doing, and if he is, he doesn't care, until such time as the party gets near his orc. When they approach he suddenly becomes aware that he might lose his lunch and have nothing for dinner. But then again, live food is better than dead, to a hungry giant on a rainy day.

The giant shouts and gesticulates at the party as they begin to retrieve the orc's body from the swollen river. At first he warns them off, hoping to spare his tired muscles the exertions of rainy fight. But if they persist, he becomes more insistent to the point that he attacks them.

Negotiating with the giant is possible, but not likely, if the characters take the time to talk to him. He really is only interested in the body but is less inclined to talk and little able to reason. Any diplomacy, or charisma checks should be made against the giant's hit dice.

Giant, Hill (*These chaotic evil creatures' vital stats are HD 9d8, AC 17, HP 54. Their primary attributes are physical. They attack with 2 fists for 2d8 points of damage or a giant club for 2d8 points of damage. They are able to throw rocks up to 330 feet for 2d8 points of damage*.)

The giant, assuming he is overcome, has some baubles of treasure in the bag he has slung over his shoulder: a ragged patchwork quilt that he uses to sleep in that smells like death warmed over but provides any who sleep in it a night's rest as if they slept for 24 hours. Sleeping in it heals 1hp per night. He has a gourd with a thick sludge-like liquid in it that when drunk improves one's vision, allowing them to see as an elf. 112 gp in mixed coin, some food scraps and the skull of a dwarf with a peculiar notch on his head, who, if some investigation is made, is a dwarf well known in the Inn lately visited . . .

THE END

Stephen Chenault has been writing and publishing RPGs since 1999 when he started Troll Lord Games. He has run the company since 2003 and written a mountain of material for *Castles & Crusades*, Aihrde, the *Crusader Journal*, *Dungeons & Dragons*, fiction, articles and a plethora of commentary on the TLG blog. He has worked with such notables as the late Gary Gygax, James M. Ward, Darlene, Bill Webb and Joe Goodman. You can find all his material and more about the games he writes at www.trolllord.com.

Making a Villain

by Casey W. Christofferson

From films and television, to novels and folk tales, our world is shaped by the ongoing struggle of good vs. evil and right vs. wrong. These stories are never better than when the hero is faced by a memorable enemy. The big bad wolf, *Dracula*, and the Red Queen, do more to make the plight of the heroes of their tales interesting than any individual actions of the characters alone. The same can hold true for role playing games, where the best campaigns aren't simply dominated by an overarching evil, but whose action is moved along by the deeds of interesting foes both big and small.

Too often game masters find themselves in the rut of throwing two-dimensional enemies at their players in an unending hack and slash cycle. At first it is fun running through wave after wave of kobold, goblin, orc, ogre and troll in an ever so slightly escalating stairway of challenge. Time goes by, another ogre is cut in half, or just another bandit chief who goes down in the immolating flames of a fireball spell, and you suddenly notice that the faces around your table are starting to get bored. Players start missing sessions, and do the players really remember this? Was it a challenge to them? Did they enjoy their game session? Could the game master have provided something more memorable?

A great villain is more than a list of character attributes, stats, special abilities, and loot for the characters to part out after the villain is defeated. To be sure, all of those things are important to flesh out the non player characters as a whole. A proper villain is more than the sum of all of these things. They have a personality. A strong villain has motivations. Importantly they don't think of themselves as villains, because in their own story arc they are the hero!

Simply put, if you create a villain that the players remember and talk about in whispered tones for decades to come, you have done it right! Creating a memorable bad guy can be a challenge, especially when starting out as a game master, or as you begin learning to design on your own. One thing to do is to look at what other designers have done, and see what it is about their villains and bad guys that you liked.

Good designers give you things to think about when creating their villains. Examples of this include the following:

Personality

The character has a bit of a synopsis written about it that gives you a glimpse into how they act, speak, look, and move. Combined with inferred details in the character's description, and their statistics, you can begin to develop a pretty strong opinion of the bad guy's personality. For example, if the character has an extremely low charisma, but high intelligence, you begin to develop the picture of someone who has a lot to say, but is often overlooked by their peers. They may have developed a complex about this and are lashing out and taking their constant slights out on others.

Motivation

Everyone from the murderous chambermaid to the overlord is motivated by something. Often a good designer places these things into the descriptive text about the character. It helps to pay attention to these suggestions and tidbits from the author and make some notes. By studying their motivations and writing down a particular non player character's possible actions on a note card is a good way to help keep your game flowing

smoothly. Things to put on the card include "triggers" that set the villain off. Others could include offers and bribes that the villain may make to get the characters to switch to their side, such as the sorts of offers made by a Mafia Don, or galactic Dark Lord.

Tactics

Just like characters, memorable villains usually have some tactic, trick, or move that is their "signature" move. Often in the thick of battle a game master is attempting to run a table with several players, and multiple foes at hand. Good designers attempt to assuage this complex set of variables by including some tactics in the text of their adventure. When getting prepared to run the adventure for players, simply write down the individual villain's standard operating procedure on the back of the note card that contains their motivations. For example the evil wizard may already have their defensive spells such as blur, haste, and protection from missiles cast prior to battle. They may open with a charm to attempt to get the heroes' toughest fighter on their side, and close with a teleport if things are go wrong. Knowing the tactics of the villain helps a game master to stay prepared and keeps things flowing smoothly.

Secrets and Knowledge

A good foe knows things that the characters do not. They may possess some secret knowledge that would be earth shaking to the characters. They may know a password or location of a hidden treasure that they would trade for their life. If the foe is powerful enough, they may have some magical gift that they may grant, such as an item, or limited use special ability.

A great villain doesn't always have to be the "boss" character

An example of how this works can be found on one of the classic RPG adventures from the early days. The adventure cycle is a famous series of raids against the lairs of giant kings. The initial read through of one of the adventures leads you to believe that the adventure is more or less a choice between a stealth mission or a long slog through knee deep rivers of giant blood as the characters hack and slash their way through each lair. It was obvious from the initial read through and running the adventures that the giant chieftains were the definitive "boss" characters of the whole deal series.

Simply put, if you create a villain that the players remember and talk about in whispered tones for decades to come, you have done it right!

The thing is, after rereading through the adventure you found that there were a few other interesting characters in those lairs. One in particular that leapt out at me was the character of an insanely overpowered dwarf. The dwarf was a renegade who served as the chief advisor to the fire giant king. Extra care was given in his description to detail his tactics, his gear, and his loyalty to his king as well as information that he had which he may use to parlay for his life in the event he is more or less caught with his trousers down.

The list of possibilities included calling for help, barring the door and "arming up", lying and trying to insinuate himself into the party, spying on the characters, or other such endeavors. Ultimately the character is designed as a survivor who could and was used frequently through ongoing adventure campaigns as a foil to the party and recurring enemy. This character was not the "boss", and in truth although he was loyal to his master the fire giant king, he was not unquestionably loyal. Importantly this villain possessed several of the basic requirements for being an important foe. He had motivation, personality, tactics, statistics, and gear.

Create enemies to the actual power of your characters, not just their level!

Despite your best efforts as a game master to control the influx of items, powers, and special abilities to the players, their characters are going to accumulate loot, powerful items, and gain abilities. Sometimes the stuff you carefully hand out in game sessions jumps out to bite you in the butt. Balance future encounters accordingly. Sometimes just because a character's sheet says they are 5th level, they have come across an item or discovered a rules hiccup that gives them an advantage that derails your cleverly created NPC

foe. Should this happen, it isn't a bad idea to consider leveling up or somehow tweaking your NPC, their stats, or the abilities they have. When doing so it is important however, to remember not to make them so powerful that they could completely wipe the floor with the players in fight. They should be at least comparable to the characters and have a similar level of goods and abilities if they are of equal level to the characters. If the opponent is intended to be a more powerful "boss level" foe to be faced by the entire party, then they should be powerful enough alone to be a challenge for the size of the adventuring group, with a possibility that some members of the group won't make it out of the fight alive.

Emotional Investment

One thing to remember as a game master or designer is to avoid becoming overly attached to your bad guys. Remember that although you are creating a memorable character for your players to interact with, ultimately the enemy is still an enemy of the characters and should be used as such. The bad guy can't always get away! Admittedly it may feel like a waste of time when your players rush through your well crafted creations like a pimento loaf through a buzz saw but ultimately the lot of the villain is to provide challenge, and experience points to the players. If the characters beat your creations too easily, perhaps you should take a look at their character sheets and figure out what it is that they are doing to so quickly upset your well placed plans. This brings us to the next point.

Don't Cheat!

Just as surely as the dice go against a good player from time to time, the players are going to have some great rolls go their way and the foe you put so much time and effort into is going to bite the dust. Like they are supposed to! If your carefully crafted anti paladin fails his save and bites the dust, then so be it. Congratulate the players, and remember to include an item, device, or save in the next enemy you create to protect from such a situation.

Encounter: "Honreed Duclaigh: A Dinner with Death"

by Casey W. Christofferson

This encounter details a villain who may be used as an ongoing foe for the party utilizing the various tools detailed previously.

Honreet Duclaigh

Honreet is a half elf assassin descended from a highland clan with a despicable tendency toward betrayal and murder. Honreet was the youngest son of Bainforth Duclaigh, and the first child of Bainforth's second wife, a lady of dubious elven ancestry, rumored to be more drow than anything else. As such Honreet was not in line to inherit any of his father's holdings, and was violently and viciously reminded of this by his elder siblings on a daily basis. This knowledge instilled in Honreet an instinct for survival, and revenge.

Like the children of many nobles, Duclaigh was educated by traveling bards, and wizards. He furthered his studies from his mother's small library of drow classics, and human tragedies, preferring stories of revenge and redemption. Stealing a makeup kit from a band of performers, he spent hours perfecting disguises that made his features unrecognizable to his family and their servants.

Young Honreet took readily to the crossbow and small swords. His elven heritage gave him agility that soon outpaced his human kinfolk and a curiosity for the use of magic that as often escaped the dull wits of his human brethren. Honreet's dark elf heritage gave him a masochistic pleasure in causing excruciating pain to his enemies as he slowly picked them apart, damaging nerve and tendon before ultimately finishing them off. His mother taught him the uses of poison and its effects upon others.

In time, underhanded dealings by the Duclaigh clan put them on the wrong side of their highland rivals, resulting in the death of Bainforth and the sack of Duclaigh Keep. Honreet escaped, eventually tracking down the heads of the various

clans who participated in the destruction of his home, murdering them one by one in very painful and public ways.

Once the task was finished, the younger Duclaigh set forth into the world, joining assassins' guilds in the cities of the south, and east, where he studied under some of the greatest professionals of the civilized lands. Duclaigh has developed a reputation for efficiency where his specialty remains public murder.

Honreet Duclaigh: Honreet is a Neutral Evil 7th level assassin/ 3rd level Wizard. Str 12, Dex 18, Con 12, Int 17, Wis 13, Cha 14.

Honreet is typically armed with a +2 rapier or short sword, a +1 light crossbow, a ring of invisibility, boots of elvenkind, +1 leather armor, and a ring of protection +1. He has four doses of poison on his person, preferring poisons that cause paralysis or strength damage to those that kill outright. 2 potions of cure serious wounds. Special Abilities: Sneak attack, Hide, Move Silent, Traps, Assassination, Poison Use, Disguise.

Typical Memorized Wizard spells: *0 – Detect Magic, Detect Poison, Ghost Sound, Mage Hand 1st – Change Self, Charm Person, Hold Portal, Sleep, 2nd – Detect Thoughts, Mirror Image*

Honreet's statistics should be adjusted to make him a dangerous threat for a player character party when they initially meet him, so that he would be a deadly challenge to them on their first encounter. That said he shouldn't go out of his way to attempt to kill the characters. The stats listed above are designed to be a very difficult challenge for a party of four 4th-5th level characters.

Personality

Few would recognize Honreet's true face as his constant use of elaborate disguises shifts from region to region and month to month leaving no actual identity to pin on anyone in particular. To some he may be a traveling acrobat or a professional herald. To others he introduces himself as a respected if somewhat snotty foreign wine sommelier, and to others still an apprentice wizard on assignment for his master.

Honreet's Tactics

Honreet likes to follow his prey from a short distance, gathering whatever information he can about his mark through magic, bribe and rumor before formulating and springing his trap. Honreet can be charming and kind to those he meets, often ingratiating himself into the good graces of his target before ripping the life from their bodies.

His assassinations vary depending on the needs. He once poisoned an entire clan of his family's enemies at dinner where he posed as a traveling minstrel. Another time he stabbed an enemy through both shoulders, and both calves, leaving him to unable to walk or lift his arms, and left him to die from the slow acting poison which imbued his blade.

Honreet makes full use of his ring of invisibility and spell casting powers to evade capture after completing a job. He is known for quickly changing his features to assume the appearance of someone in the crowd, walking free from detection of local constables. If cornered and unable to become lost in the crowd, he uses his ring of invisibility to sneak free. Honreet typically has a safe house or hideout somewhere within a short distance of where he intends to harvest his prey.

A Dinner with Death

The characters are first introduced to Honreet as witnesses to one of his murders. Many popular and common adventures of late have a "fetch" element attached to them where the characters are tasked with fetching a good or item on behalf of a local lord, crime boss, or merchant. As the characters are celebrating their success with their new patron, the patron is suddenly murdered.

Getting Started

The characters have had a recent success and are invited to a fine dining establishment within a wealthy quarter of the city. They have been adorned with fine clothes, though heavy armor such as full plate and full suits of chainmail are forbidden by the establishment, and missile weapons, staves, and polearms are discouraged at the dinner table, as it is simply poor manners. Weapons racks have been provided in the dining room for their comfort.

The Encounter

Dinner is served with plates of steaming meat and vegetables, bottles of champagne, cheese and fruit plates, and a side table lined with pies, cakes, and other delicacies. Servants weave in and out of the dinner, ensuring that no plate remains unfilled, and that no need goes un-serviced. As the dinner party is getting into full swing, the host invites the characters to relay the tale of how they managed to gather his item from his foes and return it to him. A bard sits to the side of the host, with a quill and scroll, taking notes over the proceedings. The host explains that the bard intends to write an epic of their deeds, which should help the party find further work and increase their fame.

The bard is in fact Honreet Duclaigh and he has been hired by a rival of the character's patron to murder him in grand fashion.

Allow the characters a check while regaling their host with their tales. If a character succeeds in the check they notice that the bard has dripped ink from his quill into the host's drink. If the characters miss the check, find an appropriate point in their retelling of their adventure to interrupt them with the most horrible poisoning death scene that you can imagine as their host begins to choke, wheeze, and gargle blood all over the dining table.

If the characters notice the mickey being slipped into their patron's drink, allow them to do whatever they like, such as warn their patron, say nothing, or make some move at the bard! Grabbing weapons from the weapon racks behind the table takes one round.

When the characters start to make their move, the bard stabs their host in the neck with his poisoned quill and promptly vanishes. Characters have two rounds to detect the invisible opponent, before he fully escapes. This can be achieved through magic spells, scent ability, or other means at the disposal of the characters. If the characters manage to get attacks off on Honreet, he keeps moving, as long as he is not held or paralyzed using a pre-designed exit route to escape to the streets where he quickly changes his face and proceeds to his preliminary hideout.

Battle Breaks Out

In the event that battle breaks out in the restaurant, there is pure chaos as servers, other patrons, maître de and the like crisscross the room looking for cover from the bloodshed. All attacks are at a -2 during the melee unless characters are unconcerned about the civilians in the room!

Honreet continually moves out of the room and away from an encounter with the characters, using his ring of invisibility as much as possible and crossbow bolts laced with paralytic venom should that fail him. A battle in the restaurant has possible repercussions. Wild swings (rolling a 1) may accidentally hit a servant or other patron if critical failure rules are in place. Most servants and patrons would be "low hit point" soft targets and are likely killed by blows that characters would simply shake off. Remember, murdering civilians with close impact fireballs has repercussions for the characters with the local law enforcement!

Tracking Duclaigh

If Honreet escapes, allow characters to use whatever magic or abilities are at their disposal to begin tracking him. Rangers, for example, may be able to follow a trail of blood from any wounds that Duclaigh incurred in the fight. Duclaigh's initial bolt hole hideout is not far from the restaurant or inn. They may use skills, abilities, or attribute checks to ask locals if they have seen anything suspicious. The game master is the final arbiter of how well they do, though it is suggested that Duclaigh be given at least a minimum of a 12th level challenge due to his attribute modifiers and level.

Duclaigh Escapes

If Honreet escaped without being chased into the streets, he has at least several minutes of time in which to take a potion of healing, gather his bags, and make an escape from town. The character's interference is noted and Honreet makes a vow to make a return visit to punish the characters in the future.

From this point Honreet may pop in from time to time during slow and low points of a campaign to stir things up for the players. Over time it is suggested to allow the characters to gain levels on Duclaigh so that a battle with him would be more of a "fair fight." Duclaigh works as a good tool

for thinning the ranks of pesky NPC "pet rocks" that characters tend to accumulate over time, such as kludgy henchmen that have outstayed their purpose in the campaign.

The Characters Stop Honreet Duclaigh

If the characters manage to stop Honreet, congratulate them on a job well done! Award experience and re-use the character in a better scenario. Hey at least the characters never figured out his name or where his hideout is, right?

Honreet's Hideout

Honreet Duclaigh kept a room above an abandoned wig shop. If he has evaded the characters he has left little behind. A successful search of the room reveals a scrap of paper with the words "Duclaigh Keep" scrawled on it. An empty chest sits in one corner, along with an abandoned makeup kit on an old makeup table.

If the characters swiftly track him to his hideout, he flees, though leaves behind his treasure chest which is trapped with a (level 4) poison needle trap (3d6 points of damage). Inside the chest is a dossier with information on his assassination target, notes on the various player characters including a hint that he may have murdered a family member of one of the characters in the past. There is also a small bag of holding containing 500 platinum pieces and a diamond worth 2000 gold pieces.

THE END

Casey Christofferson has written for various publishers since the early 2000's including the Ennie nominated *Feast of the Gobbler*, *Wilderlands of High Fantasy* boxed set, *Tome of Horrors* Series, and the *Tower of Jhedophar* for Necromancer Games/Kenzer Co. He has done various work for Troll Lord Games including development of the Haunted Highlands Campaign Setting, Players Guide, and adventure source-books including the Book of Familiars, and the Castle Keepers Guide. He also has an adventure in DCC #46 *Book of Treasure Maps* for Goodman Games! Casey has authored various short stories including *Tinsel the Christmas Elf*, a YA adventure available on Kindle.

Raison d'être ~ "Or Why Everything in Your Adventure Should Have a Reason for Being There."

by Christopher Clark

As adventure designers, game masters, or entertainers of any stripe who hope to amuse via story creation and the telling thereof, what is it that we truly hope to accomplish? Fear not this shall not become yet one more lengthy diatribe on 'Why do we role play?' but rather seeks to establish but a single point: We role play to escape. We design adventures to foster and facilitate that escape, for both ourselves and our friends. We write adventures in order to transport ourselves and others to worlds beyond the mundane, where we can be either heroes or villains, where the fantastic is ordinary, and where all are allowed to explore their full potential.

But a good adventure is more than just an escape. It grabs our awareness and refuses to let go. It demands that we figure out the plot, solve the crime, or defeat the evil that threatens civilization (or some portion thereof) as we know it. In short, it sucks us in. Many factors contribute to an addictive and memorable adventure, but I want to cover what I believe is the bar-none most important aspect of them all, often referred to as raison d'être. In English? Creatures, situations, items and their juxtaposition to one another should make sense. They should have a reason for being. Rationale is critical to a good adventure.

The simplest illustration of the need for rationale is found by illustrating an example that noticeably lacks this type of logical relationship.

What follows here is a fully playable adventure that exhibits a complete lack of raison d'être. Most role players have experienced this type of adventure, generally when just learning a game, or perhaps when desperate to 'level' a character in a game to which you have become newly addicted. Unfortunately, adventures of this type exhibit a vast tendency 'to suck'.

The Cave of Really Bad Adventure (designed for 3-4 characters of low level)

Entrance: An irregular hemisphere nine feet in diameter forms the rocky entrance to this cave.

Passage A: Directly behind the entrance a rough passage leads northwards through the rock for 60 feet.

A spiked pit trap (fall for 1d8 damage) is hidden in the floor at a point 40' from the entrance.

T Intersection: the hallway splits into two perpendicular hallways 60 feet from the entrance. Against the far (north) wall there is a wooden door bound with iron bands. The left and right passages continue for 30 feet before ending in identical reinforced wooden doors.

Right (east) Room: Contains a Dungeon Slime (Defense 20%/DC14, 10 hp, immune to bladed weapons, one attack per round/acid for 1d6 damage) and a suit of magical plate mail +1/+5% as well as a *scroll of blessings* (removes curses if used by a cleric or ecclesiast).

Center (north) Room: Contains six (6) Goblins (Defense 30%/DC16, 4hp each, one attack per round at 1d6) and $300 in copper and silver coins, as well as a magic wand (causes target to fall asleep).

Left (west) Room: Contains a Huge spider (Defense 35%/DC17, 9hp, one attack per round at 1d4 + potential poison for 1 hp per round for 1d6 rounds) and a +1/+5% magical mace, a +1/+5%

magical steel shield, standard chain mail, and $400 in gold coins.

Again, the adventure here presented is fully playable. It is also far from memorable. If a campaign is in play, it also adds nothing to an ongoing campaign. Why?

First, let's examine the encounters: a huge spider, some goblins, and a slime. While commonplace encounters for most fantasy role playing systems, a gigantic leap of the imagination is required to envision a dwelling of any kind that might house these three species.

The huge spider would likely view the goblins as tasty treats, and would just as likely have eaten them long ago. If, perhaps, the huge spider abstained from a repast of goblin as it was too large to leave its room, then it should have expired from hunger long ago. The spider's other neighbor is a singular creature that is ostensibly immune to the attack of the spider (at least so far as we understand the eating habits of spiders where bodily fluids are ingested from the area of a bite) as consumption of the slime would result in the death of the spider as the acid of the slime melted its vitals. We're also faced with the question of why the spider, even if it entered when younger and smaller, decided to live inside a room within a cave in the first place. If the decision was not made by the spider, then who decided that this dwelling was short a huge (or any kind) of spider and brought the poor creature to this location?

The goblins also have many reasons for choosing a dwelling other than the one presented in the adventure. Living with a large predator as a neighbor we have already discussed, but living between two neighbors that would happily consume them begs the question of why the goblins would choose this cave as a residence. No benefits appear to accrue to these humanoids, and they must dwell in constant peril of their lives… and yet this is the dwelling they chose.

The slime exhibits a similar lack of rationale. We must either assume that the original owner of the magical plate mail chose this cave as his dwelling, which is improbable but possible, and that the slime later devoured him in its quest for food, or that someone placed the slime within this dwelling for no readily apparent reason. The slime should also consider its neighbors potential food sources, and should have already consumed these tasty tidbits before ever the character party arrived upon the scene.

…and why would either the spider or the slime have placed a door to block easy access to their rooms?

The treasures found within each area are as problematic in their rationale as the monsters we find here. While the magical plate mail found in the room with the dungeon slime could have come from one of its unfortunate victims (and therefore does not beg for rationale), the scroll should certainly have been consumed by the acidic secretions of the monster. For their part, the goblins might value coinage, but would have no reason to retain a magic wand as treasure unless within their midst there lurks an incredibly intelligent, first-ever-of-his-ilk goblin with mage-like tendencies. Barring his presence, there is no reason that the goblins would not have traded or sold the magic wand after its acquisition. The spider's treasure represents, again, perhaps the remaining possessions of one of the spider's victims… but there are no biologic remains? Did the spider keep the loot and dispose of the body, including the bones?

...more than just a powerful tool for 'writing adventures that don't suck' as without it, there's a truly excellent chance that your adventure WILL suck. Don't be that guy."

The trap in the entrance hall makes no better sense. Would the goblins trap their own domicile so that on those rare occasions when its presence slips their minds they have a chance to die while returning home? The trap is useless to protect them from the depredations of their two neighbors (the slime and the spider) as it has been laid between the entrance to the cave and the rooms that are occupied; it provides no barrier barring the occupants of one room from visiting the occupants of another. Like the monsters and the treasures found in this adventure, the trap has no reason for its existence, it lacks raison d'être.

What The Cave of Really Bad Adventure lacks most is a history or backstory. It has no reason for existence; it merely "is." Although it is plausible that the characters have discovered a random cave in the midst of the wilderness, or at worst have been magically transported to a dimension wherein the only reality existent is the cave, providing a setting for this adventure alleviates many of the rationale deficits from which it currently suffers.

If we provide an introduction in which the characters meet a mage at a local town who wishes to hire them to retrieve a magical wand, the party now has a reason to seek out the cave. If we further change the wand into a magical wand of portal closure, we can make sense of the remaining logic flaws in The Cave of Really Bad Adventure by explaining, via a 'setting piece' introduction, that the goblins, having looted the local town and stolen both coin and a magical item or two, were seeking a safe lair from which to plan their next move. They happened upon The Cave of Really Bad Adventure and rushed forward, right into the lair of several huge spiders that then occupied this three-cavern cave complex. Some of the goblins killed two of the spiders while constructing doors to wall off a third. While this was taking place, a Dungeon Slime, attracted by the smell of the spider corpses, entered, killed several of the goblins, and then was, in its turn, walled off by the Goblins with a door in a cavern of its own. The Goblins now hide here, afraid to venture out as they know the townsfolk are looking for them, and that the cave is likely known locally as the lair of a huge spider.

As history pieces go, this one is a bit far-fetched, even silly in places, but it very neatly explains the presence of all aspects presented in the adventure. It provides the necessary raison d'être allowing both the game master and the players to formulate a means for resolving the presented problem which is innovative and may in fact rely on non-combat skill use.

Rationale has created from this horrid adventure a group of goblins that may realize that they have 'bitten off more than they could chew'. The characters may decide to parlay with the goblins, trading for or intimidating the humanoids in order to regain the wand from them. The game master may also decide that these goblins, if faced with a strong challenge, simply surrender the wand and head for greener pastures. Once raison d'etre is present in the adventure, both playing and mastering the adventure becomes far simpler for all parties involved.

To fully understand the difference here illustrated, however, we have to look farther. The Cave of Really Bad Adventure is still a fairly poor adventure, in spite of the fact that it might actually fit into a given campaign world if it is provided with a decent history. What mechanisms are lacking in an adventure where 'reasons for being' are left for last? Only the three most important aspects of any adventure: verisimilitude, suspension of disbelief, and immersion.

Verisimilitude is the degree of and quality of plausibility any story, as presented, contains. "No officer, I had no idea I was driving my car at 105 miles per hour!" as a statement, lacks verisimilitude, and unless extremely rare

circumstances are present when that statement is made, very few patrol officers will credit said statement as truth. The more rapid passage of scenery outside a car window traveling at that speed, the increased volume of engine sound, and the difference in driving 'feel' that exists between a car travelling at 70 miles per hour and one travelling at 105 miles per hour is too great; the observable 'facts' contradict the statement. The situation is identical when presenting an adventure.

Rationale adds verisimilitude to any adventure. Most of us have played an adventure with a somewhat socially graceless player that has called into question a ruling or a setting as described by a game master with a reply similar to, "That would never happen!" Of all interactions that occur with players, this is by far the most dreaded phrase ever heard by a game master. It indicates that the challenge presented within the adventure, or the result described by the game master, lacks verisimilitude. The adjudication of the game is no longer plausible, and therefore, no longer fun (and if not for fun, why play?). Most game masters, when faced with this conundrum, either offer rationale for their decision, or politely ask the player to disrupt a game other than the one currently being played. As designers and writers of adventures, it is our job to include rationale in our adventures. It is our duty to provide the type of verisimilitude that guarantees that no matter how exacting the plausibility standards of a player, our adventures 'don't suck.'

Suspension of disbelief is the process during a role playing game where things considered spurious in actual life are accepted as facts for the purpose of playing the game. In a fantasy game, the most common concept requiring suspension of disbelief is that magic is real, and that it works on a grand scale (by way of an example), but all aspects of any role playing game require the suspension of disbelief. We are pretending to be completely different people in a fictitious world — no more absolute requirement for the suspension of disbelief exists.

Achieving suspension of disbelief is achieved by providing acceptable reasons for the existence of the world, any physics that might differ from our own (like magic) and of far greater importance, by the details of the world we imagine ourselves to inhabit. These details are showcased in role playing games through the adventures we place within these worlds.

"You find yourself in a field of purple grass under a bright orange sun. A trained ape wearing a blue housecoat rides forward on an ostrich and asks politely if he might provide you with peanut brittle."

The details in the above statement are all nonsensical, and no rationale is provided for their existence. Although talented individuals might readily picture the described scene in their mind's eye, the average role player likely will not. If we provide rationale, however, suspension of disbelief becomes far easier.

"As the psychedelic drugs given to you by the foul mage begin to wear off, you find yourself in a field of purple grass under a bright orange sun. A trained ape wearing a blue housecoat rides forward on an ostrich and asks politely if he might provide you with peanut brittle. You realize that the drugs are still affecting your perceptions."

Rationale aids, and often justifies, suspension of disbelief.

Immersion occurs in a role playing game when you forget that you are gaming on a kitchen table and begin to fully imagine yourself as the hero you are role playing. It is a process aided by many factors, but all of these factors are inspired by rationale. From the most basic questions (why are we going to this cave again?) to the interrelationships within a given adventure (such as the disparate monsters sharing the Cave of Really Bad Adventure), and the finding of treasures appropriate to the encounters they accompany, rationale aids immersion by allowing the participant, either game master or player, to know (and agree with) the reason that the situation exists as given. In short, highly immersive adventures have rationale nested within them that make sense of the adventure in part and as a whole.

So now let's try and make from the bad example, a good example of an adventure laced with raison d'etre.

Encounter: "The Overlook"

(designed for 3-4 characters of low level)

by Christopher Clark

- First, we provide some rationale via backstory/history. Remember that this is a short adventure, and so the backstory should likewise be informative, but brief:

History

Several months ago, a group of goblins, dissatisfied with their position in the tribe, and loyal to a fault to their group's leader, attempted a coup; the overthrow of the current goblin chieftain and the installment of their leader in his place. Their plan was doomed from the start due to their lack of numbers, and those that survived the plot quickly departed the area, preferring their chances in the wilderness to the wrath of the tribe. They fled south and happened upon a cave nestled within a small cliff that overlooked a road often used by humans and their ilk. Wary of once again creating enemies, the goblins lived by killing small game in the nearby fields and by expanding and fortifying the cave. They had found a new home, and needed only time to make it into their lair.

The lair is finished now, and the goblins have recruited allies to aid them in their misdeeds. Over the last few months they have grown bold, raiding human caravans and travelers, killing these unfortunates and stealing their valuables. Secure in their fortified lair, they little fear the wrath of the mere humans whose existence provides them with victims for the mischief and misdeeds they cherish.

The goblins have trained a pack of giant rats as pets, and keep feral rabbits as livestock.

Next we provide 'some' of this reasoning to the players and the game master in the form of a 'Player's Introduction'.

Player's Encounter

While passing through a small town, you spoke to several of the locals and discovered that most, if not all, had grave misgivings concerning your plans to travel further to the north along the road. Many strange tales were told of haunts and incredible monsters, but the one repeated fact was that none who had recently travelled that road had been heard from again — ever. The owner of the general store, having overheard your plans, asked if you would be willing, for a reasonable reward, to pick up some goods he had ordered from a town that lies six miles up this northern road, and if you would perhaps discover the reason that none had returned from this area for some time. His thoughts were that highwaymen were assailing all that used this road, but that since most had abandoned using the passage, they had likely moved on. He offered 25 gold per person to your group if you would retrieve his goods.

Traps are fun, but should also be rational; they should exist for a reason.

The Entrance: An irregular hemisphere nine feet in diameter forms the rocky entrance to this cave. The entrance has been blocked from site by a large boulder that is perched on the edge of the cliff in which the cave is found. A tripwire leads from the boulder to the road below, and there is an 85% chance that any passing by on foot or horseback will trigger this trap, causing the boulder to fall upon them from above for 1d12 damage. Wagons and carts always trigger this trap, although it may be detected and disarmed by characters with skill in such matters. If the trap is triggered, the Goblins hear the commotion caused and quickly descend attacking any that have survived the boulder's descent. Behind the boulder lies about three feet of space allowing easy access to the caves by the Goblins.

- The following is meant to look like a nonsensical addition to the text, but actually is a near-requirement given the adventure as presented.

Passage A: Directly behind the entrance a rough passage leads northwards through the rock for 60 feet.

A large goose attached to an iron spike that has been driven into the wall walks up and down this passage, pecking at loose stones.

Game master: The goose is actually an early warning system installed by the Goblins as insurance against the event of unexpected visitors.

Unless the characters are using stealth, the goose begins to honk in a most annoying manner the moment they enter the passageway. The goose may be readily dispatched by the single swing of a weapon or a single arrow.

- Then we come to the only description in the original bad example that is able to survive unscathed.

T Intersection: the hallway splits into two perpendicular hallways 60 feet from the entrance. Against the far (north) wall there is a wooden door bound with iron bands. The left and right passages continue for 30 feet before ending in identical reinforced wooden doors.

- Note that actual Goblins are unlikely to place themselves within the room that would first be explored by any uninvited guest. I have therefore moved them to the end of the hall.

Right (east) Room: Contains six (6) goblins (Defense 30%/DC16, 4hp each, one attack per round at 1d6) These goblins do their best to free the giant rats in the west room using stealth if possible, and speed if not, so that these rats might help them to defend their home (which they will if freed). If this room is cleared of its goblin occupants, searchers discover $300 in copper and silver coins, as well as a small box filled with various unidentifiable (but nonetheless edible) strips of dried meat, and several bottles of fine wine. A crate in the corner of this room contains $150 worth of tanned leather, several new farm implements, and small bag containing twelve (12) $25 amethysts (all looted from passing travelers).

Center (north) Room: Contains 6 feral rabbits that have been separated from the door by a screen of wire mesh that stretches across the entire room, from wall to wall, 3 feet from the door. A second door, also formed of wire mesh, allows access through this barrier. Any character that enters that does not immediately attempt to catch a feral rabbit is attacked by these otherwise docile beasts (Defense 10%/DC12, 4hp each, two attacks per round/claws at 1d3). The skins of these rabbits are worth $1-$20 (1d20) if properly removed by a character with appropriate skills.

Left (west) Room: Contains 6 giant rats (Defense 30%/DC16, 4hp each, one attack per round at 1d6 +25% of disease. The game master is invited to determine the actual effects of the disease). These rats are brutally loyal to their Goblin masters.

- Monsters, treasure, and setting with reasons for their existence make for a quick side encounter that easily fits into nearly any campaign and that provides immersion, verisimilitude, and eases suspension of disbelief.

Is there an easy, mistake-proof method for ensuring that raison d'être is a part of your next adventure? This brings me to the most important question you should, without fail, ask yourself whenever you write and adventure, or deign to include a given encounter, item, or situation within that adventure. Always ask, "Why?" If you can't think of a good answer, then the inclusion of that aspect of your adventure should likely be abandoned, as there is apparently no raison d'être; no logical reason for its inclusion within your scenario.

Rationale or raison d'être is a more than just a powerful tool for 'writing adventures that don't suck' as without it, there's a truly excellent chance that your adventure WILL suck. Don't be that guy.

THE END

Chris is the author of the *Inner City*, *Playin' in the Streets*, *Fuzzy Hero* and *Lance* role playing games, the *Pitfall* dungeon series, *A Challenge of Arms*, *The Ritual of the Golden Eyes*, and the *Lands of Igpay* series of adventures for classic fantasy role playing games. He also penned the *Forest of Deceit* series (4 adventures), and *Rain of Terror* for Eldritch Enterprises, is the most prolific author of published *Lejendary Adventure* scenarios, and has written several science fiction adventures with noted author James M. Ward. Chris has worked with Frank Mentzer, Tim Kask and Gary Gygax on adventures and adventure writing, and has had 26 of his adventures published under various companies and for various role playing systems… and he is far from finished.

Know (and Love) What You Write

by Michael Curtis

There is an old adage in writing, one that even those who've never picked up a pen to create a work of fiction have heard: *Write what you know*. The premise behind this advice is that an author describing circumstances he's familiar with produces work more believable to the reader, writing which creates a simulacrum of reality in the reader's mind due to little details ringing true. A writer who has worked as a cop in the bad side of town can pen a story rich with the small pieces of real life about the seedy underbelly of the big city, for example, far better than a writer who has never left his small rural home. Both employ their imaginations to bring the same setting to life on the page, but the cop's tale will have more verisimilitude.

While the adage was intended for the works of fiction and non-fiction, it is equally applicable to the art of game design. It might seem inappropriate at first glance—after all, how can the designer or the game master write what she knows when so often role-playing games are set in fantastic world far beyond our own sphere of reality? The answer lies not in representing a truthful experience of the fantastic, but rather in the utilization of topics or skills familiar to the game master. By employing the designer's own storehouse of knowledge or discussing topics she enjoys in her work, she infects her adventures with emotions that are palpable to the players.

For example, let's assume our game master is an avid fan of art history and is herself an amateur artist when not running her weekly game sessions. She enjoys working with oil paints, of recreating what she sees about her on canvas, and is well-read about the lives and works of artists from certain historical periods. In addition, she enjoys watching "Antiques Roadshow" for their evaluations of art and the historical trivia that regularly comes up about the lives of the artists who created those works.

These interests might seem of little use to her as she sits at her computer, struggling to come up with a new adventure to tantalize and entertain her gaming group. The PCs have just finished exploring an ancient elven ruin and are returning to their home city next week to sell off their plunder. What's a game master with writer's (or designer's) block to do?

She should draw upon what she knows: in this case, art and art history. By beginning with what she is familiar with, she's already grounded the adventure in a subject that she enjoys and has an interest in. This gives her a wellspring of details and information she can work into the adventure to make it, its events, and the NPCs that might inhabit it more alive, and thus more real to the players. Immersion, after all, is one of the greatest goals a game master can strive for, the power to make the players feel—if only for a little while—that they themselves are experiencing the events and the world the game designer created rather than simply witnessing it through fictional avatars or alter-egos.

Taking my advice to mind, she decides to incorporate both her knowledge of artists' lives and her enjoyment of "Antiques Roadshow" into the next adventure. Looking back over the party's list of treasure plundered from the ruins, she notices that it includes a golden statuette (500 gp value) that the party found and will attempt to sell when they get back to town.

Our game master decides that the statuette is valuable for more than just its material composition—it is also the lost work of a renowned elven artisan, one known among connoisseurs of statuary as being an eclectic artist with a penchant for the weird and mysterious. She draws upon the life of surrealist painter Salvador Dali, using his life and personality as the inspiration for her elven artist. He is already coming to life in her head: maybe, inspired by Dali's iconic mustache, her elven artist employed

magic to grow a beard, turning elven stereotypes and cultural expectations on their heads! Already her NPC is already becoming one the players have never seen before, making him all the more memorable when they finally encounter him (either in the flesh or in legend).

Now she wonders, "How do I get the party involved in an adventure that features my curious artisan?" That's where "Antiques Roadshow" comes in.

She envisions an eclectic fellowship of historians and appraisers who dwell in the city, a group employed by mages, thieves, and adventurers alike to provide honest evaluations of uncommon pieces of art and other artifacts (for a small fee of course!). When the PCs turn up in the city with their golden statuette, a helpful resident or pawn broker directs them to this group, suggesting they'd get a better idea of the item's true worth from these experts.

When the party shows up with the statue, they meet all manner of historians and appraisers, many of whom have personalities inspired by the game master's own favorites from "Antiques Roadshow." This allows her to swiftly and realistically portray them as the PCs meet with one after the other, looking for not only more information about the statuette but possibly other items they plundered from the ruins. After all, our game master has given them such lively personalities, the players are actually eager to interact with the various NPCs, excited to learn who they might be dealing with, what personality quirks they might have, and what information they could provide about the plethora of plundered pieces of art and artifacts they have with them.

A good GM must be aware of both positives and negative ramifications of her choices when creating adventures.

The PCs find the information they need about the statue, its artist, and a potential lead on a wealthy collector who might be willing to pay double the 500 gold pieces they'd receive if they sold it for its gold, but they also attract the attention of a rival collector who's willing to acquire the statuette by unscrupulous methods. Can the PCs reach the wealthy collector before the rival steals it? And thus the meat and bones of the adventure is decided.

In the hands of our game master, I'm certain this adventure is going to be one the players remember for quite some time. The GM's creations are also going to have long-term impact on the campaign world itself. The party knows of the fellowship of appraisers and is certain to seek them out in the future (an excellent way to introduce more adventure hooks), the rival collector may become an ongoing foil for the PCs, the newfound knowledge about the other works of art and artifacts the party discovered in the ruins might lead to new adventures or places to explore, and lastly, what is the fate of our eclectic elven artisan? Is our bearded elf still alive and creating interesting works or is he dead, his workshop a treasure trove of unknown—and therefore immensely valuable—works of art?

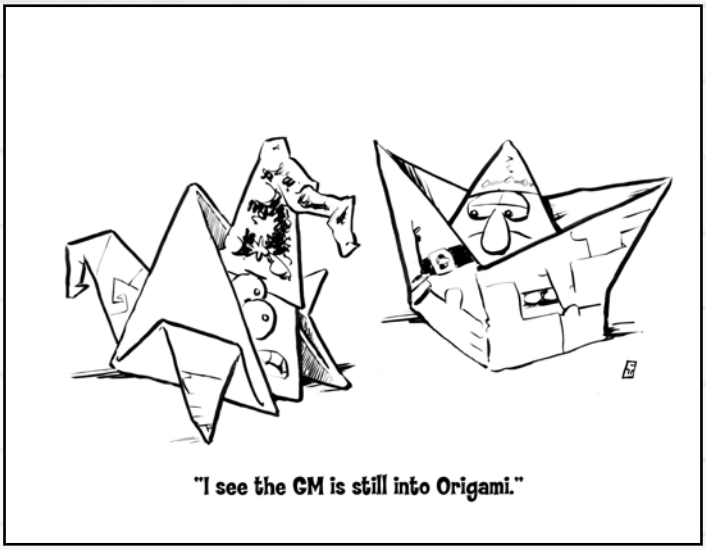
Although we've used an interest and knowledge of art and art history as our example, nearly anything the game master or designer finds intriguing and enjoyable can be transformed into the inspiration for great adventures. Some topics lend themselves more to role-playing than others: history, military science, metalworking, outdoor survival and camping, and similar subjects are obvious fodder for fantasy RPGs, but it's hard to imagine a subject the game master is enthusiastic about that can't be turned into the seed for a good adventure. Knowledge of bookbinding would be helpful in designing strange tomes in a fantasy or supernatural game, for example, while interest in dance might allow the GM to create a unique form of performing art that plays a central role in a scenario. Even something as prosaic as soap-making might serve as inspiration for designing utterly unique magical items (enchanted soap that dissolves oozes, slimes, and jellies, perhaps?) as an adventure's quest or McGuffin!

Words of Warning

We've discussed the benefits of putting the GM's personal knowledge and beloved subject matter to good use when designing adventures. However, we'd be remiss if we didn't consider the potential drawbacks of doing so. A good GM must be aware of both positives and negative ramifications of her choices when creating adventures.

Any enthusiast knows that the entire world does not always share their love for a particular topic or activity. There are people who, for whatever reason, simply don't find your pastime enjoyable or interesting, and in some extreme cases, may even be hostile towards it (as any role-player who survived the "Satanic Panic" of the 1980s can attest!).

The key to drawing upon your personal likes and interests for adventure fodder while keeping the players happy and responsive to your scenarios is moderation. Role-players pursue this hobby because it provides them an outlet for their imaginations, exploring and experiencing places and events they might not otherwise ever perceive. If every game session involves exploits into the complex world of art and art history, for example, and the players are looking for dungeon crawling hijinks, nobody is going to be happy. The players will become bored with the repetition and the game master will be frustrated when no one seems interested with the adventure.



"I see the GM is still into Origami."

Role-playing games have certain inherent social expectations. The game master will be fair to the players and the players will in turn respect both the time and effort the GM puts into their game sessions. This two-way street means both parties have to compromise for the betterment of the gaming group. Too little give on either side leads to unhappy gamers and imploding gaming circles.

A wise GM will use her interests with a sparing hand, employing them to add depth and detail to her adventures without beating the players over the head with them. In the case of our example game master, subsequent adventures might introduce new fictional artists and their works to the campaign world, things mentioned in passing or available for the PCs to pursue should they choose. This way, she still gets to include people, places, and things that interest her, but not at the cost of detrimentally impacting the players' gaming experience. A win for both groups on either side of the game master's screen!

The other potential drawback to utilizing real world interests when designing adventures is the fact that you might not be the only one interested in a topic and may in fact not be as knowledgeable of the subject matter as some of your players! Imagine the disappointment a GM would experience when, upon drawing on her knowledge of the American Revolution, uses the events surrounding Benedict Arnold's treason to spin a web of intrigue and betrayal, only to discover one of her players instantly recognizes the plot because he too is interested in the War of Independence? A great adventure idea is ruined for both the game master and the player who can anticipate the twists and turns before they arrive.

Luckily, this is an easy complication to deal with. If you're running a game for a regular group, you'll likely already have an idea about what their outside interests are, allowing you to predict which of them might prove well-informed about a topic you plan on using for inspiration. You can either A) include them in your design process or B) completely subvert their expectations.

If the player is more learned in the topic you plan to mine for design inspiration, ask them questions about the subject. Benefit from their knowledge and thereby increase your own personal storehouse of potential adventure design fodder. In the example above, ask the players for more details about Arnold's treason, telling him that you want the PCs to deal with a similar set of circumstances in an upcoming adventure. Quite likely, the player will be flattered by your asking and it'll be a small matter to get them to agree to avoid metagaming during the adventure and

ruining the surprise for the rest of the group. The player will most likely agree to your request, if only because the adventure will be an interesting one for them too given its shared inspirational basis.

The next option is to use the player's knowledge against them. In these circumstances, the game master uses Arnold's treason as the framework for the adventure, leaving enough parallels between fiction and fact to make the player assume he knows where the plot is headed. Then, at the last moment, she twists things around—what if Arnold was framed by a third party? Even the knowledgeable player is surprised and therefore able to enjoy the adventure despite what he thought he knew.

Of course, you can always do both. Pump the player for information and make him think he knows what you have planned. Then, when he least expects it, zig instead of zag, and leave his head spinning as both he and his character struggle to figure out what's going to happen next. He'll face the same uncertainty as the rest of the players and you can be sure he'll be even more intrigued (if maybe a little infuriated) at where the adventure is going to go next.

Putting Up or Shutting Up

Now that I've demonstrated a hypothetical example of how you can use your interests, hobbies, and other aspects of your own life in creating adventures, let's look at a practical example. I'll show you how I'd create an adventure or encounter using my own interests.

I'm an armchair historian with a love for the colonial era of North America, especially the period from the 17th century when European settlers were first establishing colonies in this strange and unknown land (for them, anyway) to the French and Indian War of the mid-18th century. The idea of giving up your former life to dwell in the wilderness holds a particular fascination for me, and it is little wonder that most of my fantasy role-playing game campaigns are focused on the adventurers exploring the unknown wilds beyond the borders of the known world. Although I've used this historical period for inspiration before, let's steal a bit of history that I have yet to employ in my campaign before and see if we can't make it into something special.

One of the reasons Europe pushed to establish settlements in the New England, New York, and New France regions of North America was to profit from the seemingly endless population of beaver, mink, and other fur-bearing animals. Trading posts, places where trappers who ventured into the wilds to meet the demand for these animals and their pelts, were the backbone of the complex trade networks that included both Europeans and Native Americans. They were where settlers came to buy goods, trappers—both white and native—came to sell their hauls to fur dealers, and where the rough-and-rowdy mountain men could blow off steam and lighten their purses.

The wilderness of the New World and the massive megadungeons of fantasy RPGs are strikingly similar: Both are inhabited by dangerous animals and intelligent denizens that might be friendly or hostile. Both contained valuable resources and riches that could be taken by the brave and the lucky. And both lured those who were willing to risk their lives in order to become wealthy. Looking at it this way, it seems obvious that we need a trading post for our megadungeon. And thus the idea for "Denkin's Trading Post & Rarities Brokerage" is born.

Denkin's Trading Post is a location rife for role-playing opportunities and a place to introduce adventure hooks. Run by a semi-retired adventurer and his friends, the trading post acts as brokerage for powerful wizards, alchemists, sages, and other scholarly types requiring rare ingredients such as monster parts and weirder subterranean substances. Instead of risking their own lives to procure such oddities, they place an order with Denkin or his agents, who then make it known to adventurers visiting his establishment what is desired and how much is being paid for this week's sought-after ingredients. The adventurers then depart into the depths of the dungeon or into the wilderness to procure the valuable substances, much like the fur trappers of colonial America.

The Trading Post also serves as "safe ground," a place for the PCs to learn new rumors, resupply (at a large mark-up), rest, and heal, allowing them to quickly return to plumbing the dungeon's

depths in search of treasure. If these same heroes then spend much of their acquired wealth on more goods and services at the Trading Post, Denkin is a happy man!

Let's take a more detailed look at the Trading Post, shall we?

Encounter: "Denkin's Trading Post & Rarities Brokerage"

by Michael Curtis

Background: Denkin Blueface was a hardened adventurer in his younger days, eking out a living by plundering ancient tombs, crumbling ruins, and dark dungeons. He and his fellow adventurers made their fortunes not only on the treasures they discovered in their delving, but also by providing curious and eclectic ingredients to wizards, alchemists, sages, and priests. If you need manticore hair, ogre bile, or even dragon snot, Denkin and his friends could locate it, dispatch the creature, and deliver it to your doorstep.

Denkin's too old to go toe-to-toe with fearsome monsters these days, but he's still involved in this lucrative (if dangerous) trade. To this end, Denkin has cleared out a network of rooms on the upper level of the realm's most notorious and expansive dungeon, operating a trading post serving the steady stream of adventurers visiting the dungeon and as a brokerage that buys and sells rare ingredients, monster parts, and other commodities existing solely in the dungeon. His trading post is well-defended against the monstrous inhabitants of the dungeon and serves as a convenient—if somewhat expensive—place for adventurers to rest and restock.

Area #1: A pair of massive steel doors bars the entrance to the trading post. Each door has a loophole covered by an iron shutter on the inside of the door. These shutters can be opened to allow missile fire at enemies outside the gates and to act as peepholes. A man-sized Judas door is set into the right-hand door. Both the gates are barred and protected by a wizard lock. The trading post's porters, Banquo, and Denkin can open the gates at will.

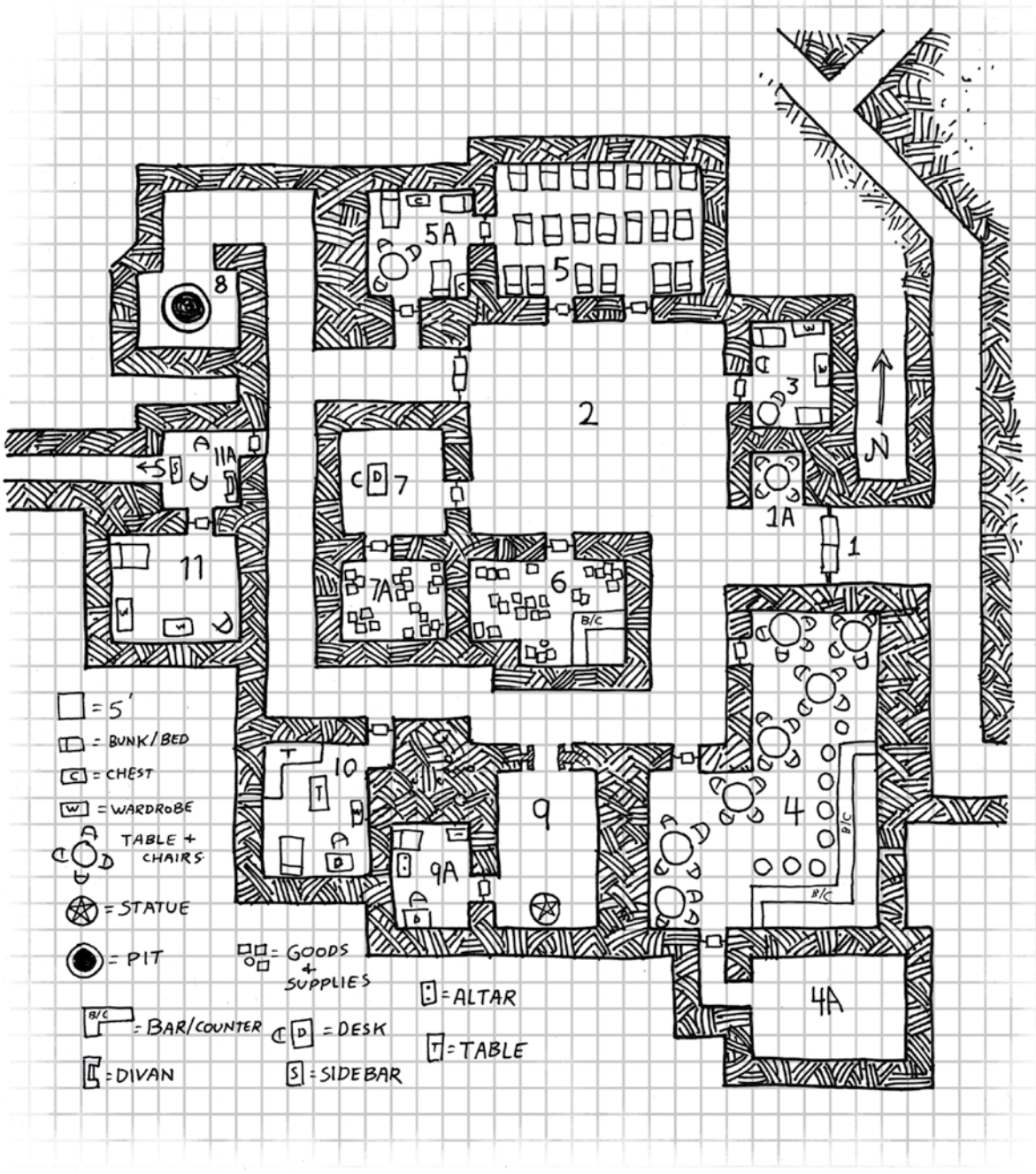
Area #1A: The space serves as a guard post. Six men-at-arms (1st through 3rd level fighters) dressed in chainmail, armed with pikes and swords, and equipped with heavy crossbows are on duty here at all times. A porter is also likely (80% chance) to be present during normal business hours. The door guards collect a 1 gp toll from all visitors, plus an addition 1 gp tax on each mount, cart, sledge, or other form of transportation brought through the doors. The guard post contains a table, a lantern, four chairs, and an alarm gong that summons reinforcements form areas 4, 5, 5A, and 9 within six rounds if struck.

Area #2: This large chamber serves as the trading post's courtyard and stables. Carts, mules, and other dungeon-sized transportation are stabled here while their owners conduct business in the store or brokerage, or lounge in the tavern. There are always 2d4 zero-level humans here tending to the animals, running errands, or attending to miscellaneous duties.

Area #3: This small room is the porter's quarters. It is home to two porters (2nd level fighters) and contains their personal belongings, beds, wardrobes, and comfortable sitting chairs. A locked iron cabinet set into the stone wall contains the keys to all locks inside the trading post and a small coffer holding the day's tolls. It has 2d20+20 gp inside. One porter is usually found here, sleeping between shifts at the front gates.

Area #4: This chamber serves as a raucous tavern. Crude, stained tables and benches line the floor and a bar fashioned from old crates runs along the south and east walls. Patrons consist of 1d3 NPC parties (generate using the system of your choice) and 3d6 off-duty guards. A one-armed former man-at-arms (a 4th level fighter) serves as the tavern master. Drinks range from 3 sp for a mug

Denkin's Trading Post Map



of swill to 2 gp for a decent drink. Meals are of limited variety and consist of heated iron rations (5 sp per meal per person). A cash box behind the counter holds 624 cp, 110 sp, and 52 gp.

Area #4A: This room serves as a sleeping area for the tavern. The zero-level employees of the trading post sleep here and space on the floor is rented out to adventures at the cost of 5 sp per night. The price includes a single meal and a shared chamber pot.

Area #5: This broad, low-ceilinged chamber is utilized as a barracks by the trading post's guards. There are pallets and footlockers for 30 men, a sectioned-off area that serves as a latrine, and several tables and chairs. Lit lanterns, greasy playing cards, bone dice, and other diversions litter the table. There are ten men-at-arms found sleeping or lounging here at any given time. The barracks contains 200 gp in personal wealth in various footlockers.

Area #5A: This smaller chamber acts as the private quarters of the men-at-arms' superior officers. Three sergeants (4th level fighters) share these quarters which contain three comfortable sleeping pallets, footlockers, weapon and armor stands, and a table with four chairs. One sergeant is here at all times unless the post is under attack, and there is a 50% chance a second is present as well. The sergeants own a suit of chainmail +1, a shield +1, a short sword +2, 1327 sp, 546 gp, and a 100 gp value gemstone.

Area #6: This chamber is the trading post and it is cluttered with crates, boxes, barrels, sacks, coils of rope, bunches of torches, and racks of weapons. The proprietor is Embernose Rockthrower, a 5th level dwarven fighter. He is assisted by three zero-level humans and a 3rd level halfling fighter. The trading post sells any common adventuring equipment the game master desires, all at a 300% mark-up. The prices are high, but the trading post is a life-saver for parties who've lost important gear during their dungeon delving. Embernose and the halfling sleep in the shop to protect their inventory. The dwarf keeps a locked and trapped (poison needle; save or paralysis for 3d6 hours) strongbox containing his profits inside a dusty barrel labeled "Orc Kippers." The box holds 1239 cp, 702 sp, and 613 gp.

Area #7: Denkin runs his rarities brokerage from this chamber. A chalkboard covered with lists of desired monster parts and subterranean substances followed by the current market value of such dominates the west wall. A high desk and stool stands before the board and Denkin (6th level fighter; carries a longsword +2) can be found here during typical business hours. A trio of men-at-arms is always present to defend the broker and there is a 50% chance Banquo the Wizard is here as well.

Area #7A: The door to this chamber is sealed with both a mundane and a wizard lock. This chamber is freezing cold and icicles cover the many wooden shelves, boxes, and barrels that crowd the room. Monster parts and rare substances are stored here until they are collected by the various customers who placed an order for them. Banquo the Wizard blasts this room with an ice storm spell once per day and the stone walls keep it well insulated and near-freezing.

Area #8: An open pit lead deep down into the lower depths of the dungeon. The shaft walls are slick and a terrible stench arises from the pit. Two men-at-arms (usually whoever is on punishment detail) are always stationed here. Trash, human waste, food scraps, and other garbage generated by the trading post is tossed down the 60′ deep pit. An ever-hungry otyugh dwells in the room at the base of the shaft, feeding on the steady stream of garbage and waste.

Area #9: The odor of incense wafts through the open archway to this chamber. Inside is a large (8′ tall) statue of a stern woman dressed in a mixture of warrior's armor and mage's robes—a representation of St. Delvinia, the Patron Saint of Adventurers. Sister Jilsa, a 5th level cleric, maintains this chapel, conducting services, healing the injured, and selling moderate cures. The first cure wounds, neutralize poison, or cure disease is free—after that, it's strictly cash!

Area #9A: Sister Jilsa uses this small chamber as her private quarters. The furnishing are spartan; a plain pallet, a personal altar to St. Delvinia, wardrobe with clerical robes and a few personal items of clothing, and a writing table with stool are all the room contains. A loose flagstone under the pallet conceals a cavity with a locked strongbox. The strongbox is lined with straw and

holds six healing potions, three extra-healing potions, a scroll of neutralize poison (x2), and cure disease (x2), and raise dead (x1). A coffer with 456 gp is also inside the secured box. Sister Jilsa keeps her war hammer +2 on top of her personal altar.

Area #10: This chamber is the home of Banquo the Wizard (7th level magic-user). Taxidermy specimens of all manner of small monsters (striges, giant rats, kobolds, etc.) hang from the ceiling, walls, or stand in the corners of the room. A poster bed takes up nearly one quarter of the room. A writing desk, a wardrobe, and a worktable covered with alchemical tools and appliances, and a large spellbook chained to the tabletop, complete the room's furnishings. One of the stuffed kobold is hollow and contains Banquo's most valuable possessions: a purse with 300 pp, a wand of *fireball* (10 charges), a *ring of water-walking*, and three potions of *extra-healing*.

Area #11: This chamber is Denkin's personal quarters. A comfortable bed covered with a bearskin (50 gp value) and goose down mattress occupies much of the room. A closed wardrobe holds a suit of chainmail +2 and a shield +1, along with a heavy crossbow and 24 bolts. The bottom of the wardrobe doubles as a secret strongbox, detectable as a secret door. The strongbox is trapped (spring-loaded blades; 2d6 damage plus loss of 1d4 fingers) and contains 2500 sp, 5000 gp, three gems (500 gp values), a potion of extra-healing, and a potion of super-heroism.

Area #11A: A pair of stuffed armchairs and a divan rest atop an ornate rug in this cozy room. A brazier keeps away the damp, and a sand-filled jar holds smoking incense sticks to drive away the smell of mildew. Denkin uses this room to entertain friends and important business clients. A sidebar stocked with crystal glasses and goblets (50 gp value), and an array of fine vintages (100 gp value) rests against the west wall. The sidebar obscures a one-way secret door that Denkin can use in case the Trading Post is ever overrun and he must escape.

THE END

Michael Curtis began playing RPGs in 1980 and has been designing them professionally since 2008. Most known for his work with Goodman Games, Michael is the brilliant mind behind such *Dungeon Crawl Classics* adventures as *Frozen in Time*, *Intrigue at the Court of Chaos*, *The Chained Coffin*, and the award-winning *Dungeon Alphabet*. He is currently the lead writer for the DCC *Lankhmar* line of game supplements based on the works of acclaimed author Fritz Leiber. Michael lives in Long Island, NY, with the requisite number of cats for a writer and far too many books.

How to Write Encounters That Don't Suck

by Chris Doyle

Basically, a role playing game adventure consists of a back story, an interesting setting, a few maps, and encounters. Sure there can be a few other components, but essentially that's it. Having a solid, compelling back story, an appealing setting, and cool maps are all important. But the players directly interact with the encounters. Well-designed encounters are therefore the meat of any adventure module that doesn't suck. The following article details how to design and write interesting encounters sure to challenge even astute players.

A few caveats before we jump into designing encounters: first, it goes without saying that encounters need to be balanced for the adventuring party. Most modern rule systems have rules on encounter design and appropriate challenges for a typical group of player characters. Individual encounters should not be designed to overwhelm the players, as long as the players employ sound tactics and are prepared. Novice players might need some careful nudging and simpler encounter design, so be aware of your

audience. This is a two-way dungeon corridor, as most encounters should not be too easy. Most encounters should further the plot or the main story arc of the adventure. This is not a hard fast rule, though. Occasionally a random encounter or a simple lair with a beast is suitable and can add an important component to a particular mission or quest. This could be a simple combat in an otherwise story-heavy or mystery-themed adventure.

The next item to consider is the encounter format. There are two schools of thought here; free-form, and standardized. Free-form was much more common with older designs, where the information of an encounter was presented at the whim of the author. Sometimes there was read-aloud text, other times not. Creature statistics could be found anywhere, often in the middle of paragraphs, and treasure was detailed as the encounter site was described. There is nothing wrong with this style, and it's actually a more enjoyable read. But it's harder for the game master (GM) to use in game. And if you are designing encounters for publication, there is a good chance the game master wants to use it in a game situation. Therefore, for ease of use, I prefer a standard encounter format. If the GM knows treasure is always detailed at the end of the encounter, when the players sack the chamber, he is prompted to search the end of the encounter for the information needed.

An encounter should provide all the information needed for a GM to present to the players without referring to other rulebooks. That said it's impossible to detail every possible situation the players come up with to overcome the challenge. At some point, the GM just needs to wing it and fill in any gaps in the information presented. The following is the format, in the order presented, I prefer. The encounter that follows, "*The Deadly Crevasse*" highlights most of these sections. If a section is not needed (i.e. there is no treasure in the chamber), it is simply omitted.

Read Aloud Text

Environment Description

Important Details

Creature/NPC Statistics

Tactics

Treasure

Developments

Read Aloud Text

Occasionally an encounter can require a note or two before this section, but otherwise the dreaded Read Aloud Text should immediately follow the encounter number and title. I say dreaded because many authors are not fond of penning this section, and even fewer players enjoy listening to the GM prattle on about the 10-foot by 10-foot chamber. But if the adventure is designed for publication, this section is essential. In the home campaign, it's completely optional, and a bulleted list of features is plenty of detail. Yet the value of the read aloud text should not be diminished. This section sets the stage for the encounter and allows the author to flex his or her creative writing chops. However, a few suggestions are in order.

If an encounter is the meat of an Adventure Module, then the Tactics section should be the meat of an encounter.; Several sentences are better than several paragraphs, so avoid long drawn-out descriptions with flowery prose.

First, keep it short and focus on the details that the players can discern with a quick glance. In the next section, you can elaborate on the details of the environment. Several sentences are better than several paragraphs, so avoid long drawn-out descriptions with flowery prose. It might be fun to write, but the players are likely to lose interest, and potentially miss important facets of the description to aid them in the encounter. Another good tip is to actually *read* the Read Aloud Text *out loud,* preferably to another audience, or at least one other person. This is a great exercise to determine the flow and the pace of the information.

Second, use the five senses to convey the encounter description. Be careful not to overdo this, and it's probably not a good idea to use all five in the same read aloud text. The obvious one is sight, but don't forget about light source limitations, room sizes, and objects concealed

in shadows. Hearing is commonly employed, especially when the orcs scream a battle cry as they launch an ambush. But sound can also be used to great effect, warning the players about the trigger of a trap, or simply putting them on edge with random underground sounds. Smells can be commonly employed to convey description. The fetid stench of the marsh, the sulfurous air of a dragon's lair, or the stale stink of a recently opened tomb are all fine examples, especially when blended with one of the other senses. Touch and taste can be difficult to incorporate into a description with much frequency. The buffet of a wind gust, or the feel (and sound) of insect carapaces crunching underfoot are fine examples of touch sensations. The acrid sting of a salty breeze that can almost be tasted could serve to set an accurate picture of the encounter site.

Finally, use read aloud text to give the players clues needed to make the encounter easier. For example, a humid chamber, with dew collecting on the walls and ceiling, could indicate a water trap room. A particular stench could betray a hidden creature or NPC. Don't underestimate using these cues to hint at areas in the environment for the players to search, either when looking for hidden objects or secret doors.

Environment Description

This section immediately follows the read aloud text, and serves as a summary to the GM on many of the details in the encounter site. Of all the sections I describe, this one is likely the most important and thus is rarely omitted. This is the section to specify the room's dimensions and construction (don't forget about the ceiling) and possibly list other exits or entrances. Any other physical features (such as pits, secret doors, furnishings) are typically detailed here. This section can be concise should the room lack many features, or sprawling to several paragraphs depending on the complexity of the environment.

Important Details

This section is optional, and could even be incorporated in the previous section. The environment description gives an overview of the encounter site, while this section goes into higher level detail on those components. This is where you can assign game-related effects to the environment, such as noting difficult terrain, cover and concealment, or adjustments to difficulty classes regardless of the rules system used. Some of the information or rules summaries presented here are suitable for sidebars, offset text in a bordered box. For example, if the encounter features a skirmish with aquatic creatures, a nearby sidebar summarizing the rules for underwater combat is logical, and can be a boon to the GM running the encounter. The same holds true for other rules sets, especially those infrequently utilized. Other material suitable for sidebars includes NPC personality notes or social interaction guidance, "crunchy bits" (new magic items, spells or equipment), or historical/back story plot notes.

If the encounter features a trap (or perhaps a puzzle or riddle), this section is a likely destination for additional information. Enough details should be presented so the GM can manage the effects of the trap. This includes a brief description, information on how to discover the trap, trigger, disable, or avoid it (along with the required game mechanics), and of course the effects if triggered. These can be presented in a stat capsule or in the running text as the author feels appropriate. It is recommended that the trap presentation be consistent and contain enough details to run without consulting other reference books.

Creature/NPC Statistics

There is nothing more frustrating for a GM running an adventure to read the following line, or something similar:

17 orcs (hp 6), see *Monster Codex* page 147.

I think it's lazy game design. If I'm laying out hard-earned cash for a ready-made adventure, I want stat boxes. Sure I don't need the whole page from the *Monster Codex* reprinted, but I need all of the game-related material at my fingertips to speed up play at the table. I need to know what weapons are carried (and any other special gear), plus details on special attacks and defenses. And it's preferable if the stat capsule occurs all on the same page, to eliminate the need for flipping pages back and forth. Taking this a step further would be having handy index-type cards containing all the stats for the creatures needed,

or a pdf file of all the stats for easy printing and use at the table. It should go without saying that the stat capsules should be consistent and follow established formatting guidelines. It's OK to omit sections that are not applicable, but otherwise a stat capsule needs to be a concise summary of all the game-related statistics needed to run the encounter.

When designing NPCs, it's important to have each prominent NPC sport at least one easily distinguishable feature. These could include a signature weapon (or armor bearing a crest), a scar on his face, or six fingers on his left hand. This is especially important if this is to be a recurring NPC. Thinking about all of the senses, this distinguishing feature could be a sound (the NPC speaks with a distinct accent or a lisp), or even scent (she drowns herself in florid perfume). On the opposite end, feel free to alter the appearance of mundane humanoids and monsters to keep astute players on their toes. The gray-skinned humanoids sporting curved horns and wielding exotic bladed chains might just be average orcs, but a little embellishment can keep the players guessing.

As another GM tool, I prefer to include experience point values to the adversaries included in the encounter. This could simply be an entry in the statistics capsule, or it could be a separate section. The latter is useful if you would like to award experience points based on exploration, finding clues, social interaction, overcoming traps, or altering the base creature/NPC experience awards based on the difficulty of the encounter.

When designing the stats for a creature/NPC, keep in mind the next section, the Tactics. When I design, I start with the creature/NPC stats, and then use these to create the tactics after consideration of the encounter environment. For example, if ranged combat is likely, make sure the adversary has a ranged weapon and plenty of ammunition. Or, if the NPC has area of effect spells, make sure there is enough room for them.

Tactics

This is crucial section when designing an encounter. If an encounter is the meat of an adventure module, then the "Tactics" section should be the meat of an encounter. Give this section due thought and preparation. Before you design this section, you need to have a good idea what the environment will be, and preferably full creature/NPC statistics. This should include spell lists for spell casters and possibly magic items to enhance the challenge, if appropriate. Make sure the environment and the tactics complement each other. If the there is a 20 foot pit in the room that the inhabitants know about, their tactics should take advantage of this feature. The same is true of spells. If the floor is dangerous (covered with green slime) or simply difficult terrain, giving a spell caster access to *levitate* or *flying* gives it a tactical advantage.

Also, consider different types of creatures and meshing their tactics and/or special abilities. For example, a fire-breathing dragon having minions that are resistant or even immune to fire damage is a fine advantage. A magical construct (immune to poison) holding the key to the exit in the midst of a pit of venomous vipers provides a tactical advantage even though the creatures are both mindless and typically would not employ higher level tactics.

This section should include information on whether the adversaries fight to the death (typical, if defending a lair), or under what circumstances they might flee. For example, the minions might surrender or flee if their leader is incapacitated. If the encounter features an important recurring NPC, tactics explaining his route of escape is essential. Don't forget spells or magic items (a *potion of gaseous form*) that could be useful for escape.

Treasure

Ultimately looting an encounter is a primary player objective, especially when playing old-school dungeon crawls. I like putting this section near the end of the encounter, summarized in one section. Although placing treasure throughout the above sections is certainly more artistic and might even make sense, when the players loot the chamber, it's more difficult to access all this information. Having a dedicated section near the end of an encounter is a cue to the GM, and likely reduces the chance of omitting loot buried and scattered about text of the encounter.

Use common sense on treasure placement. First of

all, make sure it's a suitable reward based on the challenge. Nothing is more frustrating to players than finally defeating the dragon, only to discover its hoard is just copper pieces. It's highly unlikely that a *+5 longsword* is just discarded in the corner of the room. Give it to the humanoid boss, or the NPC, or at have a reasonable reason why the NPC is not wielding it. Perhaps it's hidden at the base of the altar and has not been discovered in centuries.

Consider the following Treasure entries:

Treasure: 500 gp, two art objects worth 225 gp and 450 gp, a *potion of healing* and 7 gems each worth 100 gp.

Treasure: 455 gp, a teak harp embossed with gold paint and mermaid hair strings (worth 225 gp), a velvet-line silver coffer inlaid with mother of pearl (worth 425 gp) holding a bronze dragon hide pouch (worth 45 gp) holding a collection of gem stones. These include three small dusky pearls (each worth 50 gp), a pair of matching bloodstones (each worth 100 gp), a jagged piece of jade (worth 150 gp), and a yellow topaz (worth 200 gp). An electrum flask covered with dark runes (worth 25 gp) holds a *potion of healing* with a viscid, minty taste.

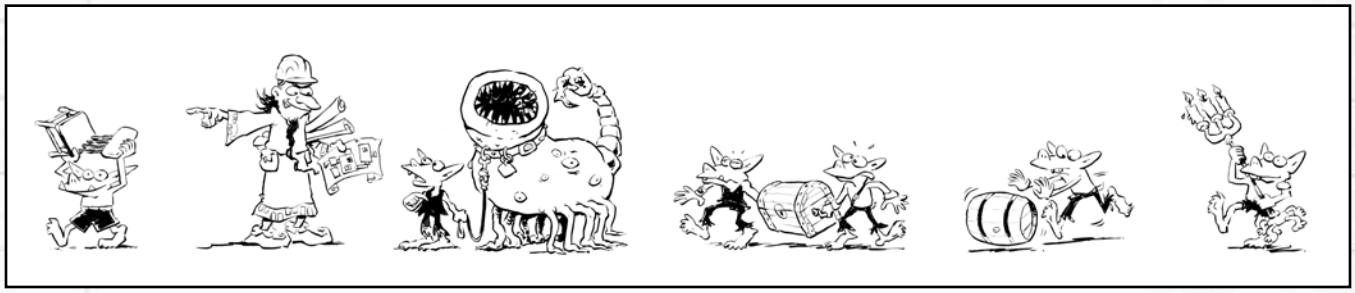
Both are the same value of loot (1,875 gp plus a potion), but the second entry provides much more detail, is more interesting to the reader, and could even spur the imagination of the players and encourage social interaction. Perhaps one of the PCs is a bard and collector of instruments? The harp in the second description is quite a find, and with a bit more design work, could have a history of its own or be an important plot point. Giving the potion a description and a unique taste could be a clue to its purpose and grants magic items, even minor ones like potions, a sense of wonder. Yes, the second entry takes more effort to design and eats up considerably more of your word count, but the payoff at the game table is typically worth it.

A final note regarding coins in treasure hoards. Unless it makes sense to the plot, random treasure hoards should rarely have round numbers. Even though a troll nest encounter calls for 1,000 gp in coins, listing "1,000 gp scattered about the offal and straw piles on the cavern floor" is lazy design, and quite frankly isn't logical. Assign an uneven number, or roll d10's if need be. A good rule of thumb would be to assign an uneven value within 10%. Therefore, 947 gp, or 1,083 gp would be appropriate for our troll nest. An exception to this rule would include containers designed to hold a specific number of coins (a sack, or chest, for example), or a royal treasury, or shop. If the main NPC has hired mercenaries, finding a chest containing exactly 200 gp makes sense, if its purpose is payroll, for example.

Developments

This is typically the final section of an encounter. It's not always needed, but can be appropriate if the PCs' actions at this encounter site have ramifications to other nearby encounter sites, or the creatures/NPCs using these sites. One example of a Developments section would include notes on how nearby creatures could become alerted to an attack and how they reinforce the inhabitants of this encounter. Or, perhaps this section includes notes on how inhabitants move around the encounter sites. A less static environment is more believable to the players.

This section could also include expanded notes on the encounter's role or importance in the overall story arc. The Developments section could also be detailed instructions on what happens if the PCs return to this location at a later time. Does it become re-populated by a random encounter, or even the site of an ambush orchestrated by the main NPC, complete with tactics?



Encounter: "The Deadly Crevasse"

by Chris Doyle

The Deadly Crevasse is an encounter set in the Underdeep or any natural cave system. This encounter is designed for character levels 8-10, but can be adjusted easily.

The meandering underground passage opens into a natural cavern, perhaps 30 feet wide. The ceiling is approximately 20 feet overhead, adorned with numerous stalactites glistening with moisture. Your feeble light source is incapable of penetrating the extent of chamber. A few larger stalagmites occupy the uneven floor, with scattered patches of bat guano here and there. The soft bubbling of nearby running water can be discerned.

If the PCs move further into the cavern, they discover a crevasse roughly bisecting the chamber. Continue with the next passage.

A yawning crevasse bisects this cavern. The sound of the water, perhaps a small stream, seems to originate at the bottom, although its actual depth is difficult to determine. On the opposite side, the shadowy features of another chamber are apparent. A metal piton has been sunk into the floor at the edge of the crevasse. Attached to the metal spike is a thick hemp rope leading to a stalactite on the ceiling approximately halfway across the expanse.

The ceiling ranges from 15 to 25 feet high, and most of the stalactites are normal. On the opposite side of the cavern, two passages exit to the west and northeast, respectively. The crevasse is approximately 40 feet wide, formed centuries ago via seismic activity. The crevasse is about 40 feet deep and at the bottom is a cool stream that flows west to east. The water is fresh and pure, about two to three feet deep. A naturally concealed passage is located to the east, near the base of the crevasse. Beyond a natural rock outcrop is a small 10 foot diameter cavity before becoming a twisting passage that heads to the northeast.

The walls of the crevasse are worn and provide many handholds. However, all surfaces are slick with condensation, granting a -15% on all climb walls checks. A fall into the crevasse causes 4d6 points of damage. The rope appears to be good condition and it is secure to the piton. It appears to have been placed here to aid crossing the crevasse by swinging. Testing or yanking the rope reveals it to be taut on the stalactite (but see below).

This chamber is the lair of a trio of large ropers. Two hang from the ceiling above the crevasse, appearing as stalactites (one with rope secured to it) and the third is on the opposite side of the chamber hiding as a thick stalagmite. All ropers are indicated on the map, and are impossible to distinguish from the natural limestone features of the chamber until they attack. Pairs of carcass creepers inhabit the bottom of the crevasse and are content to scavenge from the ropers left-over meals.

Roper (3): SZ Large (8-12 feet tall), MV 30 ft., AC 0, HD 11, hp 80, 76, 68, THAC0 9, #AT 6 (tendrils) or 1 (bite), D strength drain and attach (tendril), or 2d10+2 (bite), SA tendril (50 ft. range; strength drain; reel 10 ft.; automatic bite, SD immune to electricity, resistant to cold damage, vulnerable to fire magic MR 80%, INT Exceptional, AL CE, XP 3,980, 3,916, and 3,788.

A Further Complication

Although they prefer larger prey (such as humanoids), the ropers sustain themselves on the abundant bat population that resides in the nooks and crannies of the ceiling and the walls of the crevasse. If the PCs are having an easy time with the encounter, consider having the roper attack startle the bats, causing them to form several swarms. A swarm contains 200-300 bats and occupies a 10 foot diameter space.

If a PC shares its space with a swarm, he takes 1d6 points of damage from bites. Any unprotected light sources go out, and the confusion incurs a -4 to all attacks and makes concentrating for spell casting impossible. A swarm lasts for 1d4+3 rounds, unless dispersed with an area of effect spell.

Bat Swarm (4): SZ Small (4" long), swarm (10' diameter), MV 10 ft./ 240 ft. flying, AC 8 or 4, HD 1d2, hp 1 each, THAC0 20, #AT 1 (bite), D 1 (bite), SA swarm,, SD sonar (AC 4), MR Standard, INT Animal, AL N, XP 1 each (250 per swarm if defeated).

Carcass Creeper (2): SZ Large (9 feet long), MV 120 ft. AC 3 (head), 7 (body), HD 3+1, hp 22, 19 THAC0 16, #AT 8 (tentacles) or 1 (bite), D paralysis (tentacle) or 1d6+1 (bite), SA paralysis, MR Standard, INT Non-intelligent, AL N, XP 171, 162.

The ropers are cunning and patient, waiting for the PCs to become preoccupied with crossing the crevasse before attacking. If a PC attempts to use the rope to swing over the crevasse, or climb down the slope, at an inopportune moment, the roper simply undulates which releases the rope, sending the target into the crevasse for falling damage. If the target was swinging add another 1d6 damage for momentum. If this occurs, the other two ropers join the fray. The two on the ceiling attempt to grapple with their tendrils, and pull targets up above the crevasse. Instead of biting these targets they are smashed against the wall (for 1d6 points of damage) for tenderizing, before being released into the crevasse for standard falling damage. There is a 15% change for each slam attack that the target is impaled on a sharp stalactite for an additional 2d8 points of damage. The roper on the opposite side grabs a target (or two) and drags them into the crevasse. Keep in mind the strength drain lasts 2d4 turns and the effects are cumulative for additional tendril hits. Reduced strength should make climbing out of the crevasse a much more difficult procedure. With 50 foot long tendrils, the ropers can reach nearly to the bottom of the crevasse, and if any targets continue to struggle, they can be grappled again, reeled in and dropped repeatedly. They focus on active targets, content to recover bodies from the crevasse later for consumption, but this plays into the tactics of the carcass crawlers.

A few rounds after a target is deposited at the bottom of the crevasse, the two carcass crawlers are attracted to the commotion. They quickly engage with PCs at the bottom of the crevasse in 1d3 rounds, bringing their paralyzing tentacles to bear. If a target succumbs to paralysis, a crawler breaks off the attack, and uses the stream to float its prey back to its lair. Using the buoyancy of the body in the water, 20 feet of progress is made each round. See the map for the location of the crawler lair. Once a target is safely back in the lair, the crawlers dine at their leisure.

The gizzard of each roper contains a small amount of treasure that their bile can't dissolve. Roper #1 has 15 pp and 7 tiny red garnets (each worth 100 gp). Roper #2 has 11 pp plus 3 aquamarines (each worth 500 gp) and 12 pieces of jet (each worth 50 gp). Roper #3 has 2 pp and a large rough diamond (worth 3,500 gp).

Scattered about the floor of the crevasse and the streambed is a collection of incidental treasure discarded by previous victims. For each turn spent searching each PC has a 20% chance to locate a valuable item, as indicated on the table below (re-roll any identical results).

d8 roll	Item
1	a pouch holding 17 sp
2	a dagger with three small emeralds set on hand guard (worth 425 gp)
3	*potion of healing*
4	gold wedding ring set with five diamonds (worth 675 gp) inscribed with "Sharyn"
5	jade figurine of a frog-like humanoid (worth 85 gp)
6	bronze ankh set with tiny obsidians (worth 145 gp)
7	*wand of magic missiles* (32 charges) fashioned from finger bones
8	rough chunk of amethyst (worth 350 gp)

Behind a rocky outcropping a few feet above the stream is a hollow cavity perhaps 10 feet in diameter that serves as the lair for the carcass crawlers. The cavity is littered with moist cave dirt, bones, and bits of organic debris. Scattered on the floor of the cavity is a random collection of treasure. It would probably take about an hour to recover it all. The hoard contains 1,233 cp, 664 ep, a copper-tipped ironwood scepter covered with fanciful runes (worth 175 gp), and a silver necklace set with rubies (worth 875 gp). Concealed in a pile of damp organic debris and smooth rocks is a clutch of eight crawler eggs, each the size of a grapefruit with a milky gelatinous membrane protecting a developing crawler. If kept cool and moist, they will hatch in 2d3 weeks. If a collector could be found, each egg would fetch 100 gp.

This chamber has all the basic necessities, including water, cover and an abundant food source (the bats). If the PCs return to this chamber on their return trip it is likely inhabited by a wandering band of humanoids that set up camp, or another ambush predator.

THE END

Chris Doyle began freelance writing in the game industry in the early 1990's through volunteer efforts with the Role Playing Game Association (RPGA). He has since freelanced for several companies such as TSR, West End Games, Wizards of the Coast, Atlas Games, and Goodman Games. Although he has designed and contributed to RPG source material, the majority of his projects have been the design of adventure modules. He has penned adventures for the 2nd edition, the 3rd edition, 3.5, 4E and 5E for the world's first fantasy RPG game.

A Publisher's Perspective On Adventure Modules That Don't Suck

by Joseph Goodman

After 15 years and nearly 200 adventures, Goodman Games has gained a reputation for publishing high-quality adventure modules. Several have become "modern classics," reprinted continuously for many years. The key to our success has been highly skilled writers and game designers, and I give myself a little credit for helping to steer them. Here are some of the things I consider when evaluating an adventure module submitted for publication.

Your Customer Doesn't Read

First and foremost, a budding adventure author needs to keep one very important thing in mind: Your audience is playing, not reading.

Your audience doesn't read your module. There is an interesting conundrum in adventures: your *reader* is the game master, but your *customer* is the player. As a writer you trade in words, but the customer never actually reads your words. They experience your adventure through the filter of the game master. Therefore, regardless of how well you *write*, the adventure has to *play* extremely well. It should play so well that players enjoy it even with a bad game master. At a typical RPG table, there are 4 players and 1 GM, so 80% of the word-of-mouth recommendation on your adventure depends on people who have played but not read your adventure.

Don't write it. Play it. Based on this understanding, the first piece of advice I give writers is to stop writing. *Stop writing, and start playing!* The best way to "write" an adventure module is engage in your typical creative process, perform whatever note taking or brainstorming activities you need to, and then run your adventure module in a gaming session. Preferably multiple sessions: at least once with gamers you know, and at least once with strangers or casual acquaintances, such as at a convention or a game store. The process of playtesting the adventure will inform how your ideas translate into actual game play. The simple question of whether your players "had fun" is the best piece of feedback you can get. Once you have played the adventure module, begin writing it in earnest.

Preliminary Considerations

Once you set out to *write* your adventure (as opposed to play it), consider the following.

Your goal. Decide early on what your goal is in writing the adventure module. Many writers don't explicitly examine their goals, but based on submissions I receive, I believe most can be categorized as follows. I have also included my commentary on how these goals translate into adventures.

Goal: Expand on a campaign setting or world. Many writers see modules as an opportunity to introduce extensive back story and world-building elements. These writers typically write very long introductions and background sections. In my experience, these aren't particularly good adventures. The author's focus is not on a fun adventure but on world-building, introducing NPCs, and explaining a world.

Goal: Showcase mechanics and stat blocks. Some writers enjoy the math exercises involved in stat blocks and game mechanics. These writers often write adventures where 25% or more of the word count is appendices of new monsters, items, or spells. These may be very good sourcebooks but, again, they don't necessarily make for good adventures, since that's not the author's focus.

Goal: Demonstrate writing skills. Other writers are sesquipedalians or logophiles who enjoy "turning a phrase." These modules are often very well written, but sometimes have never been played at the table. They don't always translate well into actual game play. Furthermore, the focus on written language can sometimes serve a negative effect by derailing play. Most of us don't talk the same as we write. Read-aloud text, in particular, really needs to be in "everyday language," no matter how much you like Gary Gygax's word choices. Gary didn't include those fancy words in the read-aloud text. Adventures with flowery language sometimes leave the judge tongue-tied at the table as he tries to translate the written text into something he can speak for his players.

Goal: Impress other RPG professionals with "design skills." Some writers write for their peers, or hope to win awards for their work. Whether or not this intricate work can be handled effectively at the tabletop is another matter. These adventures can go in many directions, and I will state that the most complex among them are often very hard to convey at the table. Simple adventures typically work better in a four-hour session.

Goal: Give the players a fun time. A last group of writers is primarily interested in serving the "entertainment value" of RPG publishing. I personally find these adventures to be the best-received.

There is a place in publishing for each of these goals. I have had the most commercial success publishing adventure modules that focus on the last goal, *a fun time.* I mention this here to encourage prospective writers to undertake a bit of self-examination. If your goal is not primarily focused on entertaining the players, recognize that the commercial success of your module may not be as great. When people pay money for entertainment, they typically expect to be entertained!

The Rules System. A game's rules system must be considered in the adventure design. D&D is a classic example. A four-hour session under the 3E rules could cover multiple combats. But under the 4E rules, a single combat encounter might span two or even three sessions. An adventure written for 4E should have a very different structure than one written for 3E.

Identify the strengths or unique elements of your adventure's native rules system. Then ensure your adventure engages those strengths. For example: a Call of Cthulhu adventure should include sanity checks. A D&D 4E adventure should have skill challenges. A DCC RPG adventure should include spell checks, Luck implications, and mighty deeds of arms.

I have a strong aversion to adventures converted from one system to another. That can work for a "good enough" adventure. But to be a *great* adventure, the writing should consider the native rules system from the ground up. The encounters should reinforce the rules, and vice versa.

What I Look for As a Publisher

With these preliminaries aside, these are some factors I consider as I review an adventure.

Originality. Self-explanatory. The adventure should present new and exciting challenges to the players.

Involve All Classes. In traditional D&D games, an adventuring party consists of a fighter, cleric, magic-user, and thief. Or some variation on those

classes. Your adventure should give a chance for each class to use their special powers and be the hero of the moment.

Avoid choke points. At the same time, don't include encounters that can only be solved by one party member or in only one way. Always include an alternate solution.

Heroes and Villains: Give the players a chance to feel like heroes. People don't play RPG's to feel like they had "another day in the office." People play RPG's to feel like *heroes!* So give them that chance. Let the PCs defeat villains, let the monsters be dangerous, let there be real stakes.

Strong visual imagery. I like adventures that allow the players to visualize a scene. This does *not* mean detail-detail-detail. Quite the opposite – invoke bold settings, colorful scenery, distinctive NPCs, and distinguished looking monsters. The word "crypt" doesn't create a new visual for anyone – but this does: "A narrow path winds up a steep cliff to a a waterfall that crashes into the rocks below. In the green jungle at the top of the cliff, the tribal shaman lifts the golden casket over his head and prepares to toss it into the waterfall!" Make each encounter visually distinctive.

New creatures. D&D has been actively played for 40 years now. It's hard to bring originality to a centaur and an orc, unless you're running a game for children. My preference these days is adventures where every monster is new. Yes, really. This doesn't require an extensive monster manual at the back of the module. A simple description and in-game stat block is all that's needed. Some simple techniques for "new" monsters:

- Change color or physical traits. A blue orc can terrify players. The stats need not change; the color blue is enough to cause confusion.
- Never use the creature's name. I never refer to a creature by name in play. Don't say, "The orcs attack." Say, "The pig-faced man-creatures attack." Let the players figure out what the "pig-faced man-creatures" are.
- Swap stats and bodies. A classic example from a DCC adventure was the rust spider: it had the same stats as a rust monster, except it looked like a spider and could climb on walls. That simple change made an old, tired encounter against a rust monster much more entertaining.

In Summary

I hope this provides a good general overview of things to consider when writing an adventure module that does not suck. There is of course much more to write on this subject…but as a publisher I stick to my word count budget!

Encounter: "Eye of the Storm": A Sample Encounter

by Joseph Goodman

The stat blocks below are written for DCC RPG. This encounter should be placed alongside a body of water. It originally was written for an adventure where a strange galleon (a ghost ship) drifts into port. As the characters are investigating it, read this:

The sky suddenly darkens as storm clouds rush in from sea. The wave-crested waters not a hundred yards offshore crackle as an inexplicable lightning storm erupts. But the lightning is not coming down from the sky – it's blasting upward from the sea! A flat, rectangular portion of the sea, framed by the lightning, seems to drain away. Within the space appears an airy staircase leading up from the ocean bottoms. Up the stairs from below sea level march a contingent of black skeletons, which proceed to step through the lightning curtain, onto the surface of the sea, and walk across the water toward you. There are a dozen skeletons, each of them black as coal, their limbs entwined in a winding golden metal of some kind. The last skeleton to emerge carries a metal cage in its hand, and in the cage is a withered gray eyeball staring at you – and it's on this eyeball that the lightning seems to center.

The gray eyeball is a relic of a long-dead wizard called Thakulon. The eye is imbued with his intelligence and magical abilities. The magical portal has been created by the eye. Its goal, and thus that of the skeletons, is to retrieve an urn hidden on the ghost ship. They will slay to do so, but if a clear path exists to the urn, they take it and retreat. If the skeletons gain control of the urn, they immediately return through the portal. (Assume each skeleton has enough unholy strength to lift the urn single-handed.) The eye will lob attacks, and attempt to use its brown beam of binding to grab the urn if necessary. Note that all the skeletons can walk on water, thanks to the power of the eye. They use this to their advantage – if one grabs the urn, it immediately walks out onto the water where it is harder to reach.

Remember that the boat sinks when the urn is removed. It is quite possible that this sinking event occurs during combat, if a skeleton grabs the urn while the characters are still on the boat.

The crowd: Recall that this battle happens at the docks in front a crowd. Most of the crowd scatters at the sight of unnatural magic, but a few brave men-at-arms will defend the city peace (and aid the characters in doing so). Assume the characters gain the services of 1d4+1 men-at-arms who aid them in battle. Likewise, the characters have little room to maneuver – any big movements put them into the path of scurrying peasants.

The skeletons: The skeletons are black like coal. They are not human, but rather water-borne creatures native to the sea. Close examination reveals their bowed legs, wider jaws, and streamlined skulls – they're made for both walking *and* swimming.

A skeleton can grab the urn with an attack as noted in their stat block, below.

The brass bands around the skeletons are alive and controlled by the eye of Thakulon. Each band grants a +1 bonus to the attack and damage rolls of the skeleton it encases, and is solely responsible for animating the skeleton. As a skeleton is close to being defeated, its brass bands will detach and "swim" to a nearby skeleton, which they will "double-up" on. A skeleton with two bands receives a +2 bonus to all actions. As more and more skeletons are defeated, the brass bands continually concentrate on the remaining skeletons. Eventually, the last skeleton standing is completely encased in a brass curtain, and receives a +12 bonus.

Note that a skeleton immediately dies when the brass band slithers off. A skeleton close to death is abandoned by its brass band, and thus falls in a splashing clatter of bones (sinking under the water if it is still walking thereon).

A cleric can turn the skeletons. Once turned, the eye of Thakulon can automatically re-assert control. Each time the skeletons are turned, they react as "normal" turned creatures until their action, at which point they recover from the turn (but they spend their full action recovering control).

Retreat into the sea: After the urn is recovered, or if defeat is imminent, the forces of Thakulon walk back to the portal, enter in, and close it behind them.

Eye of Thakulon (held by last skeleton): Init +10; Atk evil gaze +14 ranged (dmg 3d8+8, range

I Left My Water-Walking Boots At Home

This entire encounter is centered around a combat on water. The skeletons rise up from below the surface of the sea, they can walk on water, and the boat inevitably sinks. Quite possibly, the characters will be stranded on shore watching the skeletons retreat with the urn – and the characters will be unable to follow.

It is okay for this to happen. It reinforces the value of versatility: combat-heavy parties suddenly learn the importance of spells beyond those that cause damage. If the party can't follow the skeletons' retreat, they'll need to employ other techniques to take the adventure to the next step. Divination, consultation with a patron, and other such approaches can be used. The adventure can still continue as the characters pursue the urn.

And if the characters *can* follow – due to the appropriate spells or magic items – *all the better*!

200') or chromatic beam 1/round (see below); AC 18 (small size); HP 50; MV fly 40'; Act 2d30; SP chromatic beam, telepathy 100', perfect clairvoyance (unlimited range); SV Fort +12, Ref +12, Will +15; AL C.

Chromatic beam: The eye of Thakulon can project a multi-colored beam of light with dangerous and sometimes unpredictable results. The judge can determine randomly, or roll 1d7 each time this attack is used: (1) red beam of flame (dmg 3d6 plus DC 15 Ref save or catch fire for 1d6 additional damage each round until DC 15 Ref save at start of round); (2) yellow beam of enervation (2d4 Str damage; DC 15 Fort for half); (3) green beam of anti-growth (shrink to half-size; DC 15 Fort save to resist and instead suffer 1d6 damage; repeated attacks continue to reduce size); (4) blue beam of holding (paralysis for 1d4 days; DC 15 Fort save to reduce duration to 1d4 rounds); (5) purple beam of poison (2d4 Stamina and 2d4 Agility; DC 15 Fort save for half damage); (6) black beam of death (automatic death; DC 15 Fort save for 1d4 *permanent* hit point loss instead); (7) brown beam of binding (target one creature or object and pull it up to 50' toward the eye; DC 22 Str check to resist).

Blackened Sea Skeletons (12, animated by eye of Thakulon): Init +4; Atk rake +6 melee (dmg 1d6+2) or grab +8 melee (grab urn or other object from a character); AC 16; HD 6d8; HP 25; MV 30' (walk on water); Act 1d24; SP +1 bonus for each segment of brass bands, un-dead traits; SV Fort +7, Ref +4, Will +4; AL C.

THE END

Joseph Goodman owns Goodman Games. He created the *Dungeon Crawl Classics* line of adventure modules and *DCC* RPG. Over the years he has published several hundred adventure modules and had the honor to work with some very imaginative game designers. He is the author of *Dungeon Crawl Classics Role Playing Game*, *DragonMech*, *Dinosaur Planet: Broncosaurus Rex*, and many adventure modules.

Keeping Encounters within the Capabilities of Your Players

by Allen Hammack

The adventure is going on really well, thinks the game master. The party found 3 of the 4 hooks he left for them in town, they gathered information and intelligence about the mission before they left town, planned a couple of strategies, and bought extra equipment, supplies, food, pack horses, and mounts. The first two road encounters ended in party victories with no deaths, thanks to proper tactics and communication. He smiles as he announces the next encounter, a harpy, and anticipates the arguments over the two nice magic items in its lair. A couple of party members should fail their save versus the harpy song charm effect, and it will be fun watching them fight each other…

"Fail."

"Fail."

"Fail."

"Expletive deleted Fail!"

"Fail. More serious expletive deleted questioning parentage of dice."

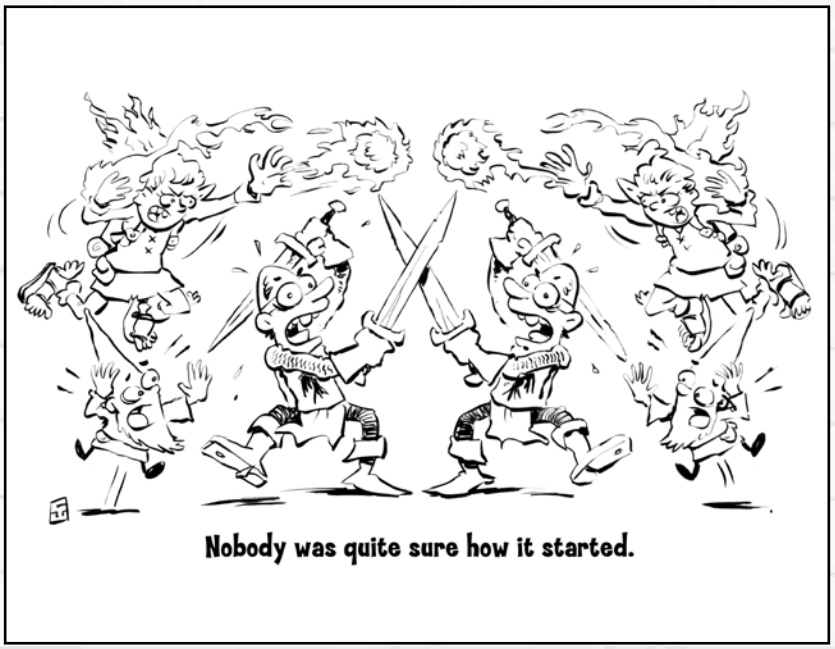
"Fail. Even more serious expletive deleted questioning parentage of DM."

…and so on. Total Party Kill.

(Before you ask: Yes, I have DMed this very scenario. All twelve party members died.) Was this example a DM failure or just rotten luck? In my considered opinion, *both*. The odds were that

enough party members would save and defeat the encounter, but the DM should have known that the party didn't include a bard and perhaps given them some warning so that a few may have used the waxy answer that Odysseus found, or something similar. All right, maybe the article should more correctly be titled "Ways to Avoid Wiping Your Party"…

Going back to the basics, all versions of D&D offer advice on balancing encounters, ranging from tips to some complex calculations involving multiplier factors. Original D&D (at least the way we played it) placed the onus mostly on the party: the first level of the dungeon tended to contain one hit die monsters, the 2nd level contained up to 2 hit die monsters, the 3rd level up to three hit die monsters, and so on. The party was supposed to be smart enough to figure out what their limitations were, "how deep they should delve," and decide on the risks versus rewards.



Later editions came out with the concept of Encounter Level, which was supposed to factor in special abilities of the monster such as damage resistance, immunity to fire, special attacks such as petrification, etc. This becomes relatively subjective quickly, due to the great variance in ability of both players and DMs.

The DMG suggests that a hard encounter is two to four levels higher than the party's level, a standard encounter is of the party's level or one level higher than the party, and an easy encounter is one or two levels lower than the party's level. This is designed for around 4 players, and larger parties will shift the scales quickly. In the real life of my experience, "easy" encounters tend to be very easy and not interesting for the party or the DM. Managing the bookkeeping for encounters involving several dozen monsters, animal companions, familiars, and summoned creatures can be difficult for the DM, and results in longer waits between turns for individual players—not as interesting for the DM and boring for the players.

In my opinion, the DM needs to look at any pre-set encounter (like a published module) while simultaneously looking at his party of players. A good DM will pay attention to any included pregenerated characters, because the author likely populated them with the skillsets necessary to overcome the encounters. If there is a large disparity between the actual players and the suggested pregens, the DM either needs to adjust the encounter or encourage the party to include some NPCs with the requisite skills. Some encounters absolutely require the presence of a rogue who can sneak, a wizard who can read a language, and so on.

An interesting thought experiment for the DM is a "mirror party." Players' worst nightmares should be encountering another party of player characters (or worse yet, ambushed by them!), with appropriate buff spells, strategy and tactics. A mirror party combat should be a close shave in a non-buffed, non-ambush scenario, but in most cases should slightly favor the players. Why? Because the problem-solving abilities of the multiple players should be somewhat superior to the single mind (epic though it may be) of the DM. Players invariably come up with something unexpected, for good or for ill. Beware, though—a true mirror party, if defeated, should double the amount of magic and treasure of the party since

the mirror party will be equipped as well as the originals. The thought experiment portion comes when you analyze what would be in the mirror party, and then try to find other monsters that would have similar abilities. Do the players have a bard? Include something with a sonic attack or sonic defense (*silence*) to keep her busy. Do the players always *haste*? A *slow* spell or soggy terrain can equalize the effect. If everyone in the party has a *feather fall* ring, a *fly* potion, *slippers of spider climbing*, or the like, then falls and high walls and mountains primarily become an expense item rather than a daunting, dangerous challenge.

A bard can increase the combat effectiveness of the whole party by 5%, 10%, or 15%. *Bless*, *prayer* and *haste* can increase the chance to hit by 15%. *Heroes' feast* can render the whole party immune to poison, making the special attacks of some monsters useless. A lucky roll on a *dismissal* or other high-level spell can end a boss combat in one round. DMs are aware of all of these possibilities, and have to fight a tendency to overcompensate with encounters that are too tough. Unlike my early ruthless days, now if I find myself in a situation where I'm DMing and a party seems headed towards a TPK despite doing everything right, I'm likely to secretly intervene in some minor way—allow one or two to survive and escape, able to return later and collect their comrades for resurrection. This turns it (again) into a financial inconvenience rather than soul-crushing total defeat.

Shortly I'll summarize the major ways to achieve encounter balance, but it all starts with knowing the party that you are running. In your campaign it can be a headache, but it's a good practice to keep copies of your players' characters on file. Controlling the total amount of magic items (and money, which turns into magic items) is also wise, because the greater the number of magic items your players have, the greater number of options you have to anticipate as a DM when designing an encounter or trap. Pregenerated characters artificially control the magic available, which is why the best modules are written with encounters that can be run with relatively little preparation and with reliable, consistent average results. There will, of course, be fun statistical outliers: "There's always a one on the die" and "There's always a twenty on the die."

Thus, a summary of the major methods of encounter balancing we'll discuss would seem to be in order:

1. **Hit point balancing**
2. **Hit dice balancing**
3. **Encounter level/challenge rating**
4. **Freshness**
5. **Strategy**
6. **Tactics**
7. **Mirror party**
8. **Maximizing/empowering**

Dynamic balancing

Hit point balancing—Simply add up the total hit points of your party and throw encounters at them which have the same number of hit points. This works best at low levels, and should result in a party victory most of the time. At higher levels you face the scaling problem: a single 200-point monster is going to be much tougher to defeat than 20 ten-point monsters.

Hit dice balancing—Add the total hit dice (levels) of the party, and throw an encounter with the same number of hit dice at them. This has the same cautions as hit point balancing, but is somewhat less sensitive to level. The DM has to factor in the different die types of the classes (d4 for wizards, d12 for barbarians, etc.).

Encounter level/challenge rating—All editions suggest some sort of mechanism for encounters. Each has a varying degree of complexity, depending on which system the DM favors. Some can get very mathematically intricate, with multipliers and other factors. You have to experiment to see if you enjoy using this approach, or whether it has good results for your players. If you do decide to follow the EL/CR formula approach, there are DM aids (some spreadsheet-based) which can help with the calculations.

Freshness—The challenge of an encounter can be increased by its novelty. An unknown monster poses the potential for wasted (or even detrimental!) attacks until experimentation discloses its vulnerabilities. New immunities, whether inherent or added by magic, will up the challenge rating for initial encounters (think the

classic mummy with a ring of fire resistance). A novel trick or trap, or modifications to standard traps should be treated as higher level (not just a pit with spikes, but a pit with poison spikes! And six inches of acid at the bottom! Oh, then I've got to make the spikes acid-resistant…).

Strategy—If the Forces of Badness in your campaign are being directed by overlords, give the bad guy leaders some advisors to plan a devious story arc beyond "Next I'll kill those meddling player characters!" Intricacies can involve bards or harpers spreading a propaganda campaign, clerics quietly replacing temple leaders with those more sympathetic to their cause, property of opponents being forcefully purchased by eminent domain, etc. That next story hook could be presaging an encounter where the party better realize that bards, church leaders, and town officials are going to be moving against them rather than supporting the party as they have in the past…

Tactics—The DM should make the number of opponents in an encounter suitable for using group tactics like the party does: ambush, prepared buff spells and potions, pre-melee "artillery" (area of effect spells like *fireball*), flanking, forming lines with clerics in position to heal as many as possible, etc. Giving your campaign bad guys come competent military officers will up the challenge rating of an encounter significantly.

The challenge of an encounter can be increased by its novelty. An unknown monster poses the potential for wasted (or even detrimental!) attacks until experimentation discloses its vulnerabilities.

Mirror party—As discussed earlier, making a checklist of all the abilities, spells, and equipment available to your party can give the DM an outline of an encounter which will tax the players' skills to the utmost. It is unlikely that one monster will check all the boxes, but an unlikely combination of monsters released as an ambush by the evil overlord will be fun—for the DM, not so much for the players! If the party has a Radiant Servant of Pelor, undead are not going to worry them unless they come in the dozens—or there is something in the encounter to keep the cleric fighting for herself instead of turning undead (Oh, the choices! The humanity!). Studying a mirror party might also reveal a glaring weakness in the party that the DM may decide to pick at: No rogue? Lots of traps. Too many fighters? *Maze* spells; water, mud, or bog trenches; things requiring Reflex/Dexterity saves. Umber hulks can turn party members against one another, as can any domination or confusion type effects. The weaknesses can be exploited for encounter fun, but should be monitored not to wipe the party. A lesson taught is only appreciated if the recipient is alive at the end of the day…

Maximizing/empowering—This can properly be called metamagic balancing, but these are the two aspects I use most often. The DM can throw an otherwise underpowered magic-using encounter at the party and still make it a challenge by enhancing the effects via metamagic. This can be done by inherent use (higher slots) or device. When possible I use expendable devices to reduce the treasure load available to the party. By increasing the area of effect, duration, maximizing the damage, etc., the encounter with the not-quite-equal challenge rating becomes rather formidable, especially to those targets in the first few spells.

Dynamic balancing—Ad lib or on the fly adjustment of an encounter that is underway. Many times the first round of actions will give a strong indication that the encounter is going to wipe the party, or that the party is going to brush the encounter off far more quickly than the DM had planned. In the latter case, the DM can add reinforcements that were "hidden" to extend the battle, or reveal that some of the monsters are leveled or classed: "That's not just an orc, that's a 3rd level Cleric orc with bodyguards who are 3rd level Ranger orcs." If a party wipe seems imminent but significant damage has been done, a failed morale check can save some of the party: "They're now below 40% strength, and their orders were to withdraw to a rally point when that happened."

In closing, my advice to DMs who want to have fun, consistently exciting encounters that won't result in a TPK is:

1. **Know your party**. Be aware of levels, hit points, abilities, and especially magic available to your party.
2. **Use dynamic balancing**. Always be willing to adjust number appearing, hit dice, and damage on the fly instead of sticking to what's on the page.
3. **Use strategy and tactics**. When playing intelligent encounters, play them intelligently. Take advantage of ambush, light, flanking, abilities, etc. Even animals have a cunning that lets them survive in the wild; a pack of wolves shouldn't be a pushover.
4. **Keep it fresh**. Adding nonstandard abilities to standard monsters keeps adventurers on their toes and permits more micro-adjustment to balance encounters.
5. **Keep them engaged**. If an encounter sets up where fighters have formed a line, behind are the clerics and mages, and the other classes are twiddling their thumbs, find some way to wake them up. An undetected secret door opens right in the middle of the party and a couple more enemy whatevers are suddenly amongst the squishies…

Applying these techniques should help the DM who is having too many unbalanced scenarios. After all, the stories that are the most fun—the ones we retell for years—are not the ones where we annihilated the enemy in two rounds. No, those sweetest stories are the ones where all the other party members had fallen, there was only one enemy left, but one more good hit was going to take me down. Should I stay or should I go? It all came down to one last d20 roll…

Encounter: "The Goblinoid Differential"

by Allen Hammack

All tricks and traps are supposed to throw a curve ball, but I like tricks and traps that look like Phil Niekro throwing a knuckleball to Bob Uecker, who famously said that way to catch it was to wait until it stopped rolling and pick it up. I go for the ones that makes players think "This is going to be *easy*!" when they should be thinking "This is *waaay* too easy! What in Loki's name is coming up?..."

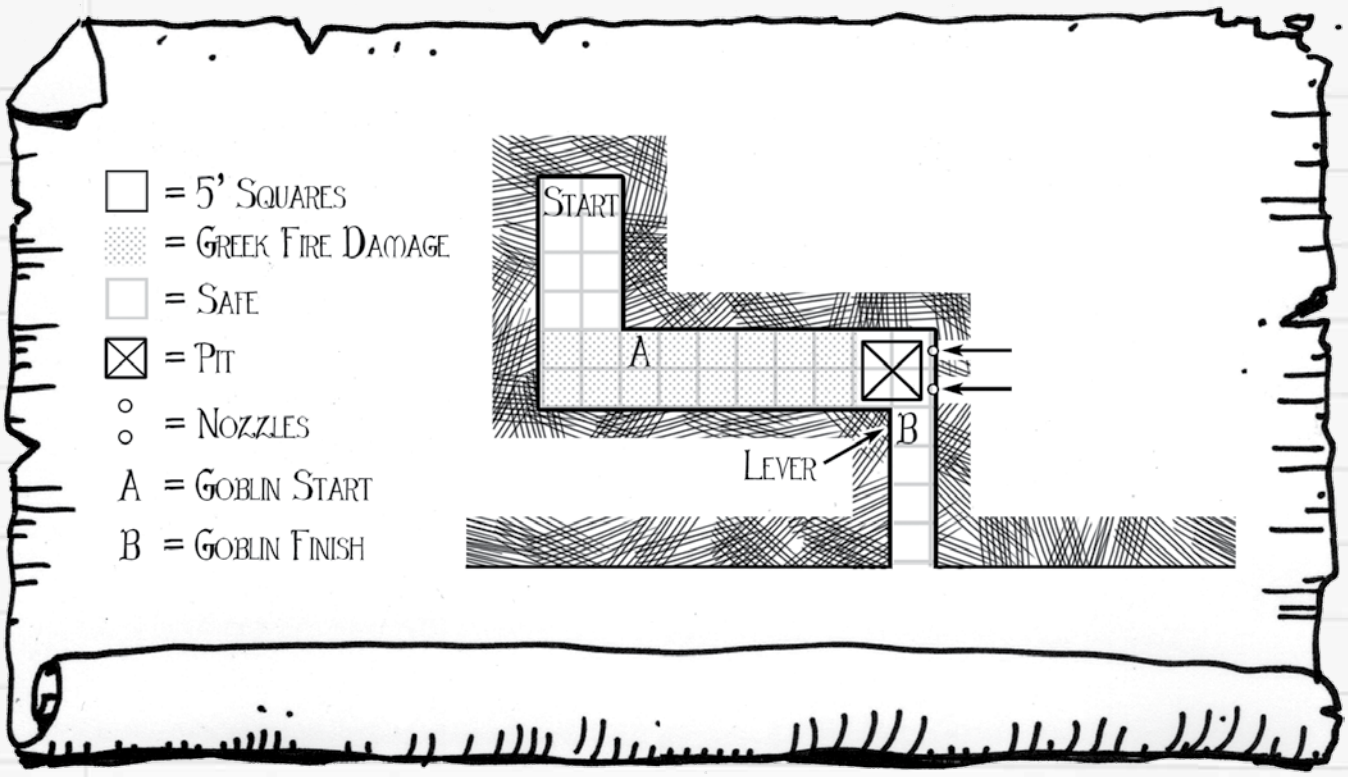
The encounter will start with a single goblin (or kobold or similar weak, non-dangerous monster) being seen peeking around a left-hand corner. The goblin will have initiative (just in case there are any super-speed hasted monks in the party), and will squeak and then disappear around the corner. When the party clears the corner, they will see a ten-foot wide corridor approximately 50 feet long that ends in a 5' corridor going off to the right. The goblin has made a double move (ending up out of sight in the side corridor) and as a free action pulls a lever in the end corridor wall (goblin-high, of course) to activate the trap. Adjust corridor length as necessary to allow your rules set to allow these actions. The goblin then runs down the corridor to laugh with his fellows (until the angry party arrives…)

The trap is activated, but nothing appears to have changed. The last 10' of the trap corridor looks like floor but it is a pit trap, which is six feet deep and covered in damp burlap sacks and sawdust, so no damage is taken during the fall. The trap is detectable (DC 15), but not if the party is in hot pursuit. A ladder with steel rungs spaced for goblin legs enables an easy climb to the 5' wide side corridor at the end.

One round after the pit is opened, in the initiative of the character who tripped the pit, 4 stone wall slabs one-half inch thick at the end of the corridor drop revealing the ends of steel tubes or nozzles. A brief hiss is heard and greenish-yellow fire roars out of the tubes into the corridor, damaging everyone who is not in the pit or around one of the corners. Characters in the pit or around either the start or end corner suffer no damage!

(I love this trap because it rewards the risk-takers like rogues by keeping them safe, and instead damages the other characters who like to hang back in the middle! Cue *Cool, Cool, Considerate Men* from the musical *1776…)*

Damage from the trap can be balanced using the



principles of my accompanying article. Look at the weakest member of the party (C'mon, you know it's the wizard!). Take his hit points total and divide by 6; this is the number of d6 the fire will do. A maximum roll won't kill anyone. Reflex save (DC should be makeable about 50% of the time) for half damage, but then for added fun tell them it's clinging and burning. (Healers, act fast!) Anyone who failed their Reflex save takes up to 3 rounds of clinging burn damage: 3d6 round 1, 2d6 round 2, and 1d6 round 3. Fortitude saves (again makeable about 50% of the time, adjust for your party) each round for half-damage. Interestingly, rolling around in the damp sawdust and burlap in the pit will extinguish the clinging flame.

The sticky fire liquid is a special type of Greek Fire, made with phosphorus-infused naptha and quicklime, ignited by water. All come up in separate tubes to avoid accidents. The lever activates a counterweight differential system that unlatches the flame nozzle covers, engages a water wheel and pumps billows for the system.

THE END

Allen worked for TSR in the early days from 1978-1983. In his gaming career, Allen has contributed to some 70 products as author, designer, editor, or developer. These include designer of the popular classic *C2: Ghost Tower of Inverness*; *A1-A4: The Slave Lords Series*; *I9: Day of Al-Akbar*; the tournament AD&D adventure *Night of the Black Swords*, and as an editor for the games *Top Secret* and the first edition DMG. He wrote three books on mythology in RPGs for Mayfair Games (*Fantastic Treasures I* and *II*, and *Monsters of Myth & Legend III*).

Making Monsters Cooler

by Jon Hook

Monsters are monstrous; they are called that for a reason. Their biology and ecology defy reason. The game master can exploit a player's perceived familiarity with "mundane" monsters, and reimagine them into something new to be feared. The objective is not to create a completely new monster, but to leverage the player's expectations with "common" monsters by creating a new strain or mutation of that monster. Monsters can be modified in a variety to ways, from the very subtle to the glaring extreme, all while still maintaining the core features that make the monster familiar to the players. The game master could make modifications to any or all of the following characteristics for the monster:

Monster Modifications Table

1d12	Modification	Examples
1	Size	It could be bigger, smaller, heavier, or lighter
2	Appendages	It could have more arms, legs, tails, or heads
3	Age	It could be an infant, very young, very old, or ancient
4	Offense	It could have new attacks, more attacks, inflict greater damage, or inflict different kinds of damage
5	Defense	It could have different defenses, additional defenses, or specialized defenses
6	Special Abilities	It could have new powers: like flight, invisibility, psionics, or a breath weapon
7	Intelligence	It is an aberration among its kin, and possesses a keen mind able to reason and scheme
8	Magic	It is able to study and cast spells like those of a magic-user or holy cleric
9	Re-Alignment	It does not share the same instincts or attitudes as that of its kin
10	Weapons	It is capable of wielding crafted weapons, or weapons of opportunity
11	Undead	It is one of the living dead
12	Eldritch	It is host to a tentacled horror

Size – The size characterization usually describes the fully grown adult form of the creature, if a "young-to-adult" life cycle exists for the creature. Just changing the scale of the creature (and possibly the number of creatures appearing), can dramatically alter how a monster if encountered by a party of player characters. The game master should keep in mind that a radical alteration to the creature's size would also change the beast's hit dice and armor class. Take the chimera for example. This large creature is typically encountered in very few numbers, but what if a full grown chimera was the size of a kitten, and they attacked adventurers as a swarm of thirty to forty beasts?

Appendages – Many creatures are recognizable by the number of limbs they have, or don't have. Changing the number or type of limbs could dramatically change the creature. For example, the game master could give a displacer beast a cluster of six tentacles, instead of its normal pair. A change like this could radically alter the number of foes the creature could engage. Or, maybe the adventurers come face-to-face with a beholder with half as many eye stalks and it has a second large eye on the opposite side of its spherical body?

Age – Typically, a monster's informational listing is designed to describe the monster in its formable adult state, but what about adolescent,

infantile, or elderly versions of the monster? As observed in nature, animals may have skewed or completely different abilities in a youthful state that eventually morph into the adult state of that ability, or is completely discarded. For a youthful or elderly version of the monster, in addition to modifying the size and coloring of the beast, the game master needs to adjust the hit points and physical statistics for the monster. Additionally, infantile creatures may have an inherent ability to hunt and kill prey, since some animals are not reared by their parents and are fierce predators at birth. Imagine a clutch of owlbear cubs with spotted black and green or black and tan feathers that camouflage them as they lay in wait for a band of adventurers to wander into their kill zone.

Offense – Why do adventurers fight monsters? To take their stuff, of course! That's why monsters are always well equipped to defend their stuff, be it by tooth, or claw, or weapon, or special ability. One of the easiest ways to modify a monster is to change the way it attacks the adventurers. By changing the method or number of attacks a creature makes can dramatically alter the encounter with the monster. Take the classic shambling zombie, for example; this mindless undead creature typically attacks last in the combat round, is immune to a handful of spells, and strikes for one dice of damage. One way the game master could alter the expectations of the zombie would be to make it a fast zombie that not only runs after the adventurers, but it gets a normal initiative roll and two attacks per round.

Defense – One of the key features an experienced player looks to exploit when facing off against a familiar monster is that creature's known defenses and weaknesses. For many games, the defense of a monster is simply expressed as a numeric armor value. game masters can easily enhance the player's game experience if the monster's defense is expressed in colorful descriptives. Take the spirit naga, for example. These vile serpents are covered in a thick armor of scales that is typically expressed as armor class four. Players who have previously confronted such creatures immediately assume that they know exactly what level of force is needed to injure them, but should the game master alter the description of the creature to something akin to, "*The roping coils of the naga gleam as a thick coating of slime slides along the length of the beast.*" A description like that should give the players pause on their standard plan of attack. Even if the monster's numeric armor value hasn't changed, the slime in this example could be a protective barrier to spells or certain kinds of melee attacks; it is up to the players to discern what defenses the monster has through 'trial-and-error' attacks. A monster's best offense is a better defense.

The objective is not to create a completely new monster, but to leverage the player's expectations with "common" monsters by creating a new strain or mutation of that monster.

Special Abilities – Many monsters already possess special abilities that mimic spells, but there are many more that do not. And because of that, players can become unwitting victims to their own complacency when they are confronted by a monster that has a new special ability. Consider the piercer; it is dependent on prey to unwittingly walk under it for it to attack and kill its food, so it may have very long periods between meals. What if, like a siren, the piercer made an audible sound that worked exactly like a *Charm Person* spell? The creature could then use the special ability to lure prey to stand willingly below it. Monsters with unexpected special abilities are exactly the kind of thing that will keep players on the edge of their seats.

Intelligence – "*For where the instrument of intelligence is added to brute power and evil will, mankind is powerless in its own defense.*" – Dante Alighieri. Nothing is more sinister than an intelligent monster, for these creatures could strategize and lead others of their kind in combat. How malevolent would something like a gray ooze be if it was driven by twisted and evil intentions? Smart gray oozes could lie in wait for the adventurers to make camp, and then slither in and strike those that are sleeping. Monsters with high intelligence can become formidable foes for the players to clash against time after time.

Magic – Actual spell casting is a rare ability for many monsters, but for those imbued with the spark of intelligence, then the secrets of

dark magic are then accessible. Players whose characters are facing off against a manticore are usually prepared for an intense battle with a creature that is lethal at both long-range missile attacks and close melee attacks. But, what if the players encountered a highly intelligent manticore necromancer? This foul foe could raise an army of the undead and lead them into battle against the player's characters.

Re-Alignment – There are many monsters with a reputation of kindness and benevolence, but in every flock of lambs is one black sheep. It is possible for the game master to catch the players off-guard should they encounter a monster with a friendly reputation. Consider what could happen if a group of wounded and battle-weary adventurers stumble into a forest glade protected by a sylph. Experienced players may expect the sylph to offer food and shelter, but won't they be surprised when she summons an air elemental to wreak havoc on the unsuspecting characters.

Weapons – Monsters that are intelligent enough to hoard and collect treasure should also be smart enough to wield the weapons they have accumulated. Sometimes, the weapons could be of a mundane design, but other times the weapons may be uniquely or magically crafted. Imagine the players' faces when they are confronted by an umber hulk wielding *Storm-Forged*, a magical war hammer capable of earth-shaking thunder claps and the ability to cast bolts of lightning.

Undead – If a player is asked to describe a skeleton, zombie, or mummy, they will most likely describe an undead human. One sure-fire way to make a monster much more interesting is for the game master to present an undead version of the beast to the players. Instead of the player's adventurers discovering an active and thriving gnoll warren, they find a stinking cesspool infested with living dead gnolls. Due to their hardiness in life, the monstrous undead can be larger and far more lethal than their standard human undead counterparts.

Eldritch – Similar to the undead version of a monster, an eldritch version is one where the monster is simply a shell inhabited by a tentacled puppet master walking around in a monster suit. The parasitic creature controls the monster so that it looks and acts like the monster normally would in life, except for the fact that the eyes (if the beast has eyes) are missing from the monster. If enough damage is inflicted on the monster, then the tentacled creature within comes bursting forth to attack the adventurers directly. Imagine the player's surprise after a fierce battle with an intellect devourer ends with a tentacled horror erupting from the creature's corpse.

TENTACLED HORROR
Frequency: Very rare
No. Appearing: 1
Armor Class: 3
Move: 5′
Hit Dice: 5
% in Lair: Special
Treasure Type: Special
No. of Attacks: 6
Damage / Attack: 1d6 +1
Special Attacks: Burrowing, and Puppet Master (see below)
Special Defenses: None
Magic Resistance: 50%
Intelligence: Very high
Alignment: Chaotic evil
Size: M
Psionic Ability: Nil
Tentacled horrors are otherworldly parasites that feed and breed by burrowing into a host, devouring that host from within, and then masquerading as that host until its asexual reproductive cycle is completed. At which time, the newly created child tentacled horror is ejected from the host body that continues to house the parent tentacled horror. The child tentacled horror then seeks out its own host to inhabit.

Burrowing: If a tentacled horror can make at least four successful tentacle attacks on a single target, then the tentacled horror has successfully grabbed its target, and may attempt to burrow into it on the next combat round. To make a burrowing attack, the tentacled horror must make another attack roll against the target's armor class; a successful burrowing attack results in the tentacled horror making a small access hole on the target. A tentacled horror's otherworldly body defies normal physics, and is incredibly pliable. The tentacled horror then squeezes itself into the target's body in a single combat round.

Puppet Master: If a tentacled horror has successfully burrowed into a host body, then it gains complete and total control of the host's body, mind, memories, and instincts in 3d4 combat rounds. During this transitionary period, the host's body writhes as subcutaneous tentacles wiggle and twist everywhere. The tentacled horror is most vulnerable during this transitionary period, and any attacks against the host's body, piercing or bludgeoning, do normal damage to the host, but double damage to the tentacled horror. If the tentacled horror can be killed before the transitionary period is completed, then the tentacled horror leaks out of the access hole it has created during its burrowing attack. Otherwise, upon completion of the transitionary period, the host's eyes are devoured from inside the host's body, and the tentacled horror then has absolute control over the host body. The tentacled horror is safe deep within the host body, and the only way to extract the tentacled horror is by first killing the host body.

Encounter: "All That Glitters Is Not Gold"

by Jon Hook

This fantasy world encounter is designed to challenge 4 to 6 third level adventurers. This encounter is set in a large chamber located within a subterranean dungeon complex. The chamber is filled with piles of gold and silver coins, precious metal works of art, and a rainbow of colorful jewels. If the adventurers are to believe their eyes, they have discovered a massive hoard of monetary treasure. The game master can stock the hoard with whatever monetary values he desires.

In truth, only one-quarter of the treasure hoard is authentic gold and jewels; the remaining piles of treasure are actually an enormous mimic in disguise. This ancient creature moved into this room years ago and was able to catch the original resident by surprise, and ate it. Immediately after, the mimic assumed the shape and texture of the nearby piles of treasure; the glittering booty has attracted the attention of many greedy adventurers, and they have all met their doom in the maw of the gigantic mimic. The ancient mimic waits for its prey to approach the treasure hoard, and then attacks as they attempt to scoop-up the coins and jewels. Those adventurers that mistakenly try to scoop-up the false coins of the mimic are surprised to discover the leathery feel of the treasure hoard.

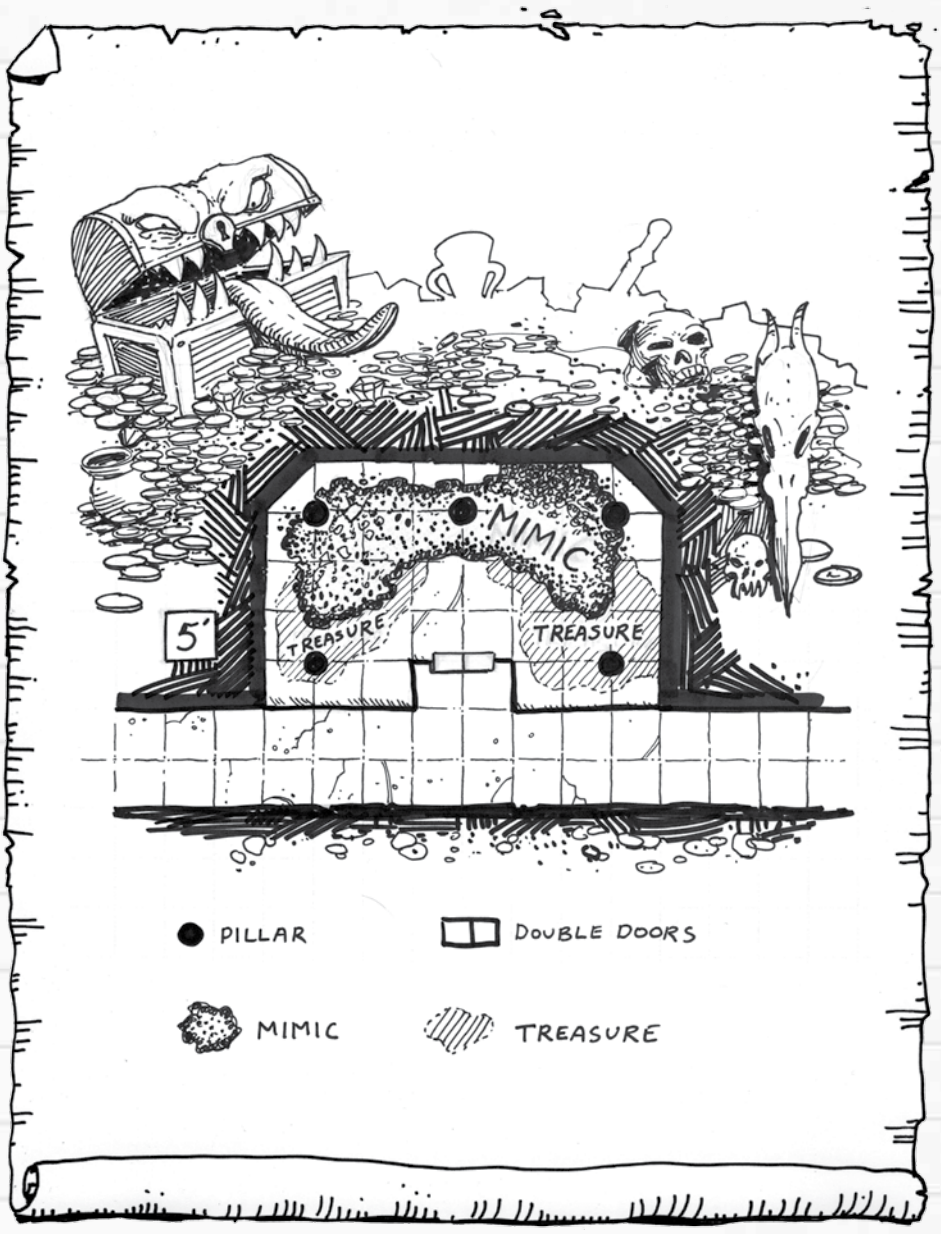
GREATER MIMIC
Frequency: Very rare
No. Appearing: 1
Armor Class: 5
Move: 5′
Hit Dice: 15
% in Lair: 100%
Treasure Type: Special
No. of Attacks: 4
Damage / Attack: 2d6 +6
Special Attacks: Acid touch
Special Defenses: Camouflage
Magic Resistance: Standard
Intelligence: Average
Alignment: Neutral
Size: L
Psionic Ability: Nil

This unique mimic is very old and very large. It can produce up to four pseudopods that are capable of attacking up to four different targets within 10′ of the mimic. As the creature aged, the adhesive glue the beast used to secrete has spoiled into a corrosive acid. Each time armor or weapons make contact with the mimic, the player must make a saving throw or the equipment will dissolve in 1d3 combat rounds. The damage the acid does to flesh and bone is already accounted for in the 2d6 +6 damage it makes with each attack. This greater predatory mimic has the power of speech, but it has a very limited vocabulary; its favorite words are "*Kill*," "*Food*," and "*Eat*."

The greater mimic perfectly illustrates how the game master can spice-up what is essentially a stale and common monster. This creature had the following features enhanced: Age, Size, Offense, Defense, and Special Abilities.

THE END

Jon Hook suspects that most of today's game authors, like himself, have been creating fantasy, sci-fi, and horror adventures since they were a kid. The only difference now is the paycheck. Jon is very passionate about the people who comprise the role-playing and tabletop game community, and they have been very kind and supportive of the work he has created. Jon is by far a *Call of Cthulhu* guy, and has been fortunate enough to have work published by a variety of *Call of Cthulhu* publishers, including Goodman Games. His most recent Cthulhu adventure is *Age of Cthulhu 9: The Lost Expedition*.



An Adventure's Story

by Kevin W. Melka

Role-playing game adventures have a wide range of different designs, plots and themes, everything from the exploration of a dungeon to rescuing the kidnapped princess from an evil sorcerer. Regardless of the plot or genre of an adventure it is the author's responsibility to spin a compelling story that ties everything together. This adventure must be enjoyable for both the players and the game master (GM), and most of all follows a series of creative encounters that tell a complete story from the first page to the last experience point.

But is writing a decent story enough to make an adventure both enjoyable and, equally important, playable by gamers? While some of the basic concepts are the same, crafting a role-playing game adventure is not the same as authoring a short story for a magazine, or writing your first prize-winning novel. Both voice a story for an audience, but structuring an RPG adventure that is creatively original, appropriately challenging, and tells a thrilling yarn can be difficult for an inexperienced game designer.

Unfortunately, listing everything an adventure needs to tell an effective story would span far beyond the scope of this book. Instead, this section deals with three of the more important adventure story-telling techniques – how the game master interprets the scenario, how the players move through the adventure, and how to best structure the narrative to support the adventure beginning to end.

Translating the Story

From the first idea to the last keystroke, telling an adventure's story comes from an author's inventiveness, which in turn is translated into encounters, statistics, and narratives put down on paper to be consumed by the masses. But herein lies the problem – it is infinitely easier for an author to game master an adventure they've written themselves, when compared to running one that is written by someone else.

An adventure author is always more familiar with the material since it spawned from their artistic imagination. The difficult part of telling an adventure's story is translating it onto paper for someone else to run for a group of players. Unless the author is only planning on running the adventure themselves it must be crafted in a manner that can be understood by anyone. No two game masters will present it exactly the same, and they shouldn't have to, but writing the adventure so it is run as the author intended is key.

Outline Your Story

One of the more critical aspect of others translating your tale into an adventure is for the author to make sure they tell the entire story as it relates to the overall plot. It's easy for the author to forget to pen specific details of a scenario that later on become an important part of the story to be told. Adventure writers often draw from their personal experiences as a game master or player, everything from specific plot devices to minor NPCs, and it's easy to forget to include some of these details due to the author's familiarity with the storyline.

One tool to help avoid this is to draw up a detailed outline of the adventure prior to typing your first word, and as you progress in the project make sure to keep the outline up-to-date. This allows the author to make sure important details are tracked from one encounter to another, and nothing essential to the overall plot is missed.

Another important feature that helps others interpret an adventure's story is a basic overview of the plot. This synopsis breaks the adventure down into sections, parts, and/or encounters that give the reader a basic understanding of each portion of the adventure. An overview (or whatever you choose to call it) should not be finely detailed or overly complicated, that can be left for that segment of the scenario. The main goal of an overview is to slice the adventure into sequential sections that tell the game master where the players need to go, who they encounter, what they find, and how to move towards the conclusion.

Stick to the Basics

The fact of the matter is that no two game masters are going to run an adventure the same way when it comes to presenting a story using RPG rules. If this were the case, role-playing games would have died off from boredom long ago. Each game master has their own style of gaming and translation of the rules, and it is not possible for an author to compensate for every reader's individual approach to the scenario. Not to downplay the importance of rules, but the more complicated the presentation of a rule or situation, the greater chance it'll conflict with how the story is presented to the players. For this reason, it is sometimes best to stick to the most basic interpretation of the rules whenever possible.

In addition, an adventure writer should avoid any modified interpretations of the rules, better known as "home rules". If an author injects their own personal perceptive of a rule or condition into an adventure it may conflict with or confuse a game master making the experience less enjoyable for everyone. An author should always try to stay within the confines of the game's rulebook, and let those running the adventure apply their own modified rules to best fit their campaign, if needed.

Proofreading and Playtest

Although it should go without saying, every adventure should be proofread over and over. However, in this context proofreading should not be confused with editing, as they are different topics when it comes to writing a playable adventure. Role-playing game editing is (but not limited to) a combination of spelling, grammar, and proofreading typically done by a third party who did not have a hand in writing the material. For an author, proofreading is the reading and re-reading their work to make sure the adventure ideas in their head are translated to substance others can understand. Getting in the habit of doing this helps minimize any important omissions, but also the illogical errors that aren't going to be caught by a spell checker. For example, typing "Strength" when you meant "Dexterity" may not be caught by an editor or grammar check, but is always noticed in the middle of running the adventure for a table of potential rules lawyers. After you finish typing a sentence, paragraph, or page of words stop and go back to read what you've written to make sure it can be properly understood by anyone.

One proven way to proofread an adventure is to have it play tested. This puts your story in front of a group of gamers whose primary purpose is to provide feedback on what you've written. Unfortunately, game designers aren't perfect, and play testers can not only find an author's mistakes and omissions, but sometimes present creative alternatives that enhance the overall work. Better to have faults in your work found by play testers rather than someone who paid money for a final product full of an author's oversights.

Players in the Story

Adventure authors craft their stories not only for the game master, but for the players at the table. When writing a role-playing game scenario, the author needs to remember that while the GM translates your tale, he does so for an audience of gamers who are the actual participants in the story. Without players, an adventure is nothing more than a hollow shell. When composing a story, the author needs to take into account how the players are going to react to each encounter or situation, and as a result how to move them from beginning to end.

Illusion of Free Will

An RPG adventure should always challenge its players by presenting a series of well-balanced encounters, that once combined tell the writer's tale. However, a common hurdle for inexperienced authors is that the version of the story in their head is too often overly linear, and that can be a bad thing. It is the author's job to move the players through the adventure, and at the same time avoiding "leading them by the nose". If the adventure consistently presents only one option to resolve an encounter or condition, players tend to get bored and the scenario becomes nothing more than endless sessions of rolling dice.

To overcome this an adventure needs to present an illusion of free will, which in turn helps the players move towards a conclusion by giving them more than one option. Think of every encounter as a road with multiple forks, where one or more of paths moves the players through

to the next portion of the story. For example, a group of adventurers come upon a bridge they must cross guarded by an angry troll. If the writer presents only one option, fighting the troll to the death, there is no "free will" presented to the players to advance the story. Instead the author could present multiple options for advancing the story – such as sneaking past the troll or bribing it with gold, in addition to putting it to the sword. No matter what option they choose, if they are successful they'll get by the troll and move forward.

Offering the players more than one possibility gives them the "illusion" they're directing the path of the story, and in turn furthers the author's goal of getting them to the other side of the bridge. This also differentiates the presentation of an adventure's story, so that no two groups of gamers have the same experience when playing the scenario.

Diversify Encounters

While most gamers love to kill things, if every encounter in every adventure was nothing more than rolling dice and dispatching monsters, players would quickly get bored to tears with your adventures. An adventure's story needs to test not only the players' skill with sword and shield, but how they deal with other obstacles in their path. The premise of the most common encounters falls into one of the below categories, the frequency and length depending greatly on the theme of the scenario.

A common hurdle for inexperienced authors is that the version of the story in their head is too often overly linear

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Hack & Slash: Most, but not all, adventures conclude with killing the story's primary antagonist, and of course any lowly minions found along the way. Pummeling opponents throughout an adventure is typically required in some form, but too much of any one thing makes for a lackluster story. Combat encounters should not dominate an adventure, and in the same breath be challenging and inventive.

Role-Playing: Getting information from a snitch, seducing a comely barmaid, or negotiating a larger reward are examples of an author injecting role-playing opportunities into their story. Role-playing options can also be presented as alternatives to conflict, especially if at that point in the scenario players are injured or outmatched. These types of encounters also give the game master a chance to involve certain players who may have only played a minor part in the adventure.

Tricks & Traps: A burly fighter in plate mail wielding a great sword might be capable of slaying an ogre on a field of battle, but he may meet his end opening a locked chest with a tiny poison needle trap. Deceptiveness woven into an adventure's story helps to keep players on their toes, but should also reward them for their resourcefulness. For example, though poisoned that same fighter could be saved when his rogue companion opens the locked chest containing not only the antidote, but a map of the dungeon they need to explore.

Obstacles: There is more to role-playing games than hack and slash, such as testing a player's moxie by putting unforeseen difficulties in their path. In this context an obstacle is a non-combat, non-role playing challenge the players must overcome to move the story forward. These obstacles could be something such as trying to cross a raging river, but can also be less physical ordeals like translating an ancient scroll or finding a magical plant to cure an ailing little girl. These encounters need not be critical to the advancement of the adventure, and should not be impossible to overcome.

Something Different: This may be the most difficult part of the story for an adventure author to tell – trying to incorporate something into their story that sets it apart from anything that has come before. There are only so many times players can rescue princesses from dragons, or aimlessly walk into a killer dungeon looking for treasure. This could be a single encounter the players must overcome, or part of the overall plot of the adventure. The author should try to craft some portion of their story that gives it a unique feel, something different (you hope) the players have not seen before.

Start to Finish

You have your idea, you've outlined your plot and detailed your adversary – so how do you actually begin putting your story down on paper? The more experienced the adventure author the easier this process becomes, but even at a high level there are certain standards you can use to help translate your story into an adventure. Like any story, your adventure should have a beginning, a middle, and an end.

The Beginning

Since it is primarily written for game masters, the beginning of an adventure should focus on whatever backstory the GM needs to know about the plot, and what is required to get the players started on their quest. In addition, this should also include any meta-game information related to the RPG system, such as what skills or level requirements the players must meet, and any specific rulebooks needed to properly run the scenario.

Adventure Background: This section contains a high-level history of what has happened prior to the player characters getting involved in the adventure, leading up to the point where they become an active part of the story. Here the adventure introduces all adversaries, their long and short term goals, any weaknesses, and how the players can emerge victorious – including the consequences of their defeat.

Adventure Hooks: Player characters need a reason to go on an adventure, something that (potentially) fits into the game master's existing campaign to get the game started. Some adventure hooks may need to be tweaked, but they give the GM an idea of how to get the players involved in the story. If an author is writing a series of adventures centered around a theme or geographical location, adventure hooks are a great way to link these different stories together

Overview: As previously mentioned, the overview is most often a high-level recap of the adventure that summarizes the players' journey towards the story's conclusion. Where the adventure background gives the reader a synopsis of the story before the player character's involvement, the overview outlines what may or may not happen after the adventure begins. An overview is meant to help the GM get a basic grasp on the flow of the adventure, leaving the details to be fleshed out by different encounters found within The Quest.

Player Introduction: The final part of an adventure's beginning section is the introduction of the quest to the story's audience in a narrative and informational section. Here the players are presented with a problem, opportunity, or need, often by a third party willing to pay them for services. A player introduction should draw upon the motivations of the story's characters by making them "want" to participate. This can be through the players' need to be the heroes of the story, because they are simply greedy and are doing it for the money, or a combination of these and other reasons. Like adventure hooks, the author may need to present multiple incentives for the players to undertake the quest, and at the same time give them an outline of how this goal might be accomplished.

The Quest

The middle part of your adventure is the meat and potatoes of your story. This is the part where everything happens – from the time the players start out on their quest until the final confrontation with the villain of the scenario.

This portion of the story holds the most detail about who the players meet, what they find, and how to best complete the adventure. All of these particulars need to be included so the GM can represent the adventure as close to the author's vision as possible.

Sections & Locations: One of the easiest ways to organize your adventure is to structure it with chapters, parts, sections, locations, or encounters. This type of presentation segments the story and helps the reader put things in perspective. Is the adventure in one fixed place? Do the players have to travel to complete the quest? The content of your story helps define how it might be arranged. For example, if your story takes place in a city followed by traveling to a dungeon, the adventure might be broken into at least that many sections (Part #1, Part #2, etc.), and conceivably one more for the final showdown. Then when detailing the dungeon, it could be divided into locations for each chamber or area, along with a narrative applied to each describing what is seen by the players.

Story Progression: An author must remember to keep their adventure moving forward by presenting a series of events and encounters that moves them towards the conclusion. If the players choose to move backwards, it should only be by their choice and not part of the story. The author should also rely heavily on their outline here, making sure that each encounter contains all the players needs to keep advancing forward.
In addition to moving the story forward, adventure authors need to take care not to overwhelm the reader with too much information. An adventure within a large city does not need to detail every dark alley and seedy tavern. While it's always good to add depth to an adventure, too much information can distract the players from the quest. Better to focus on the adventure itself, leaving tangents outside the story's confines for the game master to deal with.

Challenges Tell the Story: As mentioned above, adding diversity to your encounters and locations helps to present a wide range of options to your story. However, it's also important for all encounters to be a part of the adventure whenever possible. It's easy to inject random encounters into an adventure that have nothing to do with the plot, but it makes a better story if each happenstance plays some meaningful part in the journey.

For example, an apparent random confrontation with a band of goblins produces a unique magical dagger that turns out to be helpful later during an encounter with a powerful monster. Or perhaps a role-playing interaction with a crazy hermit whose mysterious ramblings help the party solve a puzzle that leads to a lost treasure. Filling space in an adventure with unnecessary encounters is the trick used by inexperienced authors to increase page count, and can detract from a good story.

The Ending
Every story ends differently, and the conclusion of an adventure is just as important as its beginning. An adventure author should know when to end their story, and at the same time be rewarding for the game master as well as the players.

Getting to the End: An adventure needs to be challenging all the way to the end, but not so daunting that the players have no hope of surviving. Remember the players do not have to do everything right throughout to effectively complete the quest, but at the same time should not be handed their reward on a silver platter. The author needs to insure the players have been presented with everything they need to successfully complete the quest, else they're destine to fail. Referring back to the story's outline at this time can help to double-check and make sure critical clues are not left out for the players to find.

The Antagonist: The "villain" of an adventure can take many forms, and does not necessarily have to follow the trend of your typical evil wizard or maniacal dictator. What form an antagonist takes relies heavily on the story itself, but should not be restricted to the typical "bad guy" or the standard fire breathing monster.
For example, an adventure can center around the exploration of a graveyard spawning undead horrors, but the actual "antihero" of the story is a magical item that animates the dead for miles. Succeeding in the quest isn't necessarily killing a "bad guy", but preventing undead from rising by shattering the evil artifact. On the other hand, something can be said for the conventional evil dragon's lair, but it makes for a better story if the

final encounter contains a twist the players are not expecting.

Success and Failure: As the players approach the end of your story, an adventure author needs to outline what happens if they are successful, if they fail, or something in between. The quest may end with the defeat of an evil hag, but not before she eats the kidnapped princess because the party arrived too late.
And finally, characters that are triumphant in their quest, save both the kingdom and the princess, and return with the head of her captor on a pike deserve their just rewards. An adventure author needs to properly reward both players and characters for the successful completion the story. Be it gold, magic, land, or something even more specific to a character, the author should offer some type of reward to say job well done. For the players themselves, their reward should be an enjoyable adventure that brings them back to the table for more.

Encounter: "The Old Lair"

by Kevin W. Melka

The Old Lair is a low-level fantasy role-playing adventure for three to six players. The party should include at least one fighter and cleric class character, and since the adventure is outdoors rangers and druids would do well. The quest can be inserted into any campaign with a city or village within a day's journey of a mountain range. This adventure is presented with the 3.5 edition of the d20 rules, but can easily be converted to other fantasy-based role-playing game systems.

Adventure Background

For two decades a pair of adult red dragons scarred the countryside for leagues in every direction, raining fire and death from their lair atop a dormant volcano. Zzenthralcoal was the male and Cynstarmazz the female; the two wyrms came together to mate after reaching adulthood, and unlike others of their kind never went their separate ways. Eventually the presence of the dragons threatened nearby kingdoms, and a large party of experienced adventurers was assembled to deal with the beasts once and for all.

The battle that followed was epic, lasting for hours until only three opponents remained – a paladin, a ranger, and the female dragon. Out of arrows and suffering from severe burns, the ranger, Issgard, sat helplessly while his brother, Urthadar, and Cynstarmazz were locked in a battle to the death. Then, unexpectedly, the dragon paused in her attacks and dropped her guard, giving Urthadar the chance to deliver a killing blow that ended the dragons' reign of terror.
The dragons' hoard was massive, and Urthadar used nearly all of it to rebuild cities and villages for miles around. Shortly afterwards, he was dubbed Lord Urthadar, and given rule over the lands he helped save. Despite magical healing his brother Issgard's wounds left him heavily scarred, resulting in his retirement from adventuring to raise cattle at the base of the dragon's old lair. The paladin never discovered why the dragon dropped her guard, and eventually considered it a righteous blessing from his deity. However, Issgard knows why.

Sensing her defeat, Cynstarmazz stopped her attack and used the last of her strength and dragon magic to cast a powerful spell upon the injured ranger. Known only to the dragons, a newly laid egg was hidden in a secret chamber beneath the lair. The spell cast upon Issgard forever compelled him to care for the dragon inside the egg as if it were one of his own. A decade later the dragon has finally come of age, venturing forth into the world.

Adventure Hooks

Use one or combine the following hooks to get the player characters involved in the adventure:
Missed Communication: Lord Urthadar has not heard from his brother in some time, and recently dispatched soldiers under his command to see if he is all right. They never returned.
Prized Beef: A wealthy noble needs someone to travel to the farm of the famous ranger Issgard to obtain one of his prized beef cows for an upcoming celebration.

Disappearances: Farmers have reported some of their livestock has recently gone missing without a trace. The local constable needs someone to investigate.

Overview

The battle between the forces of good led by Lord Urthadar and two red dragons is the stuff of legend, and anyone undertaking one of the above adventure hooks would know the folklore behind this heroic tale and the old mountain lair.

Player Introduction: Once the party has agreed to a presented adventure hook, they begin the quest by setting out in the direction of the mountain lair. Along the way they encounter one of Issgard's neighbors who tells the party some of his livestock has recently gone missing.

Part 1 – The Farm: Once they reach Issgard's farm they find the ranger dead, apparently slain by a group of soldiers sent by Lord Urthadar. The soldiers are also dead, burned to a crisp by the young dragon Issgard has been raising all these years.

Part 2 – The Lair: Clues eventually lead the party towards the mated dragons' old lair high atop the mountain. There they discover a secret chamber leading to the hiding place of the young dragon Pyrothraan. Here the players can kill the dragon while it's young, before it becomes a threat like its parents.

Player Introduction

The quest begins as the party is on the road headed towards the old red dragon lair. Read the following to begin, paraphrasing based on adventure hook chosen by the game master.

The sun beats down hard upon you as travel down a dirt road in the direction of the Lair. If there was ever another name for the mountain it has not been used in a long time. Anyone that knows the tale of Lord Urthadar and the red dragons now refers to this dormant volcano by its new name.

Prior to arriving at Issgard's homestead the party encounters a lone farmer from the Disappearances adventure hook, who is the contact given to them by the local constable.

The man introduces himself as Joseph Rowntree, a local farmer and closest neighbor of Issgard the Ranger. He says over the past two weeks a dozen head of his livestock, mostly cows and goats, have disappeared without a trace. He was going to ask Issgard for help, but his farm is another hour down the road. Joseph didn't want to leave his animals unattended so he spoke to the local constable first.

If asked to see the area the livestock disappeared from, Joseph leads them to a nearby grazing field. A DC 16 or greater Spot check here reveals the tops of several trees have been damaged. This is a clue that a winged predator likely took Joseph's livestock.

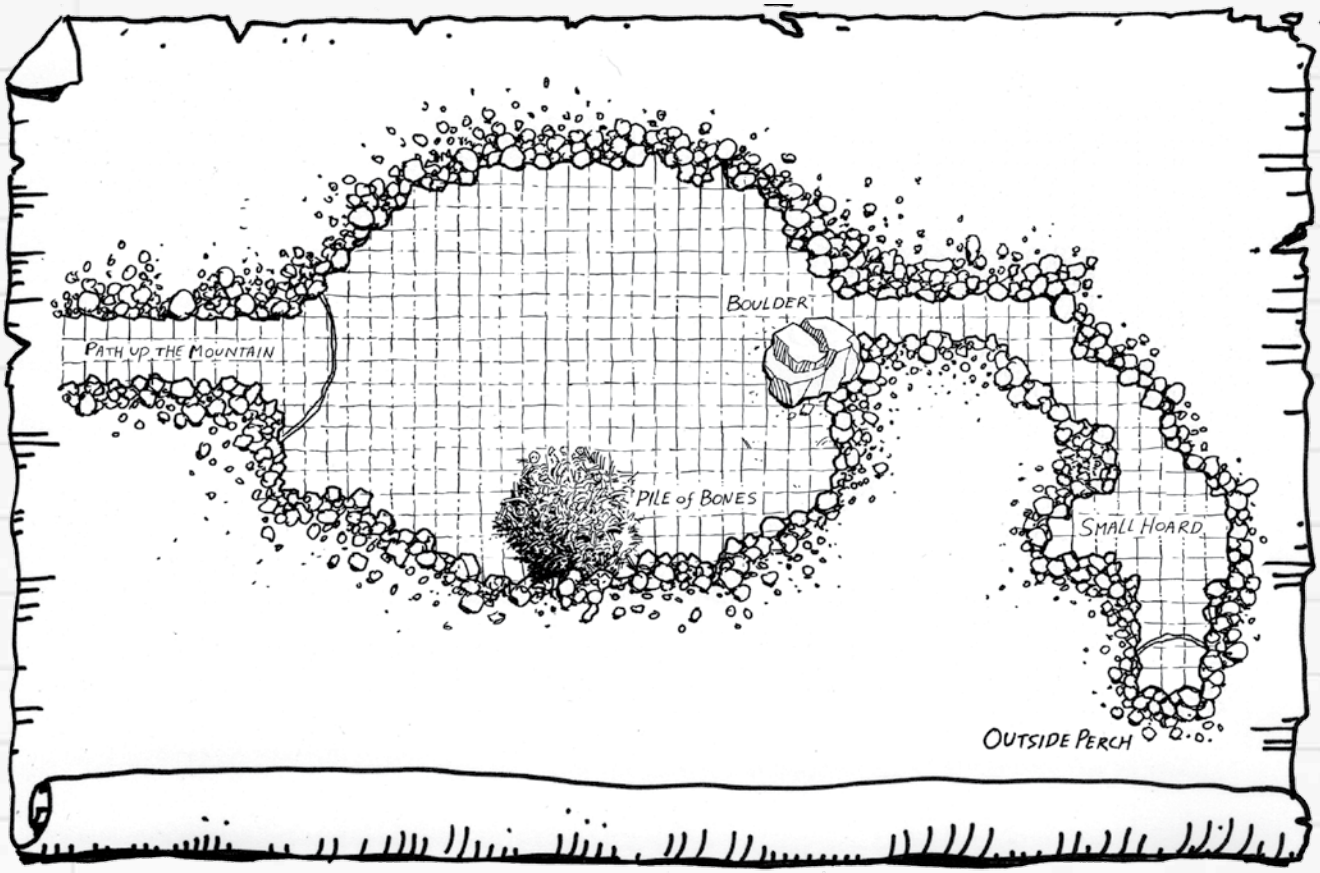
Part 1 – the Farm

Still under Cynstarmazz's spell, Issgard used his injuries as a crutch to create this farmstead so he could care for the baby dragon. Unknowingly funded by his brother, Issgard sells half of his livestock for slaughter and the remainder goes towards the growing appetite of the young dragon Pyrothraan. When the party arrives there are also 37 head of cattle wandering the fields. Read the following once the party reaches the outskirts of the farm:

> Approaching the secluded farm, you can see several large grazing fields that have been cleared and fenced for livestock in the shadow of the towering mountain. Gazing ahead you see very faint wisps of what might be smoke from beyond the next rise.

In the past few months Pyrothraan has grown strong enough to transverse the high mountain winds and fly down from the lair to get his meals. Prior to that Issgard would walk cattle and goats several miles up a mountain path to feed his charge.

When Lord Urthadar's soldiers arrived a week ago they came face-to-face with the ranger and the young dragon. One of the soldier quickly tossed a javelin at the dragon in hopes of catching it by surprise, and it might have found its mark if Issgard had not stepped in front of the throw. Piercing his heart, the ranger fell, and in his rage Pyrothraan's fiery breath incinerated the soldiers where they stood. Backlash from the attack spread to



Issgard's body and small cabin, which has been smoldering ever since.

Searching the area produces several clues for the party, eventually leading to the Lair. Have each player make a Search roll while investigating the farm, consulting the results below.

DC 10 or better: A path at the edge of the property leads up the mountain. A DC 15 Survival roll reveals both human and livestock tracks going up the path.

DC 12 or better: Without the ranger to herd them, the remaining cattle are trying to hide in the fields farthest from the mountain to avoid the hungry young dragon.

DC 15 or better: Lord Urthadar sent seven soldiers to speak with this brother, but there are eight burnt bodies. Success reveals that one of the dead is Issgard, with a javelin wound to the chest.

DC 17 or better: A set of non-human or cattle tracks are found. A DC 12 Knowledge (Nature) roll marks them as reptilian, and success above 20 marks them as draconic in origin.

Following the incident Pyrothraan returned to the Lair. Though still an evil chromatic dragon Pyrothraan had grown to love and respect his charmed keeper, and with his death is unsure of what to do next. Not wanting to return to see Issgard's body, the dragon has been raiding nearby farms for food this past week.

Part 2 – The Lair

The path to the lair was carved out of the mountain years ago to bring down the considerable hoard of the mated dragons, and until recently was used by Issgard to bring Pyrothraan food. The Lair is near the top of the mountain, several miles from the farm. Once the party has climbed the mountain and entered the Lair, read the following:

The chilled, thin air is noticeable as the path upward ends at the enormous mouth of the Lair. Daylight streams in through the entrance, illuminating a massive interior you have no trouble believing was home to two adult dragons. Where you envision once stood a huge mound of gold and silver now lies a grizzled heap of bones,

some of which still have rotting flesh upon them.

Hiding in the shadows at the back of the cave is a gigantic boulder that has been pushed to the side, revealing a passage to Pyrothraan's mini-lair. Zzenthralcoal's magic concealed the egg's hiding place years ago, and the spell on Issgard allowed him to find and open it after the hoard was gone. Unless the party is extremely resourceful, the young dragon sees their approach from his perch beyond the main cave. Pyrothraan then flies around to the front entrance and attempts to attack them from behind with surprise, ideally when they're all in the thinner passage downward. Issgard had taught the dragon how to fight adventurers trying to kill him, using surprise tactics and targeting spell casters and archers who can hurt him from a distance. In addition, the thin air reduces non-magical, non-draconic fire damage by half on the mountaintop.
If reduced to half his hit points Pyrothraan takes to the skies, leaving behind the Lair and his dead mentor.

Conclusion

If Pyrothraan is slain or able to escape the party finds his small treasure hoard, left by his parents years ago. Issgard also used some of this treasure to cover expenses from the cattle he used to feed Pyrothraan. The remainder of the hoard contains 2,339 gold, 882 silver, 211 copper, 600 gold in gems and jewelry, and 1d4 minor magic items. The hoard also contains Issgard's rare +2 longbow of seeking (double critical threat range), which Lord Urthadar allows them to keep as a reward.

Because of his relationship with Issgard, Pyrothraan always knows where this bow is should he want to find the party again.

Pyrothraan, Red Dragon Wyrmling

CR 4
XP 1200,
Chaotic evil Medium Dragon;
Init 0; **Senses** Listen +12, Spot +12
Defense
AC 16, touch 10, flat footed 16 (+0 Dex, +6 natural)
hp 38 (5d12+8)
Fort +7, **Ref** +5, **Will** +5
Offense
Speed 40 ft., fly 100 ft.
Space 5ft.; **Reach** 5
Melee bite +10 (1d8+3) or
bite +10 (1d8+3), and claws (2) +5 (1d6+1), and wing slap (2) +5 (1d4+1),
Special Attacks: breath weapon (DC 15) 2d10 fire: 60 ft. cone,

Statistics:
Str 17, **Dex** 10, **Con** 15, **Int** 10, **Wis** 11, **Cha** 10
Base Attack: +7 **Grp** +10
Skills: Bluff +10, Hide +10, Listen +12, Move Silently +10, Search +10, Spot +12
Languages Common, Draconic
Feats: Alertness, Flyby Attack, Power Attack
SQ Blindsense, Immune to fire, Vulnerable to cold

THE END

After a decade of writing and running adventures for the RPGA Network, Kevin Melka was hired as the organization's Tournament Coordinator after winning first place in the DM Invitational Writing Contest two years in a row. He was instrumental in the development of the *Living City*, and creator of the *Living Jungle* Organized Play worlds. He also has design credits in the *Forgotten Realms*, *Dark Sun*, and several d20 worlds. Kevin is writing adventures and participating in organized play events today, and still enjoys role-playing games with the friends he met in the basement of a hobby shop in 1983.

Unleashing Your Dungeon Creativity

By Brendan J. LaSalle

Eventually, role playing game GMs who stay in the game long enough all become high-powered fantasy auteurs. They create worlds of amazing depth and scope with fully realized settings, cultures, cities, and monsters. They design their own byzantine dungeons that never fail to thrill, and when they do deign to use a published adventure they make such major changes that the scenario's own designer wouldn't recognize it if they showed up in Area 1-1 with a lantern and a set of thieves' tools. Eventually, the masterful RPG GM can throw together a perfect dungeon from nothing in no time.

Eventually.

In the beginning, of course, new GMs are still finding their way. It's hard to come up with adventures that are challenging yet survivable, unique yet recognizable, deadly serious yet fun. And if you have never run a published dungeon before, designing one that doesn't suck is next to impossible. So new GMs rightfully turn to published adventures, and they count on those adventures to allow them to run great games.

When you sit down to design your first adventure, keep that starting GM in mind. The experienced GM can run a fun and challenging game with only the bare bones of a scenario in front of him. That starting GM needs as much detail as you can manage – the name of the innkeeper's wife, the smell of the damp air, the quality of the stonework in the claustrophobic stairwell behind the hidden door in the ruined cathedral.

Design your dungeon for the starting GM. Give him balanced scenarios with interesting challenges. Give him monsters that can surprise and, whenever possible, scare the daylights out of his players. Give him treasure to award with a touch of the unexpected. Give him strategic challenges that will make fantasy combat the highlight of the evening, rather than a drudgery of die rolling marathon the PCs have to survive so they can make it to the next dull combat. Most importantly, show that new GM what a good dungeon feels like, so that he evolves into the wizened GM with a thousand dangerous rooms in the dark dungeon of his creative mind.

And when Experienced GM runs your dungeon, he can make whatever changes he wants, or keeps all the elements as they were. A well-designed adventure works for everyone.

With this in mind, here are my tips for better dungeon design.

1. Play All The Games / Read All The Games

This one is a no-brainer. If you want to design RPG scenarios, read a lot of RPG scenarios and run a lot of RPG scenarios. There is no substitute for experience – on either side of the screen. The more you play, the greater the depth of experience that you bring to your designs.

You experience FRPGs as player so you can run effective games for players. You experience FRPGs as a GM so you can design quality adventures for other GMs.

Read adventures. Deconstruct them in your mind. Try to understand the choices the designer made, why he includes one element and leaves another out. See the adventure as a group of encounters, and as a unified whole. Start thinking of the designer's choices relative to the choices you might have made, working within the same restrictions that designer had (imagination is limitless, but word count trumps every, every time).

Here is an exercise I recommend: go to a published adventure you enjoyed running (or playing through), and find an encounter you found particularly enjoyable, or challenging, or just an interesting design. Copy that room down, word for word – from read-aloud text to treasure to stat blocks. Try to imagine the various elements that went into writing that room up. See what it looks like in your own handwriting. Think about what it all mean in relation to your own work.

Read adventures by multiple designers – and also

try multiple adventures by the same designer. Reading several dungeons written by the same designer is a particularly effective way to increase your design acumen. The more adventures you read by a single designer, the more a sense you have of their style. Style is a slippery design aspect but an essential one, and the more you learn about another designer's style the easier it will be to develop your own style.

I can't recommend this enough – develop a style, be aware of your style, but never let your style be your master. You grow as a designer by stepping outside of your style and trying new things. Never stop trying new things.

2. Work On Your Writing

This assumes you are designing adventures with the goal of their eventual publication. I am not going to spend a lot of time talking about this because there are a million resources to help you improve your writing which are going to be much more helpful than this journeyman will ever be on that front.

My three universal tips for better writing:

Get a copy of Strunk and White's Element's of Style, read it to tatters, get another, repeat. Forever.

Read your finished manuscript out loud to yourself. If it doesn't sound right to your ears it won't read right, so make changes until it sounds right.

Read everything you can get your hands on. Listen to audiobooks on long trips, bring a paperback for when you have to stand in line, read before bed.

3. Design with Playtesters

When I was a teenager creating dungeons to challenge my FRPG buddies, I was a solo act. I created dungeons that I wanted to be fun and challenging and, if I'm being honest, that would impress my players with my inspired deviousness.

Sometimes that worked out more or less like I wanted it to. But not always.

I often created challenges that had super-obvious solutions that I had missed out on in the design phase, or unfathomable puzzles that were so confounding and difficult that players got bored and stopped feeling involved. I created dungeons that were obvious copies of popular published adventures, or movies, or fantasy novels, and my players would then either instantly deduce the most favorable strategy, or lampoon me mercilessly for being a copycat. I designed too difficult, or too easy. I gave out too much treasure, or not enough, or I gave out dull treasure that I had obviously just rolled randomly.

The more I designed my own dungeons, the better I got – obviously. And at some point I started designing adventures for publication. Suddenly the essential nature of playtesting, and the importance of good playtesters, came in sharp focus to me for the very first time.

When you are designing dungeons for publication you are extremely well served by finding a good playtest group. Objective opinions about the quality of an adventure are invaluable.

When you run a playtest, you aren't just checking the mechanical aspects of your dungeon – although checking those mechanical aspects is essential as well. You should be trying to make sure that the dungeon is as fun as possible for everyone involved.

Ask your players what their favorite parts were, what didn't work for them, what snapped them out of the scenario. Test your adventure for balance and an appropriate level of challenge. The most fun adventure is one where the players succeed only after using all their resources and cunning to survive. You should design to the limit of that.

I recommend a minimum of three playtests before you turn a draft in:

Once with your main playtest group to really shake the adventure down. This is the kind of playtest where you might actually call a "do over" for a room or encounter if you find an obvious flaw, and want to try it a different way to fix it up.

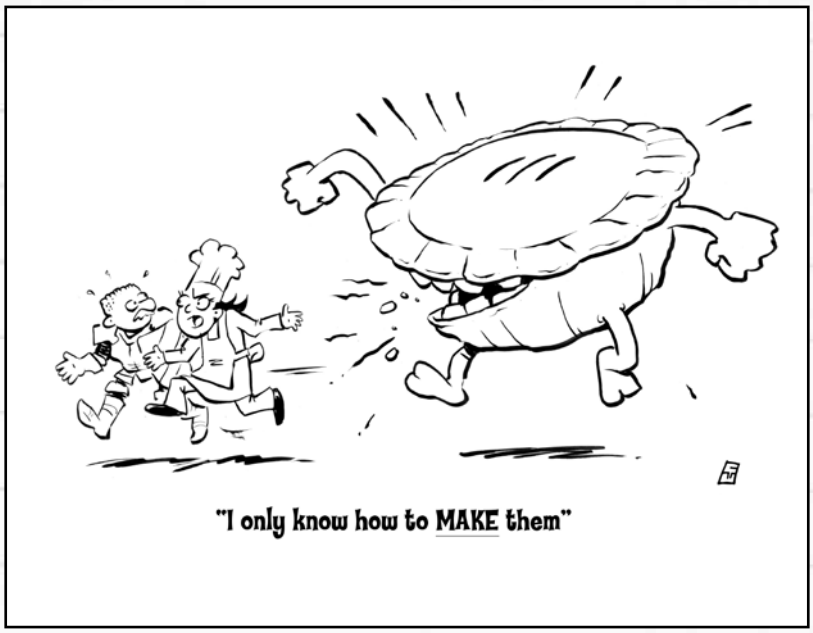
Once with strangers – run a game at a convention, or an open gaming night at a library or gaming cafe. See how your dungeon plays with folks without any expectations about you. It doesn't have to be strangers, of course – if you know another local gaming group, ask if you can run a night for them.

Once – and this is key – with another GM. Find a buddy who will run your game for his group, using the draft of your text and your maps that you mean to turn in. You never know what elements are only "in your head," and not in the

adventure as written, until you get the reaction of a different GM running it for his group. Listen carefully to their feedback. Consider updating anything that group found confusing, dull, or predictable. Most of all, see if they had a good time and enjoyed the dungeon.

(Once I got to play in a game I designed without anyone knowing I had designed it. I carefully played dumb, and let myself walk into ambushes and traps where appropriate. That was an amazing experience, but it's fairly hard to put those kinds of circumstances together).

Mind you – you can never guarantee that any given gaming crew will have a good time playing your adventure. A million things can go wrong, up to and including incompatible styles between yourself and the group playing through your dungeon. Games go off the rails all the time, and there is nothing you can do to prevent that from happening. What you can, and should, control is the quality of your design. The better adventure you write, the more likely it is to facilitate a fun night of gaming for a group when the GM picks up your adventure.



Also, pay attention to the Care and Feeding of Playtesters. Buy your gang pizza and snacks. Don't demand to playtest constantly – give your playtesters breaks to play adventures that they are interested in trying. Make sure you are also gaming just for fun often enough to keep everybody happy. Get their names right in the credits.

4. Strive for Originality, but don't Obsess over Originality

Every idea you have is built on the foundations of a million ideas that have come before it. True originality is impossible. Every new idea is just putting together two or more extant ideas in a (hopefully) unique way. It's all been done before, countless times, in endless variations.

Do not despair – just the opposite, embrace this truth and make it work for you by drawing in as many diverse elements to your creation as you can manage.

Tell a certain kind of someone about a creative endeavor you are working on, and they immediately deconstruct your idea to its most recognizable elements.

"Okay, so it's like Keep on the Borderland crossed with Labyrinth and The Raid."*

"It's like Dark City had a baby with the Dragon Slayer video game."**

"So it's basically every horror movie ever, thrown in a blender with The Matrix."***

Stop trying to impress that guy – that guy will never be impressed with your ideas. Start trying to confound that guy's expectations by drawing in elements he would never consider, and putting them together in ways he would never have thought of.

If all of creativity is just bring in those elements, then to make your adventure more interesting include more diverse elements.

I recommend being influenced by absolutely everything. Let art, music, movies, conversations, and nature inspire you. Be open and receptive to the inspiring in every facet of everyday life and let those minor miracles that we witness again and again and again in the world inspire you. Create a creative space for yourself, and live in it.

And then . . . write a dungeon with orcs and secret doors with acid traps.

That seems grandiose but it's how you work that creative muscle. Find inspiration that makes you feel creative – not with a final design in mind, not

actively trying to come up with a new encounter, or trap, or bit of treasure, or a clue or a puzzle, but just creative. Let inspiration take you where it takes you. Actively pursuing those flights of imagination and really exploring all of the possible combinations of things rolling around in your head will help you come up with new and interesting things down the road.

And sometimes those flights of fancy will become those elements of your dungeon design. The more you exist in that creative state, the more combinations and possibilities will present themselves to you as you design. Creativity is like a muscle in a very real way – the more you work it, the stronger it gets, and the more (and better!) work you can do with it before you exhaust your inner resources.

5. Re-skin To Win

Imagine if you had to design a D&D adventure using only specific elements from the AD&D Player's Handbook, Dungeon Master's Guide, and Monster Manual, as written. If you were forced to only use those monsters, those magic items, those races, etcetera, your ability to surprise your players, and therefore to keep them engaged, is severely limited. Eventually everyone memorizes what attacks work against the various slime creatures and which ones are wasted on them, the magical abilities of the djinn, ogre magi, and demons, and all of the abilities of all the neatest magic items. That could still be a fun game but it would get harder and harder the more you played to keep the adventure fresh.

I recommend creating your own elements wherever possible, and the easiest way to do this is to re-skin certain elements while keeping others the same.

Re-skin is a video game concept – you simply change the exterior to your taste, while keeping the basics the same. It's a simple enough concept.

Take a basic monster – the giant scorpion. It has multiple attacks, a tough exoskeleton, it can grab and hold, it can poison. When a party of adventurers sees a giant scorpion in a room, they have a fairly good idea what they are up against and how they should best handle it.

Now let's re-skin our giant scorpion. Lets make it a clockwork digging machine, a fantasy construct designed by unknown ancients to dig dungeon tunnels and deadfalls, and to repair cracks in stone with its giant concrete-insertion proboscis. Its program box slipped a gear, and now it tries kill everything that moves, grabbing victims with its huge shovel scoops and tries to stick them with its concrete inserter, filling their bodies up with its nasty toxic discharge.

With only a few extra considerations – this contraption is no longer affected by spells that affect animals, for example, and perhaps its vulnerable to lightning and rust attacks – it has become an entirely new challenge in the eyes of your players.

Use this technique with creatures, magic items, fantasy races, spell effects, and any other element your players have seen enough times to stop feeling that sense of wonder they felt when they first encountered it in a dungeon.

Re-skin the odd creature or magic item, and it adds a dash of flavor and mystery to your adventure. Re-skin major sections of the dungeon and you are creating a unique challenge that your player's will not soon forget. Re-skin the fantasy concept and at some point you have created a genera.

Like any technique this can be overused. Imagine this treasure hoard: 6000 GP, a wand of magic missiles with 20 charges, and a +2 dagger. Very standard; people are already divvying that up in their minds. Re-skin one element – make that wand a tiny spell fanfold spellbook with 20 copies of magic missile – and it has a unique feel. Re-skin two – use the tiny spellbook, and make the weapon a +2 folding straight razor – and players will question why they are discovering such strange items (a good thing). Re-skin every bit of treasure in the entire dungeon – make that gold a pile of 600 solid gold anatomically perfect spider statues worth 10 GP each, and give the same treatment to the rest of treasure in the dungeon . . . after a while it's going to feel like you are trying too hard. Mix it up!

* I would love to try that dungeon.

** I would play the hell out of this dungeon.

*** I would never stop playing this dungeon.

Encounter: "The Chamber of 100 Axes"

by Brendan J. LaSalle

In my dungeon design advice, I stressed creativity and drawing in diverse elements in design. To demonstrate that, this shall be an experiment. I am going to go to Wikipedia, hit the random article finder three times, read my random articles (with an option to hit it again if I come across a "stub"), and use an element from each one in the following dungeon encounter.

The three articles I landed on: Symmetry (band), Jadeitite, Thomas Pounde (the Jesuit Brother, not the pirate . . . bad luck, that, but we persevere.)

Dungeon Room: The Chamber of 100 Axes

As you make your way down the corridor you hear unearthly voices singing somewhere in the distance.

If the entire party remains silent, they can clearly hear that it is a strange song being sang by multiple etherial voices, beyond the door. The words can not be made out.

The door is not locked or trapped, and opens in with a simple twist latch.

This chamber is forty feet by forty feet feet. It is a perfect cube, and whatever ancient architect designed this room seems to have taken great pains to make the measurements precise. The walls to your left and right are pocked with dozens of small shelves carved into the rock, and on each one displays an ornamental axe. Their hafts are of polished wood, and the heads are of some gemstone of blue and green, with veins of silver and gold shot throughout. The strange singing you heard in the corridor is more pronounced here, but not unbearable.

In the center of the room is a huge creature. It is ten feet tall, wearing heavy plate armor. It has huge bull horns jutting from the sides of its helmet. Its legs are inverted at the knee, marking it as a non-humanoid. Its feet are in heavy steel boots, but they are shaped like heavy steel hooves.

The room has the dusty smell of disuse.

There is a door on the far wall.

Once inside the chamber, the singing seems to be coming from everywhere and nowhere at once.

The creature is a guardian spirit, summoned to guard this treasure by ancient priests of a now forgotten civilization. It exists only as a quantum possibility until the axes are incorrectly removed from the walls. (Its complete lack of scent, as noted in the read-aloud description, is a clue). A weapon or a hand passes right through it as if he were not there at all. The unearthly song the adventurers hear is a part of the charm that keeps him from being physically embodied in our dimension.

The axes, 100 in all, are an ancient treasure. The heads are jadeitite, their hafts are of rare pear wood. They are ornamental and non magical, and not really useful for combat (standard axe damage but they shatter 25% of the time after a hit, and automatically shatter on an attack roll of 1). They represent the marriages of 50 ancient families – one axe was given to each bride and groom.

Under close examination one sees that the axes are each a perfect twin for their match on the far wall – down to the pattern of gold veins in their hoods. Their symmetry is unmistakable when one examines them carefully – each axe is an inverted twin to its match on the far wall.

If a single axe is removed, the guardian creature becomes an actual thing in our universe – an extra-dimensional minotaur that exists only to defend the treasure - and attacks until he is destroyed, or until whomever holds the axe lies dead on the floor. The strange singing immediately stops, but starts again if the creature is returned to his quantum possibility state. The creature is treated as having a held action whenever it becomes real, and can charge and strike any creature in the room on its combat round. If the creature slays the wielder, it puts the pilfered axe back where it came from, and once again becomes a quantum possibility standing disembodied in the center of the room, as above.

An axe can be safely removed if it and its twin are removed at precisely the same time. Every time this operation is performed, there is a cumulative 1% chance that the guardian creature animates – at which point it attacks until the two axes most

recently removed are replaced, or until whoever holds them is defeated. Once it is animated in this way, the cumulative chance resets to 1%.

The axes are worth 100 gp per pair to a wealthy collector.

The far door leads deeper into the dungeon . . .

Sir Ox, the Inter-dimensional Guardian **Init** +3, **Atk** gore +5 melee (2d6+1); **AC** 14; **HD** 8d10; **HP** 57; **MV** 45'; **Act** 1d20; **SP** knockdown on a successful charge attack (Str DC 18 to avoid), immune to charm, sleep, and poison; **SV** Fort +7 Ref +1 Will +5; **AL** N

THE END

Brendan J. LaSalle is a writer, game designer, and odd-job man who had the good fortune to discover his true calling in 1977 when he helped put a new roof an a neighbor's garage. Since them he has worked on many projects in many people's houses, and helped lay the carpets at Goodman Games. He is best known as the guy who builds up the tables at GenCon. He lives in Salem, MA, with his wife, Trudy, cats, Oliver, Whisky, Jo-Jo and Pringles, and goldfish, Bob. He likes sleeping in on Sundays.

Something Worth Fighting For

by Lloyd Metcalf

If you have played tabletop role-playing games at least a few times, you are likely familiar with the feeling of being completely immersed in the game where you can practically see the action unfolding before your eyes. You may also know the feeling of a lack-luster game session where everything seems to drag and the magic is simply missing.

Not all game sessions can be epic and completely immersive for all players all the time, but there are some things a GM can do to make adventures not suck, or not suck so much. Surprisingly, the things that liven up the adventuring sessions can be small, easy, and come in between your big quests and modules.

One of the key components to suspending disbelief is establishing familiarity and consistency within your world and linking those things to experiences based in the real world. To have players connect with your world, it is often essential to give them something familiar that they can identify with in their own. Consider their own experiences in everyday life, then extend those sensations and link them to the fantasy world you are trying to present.

The party needs something worth fighting for, something beyond just a smattering of gold pieces and magic goodies. If you ask yourself about your priorities as a person, a "real world player character," the answer is likely something that would involve family, friends, connections, mom's bread and butter pickles. You may even be sitting at the table looking at some of those who are your inspiration to level up in real life. Why would it be any different for the characters in the game world than it is for you or your friends around the gaming table?

For an unusual twist, give the adventurers a treasure beyond gold and magic. Let them have friends, families and communities they can depend on, communities that depend on them. In what follows, we will visit some possibilities and some pitfalls to avoid when making your tabletop RPG games more immersive for players. That is to say, that these are the tools used at my own table, and those I have observed. Feel free to pick and choose, accept or deny any advice that follows. Like any creative endeavor, game mastering is an art form that belongs to each individual GM and the players at the table.

You Meet in a Tavern

Likely when players come into a town they will be looking for an inn or tavern to rest, buy food, drink, and listen to gossip. If the players are

consistent in this common occurrence in gaming, why not be consistent in the location? By centering a number of these down times in the same town, at the same tavern, you start to establish a sense of familiarity for the characters. Perhaps it's time to take note of the town, the tavern's name, the barkeep and perhaps a few of the regular patrons, even the weather or time of year. These small consistencies can go a long way in creating a sense of connection and a continuity within your game world for the players. However, as GM, you will need to organize these bits of information in some way that works for you and is consistently accessible. You will be doing yourself and your players a great favor by keeping track of them in a way that works best for you. Your game will become infinitely more interesting the more consistent the down-times are.

There once was a certain series of dragon books where a certain inn had characters many of us came to love. The proprietor had spiced potatoes that produced hundreds of guesses among fans regarding the possible recipe. Until the author finally acquiesced the necessity and posted her own version online, while still encouraging others to share their own. This small detail, solidified the inn with something readers and players could identify with.

Let's start with an example by giving the character's hometown inn and tavern a page in the GM notebook or device and name it "The Sparkling Tankard." Under the name, why not roll up an NPC as the barkeep? Let's call him "Bartho." Give Bartho a specialty or quirk. Perhaps he is particularly good at brewing a heavily spiced hard cider and has an interest in the game "Mancala." Let's give him a sister, "Merth" who works on weekends serving drinks and is known for her long red hair. The more details we tuck into this page, the more they can be recalled when players enter and start asking questions. Which of the following will be more immersive for the players?

1. "You enter the tavern and order a drink"
2. "You smell Bartho's hard spiced cider before the door even opens. Merth flashes her warm smile and waves you over to your regular table by the hearth before you even speak."

If the party returns after their quest, and Merth greets them at Bartho's again, the role-playing encounter will create itself. Soon it won't be just enough to return to town, the players will be asking to return to their friends at the warm tavern with the zesty hard cider. It won't be long before a grand adventure can begin simply by sweet Merth greeting the party with tears on her cheeks and concern over her missing cat. The party will rush off without any question of gold or monetary reward.

Adding numerous details can be great fun between game sessions and an inspiring past time that can seed entire quests or even campaigns. A careful GM doesn't hurry to reveal the details all at once, doing so can bog down game time. Let the details you have created simply exist and solidify an image in your own mind. Not every detail is observed all at once; sprinkle them in like savory seasoning on spiced potatoes. Some details might be made up on the spot when players interact with the world, then added to the appropriate note page later after the session or during breaks. Some details may never be explored or required for the players, and many won't necessarily need to be created ahead of time.
Player: "What is Merth's favorite color? I want to get her a gift at the tailor shop."
GM: "Green, she loves deep greens and almost always wears something of similar color when she is at the tavern."

[GM jots note under Merth's entry on the tavern page]

When the player comes back 3 adventures later, she will likely be sporting a green dress or some other wardrobe accouterment.

Home Town Feel

So many tabletop adventures have a generic "town" that is a blank utilitarian stamp of the setting. Often a medieval RPG will have these towns as small collections of citizens under a distant monarchy, rarely seen unless called up during a specific adventure. The people of the town frequently self-govern most of their business, frequently have a sheriff and a number of town guardsmen. No one asks any questions as long as there are arrows, spell components and swords to buy when they get back from looting

monsters. The collection of generic shops that serve little purpose beyond filling player character supplies, usually are lack-luster at best and almost never have a name, much less a person, attached to them. It can be remarkably rewarding to do a little more with a town than just have it be a blank storehouse. By giving the blacksmith something as simple as a consistent name that can be recalled or adding a stray beagle that always lingers around the butcher shop, or noting Filbert the dirty street kid that sleeps under the docks, you are adding immersive qualities to the game. These are the details that make players eyes glaze over as they stop seeing dice and pencils and start seeing characters living in worlds of wonder. This adds a solid connection with the environment for the players, something they can relate to in this world and apply to the vision of your fantasy one. Once these elements show up in the game just 2 or 3 times, you will see your players taking note, seeking those details out when they are looking for information. Players write the game as much as game masters do. Make it easy for them to apply creative energy to your world.

Some GMs even go so far as to take advantage of the digital world and use free blog sites and software to make world details available to players when the game sessions aren't active. Web blogs are ideally suited for organizing world information with topics, search tools, categories and more. That information can be further embellished with images and maps.

The Pitfall of Friends

"Don't trust the henchmen." It's a trap many GMs have fallen into, myself included. If we are going to give the players the gift of friends and community worth fighting for, let's not torture them with tired tropes and clichés. If the party makes a friend or hires an NPC, and before the adventure is done, the friend is possessed, a doppleganger, or charmed to attack the party by "surprise," you are falling into the trap. If you find yourself considering this as a game option, perhaps you should reconsider before you set it up. It has been done so many times, that many seasoned adventurers have come to expect the betrayal from hired help or any NPC attempting to befriend the party.

One of the key components to suspending disbelief is establishing familiarity and consistency within your world and linking those things to experiences based in the real world.

Another common theme for an NPC that has befriended the party, is that they will be slain or captured by enemies soon after their introduction and need some rescuing. Instead of these worn out tactics, allow NPCs to actually be reliable friends. Perhaps on occasion, there could even be a situation where an NPC saves the day. Possibly a friendly town guard might disband rowdy sailors threatening the party in an alley, perhaps a tavern friend helps thwart the villain with key information. Instead of trying to "trick" the party, try rewarding them for a change with connections, friends and family.

Give the heroes a safe home, a place worth fighting for, like a certain Halfling who always battled to defend his shire. If a character gains a love interest, it doesn't mean it's time to pounce on the connection with some sort of tragedy. It is tragic enough for a love sworn villager that the hero is out risking life and limb all the time.

Home is Where You Hang Your Hat

Another alternative to the classic pile of gold in an adventure is rewarding the party with their own home in town. Even if it's initially a basic shack, allow the party a chance to spruce it up and make it their own. Offering property to heroes in town is a business move that any smart town official would offer. After all, who spends more in their town than hearty, wealthy adventurers? Who leaves more behind than dead ones?

Rewarding a party with a home in a town will also help a GM drain swollen coffers and it not need be in taxes or theft. Players will find inspiration in upgrading locks, adding traps, secret rooms and study chambers to their new home. Give them something worth fighting for, let them have it and adventures sometimes start writing themselves.

This, like friends of the party, can be a temptation to a short-sighted GM. Don't take the usual path of destroying their home, or looting it. Instead, consider allowing their home to be a safe haven

for the party and a source of pride for townsfolk. The more investment of time and money the party puts into their home, the more they have to fight for in the dungeons. The more they will battle to return to their warm hearth. The more they will care about their world… your world, and even simple adventures, suddenly don't suck.

The Reward

The reward to all these small details will become plain when the next adventure comes around and some part of the module mentions a town where you easily plug in the warm home town of the heroes. Instead of asking how much gold they might get, the cause becomes immediately clear and the heroes have something worth fighting for. The game quickly gains a deep richness that never existed before and it doesn't affect game mechanics or economy in any way.

One of my personal favorite memories as a player was during my character's travels to distant lands, he began shipping exotic seeds and spices back to his hometown along the trade routes. Late the following spring when he returned, the previously struggling, small town cheered his approach. Farm fields were lush with valuable crops and his favorite tavern was buzzing with activity and the smells of new items on the menu. He had become a hero, and it had nothing to do with killing monsters that were crushing the town.

What About the Dungeon?

In those deep dark underground places, there are also ways to add consistency and flavor that immerses players into your world. When you purchase a module or adventure, the information presented is merely a suggestion, not hard and fast rules for the art that is your GMing style in your world. Something as simple as switching out a villain in a printed module with an ever-present arch-villain in your world that the party already despises can give events a true sense of continuity. They may already know a few weaknesses of the familiar villain, but those can be compensated for with some new villain surprises, or perhaps a new cohort taken from the purchased module.

Once in the dungeon, or on the road of the adventure of the session, jot down names of the NPCs, and perhaps add some additional flavor to their presence in the game. Keep the names at the ready with a couple of personality traits and motivations. Refer to NPC's by name in the game session instead of "the guide," "the rogue," etc. An old lady sorceress in a wilderness cabin gets a bit more interesting when she has a few cats, a name, and a terrible fern greens recipe that she offers travelers.

Adding interesting details to everyday locations soon becomes second nature to your adventuring style. A dungeon passage doesn't need to be a simple dungeon passage. Adding a broken arrow wedged into the stone mortar, a faint smell of wet dog or the soft chattering of mice to a hallway description brings the party attention on the rich setting at hand instead of just a run for gold. Some details write their own side-quests and red herrings from the town to the deep dungeon.

At a convention once I saw one of the originators of my favorite role playing game ask players to write their character's name and class on a folded piece of paper in front of them. This practice had everyone speaking to one another in character, by their character's name. Especially at a small table with long-time friends it can be too easy to forget character names and just refer to one another as a class or real world names. Posting this little "tent" with the character name can truly add to the immersion experience and may be worth a try at your table.

The Flavoring of Adventures

Like a spicy seasoning in your favorite dish, adventure details should be used where appropriate, but can ruin a dish if over-used. A GM may be able to give a fifteen-minute history regarding a cornerstone to the tavern, but sometimes, the party just needs a tankard. The flavoring brings your table alive when NPCs are revealed to be a little more human, the streets have pools of water, lamplighters walk the alleyways with stools and lamp oil, the leatherworker specializes in saddles for Halfling ponies.

So get out a notebook devoted to your world, start a file on your tablet, or however you organize information at the table and start peppering in interesting pieces of your town, spice up a couple dungeons, zest up some NPCs. There may be villains that despise disruptive heroes, hometown friends and family, vendors with familiar faces, all the things that are important to you in this world, can be simulated in the game world to suspend disbelief and bring a fantasy world to life for everyone at the table. Don't just go to the nearest tavern, make your way to The Sparkling Tankard for Bartho's cider, lend Merth a wink and congratulate her on her engagement to her fiancé, Guthrie Millwright.

Shock Spiders

Frequency: Rare
No. Encountered: 10d100
Size: Entire swarm Large – Individual Tiny
Move: 60'
Armor Class: 8 - swarm requires area affect to harm
Hit Dice: 1 / every 100 in swarm
Attacks: 1 as swarm bite + shock
Damage: 1d6 as swarm Shock 1d6 per 50 individuals
Special Attacks: Shock – Save vs stun
Special Defenses: +2 save vs fire
Magic Resistance: See description
Lair Probability: 90%
Intelligence: Animal / Hive
Alignment: Neutral
Level/XP: variable

Shock spiders are small brown spiders that appear normal in every way. A single individual is no more than ¾ - 1" long including legs. Shock spiders are fond of moist damp places, as they require great amounts of moisture to create the conductive glue that they weave into their webs. The webs are very resistant to flames, and will only burn by means of magical or high intensity fire. Shock spiders live in large colonies and operate in a hive mind similar to ants or bees in their use and search of resources.

Each individual can issue a small electrical shock from their abdomen that they use to communicate or when they sense a creature caught in the webs. They will hold the full shock effect until the hive mind decides it is the appropriate time to disable victims. When this signal goes out all spiders in the colony will emit their shock in unison through the webs amplifying the effect with each individual that discharges their jolt through the webbing.

Spiders each have their own assignment within the hive. Typical assignments are Guardians, breeders, hunter/ gatherers (mostly seeking water), queen maidens (groom and feed the queen), scouts.

Guardian spiders of the hive typically hide away near the edge of their webs minding a single gossamer line until they have detected prey. They first signal the hive that a victim is present, then they signal the time, type and method of attack. When a colony captures large prey, they will attempt to encase it in a cocoon in order to procreate, then lay eggs within the flesh of the victim while slowly feeding off the remains. If a hive has multiple large prey, they will choose one to host the young and others as a protein source.

Operating as a hive mind makes typical hand to hand combat with shock spiders difficult. The swarm will split and dodge, or cover a victim with instantaneous commands being delivered to all individuals instantly. When a "bite" command runs through the swarm, hundreds of little fangs go to work all at once.

The best attacks against a swarm of shock spiders are area affect spells. Electrical attacks automatically do ¼ damage, save for 0 damage. The hive receives a +2 to save vs flame based attacks since most individuals have abdomens laden with liquid for glue production.

Encounter: "Shock Spiders"

by Lloyd Metcalf

The following encounter adds some "seasoning" to the treasure and descriptions. By personalizing the treasure of the items, adventurers that typically encounter this challenge often don't even "loot the bodies." When play-tested some players of the encounter even went so far as to remove the bodies, give them an honored burial, and seek out answers to the weapon against the orcs. Then they were on to find the families of the fallen! THAT is the immersion we all hope for.

This long underground passage is silent and dark. Small pools of stagnant water are frequent among the slippery green floor stones. The length of the passage is crisscrossed by thousands of ghostly spider silk threads moist with small glistening globes of dew lining each strand. At the far end of your light you can see what appears to be a larger, proper web near the ceiling with small insects entombed in various places.

You can easily pass through the light gossamer strands of spider silk along the passage, however the strands are unusually sticky and seem to cling to everything that touches them.

Torches and comparable light sources plainly reveal the web presence at a distance of 15 ft. The spider webs should appear as nothing more than regular ghostly thin spider webs that shift in air currents. Shock spiders will attempt to remain unseen and hidden from torch light if at all possible.

The webs are as easily broken as any other spider silk and are sticky to the touch, clinging to armor, clothes and skin. The small globules of dew are the natural glue created by the shock spiders. The glue causes numerous webs to cling to any creature passing through the hallway grounding their conductivity between the main web and the wet floor.

Any spiders appearing are nondescript, and will appear harmless. The hive will hold their shock attacks until as many creatures as possible are connected and grounded to the main web. The hive will bite to subdue victims, but prefers to incapacitate, then wrap victims in silk until suffocated. The speed with which the spiders accomplish this task with larger prey depends on the number of spiders present in the hive. This process can take as much as an hour for a small hive of one hundred spiders, or just a few minutes for a thousand-spider hive.

Once any member of the party travels 15 feet down the passage they see the following:

Now that you have pressed down the passage and pushed through the sticky strands you see three figures in various states of skeletal decay. Two are in full armor, weapons dropped at their sides as they lean against the wall, their rotted faces twisted in unnatural angles. One that was apparently wearing leather armor at some time, has been dismembered and what little flesh remains, is peppered with holes. It looks as if all the dead party's equipment is present, almost as if they sat to rest and never got back up.

The three corpses here were heroes on a quest who fell victim to the shock spider's trap. A thief, that has been dismembered, has little left to her possessions. 20 gold, and a fine dagger remain hidden in the corner, with an ornate belt buckle that is fashioned into an ivy leaf. One was a human warrior; he wears platemail armor, a good solid helmet, and a fine longsword that has now just begun to rust. In his pack, his rations are completely spoiled, but he carries 20 gold coins from the western lands, fifty feet of very fine silk rope, and a small quill with ink. In his vest pocket (beneath his armor) is a letter to his beloved:

Majoram,

Travel has been difficult these days with the snow, freezing rain, and damnable orcs in the forest. I miss you and the children and yearn for the songs we sing by the fire. We hope to be able to be on the return journey within a fortnight, and possibly with the Light of Jasindor that the orcs hate so much. Our village will once again be safe.

We have made camp in the small set of tunnels for the night, some reprieve but only a little warmth.

My love to you, and the children.

~Jacamo

The other was a priest of the God of wanderers and travelers. It is rumored that such clerics are good fortune and know the roads by heart. This one was not bearing good fortune this day. He clutches his holy symbol to his chest. His armor is damaged by axe marks, one of his pauldrons is mangled. It looks like he had a very grievous wound to his shoulder and clavicle. A very fine looking flail (+1) that has no dust gathered around it looks as if it were just laid down at his side a moment ago. His pack contains a safebox and what looks like the party gold of 150 gp.

THE END

Lloyd Metcalf began gaming in the early eighties when he and his friends all pitched in for the Basic Red box D&D. From then on, he was always dreaming of other worlds, heroes and spells. Now as an adult, he can hardly believe it is his work to create, illustrate, and produce RPG supplements. It has been just over 30 years of immersion into the game and in the last few, he has been humbled and honored to have worked with many of the people who created and illustrated the game that changed his life.

Building Better Encounters: Monstrous Symbiosis and Environmental Factors

by Bill Olmesdahl

It's a common problem in role playing campaigns: there's such a wealth of foes in the world to vex the PCs that the DM gets caught in a monstrous arms race. Each week he throws larger and meaner monsters at the players, trying to offer them something new. But you needn't rely on your bigger and bigger threats. You can give your players the challenge of a lifetime by using multiple monsters in an encounter that compliments the other's abilities; or by setting the encounter in a non-standard environment.

Monstrous Symbiosis

Let's start with multiple monster encounters. One of the most powerful tools in your DM arsenal is the ability to put enemies together in intelligent ways, using one monster to cover another monster's weaknesses, or perhaps doing more than just covering it. There are combinations of creatures that can help make a bland random encounter into something that challenges your players and pushes them to their limits. It just requires a crafty game master with a twisted mind.

Let's start small. Take the humble kobold for instance. What has the kobold got going for it? Not a whole lot at first glance. They use tools. They are intelligent and social creatures, that are also noted for their cunning. How can we use that? Let's try to pair them with creatures without any of those. We'll build an encounter pairing them with oozes and slimes.

Since kobolds are cunning (to me cunning is a code word which means "play me like a PC"), we decide to design an encounter with a tribe who have learned to handle and cultivate oozes and slimes. They raise them, use them in traps, even bottle them for use as grenade-like missile weapons. Suddenly the laughingstocks of the dungeon are incredibly dangerous. They are giving the oozes what they were always missing, a dangerous intellect and purpose.

This gets even more effective if you start with a creature with more interesting powers. The only thing the kobolds bring to the table is the opposable thumb and a level of native cunning. Imagine what you can do if you start with a monster that has even more going for it.

Let's take something everyone should be familiar with; our friend the troll. Trolls are already great monsters because they are so difficult to kill. You need to bring fire or acid to bear on them or their regeneration will just keep them coming back for more. A great combination for the troll would be to team them up with patches of brown mold, which absorbs heat/fire, causing the mold to double in size. The symbiosis here isn't perfect though. Like the previous example with the kobolds, the trolls would have to be careful, lest the mold hurt them as well. A better combination would be teaming the brown mold with ice trolls, who are entirely immune to cold, but vulnerable to fire. The mold fixes both of those problems. Imagine your player's surprise when they run into a group of Ice Trolls wearing armor covered in brown mold, or even Frost Giants covered in Brown Mold laughing off fireballs and other fire-based attacks.

That trick works with almost any combination of creatures where one has a vulnerability to an energy type or sort of attack and the other creature has an ability to absorb that attack. But what about putting together a creature that gains an advantage by being hit with a certain attack with another creature that has that attack? It can get nasty very quickly. Imagine a black dragon needs a guardian for its lair. If the dragon were especially clever and evil (the very definition of black dragon), the dragon would build a clay golem. The golem need never sleep, so could guard the dragon's lair tirelessly, allowing the dragon to get on with all of its important dragon business, like sleeping, terrorizing villages and eating beautiful women. And the golem is immune to acid damage, actually healing 1 point for every 3 it would otherwise deal. When fighting with a party of adventurers, the dragon doesn't have to worry about accidentally harming the golem when it unleashes its breath on the invaders.

The key is to examine the special powers and properties of the various monster types. Look at Undead, for example. In *D&D* 3.5, creatures with the Undead subtype are immune to any effect requiring a Fortitude save. That means you can team anything Undead with any monster that has an attack or ability requiring a Fort save without fear that they will harm each other. How about a vampire and his medusa bride? The vampire is immune to the gaze weapon of the medusa, but the players aren't! How much fun would it be to fight a vampire while blindfolded or trying to employ the old mirror trick? Or what do you think about a Lich with a Gorgon as a mount? The lich would be able to ignore the Gorgon's breath weapon, but not so anyone fighting the lich. The possibilities are endless.

When looking at pairing monsters, be sure to pay special attention to these types: Construct; Dragon; Elemental; Ooze; Plant; Undead; and Vermin. These all have immunity to one or more forms of attacks.

Environmental Factors

The second thing we're going to look at is environmental factors. You can make almost any encounter extra challenging by setting it in a hostile or unusual environment. What makes an environment hostile or unusual? Any changes to one or more of the following: temperature; atmosphere; gravity; or radical change to the encounter surface. We'll take them one at a time and show you what I mean.

Temperature: This would be an extreme of either heat or cold. Neither extreme is easy for the traditional player characters to deal with unless they have prepared in advance. Either can deal ongoing lethal damage to an unprepared player.

Atmosphere: By this I mean the makeup of the air in the encounter setting. This can range from the effects of smoke or some other lethal gas in the air, to a location without air at all.

You needn't rely on your bigger and bigger threats. You can give your players the challenge of a lifetime by using multiple monsters in an encounter that compliments the other's abilities; or by setting the encounter in a non-standard environment.

Gravity: Both heavier and lighter than usual gravity can make an encounter more interesting. Heavy gravity increases falling damage and makes it much harder to perform feats associated with movement, like Jump, Climb, or Tumble. Light gravity has the opposite effect, but makes movements somewhat ungainly, especially to the neophyte. Perhaps the worst change would be an area with no gravity, where creatures merely float unless able to somehow move.

Encounter Terrain: Sand; ice; lava; and swamp are all examples of nonstandard terrain that can add interest to an otherwise standard combat.

Let's go through a short encounter idea for each Environmental Factor.

Temperature: It might seem like a great idea to put an encounter with an efreeti in an area of extreme heat. Yes, it makes sense from a thematic point of view, but if the players are able to deal with the heat, they are going to be protected from most of the efreeti's fire-base abilities.

A better (nastier) idea is to use a remorhaz: a monster native to areas of extreme cold that has a fire-based attack. Your party is likely to have used the bulk of their protection spells dealing with the cold environment, leaving them vulnerable to the creature's Heat attack.

Since the remorhaz is somewhat unique, being a cold environment monster with a fire attack, you can achieve the same effect with spells and backstory. Perhaps your extreme heat encounter could be set on the Elemental Plane of Fire where the party encounters a group of dao (genies of the Elemental Plane of Earth) traveling the Plane of Fire. They are protected from its effects, as are the PCs, but one *dispel magic* and the group can have quite a problem on their hands.

Atmosphere: Let's go with the most extreme case of bad atmosphere; underwater. For air breathing surface dwellers like you and I, it's about as bad as it gets. The heroes won't be able to breath, so they need magical assistance or are forced to hold their breath, which is challenging on its own. They will have difficulty wielding most of their weapons in this environment. The cold temperature and lack of light could be added problems they have to face. Your PCs have to solve all these problems before they even think about the monster you have in store for them.

This would be a great time to dust off one of the myriad underwater creatures you've always wanted to run (ixitxachitl anyone?) or even something that doesn't require air. You can put undead or a construct in an underwater encounter and put them in a whole new light. A dozen skeletons in a sunken tomb are a far more deadly challenge than those same creatures on the land.

Gravity: In encounters where gravity is changed, these would probably take place in your mad magician's lair or on another plane of existence. In a low or no gravity encounter, it's going to be difficult to move without magical assistance such as flight. Creatures native to the area would not have this problem and could move as usual, while the PCs would have to make skill checks to perform any difficult flying maneuvers.

The Ethereal Plane has no gravity, so would be appropriate for this sort of encounter.

For a heavy gravity encounter, how about fire giants in an area where gravity is doubled? You rule the area gives all creatures within a -10 on their Strength and Dexterity scores. This brings the most powerful fighter in the group down to human levels, and may force the weaker, less fit members of the party to use magic just to be able to walk without assistance. The giants, while

somewhat weaker, still have Strength scores in the middle 20s, so aren't nearly so negatively affected.

Encounter Terrain: Check your game system for the effects of terrain. You'll find there are almost always rules there to make encounters in special terrains more challenging. In *Dungeons & Dragons* rules exist for almost any special terrain you can think of. In this case, let's go with ice. A group of goblins have adapted to their environment and use snowshoes, skates, and skis in their raids. During their combat with the PCs, they are able to ignore the extra movement costs on ice, as well as the Balance check required to run or charge across the ice sheet. This may not sound like much of an advantage, but the first time a charging dwarf finds himself sliding prone towards a group of goblin warriors, you'll change your mind.

That's all there is to it. If you build your encounters with a thought to teaming monsters with complimentary special abilities and setting them in interesting environments, you can challenge your players with the simplest monster. The long-term effect is you keep your players on their toes and always have them guessing. The sure won't laugh at those kobolds they ran into again.

Encounter: "The Swamp of Doom"

By Bill Olmesdahl

This encounter is very simple and combines both a teaming of monsters and an interesting terrain to make for a brutal encounter for the PCs. The stats are presented in 3.5 edition format for the d20 system.

For whatever reason, the PCs are traveling through the swamp. This swamp is made up of primarily shallow and deep bog, in addition to patches of quicksand and other terrain-based hazards. A path of sort exists, winding its way through the swamp while avoiding as much of the deep bog and hazards as possible.

The PCs attract the attention of a will-o'-wisp. This particular will-o'-wisp uses a shambling mound that also lairs in the swamp as his main weapon. He prefers to wait until night and the party is camping on one of the small strips of dry land. Then the wisp uses his electrical attack to "charge up" the shambling mound, giving it an extra 1d4 points of CON per attack (these go away at the rate of 1 per hour). In a few minutes, the

wisp can cause the shambling mound to go from a 17 Constitution to 50, 60, or even higher.

The two creatures coordinate with the wisp trying to lure PCs off into the swamp with its ghostly shrieks. If the party splits, the wisp concentrates on those in the bog while the shambling mound moves to attack those left on dry ground. If the party doesn't split, the wisp will concentrate on attacking spell casters, leaving the mound to work on the fighters and rogues.

Terrain Effects:

Bogs: If a square is part of a shallow bog, it has deep mud or standing water of about 1 foot in depth. It costs 2 squares of movement to move into a square with a shallow bog, and the DC of Tumble checks in such a square increases by 2.

A square that is part of a deep bog has roughly 4 feet of standing water. It costs Medium or larger creatures 4 squares of movement to move into a square with a deep bog, or characters can swim if they wish. Small or smaller creatures must swim to move through a deep bog. Tumbling is impossible in a deep bog.

The water in a deep bog provides cover for Medium or larger creatures. Smaller creatures gain improved cover (+8 bonus to AC, +4 bonus on Reflex saves). Medium or larger creatures can crouch as a move action to gain this improved cover. Creatures with this improved cover take a –10 penalty on attacks against creatures that aren't underwater.

Deep bog squares are usually clustered together and surrounded by an irregular ring of shallow bog squares.

Both shallow and deep bogs increase the DC of Move Silently checks by 2.

Undergrowth: The bushes, rushes, and other tall grasses in marshes function as undergrowth does in a forest (see above). A square that is part of a bog does not also have undergrowth.

Quicksand: Patches of quicksand present a deceptively solid appearance (appearing as undergrowth or open land) that may trap careless characters. A character approaching a patch of quicksand at a normal pace is entitled to a DC 8 Survival check to spot the danger before stepping in, but charging or running characters don't have a chance to detect a hidden bog before blundering in. A typical patch of quicksand is 20 feet in diameter; the momentum of a charging or running character carries him or her 1d2×5 feet into the quicksand.

Characters in quicksand must make a DC 10 Swim check every round to simply tread water in place, or a DC 15 Swim check to move 5 feet in whatever direction is desired. If a trapped character fails this check by 5 or more, he sinks below the surface and begins to drown whenever he can no longer hold his breath (see the Swim skill description).

Characters below the surface of a bog may swim back to the surface with a successful Swim check (DC 15, +1 per consecutive round of being under the surface).

Pulling out a character trapped in quicksand can be difficult. A rescuer needs a branch, spear haft, rope, or similar tool that enables him to reach the victim with one end of it. Then he must make a DC 15 Strength check to successfully pull the victim, and the victim must make a DC 10 Strength check to hold onto the branch, pole, or rope. If the victim fails to hold on, he must make a DC 15 Swim check immediately to stay above the surface. If both checks succeed, the victim is pulled 5 feet closer to safety.

Hedgerows: Common in moors, hedgerows are tangles of stones, soil, and thorny bushes. Narrow hedgerows function as low walls, and it takes 15 feet of movement to cross them. Wide hedgerows are more than 5 feet tall and take up entire squares. They provide total cover, just as a wall does. It takes 4 squares of movement to move through a square with a wide hedgerow; creatures that succeed on a DC 10 Climb check need only 2 squares of movement to move through the square.

Other Marsh Terrain Elements: Some marshes, particularly swamps, have trees just as forests do, usually clustered in small stands. Paths lead across many marshes, winding to avoid bog areas. As in forests, paths allow normal movement and don't provide the concealment that undergrowth does.

Stealth and Detection in a Marsh

In a moor, the maximum distance at which a Spot check for detecting the nearby presence of others can succeed is 6d6×10 feet. In a swamp, this distance is 2d8×10 feet.

Undergrowth and deep bogs provide plentiful concealment, so it's easy to hide in a marsh.

A marsh imposes no penalties on Listen checks, and using the Move Silently skill is more difficult in both undergrowth and bogs.

Will-O'-Wisp

Size/Type: Small Aberration (Air)
Hit Dice: 9d8 (40 hp)
Initiative: +13
Speed: Fly 50 ft. (perfect) (10 squares)
Armor Class: 29 (+1 size, +9 Dex, +9 deflection), touch 29, flat-footed 20
Base Attack/Grapple: +6/-3
Attack: Shock +16 melee touch (2d8 electricity)
Full Attack: Shock +16 melee touch (2d8 electricity)
Space/Reach: 5 ft./5 ft.
Special Qualities: Darkvision 60 ft., immunity to magic, natural invisibility
Saves: Fort +3, Ref +12, Will +9
Abilities: Str 1, Dex 29, Con 10, Int 15, Wis 16, Cha 12
Skills: Bluff +13, Diplomacy +3, Disguise +1 (+3 acting), Intimidate +3, Listen +17, Search +14, Spot +17, Survival +3 (+5 following tracks)
Feats: Alertness, Blind-Fight, Dodge, Improved Initiative, Weapon Finesse
Environment: Temperate marshes
Organization: Solitary, pair, or string (3-4)
Challenge Rating: 6
Treasure: 1/10 coins; 50% goods; 50% items
Alignment: Usually chaotic evil
Advancement: 10-18 HD (Small)
Level Adjustment: —

Will-o'-wisps can be yellow, white, green, or blue. They are easily mistaken for lanterns, especially in the foggy marshes and swamps where they reside. A will-o'-wisp's body is a globe of spongy material about 1 foot across and weighing about 3 pounds, and its glowing body sheds as much light as a torch.

Will-o'-wisps speak Common and Auran. They have no vocal apparatus but can vibrate to create a voice with a ghostly sound.

Combat
Will-o'-wisps usually avoid combat. They prefer to confuse and bewilder adventurers, luring them into morasses or other hazardous places. When they are forced to fight, they loose small electrical shocks, which act as melee touch attacks.

Immunity to Magic (Ex)
A will-o'-wisp is immune to most spells or spell-like abilities that allow spell resistance, except magic missile and maze.

Natural Invisibility (Ex)
A startled or frightened will-o'-wisp can extinguish its glow, effectively becoming invisible as the spell.

Shambling Mound

Size/Type: Large Plant
Hit Dice: 8d8+24 (60 hp)
Initiative: +0
Speed: 20 ft. (4 squares), swim 20 ft.
Armor Class: 20 (-1 size, +11 natural), touch 9, flat-footed 20
Base Attack/Grapple: +6/+15
Attack: Slam +11 melee (2d6+5)
Full Attack: 2 slams +11 melee (2d6+5)
Space/Reach: 10 ft./10 ft.
Special Attacks: Improved grab, constrict 2d6+7
Special Qualities: Darkvision 60 ft., immunity to electricity, low-light vision, plant traits, resistance to fire 10
Saves: Fort +9, Ref +2, Will +4
Abilities: Str 21, Dex 10, Con 17, Int 7, Wis 10, Cha 9
Skills: Hide +3*, Listen +8, Move Silently +8
Feats: Iron Will, Power Attack, Weapon Focus (slam)
Environment: Temperate marshes
Organization: Solitary
Challenge Rating: 6
Treasure: 1/10th coins; 50% goods; 50% items
Alignment: Usually neutral
Advancement: 9-12 HD (Large); 13-24 HD (Huge)
Level Adjustment: +6
Shambling mounds, also called shamblers, appear to be heaps of rotting vegetation. They are actually intelligent, carnivorous plants.

A shambler's brain and sensory organs are located in its upper body.

A shambler's body has an 8-foot girth and is about 6 feet tall when the creature stands erect. It weighs about 3,800 pounds.

Combat
A shambling mound batters or constricts its opponents with two huge, armlike appendages.

Improved Grab (Ex)
To use this ability, a shambler must hit with both slam attacks. It can then attempt to start a grapple as a free action without provoking an attack of opportunity. If it wins the grapple check, it establishes a hold and can constrict.

Constrict (Ex)
A shambler deals 2d6+7 points of damage with a successful grapple check.

Immunity to Electricity (Ex)
Shamblers take no damage from electricity. Instead, any electricity attack used against a shambler temporarily grants it 1d4 points of Constitution. The shambler loses these points at the rate of 1 per hour.

Skills
Shamblers have a +4 racial bonus on Hide, Listen, and Move Silently checks. *They have a +12 racial bonus on Hide checks when in a swampy or forested area.

Treasure can be found on a corpse over which the Shambling Mound has been growing over to encompass. The body contains 492 silver coins in a pouch, as well as a potion of *magic fang* and an arcane scroll with *erase*, *sleep*, and *web* at level 3.

THE END

Bill has been a DM and player for almost 40 years. He started writing for West End Games in the 90's on *Star Wars*, *Torg*, and *Paranoia* before moving to TSR and working on *Forgotten Realms*, *Dark Sun*, *Spellfire* and *Dragon Dice*. Bill continues to play and run *D&D* and *Pathfinder* every weekend in various online campaigns.

ATMOSFEAR

by Steve Peek

For a moment, become a child again.

It is night. You're in bed. The room is dark. You hear a noise on the other side of the room, where the closet is. There's dim light allows you to see the door is cracked open – just enough for fingers to reach through or an eye pressed close to see your bed.

Your heart beats faster. You tell yourself you forgot to close the closet door all the way, there is no reason to be afraid, yet you are. You are very afraid. You stare at the slightly cracked open door.You listen intently for any sound. There is just enough light in the room for you to make out the bulk shapes of furniture and closed curtains. There is a flashlight in the dresser's bottom drawer but that is across the room – all the way across the room. It might as well be inside a dragon's throat. Your mouth is dry, your eyes are wide, taking in everything that can be seen in the dreary, dangerous cave that is your room.Your eyes dart back to the door. It has opened a little more.

Or has it?

Your logical mind knows it hasn't changed but your racing heart knows the truth: it has opened more and something is on the other side – watching . . . waiting.

There's another noise, a short gurgling noise – from beneath the bed.

Your mom says it's an old house, the pipes are creaky, the heater cracks and pops, but those things aren't under your bed.

Your heart infects your brain with the fear disease and within minutes the blanket covers your head as you wait for the beast's teeth puncturing your flesh. If you are young enough and the 'truth' of the grownups has yet to banish all monsters, you finally give in and scream for your dad. Your scream is loud and terrified. And before your dad arrives, the door closes. What was under the bed vanishes and you are sick with fear of a different kind – your parents will think you are a scaredy-cat.

Have you ever seen the film, *The Haunting of Hill House*? Many consider it to be a horror classic. In it, people spend the night in an old haunted mansion. The first time I watched the movie fear gripped me and I knew nightmares awaited me when I slept. A wonderful aspect of the movie is the way it scares the life out of you with noises, and the motions of objects. With walls that appear to breathe and bedroom door locks that rattle and press inward from the hall outside. Once the scary stuff started it reminded me of a ride through a haunted house. The way they shot the film instilled atmosphere. It gripped and held me, breathless, wanting whatever it was in the hall, or basement, or attic, or closet to please stop and go away.

The movie's success is based on that atmosphere. It never showed any kind of apparition or monster. It scared me more without letting me see the creature because my mind created a beast far more frightening than anything Hollywood could conjure.

Stephen King, one of the masters of horror, has published books about writing horror and reveals how he scares readers. If you are a game-master, or an author who loves to scare people, read them. The advice works well with characters or readers.

King uses the analogy of the closed door many times because it is a simple example to provide a real explanation for the source of primordial fear – the unknown.

Role playing is a perfect venue to employ the technique of the unknown.

Think about it. Your characters are many times in the confines of a dungeon or castle, places with plenty of closed doors. Even outside they venture through deep woods and pitch black caverns. Anything that prevents characters from seeing what's next works as your door – a door you want to keep closed as long as possible.

Which is a better introduction to characters?

GM: Moving along the stone corridor you begin to see light. As you near you can make out there is a heavy wooden door with a torch on either side. You begin to smell something in the air.

CHARACTER: What does it smell like?

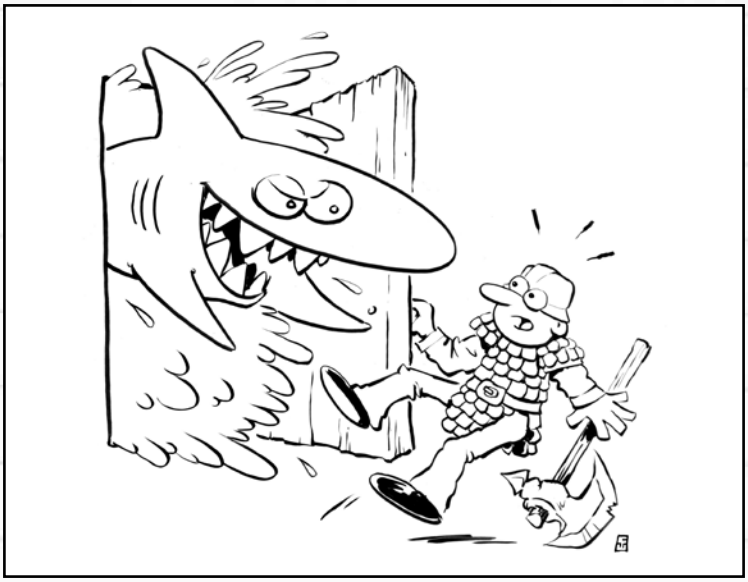
GM: It is herbs from the torches.

CHARACTER: I put my ear to the door to listen for something behind it.

GM: It sounds like something moving.

CHARACTER: I cast a spell to see what's in the room.

GM: Your spell worked but you don't see anything.



GM: You hear a movement on the other side of the door.

CHARACTER: We try to open the door.

GM: It opens inward easily. Near the center of the room is the scariest, meanest dragon you have ever seen.

OR

GM: The corridor is very dark. Your torches seem to be dimmed. Further along you see a light. What do you do?

CHARACTER: We send a scout closer.

GM: As the scout character nears he can make out the light is from two torches mounted to the right wall. He can make out a faint, odor containing an unpleasant sweetness. As you are deciding what to do, there is a barely audible scratching coming from the wall on your right.

CHARACTER: I signal with my torch and the group comes to me. We move toward the torches.

GM: The smell strengthens with every step. It becomes slightly nauseating. The torches on the wall are on either side of a large, heavy wooden door.

CHARACTER: I cast a seeing spell to see what is behind the door.

GM: The spell is cast. You see yourself and the group from the perspective of a foot above the door.

CHARACTER: I touch the door then place my ear to hear what is in the room on the other side.

GM: You hear something. Very muted by the door's thickness, it might be something heavy and soft dragging along the floor. You pick up a new smell coming from around the door. It mostly camouflaged by the sweet burning torches but still, it is there, faint but cloying. It the sickening odor of decay.

CHARACTER: We all listen.

GM: One character hears soft, unlabored breathing coming from the other side. Then everyone hears amnanimal wail in fear and pain. Then silence.

CHARACTER: I raise the latch and push gently on the door. Just enough to peek through the crack.

GM: It opens easily. The cloying smell of old death hits you like warm putrid air rushing from the room. You see the room is dark. The only light is that of your torches casting a yellow, living ray through the crack and onto the floor.

CHARACTER: I open the door another foot, extend my torch into the room and look inside the room.

GM: The odor has become oppressive. You struggle not to vomit. You see the room generates its own darkness. There is black mold on the ceiling walls and floor. There are places in the mold on the floor where things have been dragged. In the center of the room you see what looks like an animal's carcass. Around the body the floor appears to be wet. From a dark corner to your right you hear soft, unlabored breathing.

If you are young enough and the 'truth' of the grownups has yet to banish all monsters, you finally give in and scream

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The above is using fear of the unknown and a building tension by delay and innuendo. And just when the tension is ready to explode, it doesn't. New tension is piled on the existing unknown. Just when the characters realize whatever was in the room is gone, then you hit them with the cheap thrill.

The most common cheap thrill is surprise. They are often used in horror films and deliver both comic relief and set up the "in-your-face instant, out of nowhere" appearance of the big masked man with the wicked looking knife. This surprise cheap thrill is almost in every horror movie ever made.

A young couple are spending the early evening kissing on the porch steps in the moon light. The viewer knows the killer is very close to their location. They are wrapped up in burning desire and don't hear the twig snap off camera. Suddenly a cat screams and jumps from the bushes to sit beside them.

The red-flag cheap thrill is very similar but with a little more build. You've seen this type of fear on screen all your life. The heroine is walking in the woods. She doesn't know the big-bad slasher dude with the horribly deformed face is hiding in the woods. The POV shifts to the slasher watching her, then back to her strolling through the woods. She hears something and stops to listen. Nearby bushes move a little. Then they move a little more. She is focused on the brush. Then a cute baby raccoon wonders onto the path and she breathes a sigh of relief.

Of course the next time she may or may not receive a warning before the ugly dude is towering in front of her bringing down a huge edged weapon.

Another type of fear is to establish a pattern. It is similar to the red-flag fear but requires more time and thought on the part of the creator.

A perfect example of an established pattern is used in the movie *Jaws*. It worked so beautifully that audiences seeing the film for the first time screamed, then nearly leapt out of their seats when the trap sprung.

Jaws begins with music. A slow, deep worrisome rhythm that builds tension. No shark, just this repetitive music. This begins the pattern: first the music, then the shark. It is evilly and quickly effective pavlovian training for the audience.

The girl and boy leave the campfire and music for a swim. Girl gets naked and swims out in the ocean. Boy gets dizzy taking off his clothes and passes out. Girl is enjoying her swim. The music begins. The POV switches to the shark and shows the girls lower body moving in the sea. The music builds as the shark nears.

POV from the surface. The girl's head and shoulders are visible. Something nibbles her, fear flashes across her face. A pause then something violently jerks her across the water. Somehow as the creature thrashes her left and right like a rag doll, she manages to grab and hang on to a buoy. She is free for the instant. The music returns and she is jerked under water and her screams are silenced instantly.

Next we have the first beach scene. The lady's son is on a yellow raft sharing the ocean with other bathers. POV switches to shark seeing the bottom of the raft and the boy's legs and arms splashing. The shark closes on the prey.

The music stops. The monster fish's tooth-filled mouth encompasses the boy and the raft then submerges beneath a spout of blood.

The next scene show two men on a small pier. They are armed with a roast, a chain, a large hook

and an inner tube. The tide takes the bait out and before too long something big begins to nibble on the roast. Then it takes it and makes a run out to sea. Its mass rips the small pier from the shore. One of the men is riding part of the pier being dragged by the creature.

The music begins. The dock stops moving and turns as the creature circles at the end of the chain. The man's partner on land tells his friend to swim, don't look back.

The music builds. The floating pier platform is moving back toward the swimming man.

The swimmer is very close. His friend's hand is extended to help pull him to safety.

The music climaxes, the man's foot finds purchase and he is on dry land.

The music stops immediately and the pier platform washes against the shore.

There are too many examples of this pattern to include here. Besides written description of them doesn't do the movie justice.

There are two more examples of the pattern in *Jaws* that need mention because they alter the pattern to increase the fear factor.

Hooper (the university marine biologist) and the chief of police go out at night to try and find the shark. They run across a wrecked boat. Hooper wetsuits up and swims to the boat.

The music begins. He sees the hole in the boat created by the shark's enormous mouth.

The music builds.

A shark tooth is embedded in the hull. He works it loose with the tip of a knife and places it in the beam of his flashlight to examine it.

The music reaches a crescendo. Something moves in the boat. Hooper aims his light toward the hole in the hull and the boat owner's head rolls out.

This scene used the music to indicate the shark was about to attack. When the head rolled out viewers were both relieved and frightened.

The final example, the piece de resistance, occurs when the captain of the fishing boat, Quint, Hooper and the chief are far from land fishing for the shark. Quint lost the beast once when Jaws bit through the fishing line. Now the chief is stationed in the port rear aft chumming the water, an unpleasant duty. He fills his ladle with pieces of fish and blood from his bucket, extends his arm out past the boat and dumps the chum, adding to blood trailing the boat.

At that moment the shark's head rises from the sea trying to get a taste of the chief. This time there is no music setting the scene, no warning at all, only this terrifyingly huge mouth full of large saw-like teeth and that horrible uncaring eye.

The director knew what would happen. As one, the audience screamed, jumped, rose or leaned forward in their chairs. It was the scariest scene in the film. When the audience reaction died down a little, the chief delivered his most famous line, "We're going to need a bigger boat."

Stephen King, in my mind, is the greatest master of building tension. Most of the techniques used in my book, *Long Claws*, I learned from reading. There are many writers who know how to create "atmosfear." As you read novels that manage to build tension and sometimes make you sleep with the lights on, reread them to see and understand what the author did to elicit your fear.

In confidence crimes there are short cons and long cons. Use them equally. When you are good enough you may be able to equal the techniques used in Jaws which create the short con which becomes the pattern for the long con. But be careful, don't become too expert. You don't want your group of adventurers to really die.

Encounter: "Dark and Deep"

by Steve Peek

The expedition entered day three of traversing the Forest of Dead Friends. The small path forced them to proceed single file.

Along the path the trees become larger, deciduous hardwoods. Soon the trees are so large four people cannot join hands and encompass one. Besides being massively tall, their foliage completely shades the forest floor and very few plants grow there. It is mostly a carpet of decomposing leaves with occasional huge branches that have fallen from above.

The forest darkens, an unfelt wind blows in the treetops. The air fills with creaking tree trunks. Rain begins to fall in unusual patterns as it trickles from leaves and branches. The drops fill the air with plopping noises.

There are two fist-sized mushrooms growing near a huge fallen, rotting branch. They look plump and delicious. When no one goes to investigate the mushrooms begin to move – toward the group.

The group continues to hear continuous collections of water falling in an eerie cadence from the leaves high above.

Plip-plop.

Plip … plip-plop.

Plop, plip-plip.

As they close, what first appeared as spotted camouflage becomes a distinct pattern of small glistening black dots – resembling eyes.

Plip-plop.

The 'mushrooms' submerge beneath the carpet of decaying leaves.

The character nearest the mushroom's original location senses something under the leaves moving around his feet. When he looks down he sees a mole-like trail stopping at his feet.

Before he reacts, a dozen or so creamy-colored tendrils rise from the leaves. As each squirming, seeking tendril touches his boots it gains purchase and holds fast. Wisps of foul smelling smoke come from every place the tendrils lock onto the boots.

Within seconds, the tendrils thicken and lengthen, expanding their control of the boots and then their victim's legs. The smoke thickens. The traveler, whose legs are infested with a swelling fungus, screams as the mushroom's digestive acids decompose leather, cloth and flesh at an alarming rate.

The tendrils have combined into a single large fungus growing into the poor fellow's crotch. Soon everything below the waste smokes.

The other characters react. They use their knives and swords to cut the thickening fungal tissue away from their comrade's clothing and flesh. Smoldering pieces of mushroom, looking like pallid meat, attach themselves to the weapons' blades but have no hold and are quickly slung away.

The group helps their fellow traveler lie back on the damp cushion of dead and decaying leaves. They examine his injuries. Chemical-like burns blister and welt from waste to knees. Below the knees damage is more severe. Streaks of blackened flesh reek of burnt pork and indicate the severity of the attack.

The best healer in the group tries his best to restore their friend. If they fail, they will all have to turn back or leave the wounded one to the elements of the strange forest.

The clouds cast their great shadow until the lack of sun or moon makes the forest too dark to travel. The group creates a fire on either side of the trail and rest between the dancing, red and yellow flames that cast pale patterns on the travelers. As they drift into slumber a flaming branch in one of the fires makes noises; pop-crackle-pop-snap.

No one noticed the mole-like trail that catches up to them and pushes two stemmed eye-pods out of the ground cover.

Morning is announced softly as the unseen, brooding clouds above the leafy canopy a hundred feet above sway and creak.

After a not-so-tasty breakfast of dried and preserved vittles, the crew continues their journey.

No one sees the unmoving mushroom-like eyes watch them until the party disappears over a hill. It cannot follow – yet.

An hour passes and the nourishing liquid arrives; plip, plip-plop . . . plop . . . plop-plip.

The toadstool eyes submerge and the mole-like mound moves toward the hill that, for now, hides its prey.

The party follows the path through the trees. A character picks up an odor as the breeze shifts. Ahead, at the top of a rise, they see and smell oily smoke drifting toward them. They smell burned pork.

The bodies of three men lie in different stages of destruction. One charred beyond human recognition is little more than an elongated shape of spent charcoal and dying embers. Another, like the character in their own party, is burned by various degrees from the neck down with boots only burned black leather encasing the charred bones of feet and ankles. The last looks hardly burned at all but his swollen throat, grossly bulging eyes and the bluish tinted skin speak of strangulation, though his throat bears no marks of such.

Scattered about are drying chunks of the fungal tissue similar to the group's own earlier encounter. Characters check the bodies and the corpses' packs for useful items.

'Plip'. The sound is singular. A character hears it. There is a pause and then 'plop'.

A few seconds later comes another 'plop' and then another. They hear the thunder high overhead. They see the lightning backlight the thick green leaves above.

Another plip-plop followed by three more, then a dozen more and soon the windblown wet boughs brushing and the continuous dropping of thousands of streams of water creates deafening white noise and the sense of hearing is nearly useless. Characters must be close to another and yell to be understood.

In less than a minute the characters are soaked. The sounds and feel of plunging streams is maddening. Off to the right is the remains of a huge fallen, decaying trunk. Long ago it fell against a group of large granite boulders and part of it still leans against the stones' tops. It could offer shelter.

Before characters can decide what to do, the character in the most rear position looks down. His boots are captured in a sinuous, growing mass of swelling fungal tendrils. The smoking boots concede to the decaying acids and his flesh begins to burn from feet to mid-calf.

The character unleashes his sword and begins cutting into the quickly growing mass passing his knees. As he slices the foul tissue from his right leg, it seems to grow more quickly on his left. When he attends to his left leg, the fungus resumes growing on his right.

Looking from one growing mass to the other, he notices five feet ahead of him is a pair of blooming mushrooms with black dots that lean toward him.

The deafening streams of water prevented the party from hearing his initial cursing and surprise. Only when he screams does he draw his comrades' attention.

As the one closest runs toward him, drawing his sword, his foot catches on an unseen root and he crashes face down into the forest floor. Looking up and toward his screaming friend, he notices two toadstools that appear to lean toward him. He cannot rise. He cranes his neck to see his arms and legs are wrapped in the same type of tendrils incinerating his companion. His clothing provides much less protection than leather boots and it singes and smokes as his flesh heats.

With two members to save, the rest of the party proceeds quickly to begin cutting the flesh-like tissue from its victims.

The prone captured character yells, "The eyes! The eyes!" He tries to free his sword arm to take a swipe at the toadstools in the path.

The first character to be attacked screams, "The Toadstools. He means the Toadstools."

A character darts, bends and, with a single swift swipe, shears the eye-like mushrooms at ground level.

Powdery grayish-yellow mist puffs out of each then begins to settle. Some of the mist lands on the sleeve and wrist of the character who sliced the

mushroom-like eyes. There is no other apparent effect on the tendrils attacking the two party members.

In a moment, the tissue on the victims no longer grows or rejuvenates itself. Another moment and it shrinks and smokes into crusty pieces of lifeless bread-like tissue.

The character which tripped on the rising tendril is only mildly injured. Some salve and a little rest will allow him to survive with only a new respect for this dreadful place.

The character first attacked is another matter entirely. Though quick to cut away the deadly tendrils, unless a healer's power can restore muscle and flesh below the knees his only path to remaining alive will be amputation. In which case, he will be left behind as the group must reach the forest exit by tomorrow night.

The character who sliced the mushroom eyes wipes his eyes to remove the last of the falling water – with the sleeve containing the streak of yellowish spores spewed from the mushrooms' stems.

As quickly as it began, the rain slows then stops. Relieved to be rid of the deafening sounds, the party does what they can for each of the wounded. No one notices the slender, new stalks inch above the forest floor where the two mushrooms had been removed so it is not possible for them to know there are now four blossoming toadstools.

The eyes of the character who wiped his face begin to burn. His sinus cavities fill and his throat begins to swell closed. An alien allergen works quickly to constrict his throat.

The other characters must recognize the symptoms and act quickly to save him.

Once the wounded and infected are dealt with, the party continues along the pass not knowing that in the Forest of Dead Friends, tears pour from the sky every two or three hours.

Plip-plop.

DESCRIPTION OF FUNGAL CREATURE

A fungus is classified as a kingdom, Fungi, which is separate from the other eukaryotic life kingdoms of plants and animals. More closely related to animals than plants, fungi use digestive enzymes to absorb food. Growth and spores allow mobility. This creature's digestive acids burn through anything but metal, which they will corrode. The creature is essentially an octopus-like sack which raises toad-stool like eyes to see its surroundings. It feels vibrations to stalk moving prey. Its rate of growth is fast when attached to a food source or when the ground is freshly wet. If left in one place for several days, it 'tentacles' (roots) can reach forty or fifty feet in several directions. As its acid burns its prey, it enmeshes self into the prey's flesh. While its spores cause violent, often deadly allergic reaction, the creature's meat is quite tasty and nourishing unless you eat part of the sack or the eyes in which case you may find all your friends live on a yellow submarine.

THE END

Steve began designing and publishing games with Battleline Publications in 1973. Over the course of the next forty years he was involved in the design, development, production or marketing of over 400 games none of which were successful. Among those were such epics as *Men, Milfs & Marrigolds*, *Housewives and Plumber* and *Nipslip*. He continues to pester us for a chance to write, and as you can see, we let him.

The Sense of Adventure

by Jean Rabe

The best books engage all the senses, going beyond what the reader sees through a point-of-view character's eyes. An accomplished novelist makes you "feel" the setting.

The best role playing game adventures—and adventure writers—should do the same. It takes

only a little more work and a handful of lines of description, and maybe a good thesaurus on the shelf. The result yields a richer encounter—a treat for the game master to read and fun for the players to experience.

A typical monster description: The creature is ugly, slimy, and big, with five eyes and an open maw that resembles a cave mouth.

All five senses are covered here: The monster is a slime-coated grotesquerie that exudes a stench redolent of dead fish along a riverbank. The creature's growl travels up from its belly and sounds like gravel tossed in a metal bucket. Its breath is strong, reaching you across the room and feeling like a slight breeze teasing your face. But this breeze is as hot as a full-summer sun and makes your mouth go desert-dry. A foul taste settles on the back of your tongue, and though you work up some saliva, you can't rid yourself of the awful flavor.

To avoid purple prose…too much description, a writer can feed in the layers, paragraph by paragraph as the PCs explore, or as the players ask questions. A writer might imagine himself standing in the area he wants to describe. What would I see? What would I hear? And what might I notice if I take a deep breath? Touch things? Consider the following:

Sight: this is the easy one, and this text typical of what a designer would write into a scenario.

You see a room roughly a dozen feet square, lit by four green-tinged copper braziers spaced unevenly against the far wall. The rug in the center of the floor is ornate and colorful, shot through with metallic threads that gleam in the firelight. Bookcases on the left stretch to a ceiling covered with a mass of fog-gray webs. Bones are piled in a lone wooden chair on the right.

A good designer will expand it and give that otherwise boring room life. Read below, as the other four senses are added to the above description.

Hearing: Employing a touch of sound in a creative way makes the narrative more interesting and begs the characters to speculate, enter, and investigate.

As you stare into the room, you hear what sounds like someone "tsking," a soft scolding, almost a whisper. A woman's voice, perhaps; it is an unknown language with a syncopated pattern. You have to strain to hear it. The gentle susurrus comes in bursts, sometimes overlapping in two or three voices. The silence between is eerie.

It is the sound the mice make running across the tops of the books and papers on the shelf, their little claws ticking against leather spines. They have destroyed some of the books by eating the pages, and their bodies moving over the damaged pages make a shushing sound that adds to the room's quiet "conversation." The characters can discover the nature of the noise by approaching the bookcase and watching the mice scatter. Perhaps there are enchanted or cursed tomes that have defied the efforts of their tiny teeth.

Smell: This is a bonus for bards and rogues with perceptive skills. It lets them shine, noticing something that might be beyond the abilities of the burly fighters and allowing them to alert their companions to danger.

The mustiness is cloying, hinting that the books are old and that this room was damp at one time. Other scents war for your attention—the spiciness of whatever burns in the braziers, a suggestion of cinnamon and sage and something you cannot put a name to. Under that is an acridness, faint, but you can detect it, hone in on it. With it is the almost imperceptible tang of deep-rooted sweat.

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The best role playing game adventures—and adventure writers—should do the same.

Ever-burning incense fills the braziers. However, the perceptive PCs who can separate all the odors will be drawn to one brazier. Beneath the permanent coals is a dagger, the leather-wrapped hilt burnt—responsible for the acrid smell—but not destroyed because it is powerfully enchanted.

The hint of old sweat comes from the webs above, right in the center of the room. A monstrous spider, that gives off this scent, sleeps. If the PCs disturb it, the creature will fight; its treasure is scattered in the thickest webs…and perhaps it should be found because of odors, too…such as aged leather armor and rare oils and perfumes.

Touch: This is more difficult to incorporate unless a creature or conflict forces physical interaction. In those instances, the PCs can feel the ooze that coats them, the temperature change when a fiery demon appears, and the chill an icy specter brings into the room. Otherwise, the adventure author needs to build in a few sentences for when the PCs interact with objects in the room. For example:

When you step onto the rug, you feel its thick knap through the soles of your boots. Glancing down, you note that the color of the designs elicit different sensations. When you stand on the blue weave, it feels as if you are wading in a cool stream, the brown feels like gritty sand rubbing across your skin. The white is cold and makes you shiver, as if you've stepped into a snowbank. That it is enchanted is undeniable, but any other properties are a mystery.

The pages of the book are brittle and crumble against your fingertips like you've stirred cold ashes. The bindings are rough to the touch, some feeling like the skin of simple, familiar animals. Others are smooth and silky, and a few are a mix of coarse scales and knobby hide, in muted colors that at one time must have been vibrant and strange.

The bones in the chair look like they belonged to a human or perhaps an elf, but when you touch them you realize they are something else: fired clay thickly glazed the hue of eggshells. There is a potter's mark on each piece, and they are heavier than true bones. Perhaps they were intended as weapons.

Taste: This is the most difficult sense to wrap into an adventure…unless the PCs are quick to drink random vials of liquid, put the flesh of various monsters into a stew, or spend a lot of time in a tavern. A clever writer can do it, though.

The air in the room smells old, and as you breathe it in fustiness fills your mouth, so strong it lays heavy on your tongue and makes you gag. Breathable, but not pleasant. It reminds you of the last bit of stew that has congealed at the bottom of a pot—the taste is sour and unfortunately lingering. As you approach the bookcase a new flavor is added to the mix: mouse droppings so plentiful the pong makes the air seem thick, stirred with the odor of old chewed-on parchment. It makes the "stew" of a moment ago almost pleasant. The tastes of this place make your stomach churn.

I chose this topic because years ago a book editor told me he was tired of reading through slush piles, that the manuscripts just weren't good enough. He said if an author did not hit every one of his senses within the first two and a half pages of a submission, he would not read further. He would go onto the next…and the next…and the next. I decided that all my writing…games, novels, short stories…would hit all the senses. And as of this writing, I have nothing unsold sitting in my computer. And games I run do not lack for players.

Encounter: "Water's Garden Shop"

by Jean Rabe

This single one-room, multi-part encounter is lighthearted, and a break from dungeon crawls. It provides opportunities for investigation, role-playing, and combat…a little something for every adventuring class. It is suitable for any level of characters, useable with any fantasy system, and it can hit all the senses.

The water garden store is the most impressive building on the street. It is an old building that has been handsomely restored, nestled between a tailor's and a dry good business. The shop is open for business everyday, from early morning to sunset, closing only on the highest of religious holidays. Emolor Water has been invited to a family reunion, and he has hired the player

characters to look after the business while he is away. Alternately, one of the PCs could have inherited this shop or won it in a local game of chance. The shop has massive tanks filled with all manner of colorful goldfish and attractive aquatic plants. There are also tanks for frogs, lizards, newts, and more. On display are yard ornaments, lawn furniture, books, and supplies.

The game master can insert NPC and monster statistics appropriate to the PCs' level.

The shop overwhelms your senses. The colors are vivid—the orange, white, and red fish swimming in immense tanks along the walls—brilliant flashes of scales and fins that look like floating pieces of lace amid vibrant green fronds. Flowering plants in large tubs thickly scent the room and add to the riotous color. Tall spiky blooms smell of cinnamon, the flavor settling on your tongue. The air is humid and heavy from all the moisture, your skin instantly feeling sticky. The pleasant sound of water bubbling in the tanks is musical. Water's Garden Shop is a piece of the tropics nested firmly in the merchant's district.

What's in the shop?

Goldfish tanks: Fantails, bobble-eyes, comets, moors, orandas, and others. Goldfish are relatively gentle fish, and all of them seem to get along just fine.

Water plants: They are kept in magical *tanks of holding*, acting similar to bags of holding. Each contains roughly 3,000 gallons of water. PCs who remove plants from one of these tanks might accidentally discover the magical nature simply because the number of plants does not appear to decrease. One of the Red Nights lilies is actually a carnivorous plant that can walk on its fronds. It was accidentally mixed in with the last shipment. It—and perhaps others if the game master wants to present a serious challenge—will come out to feast at an inopportune time.

Amphibians: Frogs, turtles, and the like, are in the large, oval-shaped tank toward the front of the shop. Often some of the occupants find their way outside of the tank. A few of the frogs are especially fond of hopping into the water plant tanks and stretching out on the lily pads.

Buddy is the prize frog of the bunch and carries a 450 gp price tag. Buddy was the familiar of a wizard who died years ago. He is a large, heavy-bodied frog that is dusky-gray with olive-green cross bands that are barely visible. Buddy has three bumps on his snout. He is friendly and talkative and loves to discuss politics, the weather, and the taste of flies.

Seedling tanks: One container is filled with water lily starters. The other holds seedlings and bulbs of a variety of aquatic plants. When the plants get large enough to sell, they are transferred to the other tanks.

Lawn furniture: The pieces are kept clean and polished, and customers are encouraged to sit on them and see how comfortable and well-made they are.

Gazing balls and lawn ornaments: One (or more) of the stone flamingoes radiates magic (if such is detected for). The flamingo was once a minotaur who, with several of his fellows, was attacking a band of adventurers. This minotaur fell victim to a polymorph, followed by a *flesh to stone* spell (or a curse to make the mechanics easy). If the characters cast *dispel magic*, they will end up with an angry creature to fight, complete with battle axe.

Books and supplies: Nothing is in alphabetical order, nor are the supplies arranged in a way that makes sense. If there are any open spots, they set more goods out. Everything is spotless, as it is dusted daily. However, the books are faintly warped because of all the moisture in the shop.

What's in the back room?

There are tanks for sick fish and new fish, dirt for seedlings and larger plants, a table to work on. There are also three water cans, two of which are magical and act as decanters of endless water. The cabinets contain just about anything the PCs will need to operate the place: dip nets, goldfish food, fancy goldfish food, goldfish tablets to medicate sick fish, tablets to feed the aquatic plants, tablets to medicate ailing aquatic plants, canvas sacks filled with small rocks for the goldfish tanks, more dip nets, dozens of small glass bowls—these are for folks who want to buy a fish and don't bring their own containers. There are also small shovels for planting, mugs for drinking, twine, parchment, ink, quills, small chalkboard and an assortment of colored chalk, two bushels of rags (for mopping up), small pails, one large pail, three sharp knives (for making cuttings from plants), two blank ledger books.

Timed Events:

The PCs are allowed a little time to roleplay and investigate the shop before the action begins. These are in addition to the "Action Events." Sometimes the PCs will be dealing with two things at the same time.

15 minutes: The store receives a delivery of 12 garden gazing balls, 12 wicker candle holders on stakes, and a granite birdbath that the delivery men have a heck of a hard time carrying . . . it's cumbersome and heavy. The goods have been paid for.

30 minutes: One of the larger fantail goldfish in the front window-tank goes belly-up. He gasps his last. PCs in the shop get a Wisdom check chance to notice this. PCs who are near the tank (refer to their placement on the map) get a +1 bonus to notice. Hey, it's only one fish—noticing one dead fish shouldn't be easy. The fish died of ich, see "ICH" below.

45 minutes: A young half-elf offers 8 gold pieces for Buddy the Frog. He points out this is a substantial amount for a frog. It's up to the PCs whether they sell Buddy. The young half-elf cannot be bargained up higher.

60 minutes: A second fantail from the front window breathes his last . . . unless the PCs noticed the first fish and fixed the ich problem. Requires a successful Wisdom check to notice two dead fish; +2 bonus if the PC is standing by the front window-tank.

1 hour, 15 minutes: Old woman comes in wanting to purchase a water lily. She has a difficult time making up her mind and eventually has the PCs select one for her.

1 hour, 30 minutes: The young half-elf returns if the PCs did not sell him Buddy. He offers 15 gold pieces this time.

1 hour, 45 minutes: Two disheveled-looking humans enter and rummage through the books on the shelves. They've no intention of buying anything. They're pickpockets hiding out from the city watch. They eventually leave.

Oh, Ick—ICH

Ich is a nasty disease that will spread to every fish in the infected tank. There are several ways the PCs can deal with it:

1. Ignore it, but it won't go away. The stock will start depleting itself.
2. Take out the dead fish and throw them in the trash in the alley.
3. Look at the fish in the tank—the dead ones have lots of white specks and bumps on them. The living ones also have white specks and bumps on their tails and fins.
4. Cast a *cure light wounds* spell on each infected fish (the PCs won't have enough *cure light wounds* spells likely for all the affected fish).
5. Look through the books. These books all have references to the ich problem—*Goldfish Basics*, *Goldfish Breeding*, *Fancy Goldfish*, *My First Fantail*, *Goldfish Health*, *Goldfish Parasites*, *Gold is My Fish!* The books suggest pouring either potions of *cure light wounds* into the tank . . . a tank this size would require four, or a combination of any of four potions: *cure light wounds*, *neutralize poison*. One *cure serious wounds* potion would take care of the entire tank.

2 hours: A half-dozen frogs have managed to escape from the amphibian tank. Successful Wisdom check to notice. They're not difficult to catch. But at the same time, a delivery man comes in with two dozen small fan-tails, a rare pale yellow in color. One of the PCs must sign for the delivery.

2 hours, 15 minutes: A third and a fourth fantail goes to that big aquarium in the sky . . . unless the PCs have cured the ich problem. Successful Wisdom check to notice, +3 bonus if a PC is standing by the tank.

2 hours, 30 minutes: Old woman comes back returning the water lily. She's changed her mind and wants one Alicia's Dream and one Wizard's Folly.

2 hours, 45 minutes: The young half-elf and two of his human teenaged buddies have pooled their resources and offer 21 gold pieces for Buddy the frog.

3 hours: A butterfly, three orange fan-tails, and a lionhead also die of ich. The PCs notice, regardless of any Wisdom checks.

3 hours, 15 minutes: A stately wizard comes in to purchase 28 small goldfish, which he intends to use in *detect magic* spells. Money is no object; he wants the finest specimens available . . . as he's certain the spell will have a longer duration that way. Some of the PCs might not like the idea of beautiful fish being sold so some wizard can swallow them.

3 hours, 30 minutes: If the PCs haven't sold Buddy, the young half-elf comes back with his parents. It's obvious the family is very well-to-do. They offer 440 gold pieces for Buddy, and they bargain fiercely to get the PCs to accept that amount. If the PCs roleplay especially well, the family will pay up to 550 gold.

Action Events

The game master can sprinkle these in on his whim.

Newton the Newt

One of the newts is a *polymorph*ed witch who wants badly to be free. She selects one PC to target, whispering to that person and trying to convince them that she's really a beautiful princess that fell afoul of a curse. If the PCs have access to something that allows them to dispel or reverse magic, and use it on the newt, the evil witch will be freed. She will leave the shop, free to cause havoc elsewhere in the world. Or…she can come back later, targeting the PCs one by one in an effort to get their treasure.

Gazing Ball

One of the gazing balls is magical. The PCs can discover this if they cast detect magic at the right time. It is a scrying device an evil wizard is using to look in on the shop. He's hunting for an artifact that he believes is either hidden in the shop or is on one of the shop's frequent customers.

The Wealthy Woman

There's a young woman who likes to come in and look at herself in the gazing balls. She's very vain. She's also very rich and can be coaxed into buying something by creative PCs. She seems especially interested in the water plants, as she has a pond at her estate. She will spend up to 500 gold pieces. But she will not buy Buddy the frog. She detests amphibians.

The Druid

If the PCs sell a water plant to the Wealthy Woman above, it will have been the plant friend of the druid who visits the shop daily. The druid is quite mad . . . and on top of that is angry that the PCs have gotten rid of his friend. If the PCs did not sell a water plant to the woman above, the druid simply comes in to talk to his plant friend, and then leaves before the Evil Wizard attacks. If, however, the PCs sold the water plant, he is furious, attacks them, summoning a water elemental via one of the tanks. If the druid is reduced to half of his hit points, he will try to surrender. The PCs will fare better if they simply beat him up rather than kill him, as this way he can be carted off by the city watch to get the mental help he desperately needs. One of the druid's items is the artifact the evil wizard is looking for through the gazing ball. It will have fallen off into one of the tanks during the fight. If there was no fight, because the plant was not sold, the druid will simply have lost the item in the tank when he was talking to his friend.

Evil Wizard

He wants the artifact, and he's come to the shop to get it. He'll be upfront and tell the PCs he's come in to retrieve something that belongs to him (lie), and that if they let him take it, there'll be no trouble. If they object, he fights them.

Hungry Teens

Four boys come into the shop with enough money to buy eight goldfish, two apiece. They buy them one at a time, chewing on them in front of the PCs. The boys will wander off if the PCs refuse to sell them all the fish they want. However, in this instance one will take a swing at a PC. The teens are easy to kill because they have few hit points. Killing teenagers is a bad thing.

Protection Money

A new group of toughs just arrived in town is going from business to business demanding protection money. They demand 300 gold pieces for "protection," and say they'll be back in a month or two for the second installment.

If the PCs pool their money and pay the thugs, they leave. If the PCs protest, the thugs attack. The thugs do not intend to kill the PCs . . . they're thugs, not murderers . . . and so they're striking to subdue. However, because they are thugs, the PCs might kill them.

PCs' reward for this encounter: experience points, of course, plus whatever gold and treasure the villains in the shop had. In addition, the garden shop is its own reward…if the game master chooses for the previous owner to never return.

THE END

Jean Rabe learned to play *Dungeons & Dragons* from the white box more years ago than she wants to admit. It was in the con suite at WindyCon… where she met Joe Haldeman (before he won all those awards and became famous…and she's since published some of his short stories in her anthologies). She's enjoyed RPGs ever since… *AD&D*, *Star Wars*, *Champions*, and *77 Lost Worlds*. Once upon a time she worked at TSR, Inc. in Lake Geneva, running the Role-Playing Games Association (RPGA); she designed scenarios, monsters, and big robots for TSR and other game companies.

LEGO® Building Toy Maps

by Merle M. Rasmussen

Begin with one 10" x 10" green or tan plate. (LEGO® makes blue plates but I have neither seen any to buy nor have I created any water environments.) The plate with 32 studs per row and 32 studs per column has 1,024 studs. I use green for jungle and swamp adventures and tan for desert adventures. (I also have some thicker gray plates from my childhood that would be great for stone or lunar surfaces.) LEGO® has "minifigure scale" and "microscale." I use a scale where the distance from the center of one stud to the center of the next closest stud is 10 feet. The height of each regular brick is 10 feet. At this scale, the plate is 320′ long by 320′ deep. Human beings are represented by square 1x1 bricks. To scale, this means they are 5′ wide by 5′ deep by 10′ tall. I consider 5′ is how far they can reach from left to right or from front to back. I consider 10′ is how far they can jump straight up. At my scale, LEGO® minifigures not wearing helmets are 50′ tall, 30′ wide, and 10′ thick. This is perfect for giants, stone golems, genies, mega robots, mechanized soldiers, and other various oversized beings.

Using one color brick (I like white or tan), build a fortress wall, castle, temple ground, step pyramid, etc. Chipped, broken, and stained bricks work great for ancient ruins or recently besieged walls. (I bought my childhood LEGO® collection from my mother.) I built a tan stone fortress wall and then set up a camel hair tent camp inside it. The studs look like merlons atop a crenellated wall. (Merlons are the rocks people hide behind at the top of a wall.) When finished with your centerpiece, place it in the middle of the table.

Next, hand each player one 10" x 10" green or tan plate to match your centerpiece color. Ask each player for their favorite color. Hand them

a "resealable" plastic sandwich and storage bag full of their favorite color LEGO® pieces. Alternatively, you can show them each bag of LEGO® pieces that is available and have each player choose one. (Among the brown bricks is a 50' LEGO® monkey that used to be on Jackie's [my wife's] keychain. It becomes the center of the monkey temple surrounded by wild monkeys with 1" fangs every time.) In a jungle or swamp adventure, reserve the lime green bricks for later. In a desert adventure, reserve the tan bricks.

Using the LEGO® pieces in their bag, direct the players to build surrounding structures to the same scale as your centerpiece. For example, if you built a castle, they can build the surrounding village marketplace, businesses, and homes. If you built a desert fortress, they can build the surrounding oasis, bazaar, and sphinx. If you built a temple ground, they can build surrounding temples, statues, or ruins. If you build a step pyramid, they can build the surrounding palaces, ball courts, and workers' neighborhoods. A player does not need to use all bricks in his or her bag. One player asked if I had clear bricks so she could build a crystal pyramid. Players can trade bricks to achieve artistic effects. One player built a blue ancient aquarium with a yellow fossilized fish inside. Players of all ages love this building activity spending 15 to 25 minutes building a masterpiece. If a player is building a ruin, it does not matter if his or her masterpiece is complete. Color does not matter much either. I have seen green statues of Ra, a yellow lion cage, and a red cobra maze.

While the players are building, provide each of them a palm tree, and/or 1x2 brick animal (camel, cow, horse, etc.), and/or LEGO® minifigure to include in their section of the three dimensional map. As each player finishes his or her masterpiece, he or she may orient their plate in relation to the centerpiece. Ask each player to describe their masterpiece for you and the rest of the players. This is a chance for each player to shine and have an active part in creating the map on which his or her player character (PC) will be interacting. One player informed the group that his plate was 10' deep water and his structure was all that showed above the water. (Now I wished I had a blue plate.) This allowed me to populate the water with gavials.

First I built one plate worth exploring. Then I built nine plates worth of structures and transported them to conventions. Frank Mentzer was encouraging Gamemasters (GMs) to increase player "ownership" by using *ad lib* dungeons. Each player would secretly write on a scrap of paper one item they wanted to appear during the adventure. The GM would then work their item into the narrative. I tried this a couple times but in the heat of the game forgot to use all the players' ideas. Then I decided my ad lib adventures would involve players building their own section of the encounter area from scratch. I would provide each player a plate, a bag of matching pieces, and allow them to be creative. All I needed was one complete centerpiece and a plotline.

The centerpiece can be surrounded by eight masterpieces tic-tac-toe style. If you have four players, they could each build two masterpieces. If you have fewer players, empty plates can be put in place. If you have more than nine plates, you can have larger LEGO® maps. Connect the corners of your centerpiece to the corners of the masterpieces with 2x2 or larger green or tan bricks. Connect the corners of neighboring masterpieces to each other with 2x2 or larger green or tan bricks.

LEGO® maps are not always perfect squares measuring 960′ per side. I have two step pyramids built on green plates measuring 160′ on each side. When I use these as my centerpieces, the masterpieces are staggered around them. This created an uneven side that became a riverbank. The PCs were traveling by boat so they had to decide where to leave their boat to explore the territory around the twin step pyramids.

I also have two yellow plates measuring 60′ per side. I built two miniature yellow pyramids capped with orange pieces. These I can place in the center of blank 320′ tan tiles. The smooth, sloped sides of the 30′ tall miniature pyramids are especially hard to climb to retrieve a goal tied near the top of the structure.

Ask each player to describe their masterpiece for you and the rest of the players. This is a chance for each player to shine and have an active part in creating the map on which his or her player character (PC) will be interacting.

When all masterpieces are in place, you can "dress the set." If the adventure is in a jungle or swamp, I provide a bag of lime green pieces. Lime green stands out against the grass green plate. I pass the bag to the first player on my left and ask them to take out a handful of bricks. I ask them to scatter the handful of bricks across the LEGO® map at a height of 1′ or greater. If a piece bounces off the map, the player may pick it up and drop it again. Lime green bricks represent jungle or swamp vegetation in the form of trees, bushes, vines, and weeds. The bag is then passed to the next player on the left to repeat the process. If there are any pieces left when the bag reaches me, I scatter the remainder onto the map. If the adventure is in a desert, I provide a bag of tan bricks. Tan bricks represent stone rubble scattered across the sandy tan plate. One player built a blue room with a vertical light blue circular star gate in the middle. He was disappointed when a stray block of stone dislodged his teleport device. I was not prepared to send PCs through the star gate and across the cosmos.

I maintain a set of 1x1 square bricks in the same color as each player's masterpiece. Each tiny brick represents a PC. I can refer to them by color during play and the pieces bond well to the playing surface, "Mr. Green is in the aquarium with a fishing spear." I use the remaining colors of 1x1 square bricks as non-player characters (NPCs). PCs and NPCs can travel on the same LEGO® boat or other vehicles. During one adventure, the boat captain and the cabin boy (NPCs) stayed aboard a 6 passenger (2x3 brick) boat while the PCs went ashore to investigate ruins in a swamp.

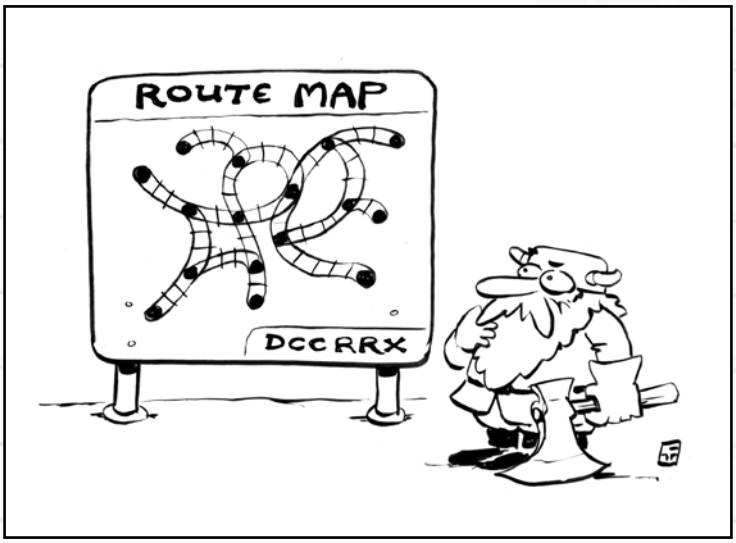
While PCs are traveling to the LEGO® map site, they are subject to random encounters. I use fierce dust, sand, and thunderstorms that cause the PCs to lose random pieces of equipment. The players choose on which side of the LEGO® map their PCs wish to enter. They can also move PCs off and around the map. When a player enters the map site, the chance of a random encounter drops to zero. If a player is close enough (say 40′) to a tree, animal, or minifigure, it is "activated." Trees may drop exploding coconuts (I use small cotton balls to simulate smoke) or emit invisible gasses. Animals may move forward at a rate of 20′ per round or run away. Minifigures may move toward the PC at a rate of 10′ per round. Players suddenly realize that the trees, animals, and minifigures they placed are traps! As one player realized, "I am being hoisted on my own petard!"

Any PC that touches a lime green brick of vegetation encounters a viper. I have five red and green LEGO® snakes for this. One PC was bitten… twice. You would think he would learn not to touch the vegetation without checking. Once the five snakes are revealed, there are no more appearances. Any PC that touches a loose tan brick risks it falling or rolling onto them.

I place my NPCs and most valuable clues or treasures at the top of the highest towers. NPCs will have the advantage of firing down on the PCs. One player built a 200′ tall red pagoda. The party decided to enter the map beneath the pagoda. My bad guy fired down on them until they took cover under the branches of a tree. When finally defeated, he fell through a window and broke off an awning on the way down. (I always leave bricks, PCs, and NPCs where they fall.) Clues and treasures are also harder to reach.

Another player built a yellow and orange 160' tall giraffe. I placed the PCs' goal on a necklace around the top of the animal's neck. The PC had to climb a giant stone giraffe statue to retrieve the goal. They fumbled the attempt and dropped the goal onto fellow PCs below. The real baddies and most valuable clues and treasures are in the center of my centerpiece. PCs have to cross a minimum of 480' of map to reach the center of a nine plate LEGO® map.

I built a perfectly symmetrical temple ground surrounded by four walls. Each 40' square temple had an opening at ground level facing north, east, south, and west. The gates in the surrounding walls lined up with five temple openings. There were clear lines of sight completely across the 320' plate from north to south gate through three temples. There were also clear lines of sight completely across the plate from east to west gate through three temples. Any firefight would have to consider what could be seen through these openings or from the 60' towers above the 30' wide streets.



Sight lines also work for PCs. One player climbed to the top of a sphinx that looked like a blue poodle to look down on other PCs and see what they might encounter beyond a fortress wall. I used a straight edge beginning at the PC's position to determine what was visible and what was obscured. He served as a sniper to protect his group of adventurers.

At conventions the finished LEGO® map is so colorful and creative, players and bystanders take photos and post them on Facebook. The random layouts have been compared to the Rebel Base in Star Wars or something you would see in Minecraft. After all photographs are taken, the masterpieces can be disassembled. Matching color pieces are placed in the same plastic bag. Players are good about doing this work for me.

I have not tried simulating underground dungeons, however if each plate provides a 10' or larger opening at the center of each edge, all passageways will connect. Ten feet thick layers can be built on stackable plates if openings, symbolized by 1/3 thickness flat bricks, exist. If all stackable plates have vertical openings to the plate above and below, the edge passageways are not needed. Oooh!

I have seen battle scenes built at "minifigure scale" at Brickmania in the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota. Brickmania specializes in custom kits and minifigures made from LEGO® brand bricks, as well as their own custom elements including lights. They are also an authorized dealer of BrickArms® accessories. "Minifigure scale" is extremely cool and detailed but battlefields use an awful lot of bricks.

We never use all the pieces in a game session. I would guess maybe 450 to 500 pieces tops. You may not need as much LEGO® as I have. Everyone could build without plates. You could also build LEGO® monsters instead of (shudder!) lead alloy miniature figurines that need to be painted.

How much LEGO® is this? I had a few pieces from my adulthood. (I kept my minifigure scale rockets and vehicles intact but took their helmets off and used the minifigures.) I purchased multiple bags of primarily red, white, and blue LEGO® from my childhood and yard sales from my mother for $30. My wife bought a LEGO® Creative Suitcase of 1000 multicolored and shaped LEGO® pieces for $51.86 including shipping (no longer available). Jackie also bought 9 tan 10" x 10" plates for $73.14 including free shipping and 9 green 10" x 10" plates for $85.89 including shipping. I paid around $17 for a large cup of tan and palm tree LEGO® pieces at a LEGO® store in the Mall of America. Five snakes cost me $1 each from a LEGO® collector. (I could have bought giant rats.)

This totals around $262.89 over 50+ years. Pretty cheap entertainment and the players love it.

Whatever scale you use…, whatever setting you choose…, use your imagination and have fun!

Encounter: "Shipwrecked on Lay-Goh Island"

A dungeon without walls and a wilderness without beasts of burden.

by Merle M. Rasmussen

For the Gamemaster (GM) to read aloud to the players: "*Hurricane-force winds drive your ship onto cubic rocks. Your wooden craft is shattered to smithereens. The order comes, 'Abandon ship! Every one for him or herself!' You do not have time to take anything with you and are flung into the angry sea with the clothes on your back and the boots on your feet. You have no food, no weapons, and no books of spells. You wade through the surf onto a tiny studded island no more than 960' feet wide. You find your comrades stunned, but alive, and scattered along the shoreline in the same shape as you.*

It is then you all notice the marks.

Running along the shore is a track of footprints each 10' square. On soil, each footprint is a foot deep. On rock, each footprint is only inches deep. On sand, the footprints are faintly visible. Whatever made the tracks has a stride of 20'. Could it be a giant wearing square shoes or the footprints of a stone golem? Your party's survival may depend on the answer."

Background for the Gamemaster (GM) only: Semitropical Lay-Goh Island lies 2,400 miles west of Awoi. Lay-Goh Island is governed by Awoi. An Awoian naval vessel stops there once each year and visited one week ago. Lay-Goh Island is of volcanic origin. Its area is 723,822.33 square feet or 16.6 acres. The island has no streams. However, one extinct volcano in the center of the island has a crater lake containing fresh rainwater. Weathered lava supports grasses on which the Awoian Navy grazes sheep. Forty to 100' tall coconut palm trees, betel palms, and vine plants dot the island. Much of the coast is steep (10' cliffs or greater), with coral reefs and only one sandy beach.

For the Gamemaster (GM) to read aloud to the players when a Lay-Gohian is encountered: "*Stepping out of the undergrowth is a single unarmed human being. He wears little but a breechcloth and a smile. He smells of wood smoke and sweat. His teeth are black and his saliva is red! He beckons you to follow him into the jungle.*"

If followed, the Lay-Gohian native leads the player characters (PCs) to a native village with eight 10' x 10' huts made of woven grass. They can make fire. The entire population of the island lives in the small village of Yelxuh on the slopes of the extinct volcano. The population was nearly wiped out by a Nisnocsiw slave raid followed by a smallpox epidemic. A period of decline followed. During this period, cannibalism was practiced. Many people abandoned their grass houses and lived in caves where they stored their treasures. The population is now around 48 human beings. Most of the time, the Lay-Gohians eat fish, sweet potatoes, and coconuts. They depend on supplies brought by the Awoian Navy once per year. These iron knives, hatchets, hammers, drills, tongs, hoes, and simple plows are considered treasures and are not for trade. Eating sheep is against the law punishable by being reported to the Awoian Navy when they arrive. Shearing sheep to make clothing or other goods is permissible.

Older Lay-Gohians have black teeth and red saliva from chewing betel (not drinking blood). Betel is a combination of betel nut (seed of the palm tree) and the leaf of a vine plant (member of the pepper family). These natives prepare betel nut for chewing by drying. Pieces of betel nut are then rolled in a leaf of the betel vine.

Eight large stone statues, called "Guardians" by the locals, were carved from hard volcanic rock in the crater walls of the volcano. The sculptors used stone hand picks made of basalt which they have hidden in caves. The statues measure 50' tall, 30' wide, and 10' thick. The 122.5 ton Guardians were transported to distant parts of the island and positioned to look out at the sea. (Place one LEGO® minifigure near the coastline at each of the cardinal points of the island: north, east, south,

and west. Place one LEGO® minifigure near the coastline at each of the intercardinal points of the island: northeast, southeast, southwest, and northwest.) The Lay-Gohians fear yet venerate the Guardians and warn the PCs not to touch the monolithic statues. Each Guardian is adorned with a necklace made by human hands.

GUARDIAN CHART

Position	Necklace	Trap
North	50 Drilled Gold Coins on a cord	Guardian tips over onto its back.
Northeast	50 Drilled Natural Pearls on a cord	Deep tiger pit is covered in branches.
East	50 Drilled Conch Seashells on a rope	Conch trumpeting causes native attack.
Southeast	50 Drilled Betel Nuts (Palm Tree Seed)	Bent sapling snare catches one foot.
South	Colorful Feather Boa from 50 Birds	Bird lice infesting boa causes itching.
Southwest	Colorful Smooth Stones from Island Trade	Guardian's 12.25 ton head rolls off.
West	Colorful Flower Lei from 50 Flowers	Pollinating bees are attracted.
Northwest	Stone Hand Pick made of Basalt on a cord	Natives attack PC when they see object.

The square tracks connect all eight Guardians around the island. It is impossible to tell if the tracks run clockwise or counterclockwise. Trees and brush have been cleared either side of the tracks creating a 30′ wide trail approximately 1,508′ long. The Lay-Gohians consider excavating the tracks (in secret and at night) as their form of civil defense against conquering invaders and unwelcome visitors. The depth of the tracks coincides with the density of the material in which it is excavated. The natives hide their stone hand picks and wooden shovels in caves before daybreak.

JETSAM, FLOTSAM, & LAGAN CHART

Once each day when a PC either searches the shoreline or travels by sea, a random item is encountered. Roll one 12-sided die and find the value rolled on this chart to determine what is encountered. Each object is found only once, so if already encountered, roll again.

d12 Roll	Random Encounter
1	Bobbing in the sea is a sealed wooden coffin. If the floating coffin is opened, a decayed body is discovered. Its skull has been detached and placed between its feet. A rectangular paving stone has been forced between its grinning jaws. Its ribs have been cut from its sternum and its heart removed. Both femurs have been broken. (These aberrant, unorthodox burial practices were used by relatives to prevent the walking undead [vampire] from drinking the blood of a sick loved one.)
2	What first appears to be a coconut tree log turns out to be a 50′ spear. (If shown or mentioned to a Lay-Gohian, they will claim it is the weapon of a Guardian. However, it was sharpened by humans and is part of the elaborate island hoax being played on the characters. It could be used as the mainmast of a raft used to leave the island.)
3	One 8″ clear hollow bladder floats on the surface. (Hanging from the float are long string like filaments called tentacles. They may be 100′ long. These tentacles act as arms and are used to grasp food. They contain a poison that seems to paralyze some fish on contact. These tentacles are also dangerous to human beings. PCs touching them will suffer painful welts, or even shock and prostration that could be fatal.)

4	The torn mainsail of your ship wrapped around the wood figurehead shows up. (If recovered, the mainsail can be used to build a shelter, collect rainwater, or even help build a raft to leave the island.)
5	One hundred feet of rope tangled in other jetsam (2 empty boxes, 2 empty barrels, and 2 oars) voluntarily cast overboard from your sinking ship appears. (If recovered, it can all be used to help build and provision a raft to leave the island.)
6	A wooden barrel is seen bobbing in the waves. (If opened, it releases four monkeys with 1" fangs that attack the four closest players attempting to bite them before running into the nearest underbrush. Monkeys are shipped in barrels to zoological parks on the mainland.)
7	A locked wooden sea chest wallows in the waves with "DAVY JONES' LOCKER" carved into the lid. (If opened, it contains one suit of clothing, one left eye patch, one right boot, one left wooden peg leg, one left glove, one right metal hand hook, one feathered tri-corner hat, a sword with scabbard, a penknife with ear spoon and whistle, a walking stick topped with a ruby worth 10-1,000 gold pieces, a leather drawstring purse holding 20 gold pieces, and a book filled with spells.)
8	An elderly Lay-Gohian corpse is found floating in the sea. The body has been flattened and its bones crushed. (If shown or mentioned to a Lay-Gohian, they will claim a Guardian has stepped on the deceased and then thrown the dead human into the sea. However, the Lay-Gohian died of natural causes and is part of the elaborate island hoax being played on the characters.)
9	A 20' wide by 30' tall wooden shield built of coconut tree planks floats past. (If shown or mentioned to a Lay-Gohian, they will claim it is the shield of a Guardian. However, it was fashioned by humans and is part of the elaborate island hoax being played on the characters. It could be used as the hull of a raft used to leave the island.)
10	A mass of marine plants, or seaweed, floats on the surface. Entangled in the grapelike, gas-filled floats is your ship's leather bound navigation log. It shows the location of the mainland and the last known location of your ship before being struck by the storm that sank her. It also shows islands between your last known location and the mainland so you could backtrack your voyage.
11	A buoy made from a barrel bobs in the waves. Attached to the buoy is a rope. At the end of the rope is a metal chest. Inside the chest are 1-1,000 copper pieces, 1-100 silver pieces, 1-10 gold pieces, 1 bag of gemstones, 10 potions for healing, 1 dagger with scabbard, 1 astrolabe, and 1 compass. (Lagan, or ligan, is cargo which someone has sunk with the definite intention of recovering it later. The person usually ties a buoy to lagan to mark its location. Someone aboard your sinking ship wanted to mark its treasure.)
12	Four Lay-Gohians are standing on wooden planks and riding them on waves. Once ashore, they paddle the boards beyond the surf to ride the waves again. Three Lay-Gohians return to the shore with their boards. Finally, the fourth board arrives without its rider. The board is missing a rough semicircle 1' in diameter where a bite was removed.

There is enough fish, sweet potatoes, coconuts, and mutton for the PCs and all natives to survive. Daily thunderstorms provide adequate freshwater but dangerous lightning. There is a shortage of shelter unless it is built or a cave is discovered. There is little, if any, valuable treasure here for the greedy. PCs climbing the volcano or descending its crater walls may fall or dislodge stones that cascade on those below. Death by accident, disease, or warfare with the natives is possible. Unless the PCs want to wait a year to maybe be rescued by the Awoian Navy, they need to find a way off the island and travel safely to another island or the mainland.

THE END

Merle M. Rasmussen has been writing for various RPGs sinc he left highschool. Discovering early that his neighbor, and part time squeeze, Jackie Mason was a far better writer than he, he formulated a plan to submit her writings under his name to an industry dominated by male editors. They went on to marry, buy a home in Mozambique, and have seven wonderful children. Jackie Rasmussen now publishes under her own name, and Merle splits his time between gardening, caring for elderly neighbors, and fishing. His last submission, *Fiver's Last Stand*, *Horse and House* 1988 was followed by more than two decades of silence, until *Goodman Games* tracked him down.

All Aboard for Adventure

by Lester Smith

Adventure design has a lot in common with fiction writing: plot, setting, characters, even dialog. Of course differences between the two immediately become evident. Characters aren't just descriptions; they also have game statistics. Game settings typically have more details than in fiction and often involve maps, especially for combat scenes. Plot, instead of being a fixed path, may change during the course of play, based on the decisions of Player Characters, effects of dice rolls, and game master resolution of it all.

Furthermore, adventure design presupposes adventure play. And play involves at least some amount of improvisation—which is where fiction writing and adventure design diverge. Exactly how much improvisation depends on GM experience and group temperament.

Published adventures often have a fairly linear plot, with specific encounters in a specific order, and even passages of descriptive text to be read aloud to the players. The scenario designer assumes a particular outcome to each scene, and GMs can run these adventures with very little preparation. Many GMs follow that model even when creating their own adventures from scratch, due to simple familiarity. Other GMs extemporize greatly during play, working from little more than a bare idea of a plot, or a villain, or a setting. Most GMs fall somewhere in the middle.

The Train-Yard Model

I like to think of adventure design like working a train yard. Each car is a scene, with an entry point, and with an obstacle to overcome before exiting. A linear adventure like the published sort described above is like hooking up a series of cars to make a train. Think of the introductory scene as the caboose, where the Player Characters catch the train and enter the plot line. The engine is the climax, their ultimate goal. All the cars between are obstacles to overcome along the way.

A new game master will follow the constraints of that lineup, one car after another in a row, improvising only the particular details and dialog inside each. A more experienced GM might remove or add cars during play, or even allow the PCs to invent a different path through a scene (metaphorically "climbing out a window and going from roof to roof"), improvising what they discover. A very experienced GM might let the PCs actually wander off the train, around the train yard, onto other trains, and so on. (In mystery campaigns, especially, presenting PCs with events from multiple plot lines at once, and letting them figure out what applies to which, is a great way to keep them engaged.)

Generally, the more improvisational a GM is, the more freedom the PCs will feel, and the more sense of control over their own direction and destiny. But paradoxically, a totally improvisational GM may actually rob PCs of that volition.

That's because even the best improv artists grow predictable over time. If a GM continually extemporizes, sooner or later the players will feel they can anticipate what's coming, and the fun will grow stale. This is especially true with GMs

that strive to always have a truly climactic final scene, with the heroes winning by the skin of their teeth. The trouble with this is that sometimes players come up with an unexpectedly good plan, or they roll supremely well, and as a result defeat their enemies easily. Faced with this, pure improv GMs often increase the odds at that point, fudging dice rolls to make the threat more effective, or even dropping more enemies into the scene. But that robs the players of the joy of their brilliance or good luck. The flip side of that coin is when players have a thick-witted session, missing clue after clue, or they roll poorly, and as a result stumble unprepared into the climax and face certain defeat. Faced with this, pure improv GMs often fudge the enemies' rolls to make them less effective, or even worse, drop an unexpected ally into the scene as rescuer. In either event, whether the odds are increased or decreased on the fly, players end up feeling like onlookers watching the GM play alone.

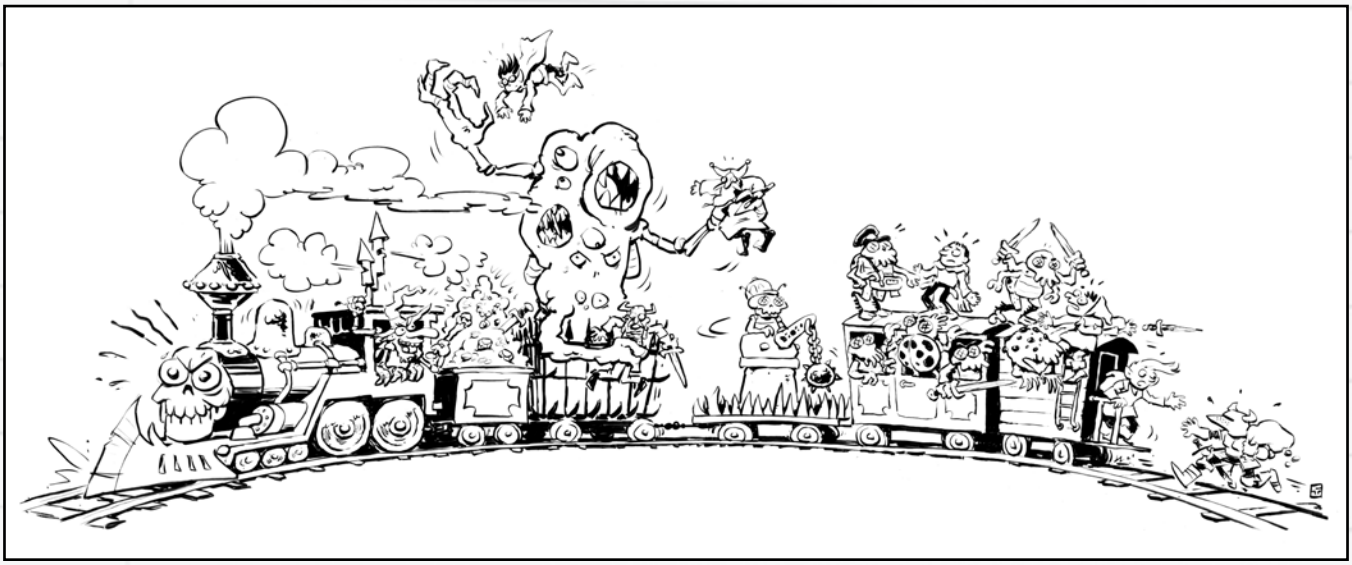
So it's generally best to show up with a plan—a rough plot and at least a few specifics—not just "wing it" from a rough concept.

A Stepwise Approach: Villain, Then Victims, Then Heroes

The best stories in both fiction and adventure gaming tend to revolve around some sort of intelligent threat: a villain or band of antagonists. (Who wants to play "Night of the Hurricane," right? Unless maybe a villain stranded you in that hurricane and you need to survive so you can get revenge. Or better yet, you're stranded with a group of townsfolk, and something is picking them off one by one during the storm.)

I like to approach adventure design by first laying out the goal a villain hopes to achieve. For example, a lich wants to acquire a magical sword buried with a paladin beneath a chapel at a mountain pass. The problem is, he can't enter the chapel himself unless it is somehow defiled, and as if that weren't enough trouble, an entire village has grown around it, with an economy based on hosting people on pilgrimage. Somehow, the lich needs to get that sword out of that chapel.

Then I lay out the steps that villain will take to reach that goal—assuming no one interferes. Different villains will approach such a problem from different angles, depending on their own temperament, abilities, and resources. The more you can get inside your villain's head at this point, the more distinctive your adventure will turn out. The lich above might send underlings to terrorize the town, such as skeletons to pick off shepherds, woodcutters, or other folk who wander from the village itself. In this case, his purpose would be to weaken the resolve of the remaining villagers, hoping they will move away and leave the place less defended. A different lich, in a rush to gain the sword, might raise a zombie army and sack the village, place the chapel under siege, and hire mercenaries to loot it. Yet a different one might visit the village himself, incognito, investigate for someone he can bribe to welcome him into the



chapel, and sacrifice that dupe in an unholy ritual to defile it.

Next, I consider how the world of NPCs will react to the villain's plan. Let's consider the case of the waylaying skeletons above. Logically speaking, how might the village leaders become aware of the attacks. Do they notice a decline in the number of pilgrims arriving (because some pilgrims are falling prey to the skeletons)? Or perhaps a family member of an important villager goes missing (whether a child who wandered away from town, a teenager who set up a romantic rendezvous, or even a shepherd in charge of the villager's flocks). How do they react? Do they send an armed posse to go searching, or barricade the village, or send a messenger to a nearby town for help? My answers to these questions prepare me with some sense of what the people involved are like, and I may even write stats, brief histories, and personality notes for those my PCs are likely to interact with.

[E]ven the best improv artists grow predictable over time. If a GM continually extemporizes, sooner or later the players will feel they can anticipate what's coming, and the fun will grow stale.

With that background laid out, it's time to consider how to catch the attention of the PCs.

Generally, I avoid the "hireling" method: You're drinking at an inn when a stranger approaches and asks you to do a job; or the head of your guild sends you on a mission; or you receive a letter from an old relative asking for your help. Instead, I ask the players to tell me about their characters, and then I start "messing with their stuff." In the example plot above, I'll ask them to tell me why they might be living in, visiting, or traveling through that village in the mountain pass. Their answers will spawn ideas for how to intersect their lives and interests with the villain's plan.

If a player tells me their character is a pilgrim to the shrine in the chapel, I might let them find another pilgrim, foully murdered and body desecrated, on the way. If another player's character is a villager, I might have a love interest invite them on a romantic tryst in the woods, where they're hounded by something foul. Yet another character might be a merchant bringing supplies to the village or through the pass; an attack on that character's goods makes a great reason to get involved. Combine those ideas together, and you have a dramatic introduction personalized for your players: the merchant's caravan comes upon a pilgrim giving last rites to a brutally murdered stranger; when suddenly a pair of young lovers comes stumbling from the woods in terror; and their undead pursuers attack the rearmost mounts before retreating into the woods again.

Note also that this way, the players don't have to invent how their characters know one another at the start. The adventure itself becomes their common bond. This is particularly useful for convention play, where the players themselves may have never met before.

Three-Act Outline

Over the years, I have come to think of adventure design in terms of three acts:

Act 1—Introduction: This act provides one or more hooks to make the characters want to pursue the adventure further. In this act they meet people and see things that pique their interest. Any conflict tends to involve dialog and posturing more than actual attacks.

Any combat that does occur is short and decisive, typically weighted heavily in the PCs' favor, but revealing that a greater threat looms. Enemies will tend to be lower-level minions (or possibly the main villain, though ill-prepared as yet) who run away rather than fight, dropping clues that the heroes can pursue further.

As an alternative (especially in horror campaigns), you can stack combat so heavily *against* the PCs that their only option is clearly to flee, investigate elsewhere to learn more about the threat, discover its weaknesses, and come back later better equipped to defeat it.

Act 2—Rising Action: Just as in fiction writing, this is a series of increasingly difficult conflicts that prepare for the climax to come. In a mystery adventure, it might be a series of clues to ferret out that will lead to the villain. In a dungeon

crawl, it is the traps and encounters along the way to finding the main treasure and its guardian. In a horror adventure, it is the trail of victims and harrying attacks from secondary monsters on the way to the main threat.

As should be evident, conflict in this act involves true danger, and any dialog tends to be the few words of threat tossed out before a fight begins in earnest. A major purpose of this act is to strain the PCs' resources, to make the climactic battle more tense and deadly. Paradoxically, it also firms their resolve to face and defeat that enemy, and often provides them with clues to accomplish that.

In this act, improvisation for the sake of pacing is appropriate. It is forgivable to skip a few planned encounters if time is running short or the PCs are growing weak. While in old-fashioned dungeon crawls (where everything is mapped out, where corridors lead to chambers that lead to more corridors, and a play group expects to spend many sessions exploring), the PCs can return to town at any time to recuperate and restock as needed, a plot-based adventure depends more heavily on dramatic tension.

By the same token, if the PCs are waltzing through this act too easily, it is forgivable to add encounters to fill time and stretch their resources. Those extra encounters might even be used to set the stage for later, different adventures, or the GM may entangle the PCs in the machinations of a recurring villain who dogs their heels at the most inopportune times, and who they'll gain extra satisfaction from eventually tracking down and dealing with at some point in the future.

Act 3—Climax: This is it, the big battle. In it, the PCs at last come face-to-face with the enemy driving this adventure, and in many cases that enemy has learned to hate them for their interference with his plans. This is also the act that "wing-it" GMs most often bungle, the one where improvisation should play the smallest role.

Depending on the exact adventure, in this act the PCs may break in on the villain in his lair, or that villain may confront them in terrain of his choosing. In either case, he has the "home turf" advantage, having prepared or at least scouted the spot for the climactic battle.

In terms of adventure design, this climactic scene deserves the most planning, even if the GM improvises most everything else to this point. Returning to our train-yard metaphor, this scene is the engine driving all the action to this point. It is also likely to be the most memorable scene to your players, so put some time into its preparation.

Example Climactic Scene

The PCs have at last worked out that a lich is behind the attacks on the village, and that his aim is to acquire the sword buried with the paladin, beneath the altar in the village chapel. While the villagers hold off a last wave of skeletal creatures from the woods, the PCs hasten to the chapel to confront him.

Reaching the churchyard, the PCs discover that the graveyard beside the chapel is now a mass of open holes. Apparently the lich has managed to raise the dead buried there! But where are they now?

Breaking into the chapel, the PCs discover the answer to that question. The former residents of the graveyard now stand between them and the lich, except for two who hold the chaplain on the altar, while the lich prepares to sacrifice him as part of a spell to defile the tomb below and release the sword.

(The number and type of undead, and exact stats for them, will depend upon the particular game system you are using and the abilities of your PCs, of course.)

The End

Lester Smith is an award-winning game designer, poet, and writer. He has more than fifty published game credits alone, along with a multitude in poetry, fiction, and educational titles. His recent work includes the one-stat, multi-genre *D6xD6* role-playing game, whose core rules are free online at www.d6xd6.com. Visit www.lestersmith.com for more information or to contact him.

Run Your Best Game Tonight

by Harley Stroh

Most of us have run adventures that sucked. Games that left the judge feeling deflated and exhausted, while the players stack dice and check their phones. Whether professional game designers, grognards of the highest rank, or wide-eyed neophytes running our first games, the only judge who can say he or she hasn't had an adventure that sucked is one that hasn't run a game.

The memories hang like albatrosses around our necks, reminders of flawed dreams and wasted hours. Our triumphs are short lived, but the memory of our failures is long: Which of my own games sucked? Why were they so terrible? And can I, just maybe, help some other judge avoid the same missteps?

Here are three stories of some of the worst games I've run over my thirty-plus years as a judge. For while I may or may not know how to write adventures that don't suck, I can certainly recall my own games that have.

Run Your Best Game Tonight

High school, rural Colorado. I had that one great session planned months in advance. My players had worked their AD&D PCs up to the 12th level range, cutting their way through (boring) scrubs, tracing the strands of the villain's web back to its unholy, dramatic center, just in time for …

… our group to break up and move on.

That one great session was never played, the dramatic reveals and reversals never took place, the masterful traps never sprung, the cunning villain – with his array of unusual powers and allies – was nothing more than notes on some college-ruled notebook paper.

There are a couple problems here; let's dissect them one at a time.

First: If you have a killer idea, use it. Life is too short to suffer through games that suck in hopes of the big payoff. You might run a thousand more games for your group, or this weekend's session might be the last before you all part ways. Run that great game tonight.

Many of us clutch tight to our "good ideas" for fear that another might not come along. We build campaigns around that One Cool Thing, never really trusting in our own creative spark. Use that great idea! Another one will come along. Prolific designers aren't more creative than the rest of us, they're just willing to put their ideas to use.

Take *DCC #67: Sailors on the Starless Sea*, a 0-level adventure that has served as many gamers' introduction to the Dungeon Crawl Classics RPG. We could have gotten away with kobolds raiding merchant caravans, maybe a small cave complex with hints at a greater threat looming in the shadowy backstory. We could have written a safe intro adventure, a way for PCs to get their feet wet as the players to orient themselves in a new system.

Or we could plunge the players (and their judges!) into the deep end, pitting their PCs against a horde of ravening beastmen, unique chambers brimming strange magics, and a chaos lord, waiting to be reborn. During the months that we worked on Sailors, we poured every cool idea, puzzle and threat into the adventure, hoping that – even when PCs died – they'd do so attempting something cool.

As an intro module, Sailors is fairly ludicrous. Yet every judge should ask him or herself one question: At the end of the night, do you want your PCs to have overcome tedium or to have survived something truly miraculous?

As players we struggle with tedium every day of our real lives. Give us the chance to do something miraculous. Cut straight to the awesome, and see who is standing once the dust settles.

* * *

Back to my doomed campaign. I had made a second, far more offensive mistake by planning the PCs' story in advance. I had robbed the players of any agency, replacing it with an experience I thought would be cool.

Like a lot of young judges, I had wanted to give my players an epic story arc, the RPG version of whatever series of fantasy novels I was reading at the time. But, like of lot of young judges, I hadn't considered the medium. A game where the players' choices don't make a difference and villains don't react? That's not even an RPG; that's a script, read aloud by half the actors to an audience of one – the judge.

RPGs are about freedom. It is the judge's job to set up epic stakes, but it is the players' job to decide how, why and if their PCs will tackle the challenges set before them. Respect your world enough to let it unfold in response to the PCs' actions. Just as life is too short to play games, it is also too short to be led around by the nose by your game master.

Looking back on that ill-fated campaign, we all would have been luckier if it had ended sooner.

Know When Not to Roll the Dice

Grad school. I was running a house-ruled, all-samurai version of L5R for what would eventually become a four-year campaign. Wounds were Kurosawa-punishing; once injured a PC quickly entered a death spiral where weakened actions lead to more failure.

The rules played out as intended. One of our principle PCs was badly injured in a battle and forced to flee on horseback, riding through the night to escape a band of assassins. He lost his pursuers in a rainstorm but, still wanting to put more distance between himself and their shurikens, leaped to a fresh horse mid-gallop.

Being wounded, of course he failed the check. Our samurai missed the saddle and fell to the mud, and was probably churned by hooves for good measure. The PC went from badly wounded to unconscious. This cycle (heal slightly, get beaten back to unconsciousness) would repeat for the next three sessions.

For emphasis: The poor player spent the next 12 hours playing an unconscious PC. Of all my adventures that have sucked, this must be the worst.

I can still recall my rationale to this day (albeit with a guilty heart): a wounded person, heavy with gear, suffering from blood loss, shock and hovering on the edge of unconsciousness, has no business jumping from one horse to another. The outcome was fraught with risk and by no means certain; a roll was certainly in order.

But why? Would the dramatic tension have been heightened if he had succeeded rather than failed? Or, in the grander scope of the game, was it meaningless, a ruling enforced in a misguided attempt at verisimilitude?

For while I may or may not know how to write adventures that don't suck, I can certainly recall my own games that have.

While my rationale may have been fair, the test was horribly wrong. The attempted action had no bearing on the game; the failure did.

It's easy to imagine a different scenario, where a wounded PC was being hotly pursued by ninjas and attempts a desperate gambit to lose his talkers. The call for a roll would have been entirely justified, given a PC's life hung in the balance. But without that pressure – and possibility of a reward – all that remained was the chance for punishing failure.

Another example. In some published adventures I have made the unforgivable error of assigning Strength checks to break down doors. Again, the rationale is a fair one: Smashing down a door isn't a given. However, unless the action can net some positive or negative result, the call for the roll is meaningless.

If the PCs were pursued by a horde of nightmare beasts and needed to get through the door, now, this would be perfectly acceptable; something would be at stake. Or perhaps if each attempt risked alerting wandering monsters, the decision to smash down doors would be a risky and foolish one.

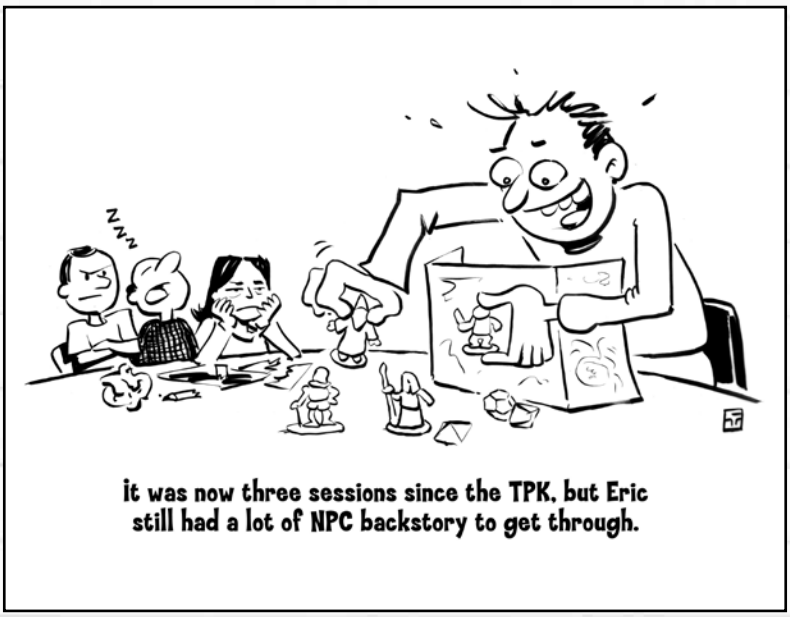
But when neither of these elements are in play, and I'm asking players to repeatedly roll Strength checks, waiting for some magic number to come up? That's a waste of everyone's night.

In both instances – running and writing adventures – I forgot that the real rules engine at the heart of any RPG is the children's game

of "Let's Pretend." Dice are a tool that are only useful for adjudication when something meaningful is at stake, and the outcomes are uncertain. If you don't need to roll, don't. Every judge should feel free to shake off the shackles of mechanics, and adjudicate results based on his or her own common sense (and the shared reality of your fantasy world), only calling for rolls when needed, rather than as the default.

For players, this is incentive to be creative, thoughtful and engaged. Dice are random and the opportunity for horrible results exists due to nothing more than bad luck. In a game with critical failures (like the DCC RPG) a horrible result will show up on average once every twenty rolls! It is far wiser to conceive a plan so brilliant and airtight, that the risk of failure is slim or non-existent.

Players, take this to heart: When a judge asks you to make a roll, you've already ceded control; when the warrior rolls his first to-hit die, he's already abandoned all other tactics in favor of bloody, deadly combat. Do you want to trust your fate to a d20? If not, come up with better plans.



And as judges, we can reward PCs for their cunning. Sometimes, the PCs win. And sometimes – when PCs play well enough – they shouldn't need to roll.

Thoughtful, creative, and engaged players? That's a game that doesn't suck.

The Suckiest Game of All

In the wake of these admonitions (and the advice from the august authors in this tome), a fledgling judge would have every reason to feel intimidated. With so much that can go wrong in any game – and so much of it beyond your control – how can a new judge hope to get it right?

One last case study: Mid-2000s. I was running sessions of DCC for Goodman Games in a convention center outside some mid-western city. Sunday morning rolled around and my 9:00 AM game was a no show. Fifteen minutes pass and still no players. When you're a guest of honor and no one shows up to play your game, the post-con deflation sets in early.

I rolled up my maps and was trashing my handouts when a young boy and his grandfather struck up a conversation, thankful for a place to sit. The boy was five or six, and had a bag of plastic dinosaurs he was marching around the table. I sat back down with my bag of dice and we start playing dice-war-dinos, where the bigger dinosaur got to roll a bigger die, and the winner was challenged by other dinosaurs in a sort of prehistoric King of the Hill.

The impromptu game was nothing more than choosing figures and dicing off. Anyone could say, objectively, that it sucked. But it mattered to the kid, and was way better than no game.

So here's last not-so secret to running games that don't suck: Run Games.

Jump in the deep end. Tackle way more than you can handle. Run every chance you can, in a dozen different systems and a hundred different worlds, and find the ones that sing to you. All of us were novices once, all of us had never run a game before, all of us ran adventures that sucked. But even a game that sucks is better than no game.

If you ignore everything else in this book, do this one thing. Run more games, and your games will improve.

Encounter: "The Oracle"

by Harley Stroh

The pair of iron doors are crusted over with a chalky green rust that seems to accumulate at the seams. The doors are decorated with hammered silver plates depicting great worms or snakes with human heads. Strangely, the silver plates show no sign of tarnish or age.

Dwarves, metal smiths and their ilk recognize that the "rust" is not due to normal conditions but are unable to identify the cause. The encrusted doors are readily opened with a stout pull or blow, releasing plumes of green vapors that wash over the PCs, stinging the eyes, searing the lungs and leaving both stone and metal (though not silver!) pitted and frosted over with a chalky-green stain. Characters that inhale the vapors suffer 1d12 damage, and see the briefest flashes of their future (+1 to one future saving throw of the PC's choice).

Read or paraphrase the following:

> *Beyond the doors is wide circular chamber, some 30 paces across. The center of the chamber is dominated by a stone well, waist-high, twice as wide, and capped with a heavy silver grate. Dense green vapors waft from below.*
>
> *Behind the well is the shape of a massive humanoid figure seated atop a large palanquin or throne. The figure and throne are fused, entirely covered in the chalky verdigris-rust. A thick green pedestal squats beside the frozen figure; atop the pedestal is a king's ransom in fiery gemstones.*

The figure was once a fearsome giant king. Seeking to divine his doom, the regent placed himself directly before the well, resolving not to leave until his future was revealed. The stubborn king never realized that he was staring upon his own death the entire time. Since succumbing to the acrid vapors, the giant king and his throne of divination have slowly petrified, replaced by the chalky green rust.

Careful examination reveals that the ceiling directly above the well is pitted and deep-set. The pervasive green vapors slowly eat away at both stone and flesh, but for unknown reasons both silver and gemstones are immune.

This slow process is far more than cosmetic: the acrid vapors have entirely consumed the stone supporting the flagstone floor. Any object weighing 10 lbs or more and coming within 15' of the well causes the chamber floor to give way – first, immediately adjacent to the well (pitching the well, throne and gems into the abyss) and then, the remainder of the chamber.

Characters caught in the collapse are cast down into the chasm below. The pit is 200' in depth, bisected by a series of hardened crystalline webs spaced roughly 20' apart. The GM should call for a series of saving throws: characters succeeding on the first throw catch themselves on the first web, 20' down, suffering a mere 2d6 damage. If the PC misses the first web, he would fall an additional 20' to the next web, potentially suffering an additional 2d6 falling damage. The webs continue the entire depth of the pit. So a character that missed the first two checks but caught himself on the third web would fall 60' feet and suffer 6d6 damage.

Characters fighting from atop the webs suffer a -3 penalty to attack rolls and their AC. The walls of the chasm are deeply pitted, permitting even non-thieves to climb at a rate of 10' per round. A character struck by an attack while atop the webs must succeed on a saving throw or pitch 20' down to the next web, suffering 2d6 falling damage.

Lurking at the base of the pit is the Oracle, a 50' long centipede with the torso and head of female giant. She is also the source of the vapors, exhaling visions of doom with every breath. Enslaved by the giants, she has bided her time until this very moment. With the collapse of her prison's ceiling, she quickly scales the pit walls at a rate of 50' per round.

Mad from centuries of imprisonment, the Oracle's first aim is to escape the chamber. She attacks PCs as she passes them on the climb, but only stays to fight if she cannot force her way past the party. Each round the Oracle may attack with any of its dozens of clawed legs (two attacks per PC adjacent to her body) and exhale a plume of acrid

green vapors, 15' long and 5' wide. Characters caught in the cloud must succeed on saving throws, or suffer 2d12 damage and receive a vision of their own doom (+5 to one saving throw of the PC's choice). The doom saving throw bonus can only be gained once, no matter how many times the PC suffers the Oracle's attack.

The Oracle's scaly hide is slick with her condensed, acrid breath; while normal weapons inflict regular damage, the weapon also becomes increasingly pitted with each blow. With each successful strike there is a cumulative 15% chance of the weapon breaking. Magical, silvered and gemstone weapons are immune to the Oracle's acid, and a successful attack with a silvered weapon automatically inflicts a critical hit.

Characters surviving the release of the Oracle may or may not think to recover the giant king's gemstones (lost with the collapse of the chamber). Those searching the base of the chamber find 3d100 gemstones among the rubble, valued at 10 to 50 gp each.

Finally, the blood and saliva of the Oracle can serve as a great boon to prophets and seers, who will pay dearly (as the GM determines) for the gift of true divination.

THE END

Harley ran his first adventure at the age of 8, when goblins killed his father's thief in the Caves of Chaos. Since then he has written nearly 50 adventures, sourcebooks and short stories, but remains hopeful the next one that will finally be good. He is grateful to every judge that has ever run one of his adventures; you guys are the ones that make these words alive.

The Risk vs. Reward Equation

by Jim Wampler

Writing good role playing game adventures is hard work, and don't let anyone tell you it's not. Creating a well-written adventure is not just a matter of writing elegant prose or crafting an exciting character arc or building good game design mechanics. It's an elusive amalgam of all three, a steely alloy of drama, excitement, and complex theatre of the mind. We all know it when we see it. We have fun running and playing in a particular adventure, and the memory of it lingers. Years later, we still tell tales of that mind-blowing adventure to one another.

It's in the remembrances of these especially exciting game adventures that we find the true coin earned by playing in them — bragging rights and a good story. Being creatures whose entire language is based upon metaphor and storytelling, this is not unusual, but it is important. In role playing games, the thing that is "won" is the quality of the story that can be told about it afterwards.

So what quantifies a good story to be oft retold? Entire books and master theses have been written on the subject, but generally we can define it as Joseph Campbell's "The Hero's Journey." But you don't need to be a scholar or an author to recognize a good game story. We all define it for ourselves instinctively, and do so at every game convention we attend or local game store we visit, when a fellow gamer regales us with his latest character story.

It's in the remembrances of these especially exciting game adventures that we find the true coin earned by playing in them — bragging rights and a good story.

Do we find that story engaging, or does it bore our collective socks off?

It depends. In the game session being recounted, is the story a linear progression of great feats that were easily accomplished by all-knowing characters, leading to the inevitable defeat of a

semi-competent adversary? That's a boring story, and we have all suffered through them. Or was the tale one of a series of game events that at each point resulted in near disaster, but also at each turn unexpectedly veered into victory through clever strategies or the last-minute desperation of all involved? Cannot an exciting story even be constructed around the in-game events that resulted in total defeat for the players?

Such is the stuff of good storytelling and the vital underpinning of good drama. If the rewards (a good story) are weak, and the risks (an actual chance of failure) are low, then the result is a boring story. We didn't "win" much in that game session. This is not theoretical. We metaphor-loving primates crave a story that surprises us in its overall arc, twists and turns, and outcome. This is, in fact, why players experience some games and some adventures as more exciting than others.

What not to do

Before we begin, let's quickly review what not to do with the following suggestions. This is not a how-to guide for creating "rock falls, everyone dies" adventures. No one enjoys those, or enjoys them for very long. The entire premise presented here is that with greater risk comes greater reward. There still has to be a viable chance for smart and thoughtful players to triumph over adversity, and when they do so don't forget to build in the reward, both in terms of a fantastic story and in more tangible rewards for the player characters.

So onto practical advice for constructing a compelling role playing game adventure, using the risk vs. reward equation. Consider the dangers and complexities with which you plan to entertain your players as slider bars on an adventure creation soundboard. You never want those slider bars all set to maximum, for playing out a scenario in which death and destruction is assured is of little entertainment value (Call of Cthulhu players not excepted). Nor do you want your challenges for the players to be paltry and easily overcome. Knowing your players and where their tastes lie will be a factor in your calculations, to be sure, but what I'm suggesting is a near universal principle — the higher the risk, the greater the perceived reward. What follows are a few specific suggestions that have always worked for me.

Potential TPKs at the front and back

I prefer to position potential total party kill scenarios at the front and the back of my adventures. Everyone expects the adventure to end with a big boss fight that risks the whole party's lives, but beginning the adventure with an extremely lethal scenario has a way of getting everyone on their toes and playing smartly right away. And that is most of what I mean by "potential TPK" — merely a first scenario that requires more than a modest amount of strategy, intelligence, and player cunning to overcome without catastrophic losses. After all, a nearly defeated party of PCs can always leave, retrench, and come back to the entrance as a smarter and wiser group. Determined players always do. Consider this a "you must be this high to ride this ride" sign parked right at the entrance to your adventure.

Give the players chances to kill themselves

Sprinkle your adventure with situations in which there are deals too good to be true, magic items bound to cause internal party strife, and plenty of opportunities for the unwise to strike a blow for foolhardiness. Easy examples include potent magic items that come with heinous side effects that do not affect the owner, complex and temperamental artifacts that blow up if mishandled, or "The Lady or the Tiger" choices.

These golden opportunities for your players to fully explore Darwinian natural selection need not be limited to complex situations. Sometimes the simplest tricks are the most memorable afterwards. An innumerable number of PCs have gone on to meet their makers in one of my adventures that simply starts with a wide open door to a darkened interior. Granted this unguarded and seemingly easily accessed entrance opens directly into a sheer 50' drop, but you would be amazed at how many times a player simply announces, "Well, I'm going in."

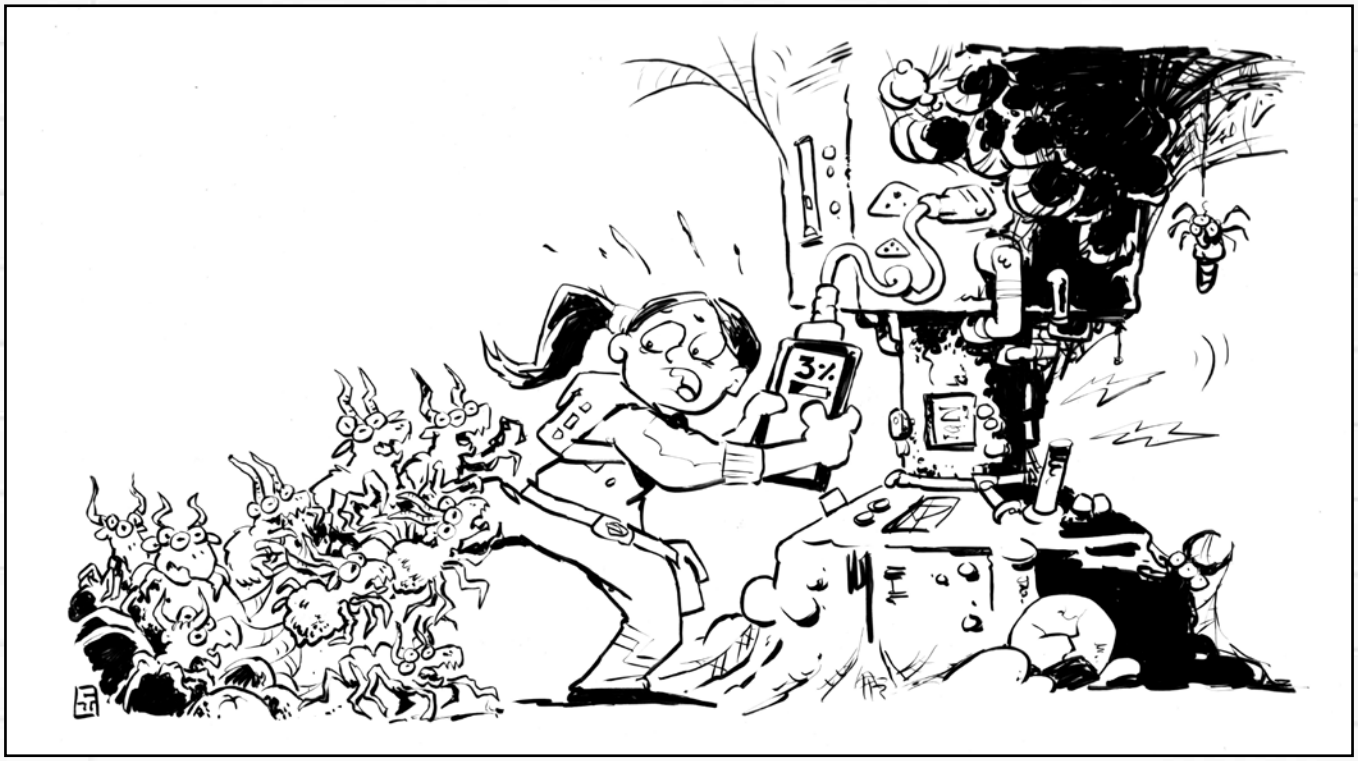
A well-armed recurring villain

Nothing gets the players more stirred up than a bad guy they can chase through a dungeon or over multiple adventures. As a judge, this one can be tricky to pull off. A villain played as intelligently and thoughtfully as a PC can make

a worthy serial adversary for the players, but be prepared to tack your sails on-the-fly during the adventure. An all-powerful villain who always escapes at the end is not interesting. A powerful bad guy who the lucky or intelligent players somehow manage to kill instantly can happen too. Be prepared for that.

The secret tends to be in the setup for the villain. He or she should use their minions effectively, especially as cannon fodder, and as a means of causing resource attrition among the party of PCs. Your villain should not stand out in the open firing off spells and magic items while making himself a giant target for the PCs. This guy didn't get to be the head of a huge evil organization by being that stupid. Your villain should have contingency plans for his contingency plans. Basic villain preparation should include secret back doors, teleport magic items, and the ability to whistle in re-enforcements if a combat starts to go pear-shaped for him.

Don't be afraid to get inside your players' heads. Vile insults, questionable choices in food, drink, and dress, unsavory proclivities, and hostage-taking are all basic pages out of the bad guy playbook. The more your players hate this villain the sweeter his eventual comeuppance will be.



Bring the epic

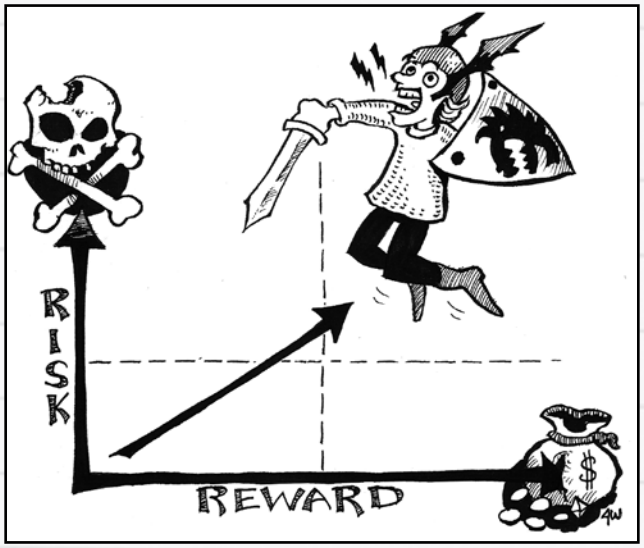
Making an adventure extra memorable by making it extra epic is an often misunderstood skill. Commonly referred to as "cranking things up to 11," remember that if you set everything to 11, then 11 becomes the new 1. What we're talking about here may seem, in many ways, to be no more than the window-dressing of an adventure. But an otherworldly ambiance or an unexpected paradigm shift can really suck the players into an adventure in ways that a merely larger or more powerful adversary cannot.

Let's start with a concrete example. Your players are looking for a specific treasure. They've been told that the item is called "The Eye of God," and among its many powers it is said to convey "ultimate knowledge" upon all who behold it. The PCs have accumulated clues that the treasure lies inside a cave guarded by primitive tribesmen. The PCs can try and take out the whole tribe to get into the cave, negotiate with the tribesmen, or any variation in-between. So far, so typical. But when the PCs finally enter the cave and are suddenly asked to start making saving throws versus fear or run back out babbling, things start to percolate a little more. When the remaining PCs finally get a chance to see "The Eye of God" and it turns out to

be a Plexiglas porthole showing only the endless vista of deep space, only then do they realize "My gods. We've been on a spaceship THE ENTIRE TIME!"

Now you've made the adventure epic for your players. Throw in some choice loot in the way of technological weapons and you're done.

Bringing the epic may seem to require genius levels of creativity, but I'm here to tell you that it just isn't so. Of all the adventure writers and game creators that you know and admire, you have one thing that none of them have — your unique history of consuming fantasy and science fiction books, movies, and TV shows. All you need to do when sitting down to create your own epic adventure is to channel your own unique media consumption history and place chunks of it into your own adventure. Picasso said, "Good artists borrow, but great artists steal." Steal your adventure ideas from everything you've ever seen. Take one premise and twist it into another. Take two disparate ideas and genre-mash them together into something new and unexpected. Think like you're a Hollywood suit pitching script ideas in an elevator to studio execs. "The big bad is an intelligent xenomorphic dinosaur. It's Alien meets Jurassic Park." This method may sound ludicrous and even tawdry, but of such stuff legendary adventures have been forged.



Using playtesters as collaborators

This is the best and oldest adventure writing trick that I know. Everyone writing adventures for publication or other distribution to the public knows the importance of play testing those adventures multiple times in public, primarily to spot and correct any flaws in the adventure design. But there is an advanced old school adventure creation technique that dates back to the birth of the hobby, one that we can all take advantage of and use.

Have you ever run a partially-written adventure for your players and have them make a beeline for the one door with nothing behind it yet? Most of us have been there. Experienced judges usually have a wide palette of stall tactics to use on these occasions. Typically, the players sense that there's a reason for the sudden stalling, and often erroneously assume that it must be because there is something really fantastic behind that door. They then become all the more determined to penetrate its mysteries. If you listen carefully to the group discussion as rampant speculation about what could possibly be behind the one door that the judge clearly doesn't want them to go through, you will inevitably hear some of the wildest and most creative ideas imaginable. Listen, pick one, and go with it. In the playtest session, this will immediately validate the players, who "knew that was it all along," while perhaps supplying you with a much more exciting idea than you would have come up with on your own. You then incorporate that idea into your adventure manuscript and one more room — one filled with wildest imaginings of your players — is done, and often better done than it would have been otherwise.

Risk vs. reward

Hopefully the toolkit provided here will assist you in adding greater risks, and therefore greater rewards, to your next adventure. If you think of your own personal all-time favorite published adventures, chances are that most if not all of the above methods were used in its creation. We tend to revere our favorite RPG writers, but remember that they, like you, started out with a blank manuscript in front of them. Using these suggestions, you can write someone's all-time favorite adventure too.

Encounter: "The Caprapod Nursery"

by Jim Wampler

The following encounter presents the possibility of two gradually escalating threats, an especially creepy version of a standard monster, the threat of a TPK, and the potentially massive reward of recharging all spent power cells possessed by the party.

The Caprapod Nursery — *While the hallway leading here was obviously crudely dug out by the caprapods (spider-goats), it exits into an underground ruin comprised of a vast circular chamber over 50' in diameter. The ceramic tile walls are festooned with hundreds of spider-goat eggs in various stages of maturation, with each egg oriented so that it receives warmth from the pulsing Quantum Particle Collider reactor throbbing in the center of the room. There are two other exits from the room, but they are obviously caved in with dirt and rocks and are blocked.*

For each round the PCs spend in this room after the first, 1d12 spider-goat eggs will hatch, releasing tiny hungry spider-goat hatchlings that will swarm and hungrily attack the party.

Caprapod Hatchlings (Spider-Goat Babies): Init +2; Atk bite 1 point (DC 5 paralytic poison 1d2 rounds); AC 10; HD 1d4 HP 2; MV 30'; Act 1d20; SP poison; SV Fort +0, Ref +2, Will +0

Quantum Particle Collider Reactor: Complexity Modifier 14.

The QPC reactor has been running automatically for centuries, and is covered in spider-goat droppings and webbing, looking quite ancient and worn. A PC attempting to understand how to manipulate the controls must make a DC 14 INT check. Any PCs successfully attempting to understand the device will be able to manipulate the control settings to increase or decrease the power output — including setting the device to maximum output, shut-down mode, or even meltdown mode. A PC who understands how to successfully manipulate the controls will not know the results of each setting without experimentation. Failed artifact checks results in the controls being set to a random setting (roll 1d12).

If the room is diligently searched and a successful Luck check made, there is a leather rucksack found webbed up in the southeast corner of the room. The sack contains 2 c-cells, a dazer pistol, a pouch with 4 radshots, and 4' long lead control rod. There is a receptacle in the control panel that will accept the control rod. If the rod is inserted into the panel, the PCs gain a +4 on their artifact check rolls. Note that the lead control rod is quite soft, and if used as a weapon (1d5 damage club), it will become bent and no longer fit into the receptacle.

The plant also contains recharge sockets into which power cells of all types may be plugged for recharging.

Fusion Plant Settings	Result
1	Shutdown Sequence
2	Minimum Power Level
3	Power Level 2
4	Power Level 3
5	Power Level 4
6	Median Power Level
7	Power Level 6
8	Power Level 7
9	Power Level 8
10	Power Level 9
11	Maximum Output
12	Meltdown Mode

Shutdown Sequence - A chime sounds and an audible voice announces that the plant is shutting down with a countdown sequence. Plant shuts down in 10 rounds and cannot thereafter be restarted.

Minimum Power Level - This is the minimum setting to use the recharge sockets.

Power Levels 2 - Current setting. Warms room to 80 degrees F.

Power Levels 3-4 - These power levels cause the plant to audibly throb and pulse, and the room temperature to noticeably increase by 1d20 degrees.

Median Power Level - This power levels causes the plant's pulsing lights and sounds to alter in pitch and to become irregular in tempo.

Power Levels 6-9 - These power levels cause the plant to begin to vibrate and audibly groan. Temperature rises rapidly 10 degrees per round.

Maximum Output - This power level is now beyond the plant's ability to maintain its safety shielding. Plant leaks hard radiation (DC 12 Fort save or take 1d6 radiation damage) causing a burst of light and a 40 degree increase in temperature. This power level immediately kills all the spider-goat eggs and hatchlings within the room.

Meltdown Mode - Alarms sound and an audible countdown sequence begins. The QPC power plant will explode creating a 300' radioactive crater and vaporizing everything within that radius in 10 rounds. Once activated, this setting is irreversible.

THE END

Jim Wampler has been playing with himself for as long as he can remember. He has been fantasizing about heroes and heroines, and all the things they do, the stuff they wear, and often makes a mess doing it. Jim is currently a writer, editor, and occasional art director and layout monkey for Goodman Games. In addition, he makes a mean cup of coffee, throws a football like a girl, and dances like petrified spider. Jim has written several *Metamorphosis Alpha* adventures and as overlord of the Dungeon Crawl Cabal, Jim has also overseen a secret gaggle of semi-talented writers and artists who have created three DCC RPG tournament funnels for use by the Goodman Games Road Crew.

Player Character Death

by James M. Ward

I first heard the term "player character death" when I worked at TSR. Jon Pickens, an excellent editor, brought up the phrase as he explained to me that TSR (we) should never say that players died. He went on to explain that players don't die, player characters die. In that way no one *(read parents especially mothers)* gets upset at the thought of gamers imagining that players die during the game. I was, at that time, no stranger to experiencing important characters dying in fantasy duels to the death.

Worried about losing consumers today, the larger companies have spent years giving the characters more powers in the rules systems they create. In doing this they hope to keep players coming back to their game as those characters become super powered young gods marching through castle and dungeon, without a care in the world, as they know they won't be killed.

Much to my surprise, I have been branded a member of the "old school" because of my attitude of not minding at all when a character dies during a game. Most people think we "old school gamers" like to play games like we did in the '70s and '80s. That couldn't be further from the truth. We Old School designers and players primarily want a good story with our gaming. We don't care if we die and when we do we want to rush back into that scenario with a different character and succeed on the second try without dying. When I played in Gary's game I didn't roll dice to see if I picked a lock or found a trap. I role-played what I was doing to uncover that trap or open that difficult lock. The exact same thing applies to character death.

I was lucky enough in 1974 to learn to play D&D with Gary Gygax on his home porch. That very first session, I rolled up a magic user character. I was first level and was adventuring with a group of fourth level characters that included Ernie, Gary's son, Brian Blume, and a few friends of Ernie. We were going to adventure to Kong Island as Gary was playtesting an adventure of his. I had the choice of a *sleep* spell or a *light* spell. After pro and con advice from Brian Blume, I took the *light* spell. During the course of the nighttime adventure I cast the spell into a large grass hut and woke up twenty warriors. I ran for my life, only to be killed by six thrown spears. My character died. I didn't cry. I didn't stop wanting to play. Eventually, that character was raised by a *wish* spell that Ernie had on a ring of three wishes.

Today, the largest rpg companies all strongly urge DMs to not kill their player's characters so that players don't get frustrated with the game. I am, and always have been, since my first days designing products, totally against the "not killing" concept. In fact, however unjustly, I'm known as a game master that delights in the TPK or Total Party Kill when I referee games at conventions. My renown in wanting to kill all of my player characters couldn't be further from the truth though, as I go to great lengths at the beginning of every one of the games I referee to warn players to be careful with their characters. Learning from the words of Gary Gygax, I feel the possibility of character death is necessary to promote the best in game play. The tension of worrying about the life of your character brings great joy to the game play. Gamers must be more careful as they move through encounters in order to keep their characters alive. I try hard to instill in the minds of the players that if their character dies during the action, they didn't do as good as they could of in playing the game correctly.


"Got the bastard!"

If the concept of character death is removed from the table of possibilities a whole mass of role-playing chances are also removed. It's fun to think ahead and plan to resist death. The loss of hit points can be forestalled through the use of healing potions or the spells of clerics. Death can be negated through the purchasing of powerful spells and the use of awesomely powerful magical devices. However, getting the use of those things takes planning in their own right. Taking more time in the planning and executing of adventures is a worthwhile effort that can aid in survival. Using flunkies to help in dangerous battles and positioning yourself for attack and defense is also part of the survival game. These solid role-playing concepts are rarely used if you aren't worried about character death.

Along the same lines, the concept of "fairness" is vital in the game play of the role-playing experience. During play, the characters must feel they had a chance or a certain amount of frustration builds up as they feel cheated. I have literally DMed hundreds of convention games and thousands of home grown games. Only once in the late '70s was I ever accused of unfairness. That single experience completely changed the way I ran and even today design adventures. In my games there are always warnings of the dangers ahead. Out of the game, I always warn the players they need to be careful before they start the adventure. I try to instill in the play that role-playing often involves talking instead of fighting. All of my game designs build in opportunities to talk to foes in attempts to bargain with them. I also have a vivid memory in another play test of facing Hell Hounds, Fire Giants, and a Red Dragon all in the same Gygaxian encounter. We complained bitterly about the unfairness of the challenge. Gary's answer was, "Why didn't you run when you saw what you were facing?" He had a point.

TSR in its heyday did a ton of marketing research on how gamers liked to role-play. The company discovered some interesting concepts. 8-9-10 year old players loved to bash down the door, slay the monstrous challenge, and grab the treasure. Those younger players gave little thought to their characters, being more interested in the fighting and treasure acquiring experience. When their characters died, they could easily roll up another character and begin again. 11 year olds and older were interested in the politics of the game and liked dealing with powerful adversaries ending in their player characters building their own castles and gaining power in cities. The challenges kept them playing and character death wasn't a game ending occurrence for the older player either. That was the experiences of the '70s, '80s, and '90s.

Somehow that concept was lost in this "modern" age of gamers and today's marketing wisdom says the players don't stick with the game if they experience character death.

When I played in Gary's game I didn't roll dice to see if I picked a lock or found a trap. I role-played what I was doing to uncover that trap or open that difficult lock. The exact same thing applies to character death.

While in Gary Gygax's games characters died, there were numerous ways provided to get around that concept. In one adventure where he was play testing a Fire Giant's complex that same wizard character of mine had his body eaten by the giants. I learned I needed to have a *simulacrum* spell ready for that situation. Our characters in that same campaign could go to the clerics of the city of Greyhawk and get our characters raised if we had the body. There was also the wizard's black tower where *clone* spells could be purchased at great expense or a *wish* could be used to revive us at great magical item expense. In short we eventually didn't worry about dying because there were lots of magical ways to come back. However, we had to prepare for those and work toward gaining the resources for those effects.

It can't be denied that dying is always extremely inconvenient. A player has to sit out a chunk of the game night and not collect experience and treasure. No one wants a character to die when great expense is paid in getting a high cleric to raise the character's body or a powerful wizard usually wants powerful magic items to use a partial *wish* spell for that revival. Then there is the attention such acts bring. "Oh, he was rich enough to have his body raised from the dead. Let's rob his home tower for treasure." It's no wonder wizards put their lonely towers on difficult-to-reach cliff faces high in the mountains.

Another way to not worry so much about character death was to play more characters. In Gary's campaign and campaigns Gary and I played in at the time, we always had three or four characters being developed at the same time. I was always encouraged by Gary to role up vastly different types of characters. In playing these different characters I learned different styles of play. Wizards don't take to the front and fight as front line characters. Clerics should be healing during a fight and not necessarily striking at the foe. I learned what a thief had to do in getting behind a foe to backstab them. My level of interest increased because I was taking up different challenges with each character. Some of those characters died, but I had others to play.

The bottom line is that a character dying is not a bad thing, but one more in a list of many experiences that enhance the role-playing effort.

Encounter: "Smallish Chamber of Doom"

by James M. Ward

In the early days of D&D I had the extreme pleasure of writing material for TSR, long before I came to work there. I used a character called Monty Haul in my stories that appeared in DRAGON magazine and the STRATEGIC REVIEW before the DRAGON was born. That Monty character did everything in excess to the extreme. As time went on in the D&D community, the term Monty Haul dungeon was a not so pleasant phrase for designers who weren't making balanced games. Every time I heard the phrase I just smiled. I hope you do the same when you read this.

Penned by Monty Haul as interpreted by James M. Ward:

. . .the original Monty Haul presents one of the little rooms in his dungeon. The encounter was a quick idea he had on a sunny day when he was painting up a couple hundred treasure chests for his next miniatures battle. . .

Creeeeeeek!

The ancient bronze door loudly protested its opening after a thousand years of peace and quiet. It took a week just to get past all the magical traps

and locking curses on the portal and the long magiced corridor before the cursed door. The wizard dearly hoped his time spent was worth the effort. His enchanted lights revealed a smallish chamber filled with wrist-thick spider webs. A close inspection of the corners and ceiling of the room revealed two, long, long dead human-head-sized spiders. Their dried, shrunken husk bodies would harm no one, at present. He closed the door behind him. It wouldn't do to have his flunkies and the mercenary band he hired follow him into the small room. Some treasures weren't meant to be shared. Unknown to him, the closing of the door activated all of the curses and traps in the area outside the door. Many of his mercenaries and flunkies died in the next few heartbeats.

The center of the chamber held the prize. A silvery chest lay bolted to the floor. Routine tests revealed the only magic in the chamber was on, in or near the chest. Beside it were two skeletons with thousands of gnaw marks on their bones. A flash of his hand turned the bones to less than dust. If his prize was what he thought it was, these two could have gotten in the way eventually. Focusing on the chest with intensity learned from centuries of practice, in a matter of minutes mystical traps, mechanical dangers, geared traps of destruction, and awesomely powerful curses were easily negated by the magics of the wizard. He'd been adventuring for several hundred years and the working of such magics to safeguard his life became common place after a while. The chest opened at a flick of his telekinetic finger.

The radiance of the Gem of Antania filled the chamber. Picking up the fist sized, glowing amethyst, the wizard felt its arcane energy filling his body. Almost instantly, he physically became a man of twenty again. Aged muscles became full and strong. Long gray hair turned lustrous and richly black. His stooped back straightened and the wizard's eyes focused, becoming clear and sharp. The aches and pains of age washed themselves away with the power of the gem. The scars of a thousand battles vanished, becoming smooth skin in the blinding radiance of the magical artifact. The wizard held the gem high over his head and exalted as the chamber filled to bursting with the magical healing and revitalizing energy of the amber light. He was now an immortal. With this gem on his person, he'd walk the land a new god. Never having to eat, never knowing pain again, never taking damage from sword strokes that would instantly heal, he was unstoppable. There was nothing to hinder him now from ruling this world and every world in every dimension. Time became meaningless. He would live forever.

The revitalized spider fangs ravaged him in the neck and ankle. Easily bowling him over, the gem fell out of his hands and back into the chest. The lid, as it had done at least two times before, down through the ages, slammed shut blocking off the healing energy. The two, no longer withered and now hundred pound, revitalized spiders, danced on his body and injected him several more times with numbing, magically revitalized venom. The magic of the gem made him strong, but seemed to do nothing about the effects of spider venom paralysis.

The wizard lay there quite magically alive as the two spiders sucked all the blood out of his body. On the first day, he'd hoped his followers would rescue him. He heard their attempts to open the door, but he soon realized the magics of the portal had reset when he closed it behind. They just weren't strong enough to get back in. The gem's power kept him alive for well over a week as the hungry spiders resorted to ripping strips of his flesh away when the blood was all gone. The wizard learned he could see magically after they ate his eyes out. Finally, when he was little more than a skeleton, much like the other two now-dust victims, the magic of the gem ebbed away from his bones and he died. It didn't matter; he'd gone insane several days ago. The venom paralyzed him, but did nothing to stop the pain of being eaten alive day after day.

Hi, I'm Monty Haul. That was my chamber you just read about. It's just something I cooked up to take the smile off of any twentieth level character who thought they were too tough for a single room. I've killed quite a few characters with those spiders.

Some might think that giving the party an immortality gem is a bit much in a RPG campaign. I never thought so. There are so many ways to make characters really regret they have such a gem. Walking around with a gem like that revives your foes as well as your friends. Walking through a battlefield causes the dead to rise

up and lots of those dudes aren't happy at being woken up from their restful sleep. You can't imagine the look on a player's face as some type of magical sucking area in the dungeon takes the magic out of an immortality artifact. The look of the great loss of regenerative power is worth seeing several times a month.

Some gamers have actually used my name in serious vain as they commented on the incompetence of this or that DM. I've listened for years to such comments, always wondering if their critiques might be a tad misplaced.

Giant Venomous Spider

Size: Large
HD: 9 (d8)
Move: 40 ft. / 20 ft. climb
AC: 16
Attacks: Bite (1d8 + paralysis venom), Sticky Webbing
Special: Twilight Vision
Saves: Physical
Intelligence: Animal
Alignment: Neutral
Type: Animal
Treasure: None
XP: 240 +5
As soon as the spiders are revitalized they attack the person with the gem. They are silent assassins and smart enough to attack from surprise at the back of the victim. The creatures are a little larger than a basketball and weigh several hundred pounds.

Unusually resistant victims get attacked with webs from two different directions.

Invisible Stalker

Size: Large
HD: 8 (d8)
Move: 30 ft./ 30 ft. flying
AC: 17
Attacks: Slam (4d4)
Special: Darkvision 90 ft., Natural Invisibility, Improved Tracking
Saves: Magical
Intelligence: High
Alignment: Neutral
Type: Extraplanar
Treasure: None
XP: 540 +8
Stalkers are mostly claws and fangs. The demonic humanoids are always invisible. They have no problem attacking the backs of victims.

Smallish Chamber of Doom Entrance

The entrance acts like a magical cleansing feature. As a magic user walks through the entrance all of the spell scrolls they have on their person are negated. The entrance does nothing to magic items and the memorized spells of spell casters.

Smallish Chamber of Doom Anti-teleporting Feature

Magical teleportations both in and out of the chamber cannot be done. This includes the function of teleportation devices, teleportation spells, opening portal enchantments, and the abilities of arcane creatures.

The Chest

The silvery metal of the chest is adamantine. The walls of the chest cannot be broken or smashed in by any force.

Treasure Chest Enchantments

1 – Regenerating Disease

There is a magical disease on the chest that flows over the hands of anyone touching the chest. The disease grows on the body of the toucher. In one day it begins doing a hit point of damage a day until cured. On the second day the infected victim is constantly dizzy. On the third day the victim is wracked with coughs and can't cast spells or hold a sword.

2 – Telekinetic Chest Lid

If ever the magical gem of the chest fell to the floor, the magic of the chest pulls in the gem and closes the lid. This resets all of the other traps.

3 – Death Curse

The curse kills the opener of the chest unless they make a magical avoidance roll.

4 – Magically Locked Lid

There are magics on the lid that prevent it from being opened.

5 – Magic Fireball

Reaching into the chest causes a fireball to explode in the chamber for 55 points of flame damage.

6 – Magic Used on the Chest

Whenever magic is used on the chest, that action summons two invisible stalkers to attack the being using the magic.

Treasure Chest Device Traps

1 – Twin Swinging Blades

Touching the chest causes two huge swinging blades to swing out on either side of the chest. The blade inflicts 10 points of damage if it strikes.

2 – Liquid Fire

If the chest is successfully opened, a burst of flammable liquid spurts from all of the walls into the area of the chest. Another burst lights up the liquid for 25 points of fire damage on the first combat round and 10 more points of fire damage in the next 1d6 combat rounds.

3 – Poison Needle Trap

The lock has a poison needle trap. If it isn't avoided it injects killing poison into the character.

4 – Poison Dagger Trap

The lid of the chest has a spring dagger that ejects when the lid is opened. The dagger does 1d4 points of damage and the poison is deadly to the touch if an avoidance roll is not made.

Gem of Antania

The magical gem does much more than regenerate the flesh. Exposure to the gem takes a body back to the time when it was most healthy. As long as the gem is out, the magical effect keeps beings from dying or taking physical damage. It works in a 10-yard sphere around the gem holder. If a living being is not holding the gem, its magical properties do not function for all of the beings in the area.

Beings under the influence of the gem do not need to eat, breathe, or drink, but may if they wish to.

Beings under the influence of the gem cannot have spells influence them unless they want the spells to do so.

Devices or monstrous abilities that chop off body parts do not function on beings under the influence of the gem.

THE END

James M. Ward on James M. Ward

I had the distinct pleasure of learning how to play *D&D* on Gary Gygax's side porch in 1974. Gary must have seen some spark in me because he allowed me to try my hand at writing *Metamorphosis Alpha*, the first science fiction role-playing game. I went from writing MA to writing *Gamma World*, the first apocalypse role-playing game. Over the last forty years or so I've written many RPG things with my latest being the *77 Lost Worlds* RPG campaign setting. Goodman Games has been kind enough to revive the MA intellectual property and now there are lots of MA adventures and accessories to enjoy; and I thank them for that.

Tell a Story

by Skip Williams

The best role-playing adventures have stories underlying them, and these narratives tie all the adventure's elements together into a whole that's greater than the sum of its parts.

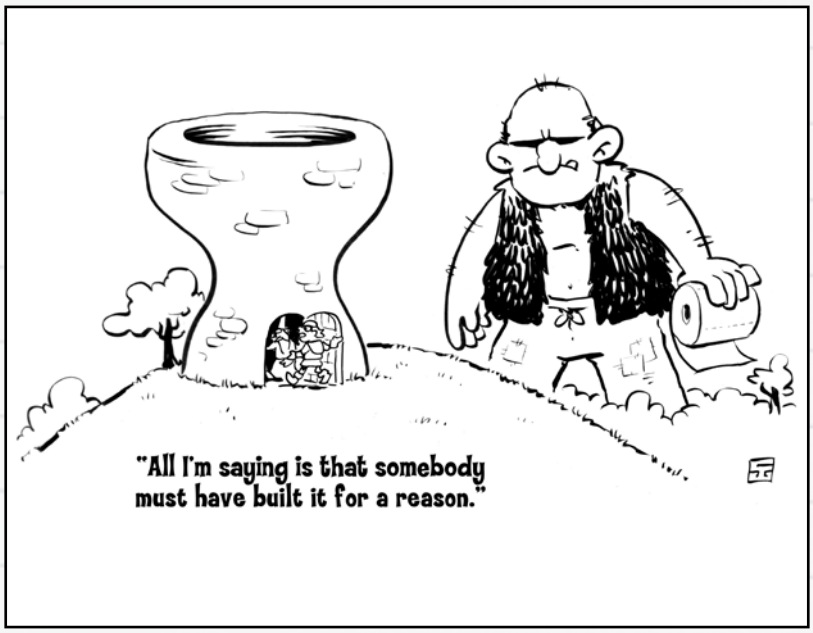
For some groups, the story takes center stage and everything else: the rules, the dice, and even the player characters is subordinate to the story. That's a fine way to play (when the group is up to the challenge), but not the only way. I'm here to talk about how to use story as a tool to add depth and flavor to an adventure no matter what your playing style.

I Like Games With Lots of Action! Why Should I Bother With Story At All?

Because even a simple story can do great things for your adventure:

- A story anchors your adventure to your game world.

- Everyone (and everything) in the real world has a story, the tale of how we came to be where we are and what we're doing now. Some of these tales prove thrilling or entertaining, others not so much, but all explain a great deal about who we are. If you take some time to consider how places, things, and creatures in your adventure came to be were they are, doing whatever they're doing, and in the conditions they're currently in you'll go a long way toward creating the illusion that your group has become involved in something that's vital and ongoing and that the adventure's outcome will have a genuine impact on your game world.
- It helps you deal with the unexpected.
- If you've spent some time considering how the situation in your adventure came to be the way it is, you can use that knowledge to craft a response to anything your players decide to do. You might not always be able to craft the perfect response every time, but you'll have a response that makes sense because it fits with your adventure's past and present.



- It provides a springboard for further adventures.
- Once you've determined how your adventure came about, it's fairly easy to imagine what consequences might arise after the adventure concludes. Consider not only new challenges and opportunities for your player characters, but also for non-player characters—even for characters your players haven't met.

Building a Story

You can create a story in any number of ways; however, when you're building a story to support an adventure it's helpful to consider the classic elements that make up any story: who, what, where, when, why, and how.

For creating an adventure, I recommend choosing a single key element that will become your adventure's focus. Pay special attention to your key element and use the remaining elements to support your primary focus. For example, the classic fantasy role-playing adventure is the dungeon crawl. A dungeon crawl is all about the dungeon and that makes "where" the key element for the adventure. Once you have that, consider the other elements in support: When was your dungeon built and when? How was it constructed? Who built it and when? Why was it built? Who lives there now, when did they move in and why? It's not necessary to create a great work of fiction here. It's not even necessary to create a complete narrative; all you need do is fill in the blanks in a logical and inventive manner.

For example, let's say you're sketching out a small dungeon that you expect your group to explore in a couple of sessions. You've got a tangle of corridors, several rooms of various sizes, and a staircase. There's a fairly large central chamber with a number of smaller, satellite chambers. What's the story here?

We have the adventure's site (the dungeon), but where is it exactly? A lonely, rocky crag is always nice. Why there? Perhaps this dungeon is the underground level of a small castle that once stood near the crag's summit. The upper works are now just rubble covered in trees and brush. Let's also suppose that castle was once part of a series of watch posts defending a road (now

vanished) through a frontier. The place was never really intended to withstand a siege, but rather as a strong point that would be hard to take by storm and that could serve as a base from which patrols could fan out over the countryside. After a war shifted the frontier, the castle fell into disuse and slowly crumbled into ruin.

How long ago was the place built and abandoned? It had to be several centuries ago at least, because stone fortifications tend to last awhile.

How was it built? From stone quarried nearby, most likely. The quarry might or might not be active in the present day.

Who built it? Likely it was a local warlord, general, or government official. Perhaps it was a royal officer, acting on instructions from a distant king. Perhaps the ruin is now at the far reaches of a current duchy and the original builder was an ancestor of the current duke or duchess. It's possible that some of the local commoners have ancestors who helped with the construction.

What about the current residents? The place seems like a good lair for a group of evil humanoids, something that can lurk in the ruins at the surface and have something nasty going on down below. Hobgoblins fit the bill here. Perhaps these hobgoblins are a splinter group from a larger tribe, out to make a name for themselves. Such a group should have a memorable leader. Let's say the lead hobgoblin is a fighter called Chogti.

How is Chogti special? Let's also say that he has masterminded several raids on merchant caravans, local settlements, and even on another hobgoblin band. Chogti's hobgoblins have absorbed the other hobgoblin group. The survivors now chafe under second-class status at the ruins. Many of these hobgoblins would escape or betray Chogti if they could. The newcomers, however, also have the opportunity to become full members of the group if they serve Chogti well. The same hobgoblins who would run or turn on Chogti also have a reason to heroically defend their new master. Which option they choose would depend on what opportunities arise.

At home, Chogti's hobgoblins are stealthy, organized, and busy recruiting partners too formidable to conquer. Trolls and ogres are the traditional hobgoblin allies, and perhaps this group has managed to attract some of both. Even with that kind of backup, though, hobgoblins aren't much of a threat to an experienced group (leaders with a few class levels notwithstanding). So, who might someone like Chogti choose as a key ally? It should be a creature that can help the hobgoblin leader accumulate the power and status he craves without posing a threat to his rise. Every fantasy group needs a spell-user, and perhaps Chogti has found one. It would have to be someone who's confident and not at all squeamish. Enter Camelia, a wizard and vampire who has recently won her freedom of the vampire who made her undead. Camelia operates in a nearby town, but she keeps a backup coffin inside Chogti's stronghold. Though seldom in residence at the stronghold, Camelia is available to assist Chogti on about a day's notice, and the vampire has sent a cadre of vampire spawn to guard her spare coffin and to bolster Chogti's defenses.

Chogti also has recruited a small red dragon (to help keep his troll allies in line), a few harpies that he found hanging around the ruin when he moved in, and some dire wolves that serve as guards and mounts.

It's helpful to consider the classic elements that make up any story: who, what, where, when, why, and how.

All the elements in your story won't always combine to create optimal results in your game. That's not always a bad thing.

What are Chogti and Camelia up to? We've already seen that Chogti is shrewd and ambitious. He's likely to have his harpies and a few hobgoblins mounted on dire wolves combing the area around the ruin, seeking opportunities for raids or new conquests. Camelia is likely to keep a low profile, and probably only comes to the stronghold once every few weeks to check on her coffin or when Chogti sends for her. It's possible that Camelia uses her *domination* power to send some hapless people Chogti's way. The hobgoblin certainly robs such prisoners, and he likely also

holds them for ransom or ships them off to become slaves. If so, Chogti must also have some other ally or collaborator who transports and sells the slaves. For the moment, let's just assume that this particular villain is too far away from the site to have any role this particular adventure.

On a typical day, Chogti has a couple of harpies and dire wolves lurking on the surface along with the warriors from the newly absorbed hobgoblin group. Chogti remains underground, guarded by his most loyal hobgoblins and by the tougher monsters. Camelia's coffin lies behind a heap of loose rubble in a partially collapsed chamber. A vampire in gaseous form can access the coffin fairly easily, but anyone else would have to do a great deal of digging. Camelia's spawn mostly hide near the coffin, keeping an untiring watch, but they also move about the dungeon, alert for trouble.

Taking Stock

We've collected quite a few details about our dungeon and its residents, now let's take a look back at what we actually set out to do:

- Anchoring the story to the game world.
- We've added (or uncovered) quite a few historical details about the world, from hints of past conflicts (the shifting frontier) to political and economic upheaval (the vanished road and the neglected fortifications), to present day intrigue (Chogti's and Camelia's machinations). We've woven the adventure pretty tightly into the game world.
- Dealing with the unexpected.
- You never know exactly what players will do, but we've got a pretty solid foundation. We have enough background, both ancient and recent, to deal with players who want to ask questions or do research.
- We also know enough about the dungeon's residents to have them react in character when player characters come on the scene: We've already noted that the hobgoblins guarding the dungeon's entrance have plenty of reason to betray Chogti if they have the chance (through they also have a reason to act downright heroically if the opportunity presents itself). That's worth keeping in mind if the player characters start using charm spells.
- Once the characters reach the dungeon, Chogti certainly will mount a vigorous defense, likely aimed at wearing the invaders down and encouraging them to retreat. If the party does back off and return later, it's a good bet that Camelia will be on hand to help Chogti mount a fresh defense; however, we've already noted that the coffin Chogti guards is a mere backup. It's reasonable to assume that Camelia regards Chogti as a useful tool, but not anyone for whom she'd take any serious risks. If the going gets tough, Camelia probably will abandon Chogti to his fate. Before she leaves, however, she's likely to throw quite a scare into the party.
- Spring boarding further adventures.
- Our story provides plenty of leads for more adventures, especially if either Chogti or Camelia survive. Tracking down Camelia in her true urban lair could provide enough material for several gaming sessions. Likewise, Chogti could prove a thorn in any group's side if he manages to escape—he's not likely to meekly accept defeat. Even if the party eliminates the principal villains, there's that ancient road with its abandoned fortifications to explore. Finally, there's the network of slavers to deal with. Those beings, whoever or whatever they are, aren't like to simply abandon their trade just because they've lost one source of "product."

The Perils and Costs of Storytelling

Creating adventures with stories isn't all sweetness and light. First, building a story requires time and effort, and you'll need to take that into account when you're preparing. You'll also lose a degree of spontaneity in your games. Sometimes, it's best to just turn your players loose and let them create your plot. You can preserve some spontaneity by creating your story in broad strokes and attending to the details as you play. Finally, all the elements in your story won't always combine to create optimal results in your game. That's not always a bad thing. Not everything in your world has to be min/maxed to the hilt.

Some Dos and Don'ts

There's a right way and wrong way to use almost any tool, and story building is no different.

Choose Story Elements that Support Your Playing Style

You might just find that making up backstories for your adventures is a great deal of fun, and if you enjoy it, go ahead and spin whatever tales amuse you. It pays, however, to remember that you're preparing to run a game. Always include details that will impact the game in ways that your players are going to notice. Anything else you care to add is just icing on the cake.

For example, suppose your group is deeply immersed in roleplaying. The players have developed detailed histories for their characters and they always strive to make their activities in the game reflect their characters' personalities, values, and priorities. Your story should address all those elements. Perhaps some choice the players made in the past has led to the situation in your adventure. Perhaps your villain represents values diametrically opposed to what the player characters (even just one player character) believes or wants. Include things in your stories that test the values your players have created for their characters, plays on their fears, or tempts them to stray from the goals they've set.

If, on the other hand, your group prefers to just kick in doors and fight everything they meet, you can get away with much simpler stories. It still pays to consider what happened before the player characters arrived on the scene, but concentrate on things you know will come up in the game. Ask yourself relevant questions such as: What is villain's favorite weapon or tactic and why? Is there anything your group's foes might value over survival? What might they try to save or take with them if they're forced to flee for their lives? Are the bad guys smart and disciplined enough to have a detailed plan to defend themselves? Why or why not?

Always Remember that Your Story is a Tool, Not and End Unto Itself

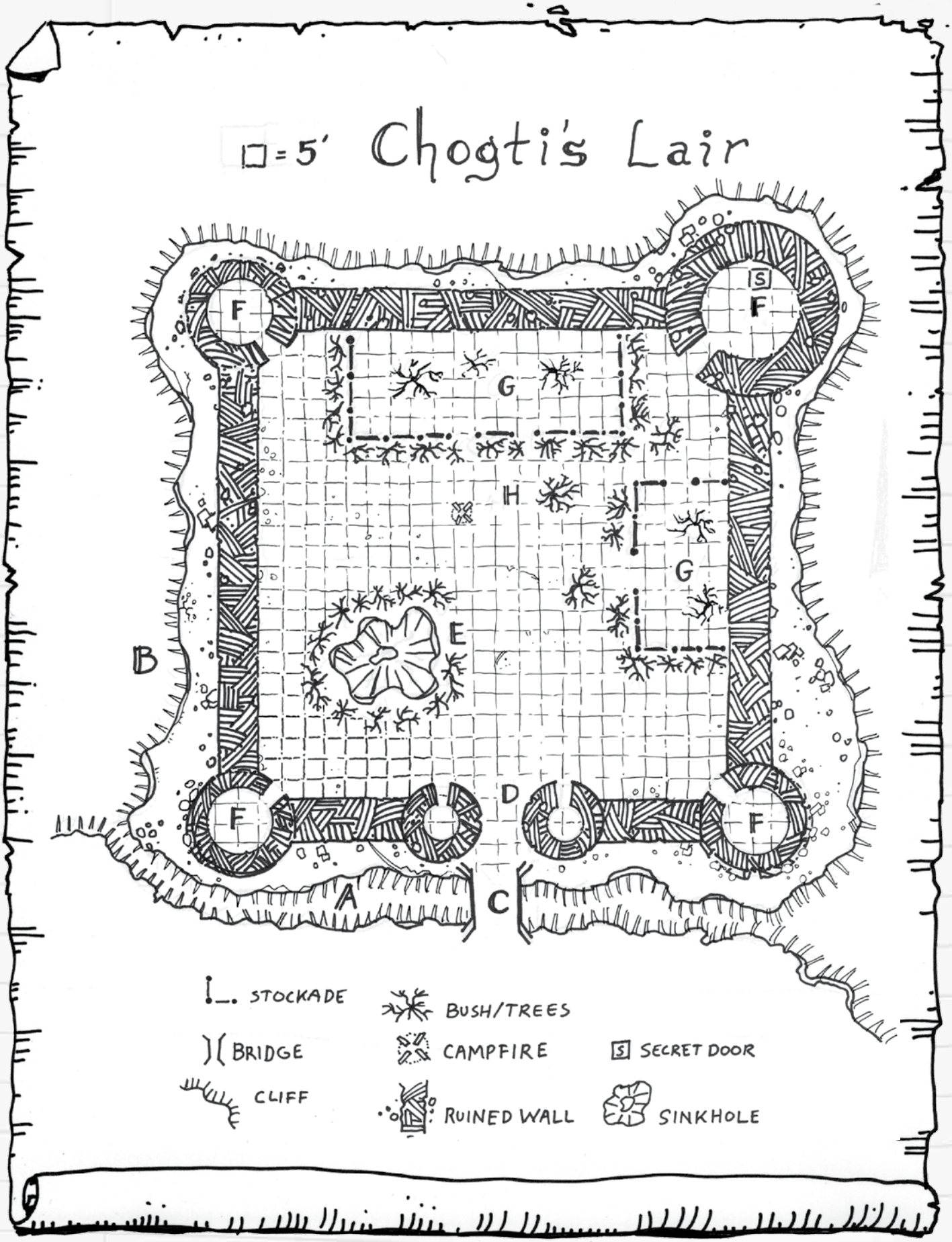
Your story provides a foundation that supports the adventure you're creating. Never presuppose an ending for any particular adventure's story. Instead, be prepared to let the players write the ending. It's fine to work in elements that can keep things moving if the action bogs down, but never try to force storyline onto your players.

Stay Flexible

While it's not a good idea to force the action, it pays to consider ways that your story can stay on course even if the players find a way to derail your plans. When possible, avoid stories in which the outcome can change dramatically with a single event (such as the death of a key villain), especially when that event can occur early in the adventure. If you can't (or don't wish to) avoid such possibilities, create a backup plan. This might come in the form of key subordinate who can step up and lead the bad guys, some alternate storyline that begins when the key event occurs, or a series of external events that grind on no matter what happens in any one game session.

Let Your Players Uncover Your Story—Or Not

A good story can help you create a great adventure even if your players never figure out exactly what's going on; nevertheless, it's quite satisfying when players sift through clues you provide and piece together the bigger picture. Knowledge and investigation skill checks are great for revealing such details, but they work only when the players actually remember to make the checks. You can feed some clues to your players simply by including the relevant details as you describe the encounters and events in your adventure. Avoid long soliloquies from mysterious strangers, talkative bartenders, and ancient journals that reveal key details unless your players overlooked some key detail and really need the help to get unstuck.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CAMPFIRE
S SECRET DOOR
CLIFF
RUINED WALL
SINKHOLE

Encounter: "Chogti's Lair"

by Skip Williams

Chogti's Lair: Upper Works

The ruin where Chogti resides doesn't look like much on the surface; it's pretty much just a pile of rock covered in brambles and small trees. The whole place rests on a rocky spire about 80 feet high. A winding path, overgrown with brush, climbs to the summit where the ruin stands. The castle walls and towers are only a fraction of their former height today because generations of local people have been carting stone from the ruin. This looting stopped only when the place became overgrown and the first monsters moved in. The curtain wall surrounding the place has been reduced to a grassy mound about three feet high. The towers, being slightly harder to pry apart, stand a bit higher, as noted in the sections that follow.

Chogti has managed to turn the place into a formidable lair. The hobgoblin leader spends his days in the dungeons below the wrecked upper works. He's left a mixed force up here to discourage visitors.

[[Insert: map: chogti's lair.png]]

A. Cleft

This natural break in the hilltop is about 30 feet deep, with crumbling rock and earth walls covered in woody shrubs. Its climb DC is 20. There are plenty places to tie off ropes.

B. Outcrop

This area rises 80 feet from the valley below, with decaying castle walls and towers on top. The cliff face is otherwise similar to the cleft walls in area A.

C. Bridge

The original castle had a wooden trestle over the cleft (area A) that gave access to the castle. The defenders could fire the bridge to deny attackers access if the need arose. The original bridge rotted away long ago. Chogti and his minions have created a crude replacement:

> The steep trail ends at a gap in the hilltop. The cleft is about as wide as city alley.
>
> Beyond the gap lies a pile of broken rock that just manages to look like a small castle. Its broken towers aren't much taller than two humans; what's left of the curtain walls is even shorter—not even as high as a dwarf. Stunted trees and climbing vines cover everything.
>
> A quartet of massive logs has been placed across the gap right where the trail ends, effectively bridging the gap. Daylight is visible between the logs. All the bark has been stripped (or worn) from the tops of the logs, and the exposed wood has weathered to a pale gray. Just beyond the makeshift bridge lie the remains of the gateway with two crumbling towers. An open courtyard, green with turf is just visible through the gateway. A light breeze rising from the valley floor carries the piquant scent of wood smoke.

The bridge is mostly safe to cross, though the logs are somewhat slick. There are no guardrails, and the gaps between the logs are about four inches wide. Creatures of at least Large size can cross without difficulty. Smaller creatures must attempt Balance checks (DC 12). Characters of Tiny to Medium size who fall while crossing the bridge put a leg through the gaps in the logs and are stuck until they can pry themselves out. This requires a full-round action and a DC 15 Strength or Escape Artist check. Diminutive or Fine creatures that fall slip through the gaps and fall 30 feet into the cleft (3d6 points of damage). As noted earlier, there's a great deal of vegetation growing in the cleft, but there's not enough to break a fall.

The smoke comes from the campfire at area H.

The harpy guards at area D keep a close watch over the cleft and the bridge.

D Gateway

Chogti has bid his minions to rebuild the towers here back up to a height of about 15 feet. A character with the stonecunning trait can notice the new construction.

A harpy archer always roosts in each tower. These guards keep out of sight behind the stonework.

Anyone taking a hard look at the tower tops can attempt a Spot check (DC 15, adjusted for distance) to reveal them.

If the harpies see anyone near the bridge or cleft, they quietly signal the hobgoblins at areas G and H that there are visitors, then hunker down to await developments. They hope that intruders will pass them by so that they can attack with their bows from the rear.

In a fight, one harpy sings and the other takes potshots at any convenient target, preferably a lightly armored one. If anyone succumbs to a harpy's song, the singer tries to lure the subject into the sinkhole at area E. Each morning, the harpies sing to the hobgoblin guards at areas H and G so that the guards gain immunity to the song for the day.

When roosted in a tower, the harpies have cover (+4 to Armor Class and a +2 on Reflex saves).

If unable to use their bows, the harpies take to the air and use their flyby attack feat to swoop toward foes and attack from 10 feet away with their longspears. The harpies rely on the extra reach they get from the longspears to avoid attacks of opportunity as they fly by.

E. Sinkhole

A few centuries of weather and neglect has opened this wide hole in the ground here. The hole is a bit more than 20 feet deep, with damp, crumbling walls. A thicket of trees and shrubs has grown up around it, and the hobgoblins have laid a mat of dirt and twigs over it, creating a covered pit. The hobgoblins also have added spikes at the bottom. Anyone who survives a fall into the pit can climb out (DC 20 Climb).

> **Camouflaged Spiked Pit**: CR 2; mechanical; location trigger; manual reset; DC 20 reflex save avoids; 20 feet deep (2d6 falling), multiple targets (first character in any adjacent square), pit spikes (attack +11 melee, 1d4 spikes for 1d4+2 each; Search DC 18; Disable Device DC 15.

F. Towers

These areas aren't much more than foundations filled with rubble. The largest tower at the northeast corner of the ruin contains a spiral stair concealed under a thicket of vines and young trees. The hobgoblins have created a hinged cover to conceal the stairwell. It takes a DC 15 Search check to locate it.

The hobgoblins also keep six long rolls of planks linked with skeins of rawhide in the northeast tower. They use these unusual objects to create a fairly stable roadway over the bridge (area C) when the need arises. They roll up the planking when they're not using the bridge. Each roll is 10 feet long, a foot in diameter, and weighs 325 pounds.

G. Ruined Buildings

Wooden buildings with stone foundations once stood in these locations. Today, there's little left except for the floors and the knee-high remnants of the foundations. These were made from small stones, mortared together, and the looters had little interest in them. Thickets of saplings and brush have grown up all around the wrecks.

The bulk of Chogti's guards use the two areas as barracks and guard posts. They've made crude huts from some of the saplings and have set small logs along the foundations to create crude stockades about four feet high. From a distance, however, both areas just look like overgrown ruins.

There are three hobgoblin warriors and two dire wolves on guard in each area at all times. Generally, two of the hobgoblins lounge about and the third keeps watch. The dire wolves mostly lie down next to the lounging guards. The lookouts keep an eye on the gateway (area D) for any signals from the harpies there, and on their comrades at area H. They also watch the towers and walls for anyone climbing over.

Most of the time, the guards set aside their heavy shields, which lowers their Armor Class to 15 but also improves their Hide bonus to +1. In battle, they hunker down behind their stockades and fire their bows for as long as they can get away with it. They have cover (+4 to Armor Class and a +2 on Reflex saves) while behind the stockades.

If forced into melee combat, the guards take up their shields and attack with their bastard swords. They try to meet the foe head on while the dire wolves circle to attack from the flanks and rear.

The guards have no love for Chogti and gladly would flee the area in the face of a determined attack. However, they also fear being slain out of hand while trying to escape or being captured again if Chogti should survive the attack. They'll fight until at least three of them are killed, and then call for a parley. If they can establish communication with a foe, they offer information in exchange for walking away alive. They have little information about the dungeons except for the location of the stairway in area F and the general composition of Chogti's forces (trolls, ogres, and hobgoblins much like themselves). They've heard rumors of a wizard who comes to visit (Camelia), but they have never seen her. They know the wizard has left behind some mercenaries or servants (Camelia's vampire spawn), but they keep to themselves. The hobgoblins on the surface think the spawn are just very agile humans. They've also heard it said that Chogti has some kind of fire breathing pet, but they have not seen it and they suspect that it's just a rumor Chogti planted to scare the trolls.

If the hobgoblins can't talk their way free from a pending defeat, they might try to climb aboard the surviving dire wolves and escape.

H. Campfire

Two hobgoblin warriors always keep watch here, and always with a smoky campfire burning. Chogti has placed them here to distract attackers and to tempt them into the ruin where the harpies at area D and the hobgoblins at area G can surround and annihilate them.

The hobgoblins are well aware they they're bait and they're none too happy about it. They keep the shields and bows handy at all times. If they notice visitors, they do their best to act like lords of the place, and try to invite the newcomers in for a chat, or for a duel. They don't much care which. In a fight, they employ tactics similar to those described in area G.

Harpy Warriors

CR 5
XP
Female harpy warrior 2
CE Medium monstrous humanoid
Init +7; Senses Listen +7, Spot + 3, darkvision 60 feet
AC 16, touch 13, flat-footed 19
hp 40 (9 HD)
Fort +5, Ref +8, Will +6
Speed 20 ft. (4 squares), fly 80 ft. (16 squares) (average)
Melee longspear +9/+4 (1d8/x3), or scimitar +9/+4 (1d6/18-20) and 2 claws +4 (1d3/x2)
Ranged longbow +12/+7 longbow (1d8/x3)
Space 5 ft. Reach 5ft. (10 ft. with longspear)
Base Atk +9; Grp +9
Atk Options Flyby Attack
Abilities
Str 10, Dex 16, Con 10, Int 7, Wis 12, Cha 17
Base Atk +9; CMB +9, CMD
Skills Bluff +11, Intimidate +9, Listen +7, Perform +5, Spot +3
Feats Dodge, Flyby Attack, Improved Initiative
Languages Common, Goblin
Possessions leather armor, longspear, scimitar, longbow, 20 arrows
Captivating Song (Su)

The most insidious ability of the harpy is its song. When a harpy sings, all creatures (other than harpies) within a 300-foot spread must succeed on a DC 16 Will save or become captivated. This is a sonic mind-affecting charm effect. A creature that successfully saves cannot be affected again by the same harpy's song for 24 hours. The save DC is Charisma-based.

A captivated victim walks toward the harpy, taking the most direct route available. If the path leads into a dangerous area (through flame, off a cliff, or the like), that creature gets a second saving throw. Captivated creatures can take no actions other than to defend themselves. (Thus, a fighter cannot run away or attack but takes no defensive penalties.) A victim within 5 feet of the harpy stands there and offers no resistance to the monster's attacks. The effect continues for as long as the harpy sings and for 1 round thereafter. A bard's countersong ability allows the captivated creature to attempt a new Will save.

Hobgoblin Warriors

CR 4
XP
Male hobgoblin warrior 4
Lawful Evil Medium Humanoid (goblinoid)
Init +1; Senses Listen +3, Spot+ 3, darkvision 60 feet
AC 17, touch 11, flat-footed 16
hp 26 (4 HD)
Fort +6, Ref +2, Will +0
Speed 30 ft. (6 squares)
Melee bastard sword +6 (1d10+2/19-20)
Ranged longbow +5 (1d8/x3)
Space 5 ft. Reach 5 ft.
Base Atk +4; Grp +6
Abilities
Str 14, Dex 13, Con 14, Int 10, Wis 9, Cha 8
Feats Alertness, Exotic Weapon Proficiency (bastard sword)
Skills Hide -2, Listen +3, Move Silently +2, Spot +3
Languages Goblin
Possessions chain shirt, heavy wooden shield, bastard sword, longbow, 20 arrows

The End

Skip Williams started running role-playing games in 1975, shortly after meeting a fellow named Gary Gygax. Before long, Skip joined the original TSR, Inc. as a part-time employee and later full time as director of the GEN CON game fair. For many years, Skip penned the Sage Advice column for DRAGON magazine, answering questions about game rules and sharing tips and techniques for keeping a campaign running. He's the co-creator of the *D&D* 3rd Edition game and an avid miniaturist.

How to Design Setbacks That Don't Suck

by Steve Winter

A typical role-playing adventure confronts characters with a series of escalating challenges. The characters narrowly overcome each challenge, one after another, on their path to the climactic finale. This story structure lines up with the hero's journey, in which the protagonist faces a series of trials, and with classical myths such as the twelve labors of Hercules. It's well suited to the episodic nature of role-playing games, where the story is strung across many sessions. Each session might be thought of as a chapter in the ongoing story, with the length of individual chapters depending mainly on how much time players have to spend around the table at each gathering.

This story structure, however, is only one of many, and a fairly unusual one at that. If it was drawn on a graph, it would look like a line that rises gradually from left to right, or maybe like steps rising to the right. Most novels, plays, movies—most fiction of every type, in fact—takes a different approach. More commonly, the protagonist's path to the climax isn't a string of small, steady triumphs climbing toward ultimate victory; it's a string of setbacks or outright defeats along the road to the eventual climax.

Examples are easy to come by.

- In the *Odyssey*, many of Odysseus's trials come about because of failures or human weakness on the part of Odysseus or his men. They are captured by the cyclops Polyphemus through carelessness, and Odysseus's pride in revealing his real identity to Polyphemus leads to trouble with Poseidon later in the journey. His sailors' greed leads them to open a bag containing the east, north, and south winds, which blow his ships far off course. Later, when his starving sailors kill and eat the sun god's cattle despite being warned not to, Helios's desire for revenge leads to all of their deaths; only Odysseus survives to reach home.
- In *Game of Thrones*, characters too numerous to list spend long stretches of the story fleeing or in hiding from the consequences of failure. And they're the lucky ones; the unlucky ones die in battle or are murdered.
- In the crime stories of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, heroes like Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe tend to take one step backward for every two steps forward. They routinely get lied to, misdirected, tied up, beaten, and arrested for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Sometimes they encounter so much adversity that it feels more like two steps backward for every one step forward.
- In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo and Sam's entire trip to Mordor is a Hail Mary play. After Rivendell, almost nothing goes well for the Fellowship, to the point where every character in the story assumes or suspects that all hope is lost until the final moment when, against all odds, the ring is destroyed through the action of the biggest wild-card character in the tale.

Role-playing Setbacks

In fiction, even though adversity might be deeply felt by readers, it's still something happening to someone else. The victim is a fictional character who the reader cares about but is consciously separate from. That separation doesn't exist in a roleplaying game, where the identities of players and characters are intertwined. In an RPG, it's personal.

When the GM heaps too much adversity on characters, players can feel as if the gamemaster is picking on them. Players need to trust that the GM won't abuse them simply because he or she can. That type of trust grows from experience; a GM who's never abused players in the past probably isn't abusing them now, no matter how bad things look, and players who've never been picked on by a familiar GM are more likely to trust a new or

strange one (at a convention, for example).

Assuming, then, that the GM has the players' trust, the question becomes how their characters can be hammered with repeated setbacks, defeats, and failures without causing the players so much frustration that they stop enjoying the game.

The path ahead isn't always clear. Sometimes, it's laced with costly choices: situations where, to achieve one goal, characters must give up on accomplishing a second goal that might be almost as important.

Every imaginable type of setback has been thrown at characters in fiction. Not all of them are suitable for use in a role-playing situation. Some are too tough psychologically for a game that's supposed to be enjoyable (no GM with any humanity, for example, would subject a cherished player character to the type of torture that was inflicted on Theon Greyjoy in *Game of Thrones*, and no player should be asked to put up with it), some are too dependent on unpredictable player reactions, and some just lose their emotional punch when translated into numbers at a gaming table.

That still leaves a lot to work with.

A Menu of Setbacks

Physical Obstacles. The first broad category of setbacks involves physical obstacles of any kind: a mountain pass that's blocked by an avalanche, a harbor with no ships willing to sail where the characters need to go, a bridge washed out by rain, or a door that turns out to be locked, barred, blocked, magically sealed, and cursed.

These types of setbacks are more frustrating than dramatic. Use them only if the characters could have avoided the problem by being smarter, quicker, or more cooperative. For example, if characters were warned that snow was falling in the mountains but they chose to spend an extra day in town betting on the flumph races anyway, then it's their own fault the pass is snowed in and impassable when they reach it. That's a very different case from characters who hurry into the mountains only to find the pass obstructed by the GM's whim or by a roll of the dice. Players are likely to see the "justice" in the first situation and interpret it as a dramatic consequence of their action. Players in the second situation can't do much more than say "oh well, screwed again," and reroute their trip.

Even then, the obstacle needs to present a dramatic opportunity. A simple delay isn't dramatic unless time is pressing.

Mundane Problems. A closely related category is mundane problems: rotten supplies, mutinying sailors, horses that refuse to enter the Griffonwald, or the only guide who knows the trail through the Haunted Slough being lured to his doom by will-o-wisps. Everything said about obstacles applies equally here. If characters put an unsupervised NPC in charge of buying their supplies, or they buy from the shady merchant who promised to supply "the exact same goods for 25 percent less," then they have no one but themselves to blame when the rations in the bottom half of the crate turn out to be inedible.

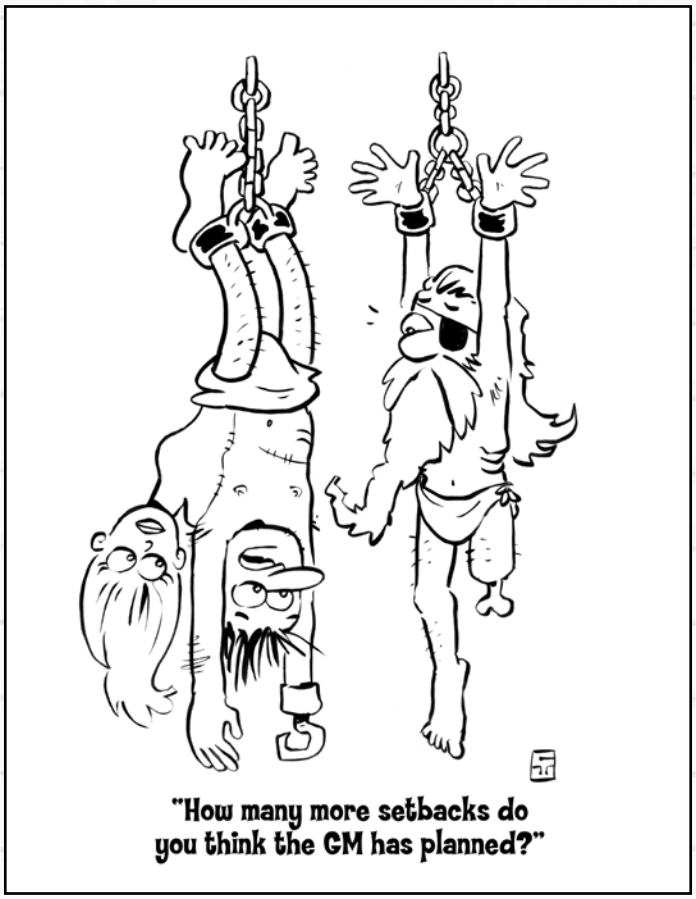
The common thread woven through these first two categories is that bad luck isn't dramatic, but comeuppance is. Bad luck is simple melodrama. It can occasionally inject some excitement into a story—the best-known example being Raymond Chandler's advice that, when things get dull, have a man burst into the room with a gun in his hand—but it has nothing to do with the plot, the characters, the villain, or their actions.

Unbeatable Foes. Another variant on the impassable obstacle is the unbeatable enemy. This is a step up in dramatic terms because players have a choice: they can recklessly charge into combat and take whatever punishment comes their way, they can turn back and look for a way to bypass the enemy, or they can retreat and look for a way to shift the odds in their favor. The third option is the most dramatic, because it creates a situation where characters can heroically beat the odds. It might be as simple as preparing the right spells before the fight, or as complex as performing a quest to uncover the "unbeatable" enemy's secret weakness.

This is an even better setback if the enemy's strength isn't known (or is only suspected) until the characters are soundly defeated and forced

to run with their tails between their legs. Being forced to spend time lying low, possibly hiding from pursuers, healing injuries and rebuilding stocks of potions, scrolls, or other ammunition before they can even consider taking up the fight again, is a fine way to make players understand their characters took a real drubbing and fill them with a desire to even the score.

Arriving Too Late. It's exciting when heroes arrive just in the nick of time to save the hostage, prevent the gateway to the Abyss from opening, or stop the countdown two seconds before the missile launches. It can be even more dramatic if they arrive just too late. As with the snowed-in mountain pass, the ideal situation is when characters might have reached the scene in time if only they hadn't dawdled or taken that detour.



With that in mind, this type of scenario needs two things: a clear deadline that the characters are aware of and plenty of distractions along the road. The more compelling those distractions are, the better. Taking time to pick the lock on a chest that might be full of gold and rubies is tempting, but it's hardly the characters' top priority when the world is in peril. Taking time to save the life of an innocent person who's threatened by a monster or by agents of the villain presents a real quandary when greater evil hangs in the balance. When seconds count, any delay can be enough to trigger awful consequences.

Pyrrhic Victory. Sometimes, victory and defeat are hard to tell apart. Winning a battle so hard-fought that characters are too weak to push on to their goal is almost as bad as losing it, because the prize that victory should have placed within their grasp is still unreachable.

Partial Salvation. When a quest holds the promise of solving all the heroes' problems but turns out to solve only some of them, or to solve known problems but also create new ones, that's a partial salvation. The mystical *Sword of Ice* turns out to be broken; the new king is a bigger tyrant than the old one; the Wizard of Oz is a phony.

It's important not to break promises when obstructing the characters with a partial salvation. If a reliable ally told them the *Sword of Ice* was intact, they'll be justifiably angry when they find it in pieces. If the omens were silent about its condition—or if it's found intact but then shatters the first time someone uses it—they're more likely to be dramatically shocked.

A Severe Beating. Whether it's a literal beating or a metaphorical one, the villain's intended message is "back off now or pay the price." The real message is that, from the enemy's viewpoint, the heroes are getting too close to their goal and the villain feels threatened. While characters congratulate each other over how well they've put the squeeze on the bad guys, they might lose sight of the fact that the bad guys know where the characters are and what they're up to. A heavier punch is coming, and if characters don't take steps to protect themselves, the next one is really going to hurt.

A Crucial Ally is Killed or Captured. This type of setback happens so often in *Game of Thrones* that it's hardly worth listing examples; watch any random episode of the televised series and you'll see it in action. If the ally (or mentor, or family

member, etc.) is killed, it's really just a more dire twist on getting a beating. If the NPC is captured, then a potential rescue mission sets up a side quest or a new direction for the adventure. Either way, the NPC needs to be someone who's integral to the plot or whose loss will be a blow to the characters' plans or composure.

The same idea can be used with almost equal force against a crucial object, such as a magic item, a book of arcane lore, a piece of evidence, or a prototype of a breakthrough technology that would have given characters the edge they needed against the enemy. In this case, the item might be stolen by someone other than the enemy—a regular (or superlative) thief who saw an opportunity to turn a quick profit and seized it.

Betrayal. Instead of being killed or captured by the enemy, a trusted ally can turn out to be the enemy. A famous example of this from D&D is the character Kitiara, from the *Dragonlance* Saga. She began the series as a member of the original troupe of characters but partway through, jumped to the enemy and quickly rose to become a Dragonlord herself.

Aside from the emotional shock of betrayal, this comes with the added setback that the traitor knows all the characters' strengths, weaknesses, hideouts, and plans. The most carefully laid campaign of attack can be utterly derailed by a well-timed desertion to the enemy. Even more rewarding to the crafty GM is that indignant player characters will scour Heaven and Earth to get revenge on the betrayer.

Between a Rock and a Hard Choice. The path ahead isn't always clear. Sometimes, it's laced with costly choices: situations where, to achieve one goal, characters must give up on accomplishing a second goal that might be almost as important.

Film noir abounds with these situations. Consider Sam Spade's final predicament in *The Maltese Falcon*. He's bound by an unspoken code to catch his partner's murderer. When that murderer turns out to be the woman he loves, Spade is forced to choose between his honor and his happiness. He chooses honor, knowing that without it, the happiness wouldn't last anyway, but role-playing characters in the same situation might make a different choice—or they might find a third option the GM never imagined!

"There's a Reason Why the Villain is Called 'Master'." The architect of all the characters' troubles didn't rise to the pinnacle of villainy by being careless, foolish, lazy, or impetuous. In addition to his own sane or insane genius, he might have demons, oracles, or a supercomputer advising him.

When players work together, they're capable of devising brilliant plans to bring down the villain's scheme. But an arch-villain is always one step ahead. He might not foresee every avenue of attack, but he'll guard against most of them and have counterstrategies of his own. If the characters' best plan of attack runs smack into a cunningly prepared defense or even an ambush, they'll be forced to fall back on Plan B (or come up with one on the spur of the moment).

This type of setback must be used with care. Player creativity deserves to be rewarded, but the reward doesn't need to be 100 percent success. If the characters' brilliant plan is foreseen and undercut by the enemy, the reward for the players' innovation may be that their plan produces a Pyrrhic victory where a lesser scheme would have failed entirely or ended in catastrophe.

The Situation Is Worse Than Anyone Knew. In fact, the situation in most role-playing adventures is always worse than characters suspect. The full extent of their misunderstanding can come as a major shock and deal a severe setback to their plans, if it's handled correctly.

This type of twist is especially popular in horror games like *Call of Cthulhu*. Each evil plot the characters foil is an important step in the right direction, but ultimate success is elusive. Unraveling one conspiracy inevitably reveals hints of a deeper, darker, more insidious plot beneath—possibly one so insidious that even the masterminds of the first plot were unaware they were pawns in a scheme beyond their imagining.

Patron Gets Cold Feet. The final item on our menu of setbacks is the patron who suddenly has second thoughts about the whole operation. Adventurers usually have someone powerful or important behind them: a king or other member of royalty, a wealthy merchant or industrialist,

a town burgher, or a subsector duke. As setback piles on setback—the villain seems to always be one step ahead, allies have been murdered in their homes, foes seem unbeatable, even the good guys' few victories have been horrendously costly, and the whole situation has gotten far worse than anyone imagined it could—normal folk like their employer can buckle under the pressure. That's when a politician or a merchant may decide that running away, surrendering, paying up, or just not fighting anymore is the best course of action.

At that point, characters must decide whether they'll give up the fight too, try to persuade their patron to stick it out just a little longer, or push forward on their own, without backup. These are the moments that make heroes.

Building On Failure

It's vital that these setbacks serve to amplify drama in the adventure and not just delay characters, frustrate players, and make the GM feel powerful by making characters powerless.

Setbacks have a curious effect on human psychology. Some people accept every reversal as a challenge and rise to meet it with fresh determination. Others shrink from failure, lose energy, or give up. The hard-charging heroes and devil-may-care rogues we play in RPGs fall into the first group, but not every player does. Odds are, your game group contains a mix of personalities. If they aren't accustomed to meeting serious setbacks in their role-playing, they might need to be "broken" to this idea gently. Start small, be alert to the players' reactions, and learn from every situation. Eventually they'll learn that you can lose battles—you can even lose every battle—and still win the war. The most exciting role-playing sessions happen when everyone feels as if they're teetering on the brink of catastrophe, only to triumph in the end.

Encounter: "Lair of the Chokebats"

by Steve Winter

This encounter is best suited for a cavern or abandoned mine, but it can be placed in any disused underground or sealed chamber. It should have restricted exits, such as self-closing doors, narrow shafts, or holes in the ceiling that characters must climb through one at a time to get in or out.

Chokebats are an animal/fungus hybrid. They have bumpy, roughly spherical bodies ranging in size from several inches in diameter (like a cantaloupe) to as much as 2 feet (like a beach ball). Their bodies are essentially bladders filled with gas that's slightly lighter than air. Stubby, spiny wings fold tightly around the body until the chokebat takes to the air. Then the wings unfold, allowing the chokebat to glide silently, to use its wings like sails in a breeze, or to propel itself with a clumsy flapping. Chokebats spend most of their time clinging motionless to the walls and ceilings of dark spaces, like sleeping bats. Unfortunately for adventurers, they're drawn like moths to the light and warmth of torches, lanterns, candles, and fires. Magical lights don't attract them.

One chokebat is harmless, but a swarm can be deadly. The gas in their bodies is also poisonous, and it's released when the chokebat is cut, stabbed, crushed—or when it dives into a fire or flame. Even the largest chokebats are notoriously fragile; a single point of damage or successful attack kills one and releases its noxious gas. Because they make their lairs in enclosed spaces, a fight against chokebats can quickly fill the air with poison.

When characters first enter the chokebats' lair, the walls and ceiling seem to be covered by fungus. After a minute (or immediately, if curious characters poke or prod the unfamiliar fungus), 1d6 chokebats launch themselves into the air and start flitting around any flames the characters brought with them.

Initially, the chokebats are harmless. If characters keep a low profile, the number of chokebats in the air increases so slowly that characters might not notice—another 1d6 per minute as characters quietly explore the chamber is appropriate. If characters kill one of the creatures, it bursts open with an audible "pop" and they notice a

slight, unpleasant odor but no other ill effect. If characters do something loud or startling—knock over a table, bash open a chest, shout, sweep a bunch of hibernating chokebats off a cabinet or door—or if they kill more than one chokebat, then a frenzy begins.

When the chokebats go into a frenzy, hundreds of them launch into the air. The exact number isn't important; it's a swarm that fills the chamber. They flap crazily everywhere and crash into characters. Everyone in the chamber takes minor damage (1d6 in D&D-style games) from lacerations caused by the spines on the creatures' wings.

If characters have any open flame, such as torches or candles, one chokebat dives into each flame and burns to death every round. If the flame is inside a lantern, a chokebat will dash into it hard enough to break the glass and get at the flame. Keep track of how many chokebats are killed. When the tally reaches 10, characters need to start making Constitution saving throws at the start of their turns. The DC equals the number of chokebats that have died. Anyone who fails the saving throw takes 1d6 poison damage and is debilitated by the poison (gains the poisoned condition in Fifth Edition, or has a –4 penalty on attacks and ability checks in other d20-based games). The debilitation lasts until characters get into fresh air unpolluted by chokebat gas.

And it gets worse. For every additional five chokebats killed, the damage from a failed saving throw increases by 1d6 (15 dead = 2d6, 20 dead = 3d6, etc.). When the number of dead chokebats reaches 20, they are so frenzied that they begin killing each other at the rate of 1d6 per round. Once that begins, the atmosphere in the chamber rapidly becomes so toxic that nothing that breathes can survive for long.

Area effect spells are very dangerous in this environment. Explosions, such as a *fireball* spell, kill one chokebat for every 2 points of damage. Line effects (e.g., *lightning bolt*) kill one chokebat for every 10 points of damage, and cone effects kill one for every 5 points of damage.

Cold is the best weapon to use against chokebats. They're immune to harm from cold, but instead of causing damage, cold shocks them into unconsciousness. It also condenses the gas in their bodies to the point where the comatose chokebats sink slowly to the ground. Characters need to be careful not to burst the dozing fungoids by stepping on them, but otherwise, they become inert for 30 minutes. At that point, they could safely be scooped up and placed in a *bag of holding* or other dark container, where they'll remain calm and quiet even after they warm up.

The most insidious use of chokebats is to put them in a chamber where they cover a surface that must be disturbed, such as a door or a chest that characters must open or a statue they must topple to reveal stairs underneath. Alternatively, they could fill a chamber where light is essential: where characters must navigate narrow ledges above a yawning chasm, where they must step only on the onyx floor tiles, or where they must translate an ancient message inscribed on the walls and ceiling (which are also obscured by dozing chokebats!). Teaming them with other creatures that adventurers love to attack with fire, such as trolls, is an especially dirty trick.

THE END

Steve Winter has been a stalwart of the role-playing industry since he joined TSR, Inc. in 1981. Over the decades, he's been an editor, designer, author, bouncer, creative director, product manager, web producer, HR executive, community manager, golf caddy, and airline pilot. His armpits are stamped with role-playing tattoos from *Dwellers in the Forbidden City* to *The Rise of Tiamat*, and hundreds of others on his arms and legs. Steve's short-commings are few, and experience great (although that does not translate into wisdom). His ramblings can be found at www.HowlingTower. com, or @StvWinter on Twitter.

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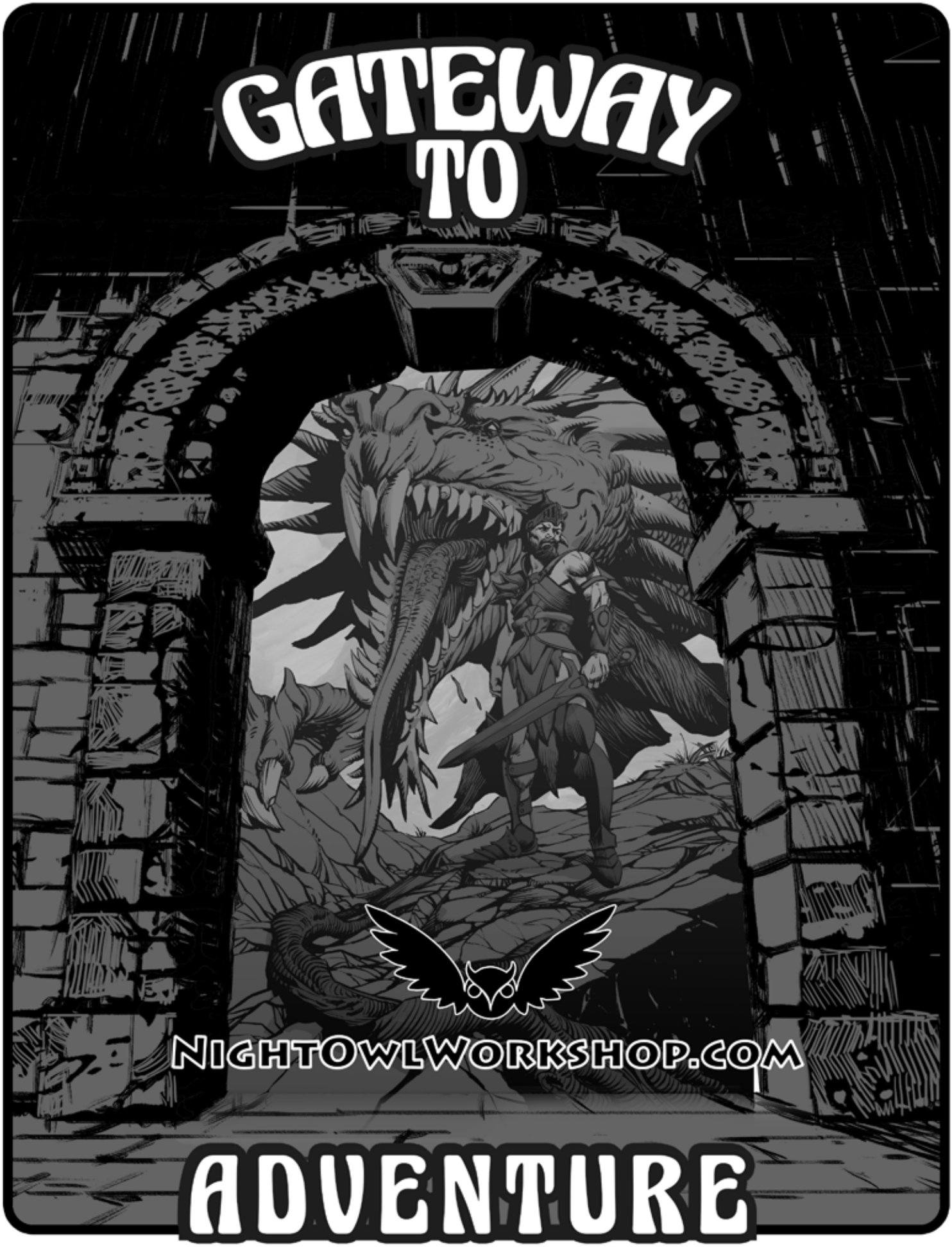

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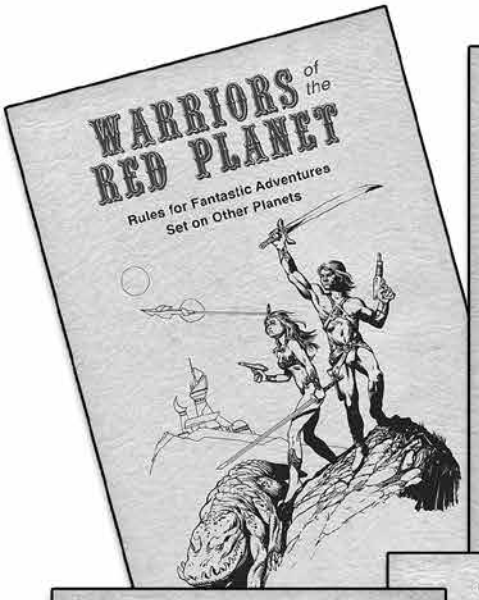

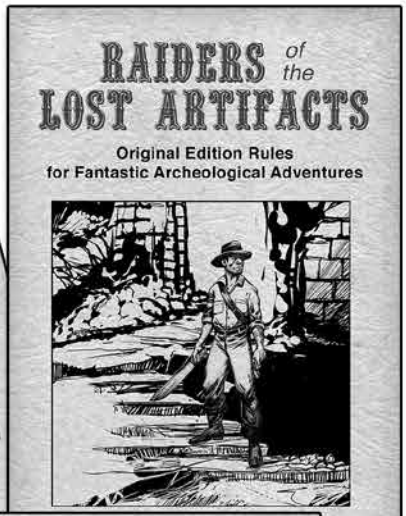

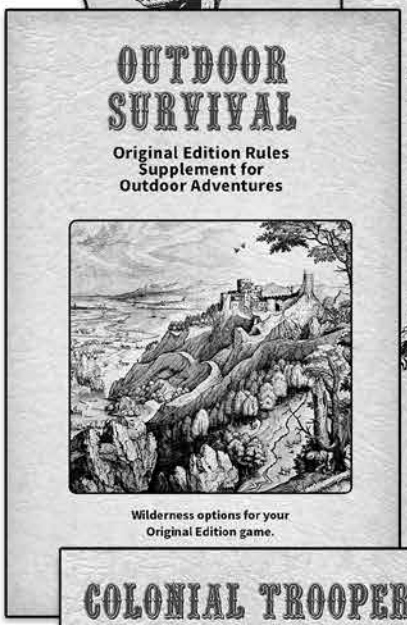

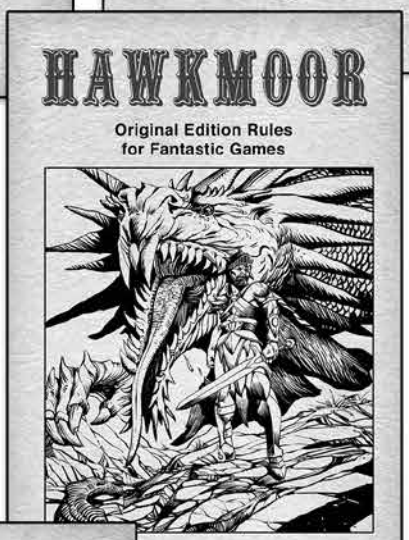

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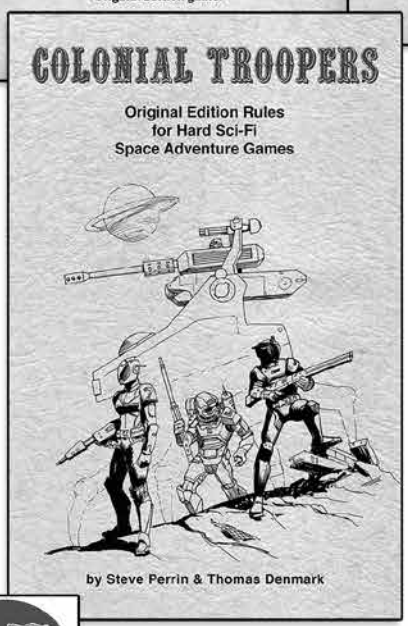

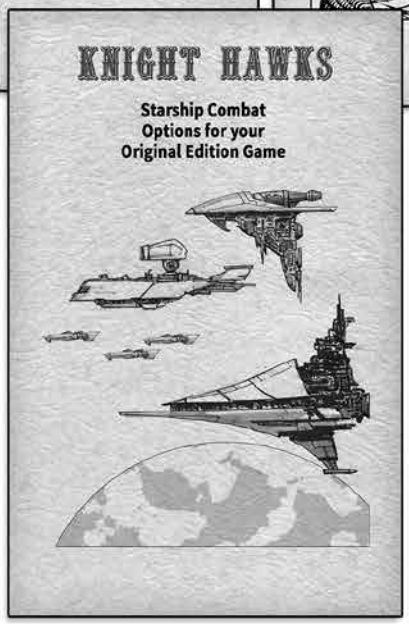

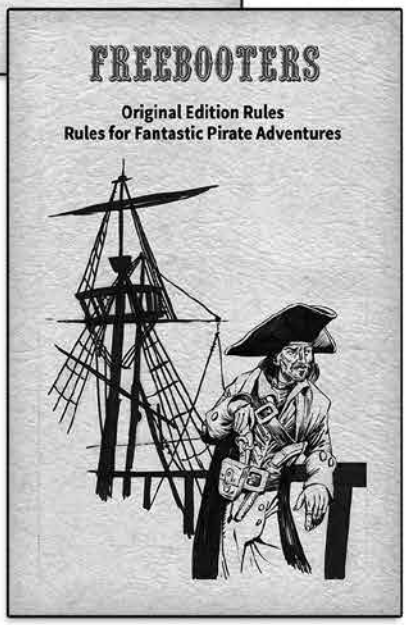

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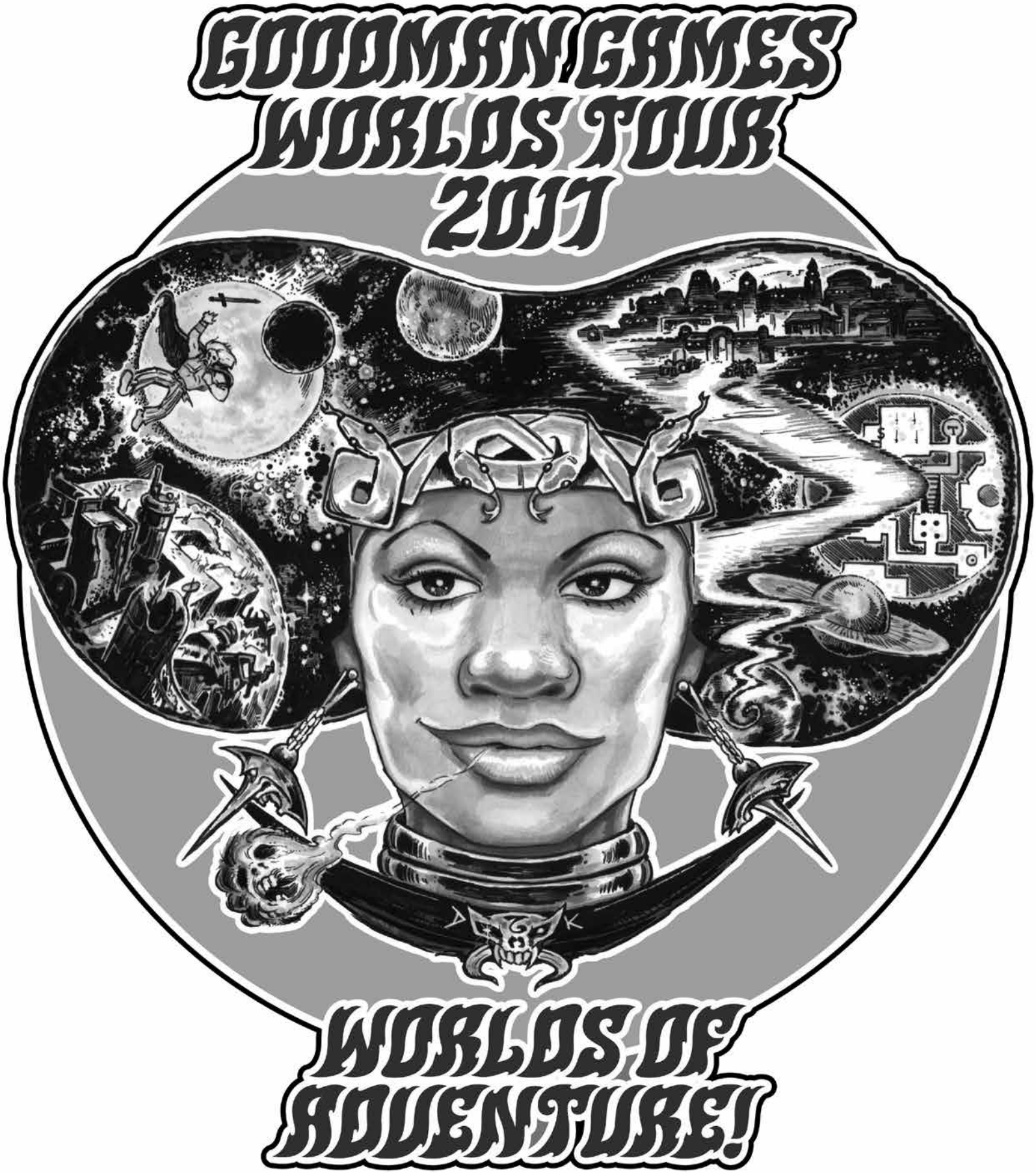
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