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BE AWESOME AT:  
DUNGEON DESIGN



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# BE AWESOME AT DUNGEON DESIGN

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Any GM can design a basic dungeon. A dedicated GM takes the extra time to craft exciting, logical and challenging dungeons that are so much more than a series of rooms stuffed full of monsters and treasure. *Be Awesome At Dungeon Design* comprises eight dungeon design essays by ENnie Award winning designer Creighton Broadhurst. Handling such subjects as a dungeon’s purpose, design, ecology, dressing and physicality *Be Awesome At Dungeon Design* also includes essays on alternate dungeons and the principles of megadungeon design.

Whether you are a new GM just starting out, or a grizzled veteran, there’s something for you in *Be Awesome at Dungeon Design*.

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Thank you for purchasing *Be Awesome At Dungeon Design*; we hope you enjoy it and that you check out our other fine print and PDF products.

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## ABOUT THE DESIGNER

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Creighton Broadhurst lives in Torquay, England where, apparently, the palm trees are plastic and the weather is warm. He shares a ramshackle old mansion with his two children (“Genghis” and “Khan”) and his patient wife. Famed for his unending love affair with booze and pizza he is an enduring GREYHAWK fan.

An ENnie Award winning designer (*Madness At Gardmore Abbey*) Creighton has worked with Expeditious Retreat Press, Kobold Publishing, Paizo and Wizards of the Coast. He believes in the Open Gaming License and is dedicated to making his games as fun and easy to enjoy as possible for all participants. Reducing or removing entry barriers, simplifying pre-game prep and easing the GM’s workload are the key underpinning principles of the products he now releases through Raging Swan Press.

You can read his thoughts on game design at [creightombroadhurst.com](http://creightombroadhurst.com).

## WANT MORE?

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Creighton blogs daily about all aspects of game design at [creightombroadhurst.com](http://creightombroadhurst.com). The design articles herein – along with over 300 pages of additional content – appear in *GM’s Miscellany: Dungeon Dressing*.



## THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT A DUNGEON

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PCs ARE AN INQUISITIVE LOT. IRRITATINGLY THE MORE SUCCESSFUL ONES DON'T JUST CHARGE INTO THE NEAREST DUNGEON IN SEARCH OF LOOT AND GLORY. THEY ASK QUESTIONS. LOTS OF QUESTIONS.

A wise man once said that knowledge is power. One of the principles of successful adventuring is reconnaissance. Knowing what the party is going to face before they face it enables them to purchase the right equipment, memorise the proper spells and even higher appropriate henchfolk and hirelings. Clever and wise PCs start their reconnaissance before they even enter the dungeon!

A prepared GM should be able to answer these important questions about the dungeon:

- Who built the dungeon?
- Why was the dungeon built?
- What major events have occurred in the dungeon?
- What is the dungeon called? Why?
- Why would the party want to explore the dungeon?
- What legends and rumours are associated with the dungeon?
- Does the dungeon have more than one entrance?
- Does the dungeon have any particularly well known features or locations?
- What secret(s) does the dungeon conceal?
- What general perils lurk in the dungeon?

Having this kind of information at his fingertips enables a GM to provide the appropriate information at the appropriate time. (Instead of revealing too much or making hasty choices that lead to confusion later on). Of course, not all the information the PCs

gather will be true and accurate. Sources can be deliberately wrong or merely mislead. Others can provide correct information, but from their own perspective. For example, a lowly man-at-arms who sees a wizard cast a *fireball* might describe that worthy personage as an archmage!

But from where will the clever PCs gain this information?

- Sages and other scholarly folk.
- Adventurers who have already been in the dungeon.
- Escaped slaves and prisoners.
- Ancient and not so ancient documents (journals, diaries, maps and so on).
- Current rumours.
- Legends.
- Talkative (or easily bribed) dungeon denizens.
- Skills.
- Spells.

So those are the general kind of questions PCs will (or more accurately should) ask about a dungeon before they delve into its depths. Having the answers ready (assuming they manage to find them) rewards clever play. It also ensures the GM does not accidentally reveal some important secret he wanted to keep secret until later.



## THE DUNGEON'S PURPOSE

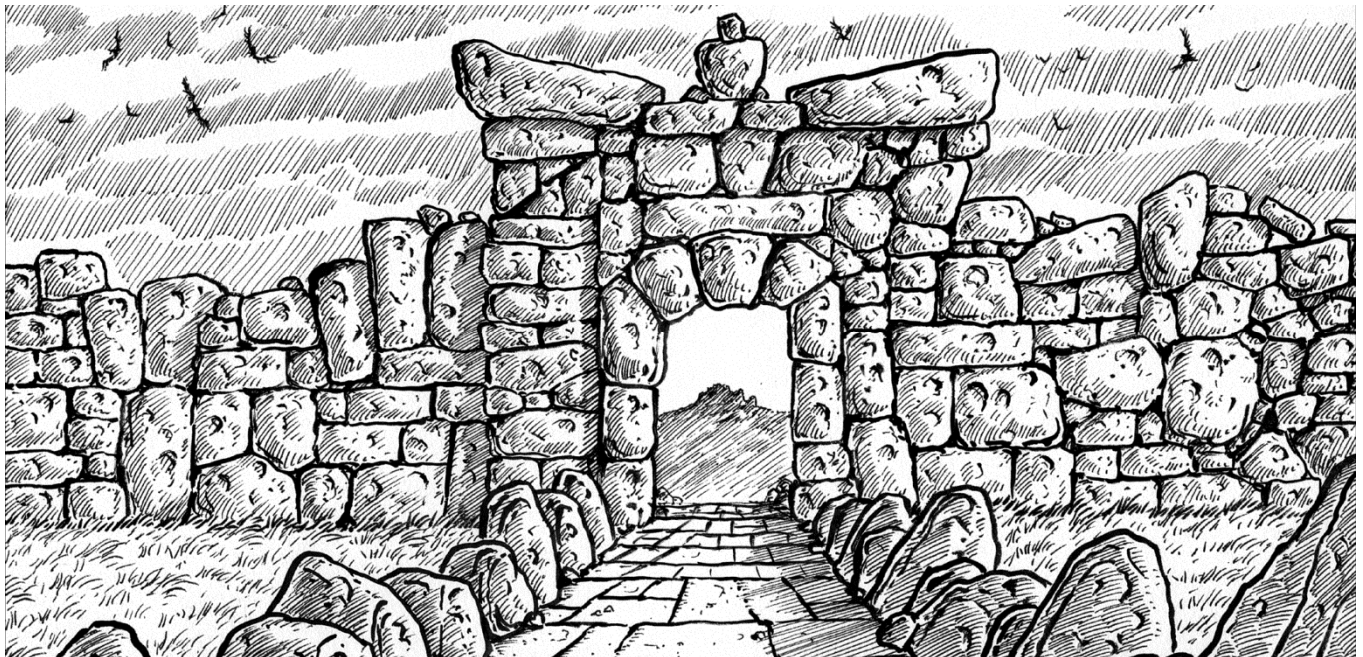
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A DUNGEON NEEDS TO BE SO MUCH MORE THAN A HOLE IN THE GROUND STUFFED FULL OF MONSTERS AND TREASURES. A DUNGEON WITHOUT A PURPOSE IS A POOR DUNGEON INDEED.

In almost all cases, someone at some point made the decision to build the dungeon. An undertaking of such magnitude is unlikely to be done on a whim. Whoever built the dungeon did so for a specific purpose. That purpose shapes the layout and feel of the place. There are several types of dungeon:

- **Fortress or Refuge:** Built as a place to withstand a natural disaster or one's enemies the dungeon is heavily fortified. Entry is difficult and likely individual levels, sub-levels or places of importance will feature additional defensive points.
- **Lair or Home:** Some villains feel safer underground and live there with their minions. Such a location will have everything the villain's needs for long-term living. A villain's personal quarters will be the most defensible location.
- **Mine:** Built to find minerals, metals or gems a mine is likely a long, rambling affair. It lacks many of the features of a normal dungeon and may or may not be still active.
- **Temple:** Built to venerate a deity (or possibly a whole pantheon) a dungeon designed as a temple was likely built to worship a power of darkness or death. Alternatively, a temple dedicated to a good deity may have been built to ward approaches to an entry to the Ebon Realm or other place of fell aspect.
- **Tomb, Crypt or Sepulchre:** Built to house the earthly remains of some great personage, a tomb, crypt or sepulchre is likely to have undead within. It is also likely to have many shrines. It could house one body, or thousands.
- **Cellar:** Originally built as a cellar to an above ground building such as a castle or church, the dungeon has survived the destruction of the above structure.
- **Sewer:** Built to carry waste away from a settlement, a sewer is a filthy, loathsome place.
- **Colony or Community:** Some communities choose to live underground. Such locations are often extensive and ramble over several levels. They contain everything needed for underground life.

It's also important to remember a dungeon might not still serve its original purpose. New inhabitants may use it for their own purposes. If this is the case, the new inhabitants will modify the dungeon to suit their own needs.



## DUNGEON DESIGN

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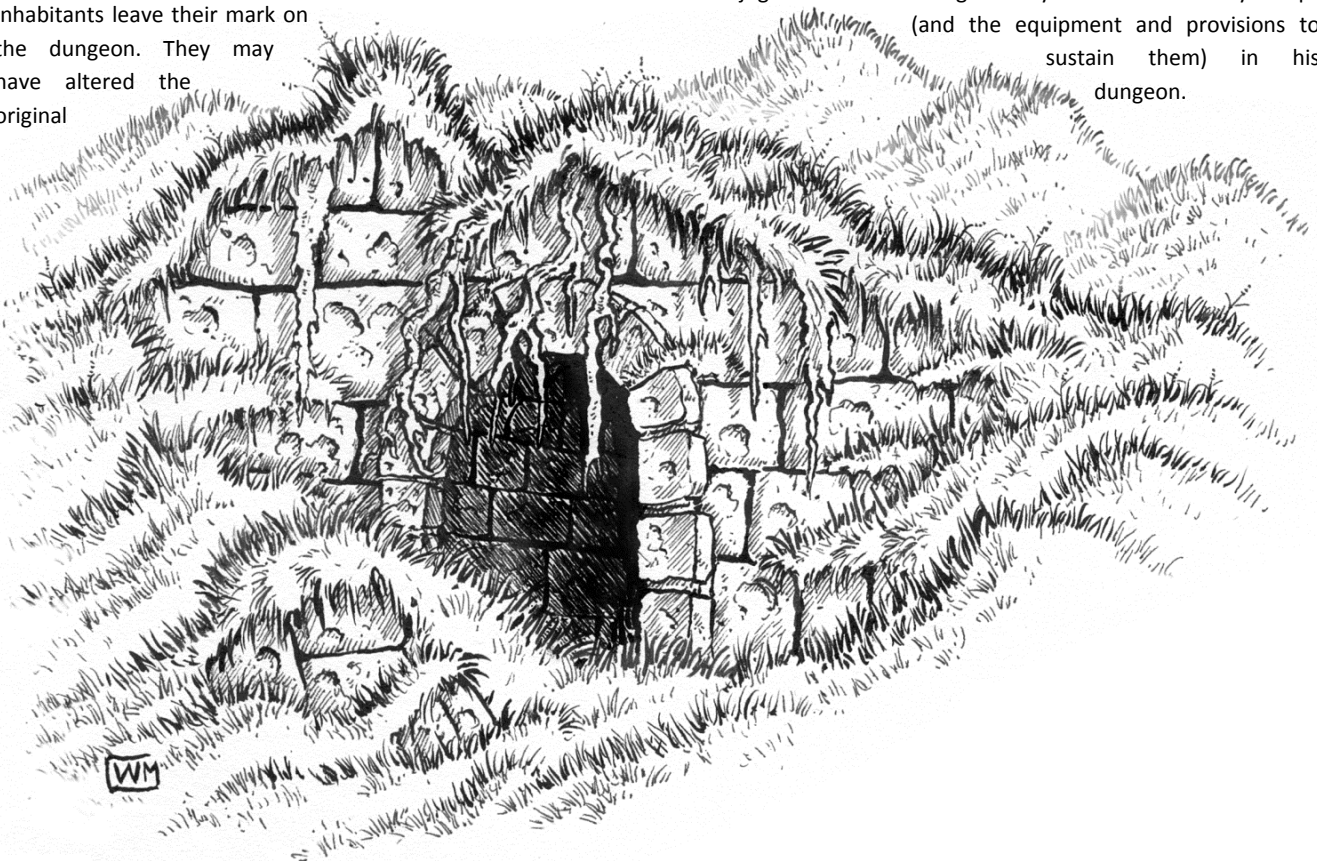
DUNGEONS THAT ARE NOTHING MORE THAN A SERIES OF ROOMS CONTAINING A RANDOM ASSORTMENT OF MONSTERS AND TREASURES AND THAT HAVE NO REAL REASON FOR EXISTING ARE THE RESULT OF SLOPPY, LAZY DESIGN.

To create memorable dungeons, a GM should consider many more factors than simply what to stick in its rooms. When designing a dungeon, consider the following factors:

- **Original Purpose of the Dungeon:** A dungeon designed as a gigantic tomb is going to look and feel completely different to one that was once a grand temple. In either case, the builders construct different kinds of rooms, chambers and corridors based on what they needed the dungeon to do.
- **Who Built the Dungeon:** The dungeon's builder inevitably leaves his mark on the dungeon. From grandiose statues of himself to particular room features the PCs can detect even a long-dead builder's influence on the dungeon.
- **Current Purpose of the Dungeon:** Even if the dungeon was originally conceived as the tomb of an powerful mage, the orc tribe that now lurks within will adapt and change portions of it to suit their needs.
- **Dungeon Inhabitants:** The dungeon's past and present inhabitants leave their mark on the dungeon. They may have altered the original

structure, decorated it in distinctive fashions and so on.

- **History of the Dungeon:** A dungeon's history inevitably affects its disposition when the PCs delve within. If an earthquake struck the dungeon, for example, evidence of the damage it inflicted is likely all around. A dungeon's age also affects the conditions of many of its features. Wooden doors rot, metal portcullises rust and so on.
- **Fame of the Dungeon:** Some dungeons become famous (perhaps for the dangers or treasures within); such locations attract more than their fair share of adventures. Settlements may even spring up nearby to service the many adventurers trying their luck in the dungeon.
- **Upcoming Events:** Upcoming events can affect the dungeon. For example, a dungeon hosting a battle of annihilation between duergar and troglodytes will have signs of not just the current conflict but upcoming battles (which might include traps, fortification and so on). An evil mastermind planning to subjugate the surrounding countryside will have many troops (and the equipment and provisions to sustain them) in his dungeon.



## DUNGEON ECOLOGY

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DESIGNING A DUNGEON BADLY IS A DODDLE – JUST SKETCH SOME ROOMS OUT AND RANDOMLY STOCK THEM WITH MONSTERS AND TREASURE. TAKING A LITTLE EXTRA TIME TO CONSIDER THE BASICS, THOUGH, IS TIME WELL SPENT.

I've previously talked about the big picture when it comes to dungeon design. Just as important, though, as questions about who built the dungeon and why are more mundane details. The devil is in the detail, after all. Ignoring the basic characteristics of a dungeon and its inhabitants can shatter the players' suspension of disbelief.

### THE ULTIMATE IN BAD DESIGN

It's Magic! This is the ultimate rationale for lazy design. "It's magic" can sweep away almost any logical inconsistency. All it says to me as a publisher, though, is that either the freelancer doesn't care about creating a plausible dungeon or he doesn't know he's failed horribly. (Of course, some extra-planar dungeons or the lair of a powerful wizard could prove the exception to this rule, but such examples are few and far between).

### THE BASICS

- **Food & Water:** Of course, some dungeon denizens – elementals and undead to name but two – normally don't need to eat or drink. Most others, however, require sustenance to survive. If the means to acquire food and drink do not exist in the dungeon they must be acquired elsewhere (preferably from somewhere close by).
- **Access:** Pretty much every denizen of the dungeon needs to move about. Creatures need to gather food and water, at the most basic level. They may also trade or work with their neighbours, creep forth to raid the surface lands and so on. To do this they need to have access to a means of entering and exiting the dungeon. The classic example of this done badly is the monster living in a room that is only accessed through the lair of another. Sure, the two might be allied, but would you really live in a place in which you were totally beholden to your neighbour for everything?
- **Conflict & Alliances:** It is very unlikely the denizens of a dungeon exist in a bubble of isolation, not interacting with each other. As in any community, alliances, rivalries and conflicts will be present among the dungeon denizens. Clever explorers can learn of these and exploit them to their advantage.
- **Why Are They There?** Consider why the denizens are actually living in the dungeon. Have they chosen to be there? Are they

trapped? Are they here because they are searching for something? Shocking, most monsters don't just hang around in a room and wait to be slaughtered by rampaging adventurers.

- **Light:** While most won't, some dungeon denizens need light. If they do need it, they must have a means of providing light practically continually.

### UNOCCUPIED ROOMS

Empty rooms are a vital part of dungeon design that have fallen out of fashion in recent years through the tyranny of falling page counts and increased space given to the crunchy bits of modules.

Unoccupied rooms can contain furniture, hidden secrets, interesting dungeon features and even treasure! Skilled players can learn a lot about a dungeon by poking around empty rooms.

Dungeons need empty rooms because:

- **Provide a Change of Pace:** They provide a break from the constant grind of combat that often occurs in dungeon delving and allow players to catch their breath.
- **Enable Skill Checks:** Such locations practically beg to be investigated. Perception checks, Knowledge checks and so on can all be used to learn more about the location. Canny players can use this information to their advantage. If, for example, the party explore an unoccupied barracks and note there are 20 bunk beds in the room, they get a good idea of the size of the garrison. That could be very useful information to have.
- **A Place To Rest:** If the party are in need of rest, an empty room is the perfect place to hunker down for the night. An easily defensible, empty room or one that is remote from the main complex is even better!
- **Verisimilitude:** Not every room in a dungeon should be stuffed full of villains waiting to be slain. Some rooms are used for storage, meeting, sleeping or ceremonial purposes. They won't be all occupied all the time. If every room is occupied by foes it is very hard for the PCs to move through the dungeon without every denizen charging to the aid of their companions. Such a situation usually ends up in a very large, bloody and long-winded fight the PCs have no real chance of winning (and is probably crushingly boring).
- **Dressing:** Empty rooms can be interesting places to poke about. They can contain interesting odds and ends that although not intrinsically valuable build on the flavour and style of the dungeon.

## DUNGEON DRESSING

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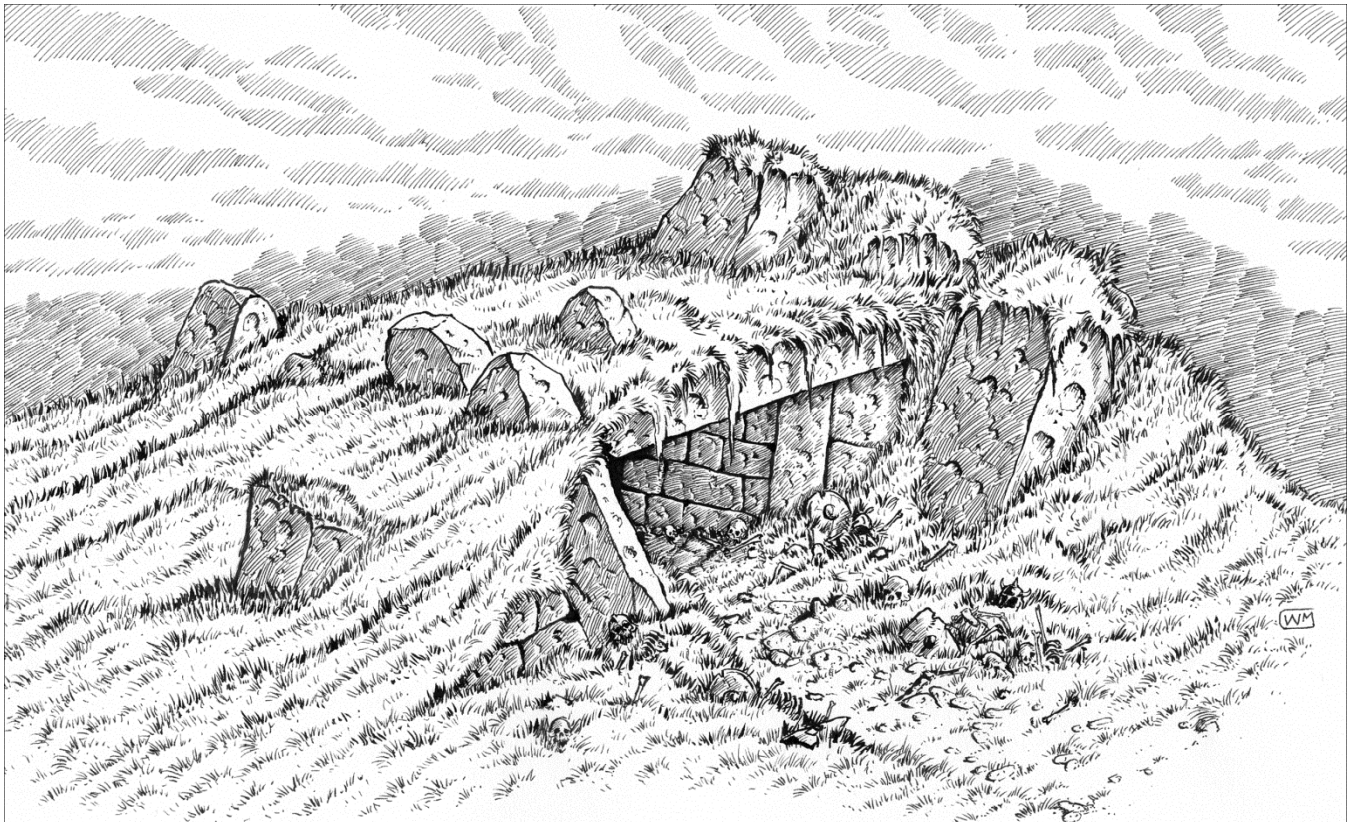
MUSTY DUNGEON CORRIDORS SET WITH UNEVEN FLAGSTONES WHOSE WALLS ARE DAUBED IN GOBLIN GRAFFITI ARE INFINITELY MORE INTERESTING THAN “A DUNGEON CORRIDOR.”

Dungeon dressing is one of the most important things a GM can do to bring his dungeon (and campaign) alive. Sadly, because it's not a crucial aspect of dungeon design – it's not as important as stat blocks, for example – most GMs don't have time to dress their dungeons. That's a shame as there are many great reasons to dress a dungeon:

- **World Building:** If you waffle on about the ancient style of dwarven mining or the fascinating intricacies of goblin art the players will likely switch off and go to sleep. If you casually mention the intricate locking mechanism of a stone door, the players immediately want to know more.
- **Verisimilitude:** Dungeons are not sterile, unchanging environments; explorers and inhabitants all leave signs of their presence within. Crude graffiti daubed on the walls, skeletal remains, carved pillars and more all add a sense of realism to the place which helps players maintain their suspension of disbelief.

- **Story Telling:** What happened in the dungeon before the PCs got there? Dungeon dressing can give the players some of the answer. Were the orcs slaughtered by something large and obviously powerful or are the signs of flooding, earthquake or other calamity everywhere?
- **Foreshadowing:** Are the dungeon denizens working toward some evil scheme? If they are, on doubt, the PCs will be able to find signs of their work throughout the dungeon. Does the dungeon periodically flood? If so, signs will be evident throughout the complex and give canny players a warning that something bad might be about to happen.

When dressing a room (or entire dungeon), don't go mad with detail. Adding too much detail creates confusion and eventual apathy in players; in effect, they don't see the wood for the trees. Instead, concentrate on a couple of interesting features in each area.





## DUNGEON PHYSICALITY

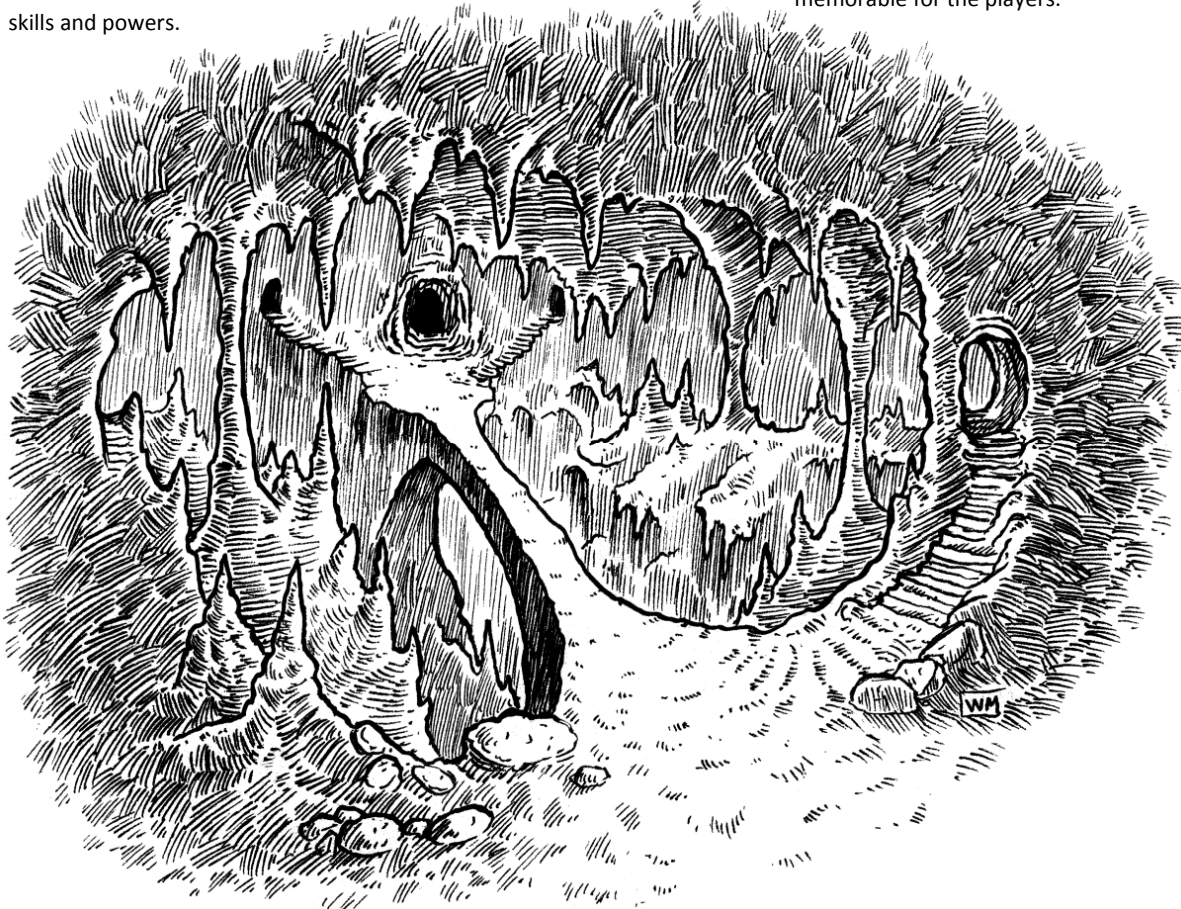
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A GOOD DUNGEON FORCES EXPLORERS TO INTERACT WITH ITS TERRAIN FEATURES. DUNGEONS WITH NOTHING BUT SMOOTH FLOORS, FEATURELESS WALLS AND PLAIN CEILINGS REALISE ONLY A FRACTION OF THEIR POTENTIAL.

A superior dungeon gives the PCs a chance to interact with its physicality. During a delve, combat should not be the only physical challenge explorers face. No matter the game system you use for dungeon delving, it likely features rules for dealing with physical challenges such as climbing, swimming and jumping.

GMs should consider the physicality of their dungeons for several reasons:

- **Problem Solving:** A deep chasm presents a challenge wholly different to a tricky fight and forces explorers to problem solve if they want to overcome the challenge. Such challenges promote team work, lateral thinking and clever play.
- **Change of Pace:** Dungeons featuring nothing but battles can get boring quickly. Dungeons with significant physical challenges not only promote a change of pace, but also enable the PCs to use other, non-combat related skills and powers.
- **Interesting Fights:** Battles fought upon a slippery stair or on the brink of a pit are inherently more exciting than those fought in a normal, featureless corridor and provide combatants with different tactical options. Similarly, smaller features such as statues, rubble and so on shape the battlefield and provide smaller game-related benefits for clever combatants.
- **Segment the Dungeon:** Large terrain features – lakes, chasms, raging rivers and so on – can segment the dungeon and provide an excellent reason for areas of different flavour. They can act as barriers to exploration or obvious “signposts” the PCs are entering a different level, sub-level or area.
- **Flavour & Verisimilitude:** To a reasonable degree, flavour and verisimilitude are good things. They make the dungeon more believable and real. Providing this backdrop differentiates the dungeon from other similar complexes and makes it more memorable for the players.



## PRINCIPLES OF MEGADUNGEON DESIGN

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DESIGNING A MEGADUNGEON IS HARD. IF YOU DON'T GET THE DUNGEON'S METAPHORICAL FOUNDATIONS RIGHT, YOU ARE WASTING YOUR TIME.

Over the last forty years, countless dungeons and hundreds of megadungeons have graced GM's campaigns all over the world. Detailing such a locale is a gigantic undertaking. When designing a megadungeon, keep in mind the following criteria:

### LAYOUT & DESIGN

- **Name:** The megadungeon should have a cool, flavoursome name.
- **Multiple Entrances:** There should be several different ways of getting into the dungeon. While all might not be obvious (secret entrances are cool) most should be easy to find by all but the most blinkered explorer. Entrances set in the midpoint of the dungeon provide access to dungeon levels both above and below the entranceway.
- **The deeper you go, the more dangerous it is and the greater the rewards.** This is a tradition of dungeon design. However, it is better restated as the further from the main entrance you go, the greater the danger and greater the rewards. Some dungeons may go up not down or could run for miles and miles at roughly the same depth.
- **Each level (or sub-level) has a distinctive flavour.** This flavour shouldn't be unnecessarily odd just for the sake of flavour. For example, a sub-level of twisted natural passageways home to degenerate and feral derro seeking a way down to a deeper level is an example of good flavour. A level dominated by a mad alchemist who has no connection or relevance to the greater dungeon is bad flavour.
- **Sub-Levels:** Smaller, self-contained areas, sub-levels enable the GM to inject different kinds of flavour or monsters into the dungeon. Sub-levels may only be accessible from one normal dungeon level. Some may be secret while others may provide a relatively safe haven for explorers.
- **There should be multiple connections between levels and sub-levels.** The PCs should have freedom of choice to decide which parts of the megadungeon they explore. Access points between levels often serve as choke points. The more access points there are, the easier it is for dungeon denizens to move about and the more choices the players have. Some connections should be hidden or secret. Not all should proceed only to the next level; some may provide access to multiple levels or may miss one or two levels out (for example a connection might exist between levels 1 and 4).
- **Secret & Remarkable Connections:** Not all connections between levels and sublevels should be a standard staircase. A dried up well shaft, flooded passage or chasm are all good examples of other connections.
- **Players should have meaningful choices:** This doesn't mean the party get to choose which door to use to get to the villain's throne room. Rather, the complex's layout enables the PCs to pursue multiple paths through the dungeon, exploring different areas, sub-levels and levels as they choose. Wherever possible, the PCs should enjoy freedom of movement through the dungeon and not be forced down a set path.
- **Links to the deepest dungeon of all.** The megadungeon should have one or more links to the Ebon Realm. This link provides tremendous design freedom to include strange, ancient monsters crawling up from the lightless depths in search of prey. It essentially answers loads of tricky questions about how and why certain monsters came to be in the dungeon.
- **It should all make sense (to a certain extent).** Realism is good to a certain extent, but realism for realism's sake is pointless. Worrying about the minutia of dungeon design is time spent not crafting exciting encounters and flavoursome dungeon levels and encounters. Enough information should be present for a GM to answer most basic questions about the dungeon, and no more. For example, deciding where the dungeon's denizens get their drinking water is important. Worrying about the minutia of the dungeon food chain is not.
- **Minor Elevation Shifts:** Dungeon levels should rarely be flat. Minor shifts in elevation can confuse explorers. Are they on the same level or are they not?
- **Extra-Dimensional Spaces:** Used sparingly, extra-dimensional spaces provide an interesting change of pace to exploration.
- **Level Size:** The dungeon levels should be of various sizes. Not all should fit on a single piece of graph paper. Some especially large levels may use a larger scale per square.

### HISTORY & MINUTIA

- **Details, details, details. But not too many details.** Empty rooms are boring. Standard corridors are boring. Dungeon dressing is an excellent cure for boring areas. Are the flagstones broken and cracked? Does dried blood splatter the wall in an otherwise empty room? Such details build verisimilitude and give the feeling the dungeon is a live setting.
- **The megadungeon needs a decent reason for existing.** The megadungeon must have or have had a reason to exist. Did an ancient race use it as their lair, or did a wizard retreat underground to continue his strange (and undoubtedly

dangerous) research? Whatever the reason, it will have left its mark on the dungeon's layout, architecture and style.

- **There should be secrets to uncover.** Be it secret doors, lost treasures or shocking discoveries about the dungeon itself, the complex should have secrets. The PCs should be able to uncover these as a result of good, attentive play.
- **Relevant and discoverable back story:** The dungeon must have a relevant and discoverable back story. The greatest back story in the world is pointless if the PCs never get to interact with, discover and understand it. Knowledge of the dungeon's history shouldn't be automatic – they should have to work for it. Having knowledge of some or all of the complex's history should provide insights into the dungeon (and perhaps even in-game advantages).

## DENIZENS & CHALLENGE

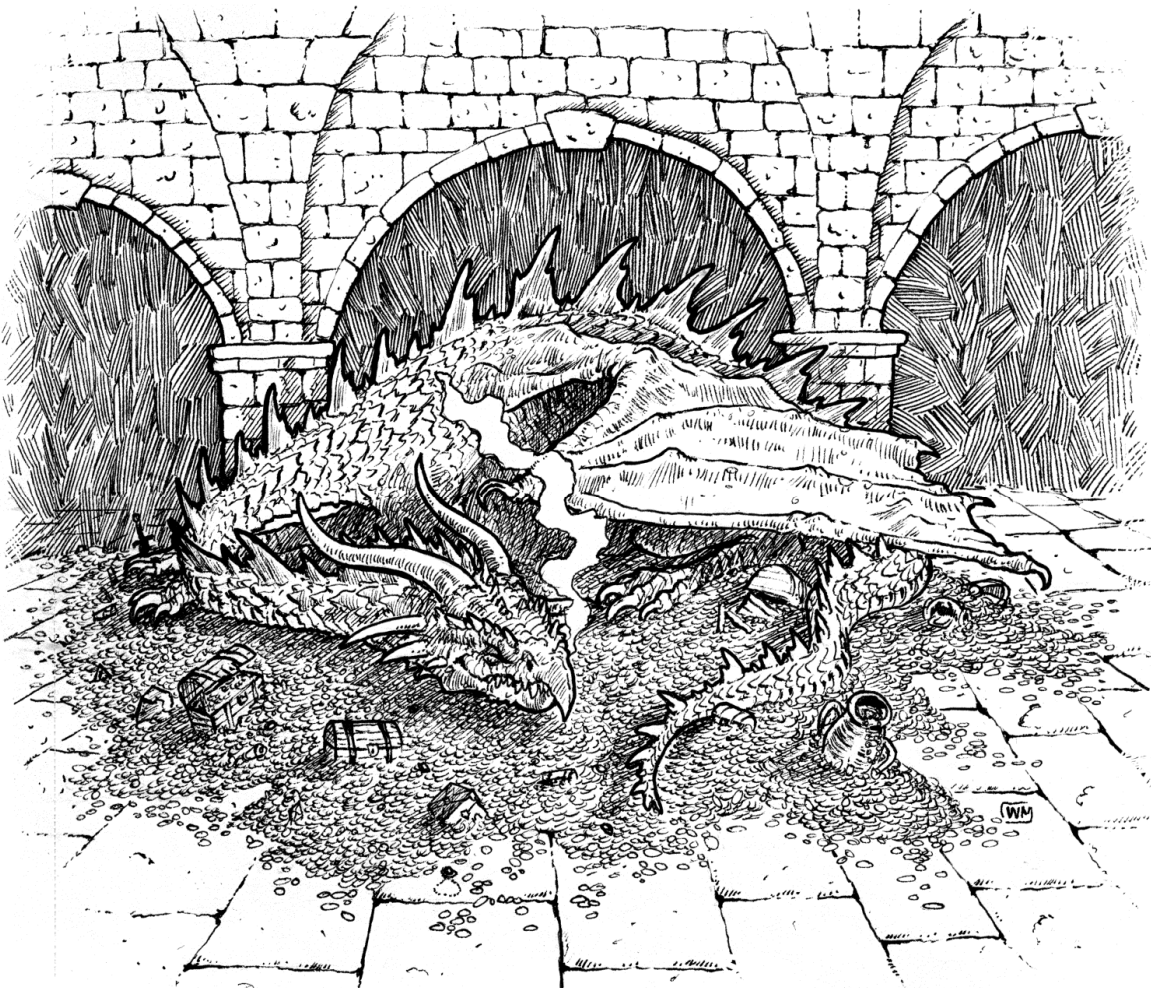
- **Wheels within wheels:** The megadungeon should have an overall boss or super villain. This individual doesn't need to be in charge of everyone in the dungeon, but he should be the most powerful and influential figure therein. He will have many sub-leaders or vassals; many of these will command

their own level or sub-level.

- **Away with the 15-minute adventuring day.** If every room contains a life or death struggle in which one or more PCs end up unconscious or dead the dungeon turns into an unending grind. The PCs do a room or two and then retreat to rest. That's boring game play. Instead, the dungeon's design should promote long-term delving. Parties should be able to explore at least a dozen rooms before resting. Easier fights, unoccupied rooms and easily if dealt with properly battles are all excellent tools to prolong the adventuring day.
- **Wandering Monsters:** Monsters don't just sit in their chambers waiting to be slaughtered. Some move about – either because they are scavengers or because they have things to do. Random encounters adds both an extra level of uncertainty to exploration and to the realistic feel of the place.

## NEARBY

- **Settlements:** One or more settlements should lie within relatively easy reach of the dungeon. This provides explorers somewhere to retreat to between forays. Here they can rest, recruit help, buy and sell magic items and so on.



## ALTERNATE DUNGEONS

THE ICONIC VIEW OF A DUNGEON IS OF A CONSTRUCTED UNDERGROUND COMPLEX STUFFED FULL OF MONSTERS AND LOOT. THERE ARE OTHER KINDS OF DUNGEON, THOUGH, RIPE FOR ADVENTURE.

Dungeons are perhaps the iconic location of many fantasy roleplaying games. These deep subterranean complexes have rooms, corridors, doors and other familiar features. This isn't the only kind of dungeon, though. Other dungeon-like venues for adventure exist.

A few examples of alternate locales for a dungeon adventure include:

- **Buildings:** Castles, cathedrals, haunted manor houses or even particularly capacious warehouses could all make a great dungeon locale. With windows, roofs and possibly battlements, such locations would undoubtedly have many more access points than a normal dungeon. Such "dungeon" could even be set in the middle of a town or city!
- **Caves:** Networks of natural caves can serve as excellent dungeons in their own rights. In all likelihood, the denizens will make some effort to make them more comfortable – levelling the floor and so on – and such locales could extend for miles. Because nature has done much of the construction work, these locations are particularly attractive. They are probably the second most commonly encountered dungeon type. Even the caves themselves can be atypical. Networks of ice caves, sunken cave systems hidden deep beneath the ocean's waves and even the warrens of gigantic insects could all make excellent adventure sites.
- **Sewers:** Terrific venues for a dungeon adventure, sewers are rife with noisome denizens and disease.

Their proximity to the streets above provides explorers with easy access and a safe place to retreat to after a foray. Because sewers are often as extensive as the settlement which they serve, they can be particularly expansive.

- **Mines:** Often of dwarven construction, mines differ from a standard dungeon in terms of function and form. The layout and architecture of the place will be different and it will in all likelihood lack many of the traditional rooms such as throne room, prisons, torture chambers and so on.
- **Huge trees:** A fixture in ancient forests and elven domains, the trunks and branches of huge trees can be large enough to contain a dungeon. Either the dungeon could be built among the tree's branches, or it could be carved into the its trunk.
- **Demi-planes:** These are perhaps the most fantastical of all dungeons. Created by powerful folk such as archmages and demi-gods, demi-planes are an excellent venue for a dungeon. Here time may flow differently, magic may be subtly (or unsubtly) altered and even the laws of physics may be different. Extra-dimensional spaces also fall into this category. Both can be as large or small as a GM desires.

- **Gigantic Spider Web:** Vast colonies of spiders – or several huge spiders – could conceivably create an incredibly vast web with rooms and corridors on many different levels.

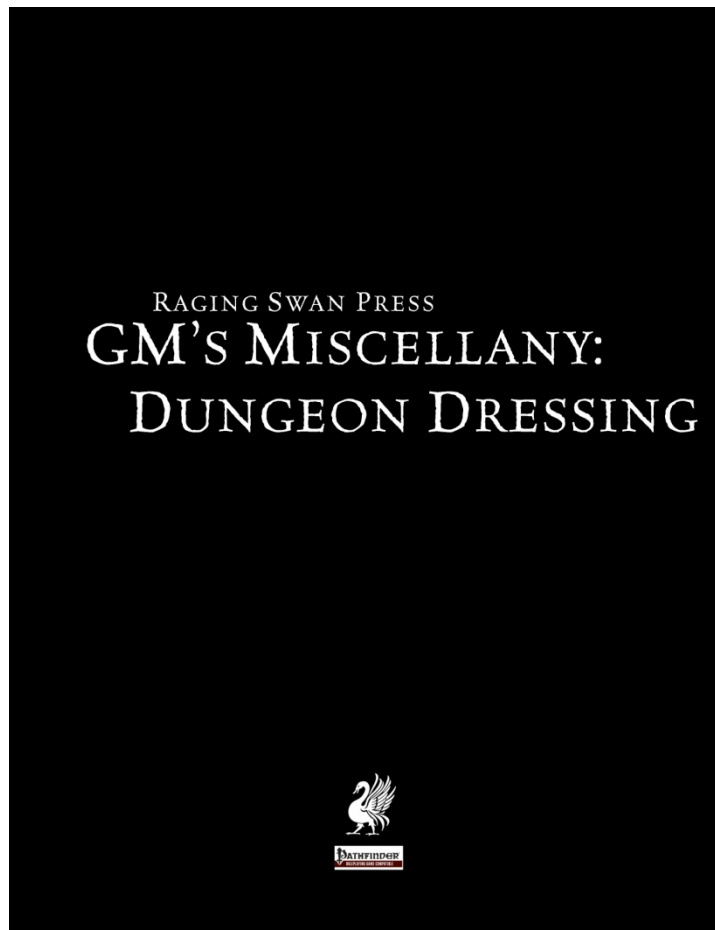
- **Dense Vegetation:** Where vegetation is particularly dense – perhaps in primal forests, for example – trails become corridors and clearings become rooms. Such locales could be the demesne of fey creatures or even a cabal of druids.



Tired of dungeons lacking in verisimilitude?

Want to add cool little features of interest to your creations but don't have the time to come up with nonessential details?

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*GM's Miscellany: Dungeon Dressing* presents loads of great features to add to your dungeon.

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