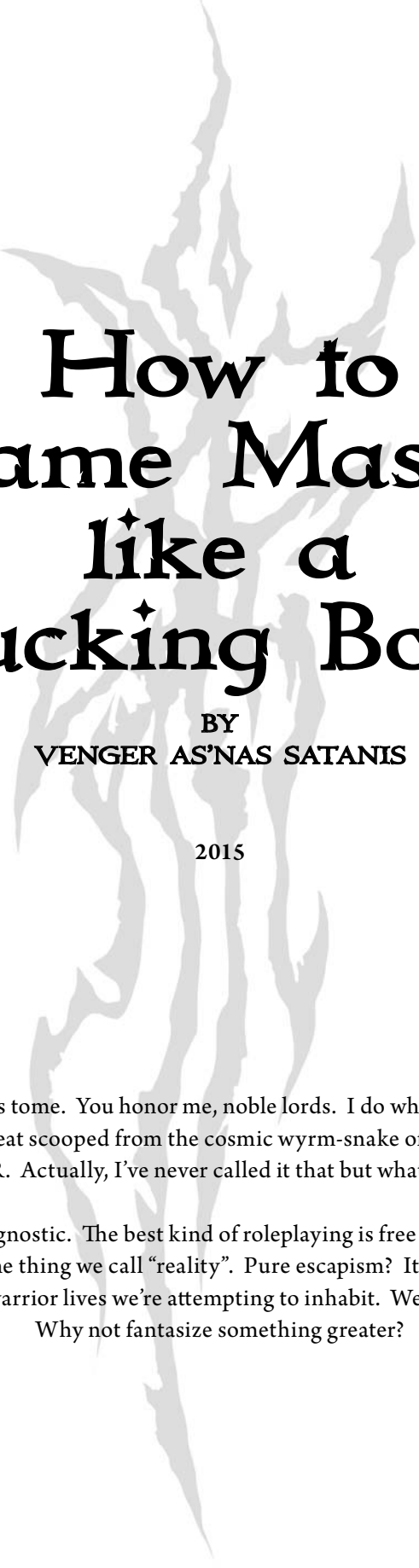# How to Game Master like a Fucking Boss

A toolbox, checklist, and Devil's dozen of random tables
for improving your tabletop fantasy roleplaying game.

Venger As'Nas Satanis

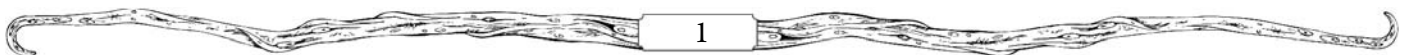# How to Game Master like a Fucking Boss

BY

VENGER AS'NAS SATANIS

2015

Thank you for purchasing this curious tome. You honor me, noble lords. I do what my warlock hands can with this slick, slime-scaled, shadowy crustacean meat scooped from the cosmic wyrm-snake of one hundred and eleven eyes I call the O5R. Actually, I've never called it that but whatever...

This book is system and style agnostic. The best kind of roleplaying is free from constraints and limitations.
It is orders of magnitude richer than the thing we call "reality". Pure escapism? It isn't our lives we're attempting to escape so much as wizard and warrior lives we're attempting to inhabit. We were born into this world.
Why not fantasize something greater?

How to Game Master like a Fucking Boss is an instruction guide for GMs old and new, written to assist with virtually every fantasy paper & pencil tabletop roleplaying game. The rights to reproduce this work are reserved for the copyright holder.

http://vengersatanis.blogspot.com/

&

http://www.draconicmagazine.com/
—————

INDEX

INDEX

The Draconic Method: Game Mastering Secrets of Venger Satanis

As my wife is fond of telling me, I don't have hobbies. I have obsessions. She's right, of course. I don't just run a weekly game and leave it at that, I turn each session over in my mind... encounters, characters, descriptions, environments, themes, gaming aids, etc. I examine every square inch of the campaign until it has been checked and double-checked. I'm not only looking for weak spots but points of strength and golden opportunities. Why? Because I have a screw loose. Probably a bunch of them.

Becoming the best Game Master in the world (at least the best I can be) is my latest and greatest goal. It's what I was put on this earth to do. It's my destiny. My obsession is not simply a manifestation of will. It has taken practice, study, discipline, and the application of unorthodox theories. One must experiment with a wide variety of variables, testing and re-testing.

Originally, this book was meant only for me; a collection of secrets that I could refer back to time and time again. But wouldn't it be selfish to keep that lore all to myself? Why not teach my discovery, allowing my insanity to illuminate Game Masters throughout the world? You hold in your hands a chronicle of my journey: the Draconic Method. Thirty years of Game Mastering knowledge is now at your disposal. Use it wisely... or don't. I don't really give a fuck.

Why do We Roleplay?

It almost feels like we're lucid dreaming. We may not be able to control our environment and what happens to us, but our awareness is palpable. In that situation, we are consciously aware that we're dreaming, that this isn't real – even though it can seem incredibly real in the moment and then again when we look back on the experience... remembering that, for a time, we wore chainmail, leather, or arcane robes; that we were the slayers of foul devils from black gulfs beyond known space and time. During a lucid dream, the dreamer has a greater chance to influence events and to participate as an autonomous being. He has more control.

That's an amazing thing. So, it's no wonder we keep coming back to the same well, especially when we can choose the genre, system, Game Master, and our fellow dreamers... or players. We may not have limitless choices but there's certainly more authority than the random firing of neurons. Like lucid dreaming, roleplaying provides a special kind of experience.

So, what is the purpose of a roleplaying game?

- Not to have fun. Fun is a state of enjoyment we should cultivate no matter what we're doing.

- Not to tell stories. Storytelling is the vehicle that gets the roleplaying from point A to point B.

- Not to socialize. Yes, it's a social activity but there are easier ways of talking with friends – it's called hanging out.

- Not to optimize one's character or game the system. The rules are there to establish an even playing field, not a min-max stress test.

- Not to see what happens. Go watch TV or read a book.

- All the above should be byproducts of good roleplaying, not its chief goal.

Roleplaying has a lot to offer but its primary function is this: immersing ourselves in an imagined self and/or reality. With regards to tabletop fantasy roleplaying, it allows us to feel like a brave knight brandishing our enchanted sword, a learned wizard capable of shooting fire from our fingertips, or an unscrupulous rogue hiding in the shadows... waiting for his chance.

However, it's not enough to imagine that we're such adventurers. One must explore this amazing world full of dragons, dungeons, castles, elves, demons, and all manner of dreadful subterranean denizens. If it seems like you're actually there, experiencing this realm of sword and sorcery via your character (yourself by another face and name), then you've achieved the highest level of roleplaying. No matter how fleeting, that immersive quality is its essence, the starting point from which everything else springs. The more we suspend our disbelief, the more powerful our experience has the potential to be.

Having said all that, it should be obvious (though clearly it won't be to everyone) that players don't want to embrace life as a copperless street urchin dying from syphilis as he hopelessly tries to knife that ogre who just pissed on the filthy rags he calls an outfit. Nor will players enthusiastically remain awkward buffoons while the mayor, his wife, and

the head guard do all the work and have all the fun. Neither would they be content to stand around a cornfield being wizards, warriors, and the like.

Adopting a role is not enough. Basically, what I'm trying to say is this: players want to experience the best, the most interesting parts of their alter-ego. It won't always be roses but neither should it always be thorns. Give the players something thrilling or, at the very least, mildly intriguing every session, if not every single encounter. It's a Game Master's duty to help players fully imagine themselves within another world and then to make that experience awesome.

Roleplaying versus Persona-play

"Wow, 18 years of nothing and now twice in one day!" - Den from the film Heavy Metal

I've never heard anyone going on about their favorite RPG experience while they were playing Sturm, Wolverine, Drizzt, or Randolph Carter. However, I often hear the nostalgic recollections of those who read Choose Your Own Adventure books. That's because we want to be the ones attempting to slay the dragon, traverse the swamp of despair, or reciting passages from the fabled Necronomicon - not some other guy.

There's a reason why it's called roleplaying. Players adopt a role; specifically, their characters. But a role is not the same thing as a fully formed persona. One (generally) does not assume the personality, mindset, style of communication, mannerisms, etc. of an established character with the intent of trying to be that person, to disappear into the character to such an extent that the player no longer exists. That's called acting and though it's similar to roleplaying, they are not the same thing.

In a roleplaying game, players use a proxy or stand-in for themselves. The character is similar to them in many ways – to such an extent that the line easily blurs. These superficial differences merely enhance the roleplaying experience – the chance to become a thief, witch, or druid… through ourselves, our unique lens.

Adopting dozens of quirks, interests, gestures, passions, motivations, limitations, and parameters is not the same thing as playing a role. If the point of roleplaying is to see what it would be like to slash monsters with flashing steel and conjure demons with a wave of our hand, then we need to feel what that would be like. Not by becoming someone else entirely and losing ourselves in a character, but placing ourselves in another's shoes.

If you've seen The NeverEnding Story, you'll remember the boy reading the book and the boy who went on the adventure. They're not the exact same person but are similar enough so the first boy can fully experience what the second has to go through. Hopefully, you'll also have watched Heavy Metal. The young man who discovers the green meteorite soon becomes Den after he's transported to another world. That young man is somewhere deep inside Den just like the player resides within his character. This is the most rewarding aspect of a roleplaying game for the players – essentially remaining themselves while being superficially transformed into individuals who belong to a certain world.

Obviously, we're not going to put ourselves in the same kind of peril as our character. A certain amount of psychic distance is necessary to full enjoy our vicarious experience. Yet, players must be able to identify with their characters, enough so that in some small way, it feels like them… like they are the ones storming the castle, not just their surrogate. Identification is key.

While turning this revelation over in my head, I'm reminded of something else from my youth – an episode of Doctor Who called City of Death. Scaroth is fragmented through time. Those scattered selves (such as Count Scarlioni) are both him and not him simultaneously, a bit like Schrodinger's cat whose indefinite state remains a mystery until the feline's fate has been revealed. Scaroth is leading a different life in each of his fragments. Presumably, he's not an exact copy but more like identical twins. Their environment, parents, and luck play a part in how each has developed. Yet, essentially they are cut from the same cloth. When one is in distress, the others feel it. The success of one is felt by all.

Keep in mind when running the game that roleplaying is preferable to persona-playing. If a player is not fully enjoying himself, the cause could be his lack of self within his character. Those wishing to further explore this concept may want to keep character creation short and sweet. Keep backstory to a minimum. Excessive acting (or over-acting) could be detrimental to the immersion.

Conversely, Game Masters should opt for persona-play whenever possible. NPCs should rarely be stand-ins for the Game Master. Rather, he should become an actor, portraying a character as best he can. I know from personal experience. I've used myself as the basis for various NPCs. Not only does my characterization lack in flavor because I'm basically speaking as myself and from my point of view, I also empathize too much with the NPC. That means, I'll more than likely fight tooth and nail to protect him, to make him succeed or come across as noble, impressive, charming, etc.

Once or twice a campaign, it's not a big deal; once or twice a session? That's a problem.

Becoming the Boss

How can you be an effective boss, if you don't know what you're supposed to be the boss of? What's the company's purpose? What are you guys making? How do you intend to make it? Once you know that, you can determine how to make it properly, over and over again... stronger, faster, better!

You're going to be the boss of 'let's pretend'. Look the players in the eye and, in your own words, summarize the campaign world, current situation, and how those two things relate to them, based upon the characters they created. Set the scene, narrate a fragment of story – enough to hook the PCs in – and then let go. Allow the PCs the chance to figure things out and do their own thing. Slowly reel them in when it's time for another encounter. Set the scene with a bit of narration then let things take their course again. The following paragraphs are an example of what I mean.

Here's the deal. This was an ordinary medieval realm until dragons appeared in the northern skies, possibly something to do with dimensional anomalies predicted by the azure sorceress. Now, the people live in fear. Civilization crumbles a little more with each village and town burned beyond recognition by dragon fire.

You're a barbarian without a tribe, exiled. You're a wizard who's been corrupted by black magic, enslaved to your demonic patron. You're a scoundrel looking for purses to cut in dark alleyways and outside taverns. None of you have done very well for yourselves; you're all bottom-feeders, vagabonds, and murder hobos.

One night, a stranger walks into the Lion's Den – an alehouse between kingdoms, left to its own devices as far as the law is concerned. The stranger eyes up everyone he sees, asking more questions than he should be. "You look as if you've seen better days, my friend. Have you ever thought about exploring the mountains to the north?"

Looking like a Boss

Wear what makes you feel good. If that's a buttoned down shirt and slacks, black heavy metal t-shirt and jeans, or a dress, then wear that, as long as it's presentable. Avoid ripped, stained, ill-fitting, and dirty clothes. Fashion is fine but don't look like a derelict.

For the first couple sessions, pretend that you're going to a job interview. Whatever you would do to make a good impression (even if you already know the players), do that. Show up in a good mood with a positive perspective; look forward to the game. Conduct yourself in a professional manner, even though you're not getting paid.

Definitely bring plenty of paper (including graph paper), pencils, pens, dice, rule books, adventure, supplements, screen, campaign notes, post-its, miniatures, maps/terrain, and all the other stuff you think you might need. Not that you need all that stuff, they're optional. If you want to go the extra mile, get an extending chrome pointer or laser pointer.

Speak your mind. Don't be afraid to tell players what you think before the game starts and after it stops, but keep your speaking to a minimum during the session. Think of yourself as the host of a party before and after. Think of yourself as Chris Harrison on The Bachelor while the game is in progress. He tells people what they need to hear, listens to what they have to say, and gets the hell out of there. Chris Harrison has been doing it so long that he's totally at ease, relaxed; even if he's taken off guard, it seems like he always has a prepared response.

Gesture and gesticulate for effect. Speak slowly, clearly, and loudly enough to be heard without raising your voice unnecessarily. There will be times when whispering or shouting is appropriate, but they are few and far between. Use words that communicate action, excitement, tension, conflict, mystery, empathy, fear, passion, desire, and a sense of wonder. Emphasize certain words by the way you speak them. For example, practice saying the following poem several times before a session and in a variety of ways.

Tales from an Experienced Game Master

Reading through my old blog posts, I'm reminded of something I used to feel hours before game time. A mix of worry and anticipation… but most of all ridiculousness, as if paper and pencil, tabletop roleplaying games might just be too frivolous a pastime to take seriously, as serious as I was about to take it.

Yes, occasionally, I would feel a bit silly… perhaps something bordering on shame. As if I were seeing myself through the eyes of a disapproving or disappointed parent, sibling, spouse, significant other, friend, random person off the street… anyone who might consider RPGs a joke.

Beyond all that, there was the god awful responsibility sitting uncomfortably upon my shoulders. In those pre-game moments, I realized that everything rested on me. The entire game relied upon my ability to communicate and convey an enticing series of encounters making up a fantastic adventure. If I fail, the game fails, and everyone will know I fucked up, that I'm a shitting Game Master.

Well, those days are over. I've now run so many games for so many different people that the only thing on my mind these days is the following…

- Do I have all my stuff (books, notes, dice, etc.)?

- Do I have a general idea of what's going to happen?

- Am I ready to crank this bitch up to 11?

If you've answered or want to answer, "Hell yeah!" to all three of the above questions, then you're ready for this guide. I'll be touching on all the basics: proper state of mind, improvisation, encounter balance (probably not what you're thinking, though), incremental progression, and just plain having fun.

Preparation

Now is the time

Grip your blade

Sprayed with crimson

Glaring

A single cat's eye open

Shapeless, Satanic singularity

Darkness covers the land

Demons shriek. Devils cackle

It drinks your soul

Forever

Be a Self-Confident Game Master

Imagine three circles, each containing one of the following sentences: 1) realize your vision for the campaign, 2) make the players happy, 3) fuck it; let's just see what happens.

Now imagine an area where all three of those circles intersect. That's where your optimal Game Mastering lives. A confident Game Master cares about manifesting his will just as much as he cares about his players having a good time and letting each session take its course, wherever that may be.

You don't have to be a control freak - though it might help if you have control freak tendencies - but you do need some kind of vision, aesthetic, story, etc. If you don't have anything to say, even if it's, "I like tentacles," then put the screen down and work on being an exceptional player, instead.

As Game Master, you have a voice. That voice needs to say something. You can run a simple dungeon crawl, but a part of you should be in there somewhere. It shouldn't be utterly generic. It needs personality and character. That's for you to provide. Hopefully, you're not a blank slate. On the contrary, I assume you have loves, hates, fears, hopes, fetishes, annoyances, beliefs, curiosities, and a whole bunch of subjective idiosyncrasies that make you who you are. Put that stuff into your campaign. Use your voice. Be more than a published adventure's narrator. Be a fucking Game Master!

Obviously, you're not just scribbling in a dream journal or writing a collection of short stories. You're running an RPG for a bunch of players. They are your audience, as well as, your collaborators. Treat them kindly and with respect… until they show themselves worthy of your ridicule – at that point, be merciless!

Give the players what they want, but don't go too far. Too much of a good thing and too soon will spoil the players. At which point, they'll take your campaign for granted. You don't want lazy and entitled characters looking to you for their entertainment instead of allowing the fun to come from their own creativity.

Let go of your need for concrete answers. There's no well-lit path that you can follow from the first session to the last. Even if you identify the right road, you will drift off course. That's OK. Those side-streets aren't full of landmines. Ultimately, you shouldn't care where the campaign goes as long as it's interesting. If it's interesting, it'll be entertaining. Those who are entertained will come back for more. Avoid dull encounters. Steer clear of boredom. Embrace the road less traveled because it'll surprise you just as much as the players.

Proper State of Mind

In the Blake's 7 episode Deliverance, the planet's inhabitance believe Avon some kind of god for fixing their ship containing DNA that will seed another world. At the episode's end, Blake confirms what Avon is feeling… a heavy responsibility. Similar to being a Game Master, probably.

If you're starting out, then of course you're going to be nervous – unless you're either too clueless to be nervous or some kind of sociopath who just doesn't care about other people.

Most likely, if you're reading this book, you're not just starting out. You've Game Mastered before. Perhaps many times over the years. That's great. But don't be alarmed if you (still) feel insecure, incompetent, or ashamed. Most individuals don't know how to Game Master like a fucking boss.

Rather than a sociopath, a Game Master… hang on a second. As you've probably noticed, I'm not abbreviating the title as you would expect. And I won't for the vast majority of our journey together. That's because it's a high office that deserves the utmost respect. In fact, I want you to temporarily wipe "GM" from your vocabulary. From now on, you're going to refer to the generic running and refereeing of roleplaying games as Game Master, Game Mastering, and Game Mastery. Don't minimize your vocation with a two-letter abbreviation.

Why? Because what we do requires a strong belief in ourself. Belief, like reality, is malleable. Both are defined by language. The words we use create the world around us and determine how we interact with it. So, use the right ones. Start with calling yourself a Game Master or similar handle that's recognized throughout the gaming community… or make up your own, such as Usurper of the Crimson Blade.

But don't get too cocky. A god needs humility. He really does. Otherwise, he's just an egotistical narcissist who doesn't bother with the thoughts and feelings of mortals. Game Masters are like gods - they also need humility. Even though they run the show, a Game Master is just a piece of the puzzle. In fact, he's the corner pieces – all four of them.

It's always a good idea to start with the Game Master. Get that ironed out first. If it's not you, make sure he's solid because everything flows from him. Yet, once the trickle becomes a stream, we Game Masters must get out of the way, allowing the game to find its own direction. Only divert the flow if it will make for a better game. Don't dam up the river because it's going somewhere we hadn't anticipated. Obstacles and setbacks can be useful, but completely stopping the flow will halt the game or, at least, the game's fun.

Be confident. This is your game. You're running it. You might be thinking to yourself, "Why should I be the one? Am I worthy?" To that, I respond: You were chosen – chosen by fate itself – to Game Master this session. You are worthy. You have to be. If you don't feel it, then convince yourself somehow… borrow strength from the gods, model a Game Master you admire, or just pretend you're someone else for a while. Try anything! Because you're going to Game Master the shit out of this thing. You have to believe it deep in your bones. You may not have been born to Game Master, but that doesn't matter now. It's time. Time to run the fucking show. You've got this. It's your destiny!

Also, keep your sense of humor. Sure, you should take Game Mastering seriously but not too seriously. By that I mean this: it's ok to joke around, laugh at yourself, and have fun. If you can make each session your bitch whilst charming the pants off her, well… now you're Game Mastering like a fucking boss!

Improvisation

No matter how much you plan and study and prepare for what's about to happen, things will occur that will throw you for a loop. Even after decades of Game Mastering, I still forget to name that one NPC or village. Those runes I mentioned on the temple walls… I never came up with a translation if someone rolls an 18 on their arcana check or whatever.

Yeah, I'm not gonna lie. There's a fair amount of stuff you'll just have to make up on the fly. Game Mastering is about reflecting the world around the characters through the Devil's prism. Players expect a certain amount of detail. When you don't deliver, it will reveal a glaring hole in your campaign world. Keep those eye-sores to a bare minimum with improvisation. Use the first thing that comes to mind. If your imagination's running on empty, don't elaborate unless the players ask you directly.

First, try to visualize the scene yourself. As you describe it, see it in your mind. What do those runes look like? "Spiders," you say. Go with that. "What kind of spiders," they ask. "Alien ones that, uh… come down from the mountains in winter," you reply. If they press you for more information, tell them that that is all they know at the moment. "You have a feeling that Benro the heretic would know more about those runes."

Second, think of something cool. What would impress you if you were sitting across from yourself listening? Do the runes tell of something awful – a hideous rite of passage for obscene priests who draw power from being as degenerate as

their loathsome god? Sure, why not? The players won't know it's something you just pulled out of your ass unless you make it obvious (like straight-out telling them).

Third, if nothing at all comes to mind, buy yourself some time. "As the wizard is just about to make out what those runes mean, they begin to glow orange, white, and then aquamarine before bursting into living flame. The runes disappear, burned away by the magical fire." It's going to take a while for the PCs to bring the runes back… and it may take an hour or more of screwing around if the Game Master isn't careful.

Yes, it's great to provide the players with a juicy tangent their characters can sink their teeth into; however, when the session gets derailed by something you came up with off the cuff, you've got three choices (besides stalling for time). 1) Make this new lead really important. That might mean changing the focus of the session, if not the entire campaign. 2) Quickly resolve the mystery by allowing the first or second idea the PCs have to succeed or maybe they somehow get what they want while they're huddled in strategy mode. 3) Interrupt this tangent with something more pressing like an encounter with ogres, dark elves, or a dragon.

The Devil's Prism

The Devil's Prism is a grand illusion! An illusion so vast and deep and compelling that it seems real… perhaps more real than our reality.

The Game Master doesn't just present his players with a universe for their characters to interact with. No, his universe is conscious (well, as conscious as the Game Master in question); it can think for itself, reflecting player and character assumptions, expectations, and desires.

Why the Devil? Consciousness is unnatural, which makes human beings unnatural because of this unexplained, possibly extraterrestrial gift. Unnatural things are widely thought to be supernatural, and simple folk occasionally attribute supernatural phenomena to the Devil.

This conscious RPG reality adapts as the campaign unfolds. With subtle and continual prodding behind the scenes, it evolves into a living breathing world that cannot be easily defined with words nor expressed with simple mathematic equations and formulae.

Random tables, rolling probabilities, prepared encounters, accommodating the adventurers (even when that means actively working against them), and Game Master authority

can simulate an entire world in which to play. It responds to stimuli. If you prick its finger, it will bleed. If you attempt to cut its throat, yours will be opened, instead. Certain campaign worlds seem to be artificially intelligent. They have will, and their will manifests in strange ways… ways a Game Master cannot predict.

That's the Devil's Prism and is the result of desire, discipline, and knowing what the hell you're doing. When the campaign world feels like it could run itself without your blood, sweat, and tears, then you've achieved it. What you've created is more than the sum of its parts. It's as real as you and me, opening gateways to other realities. That's what makes roleplaying unnatural and dangerous… the Devil's work.

When Metallica forgot how to be Metallica

Back in 1983, the heavy metal band Metallica released their first album, Kill 'Em All. It was raw, aggressive, and in your face. The perfect no-bullshit debut that would eventually propel them to their rightful metal god status.

In 1991, they released a self-titled album, simply called Metallica also known as the black album because of its cover. For many of the band's supporters, that's when Metallica ceased to be Metallica. 1991's effort seemed like a commercial sell-out that tried to appeal to the masses. It was over-produced, James Hetfield learned how to sing instead of angrily shouting into the microphone and for a lot of fans (including me) it was an aesthetic disaster - though financially lucrative, of course. Selling out usually is… in the short term.

After a while, Metallica decided to go back to their roots and try to be the good old Metallica of the 1980's. Unfortunately, it seemed they forgot how to be Metallica. Sometimes the old and new can work harmoniously or synergistically together (like 5th edition). Other times, it just creates a Frankenstein's monster, an ill-fitting catastrophe. I'm sure you can think of your own examples.

I think this pattern can be seen all over the place. The reason I bring it up is because Game Masters who felt a certain magic when running the game decades ago might come back to it (or maybe they never left) but just can't seem to get back to what made tabletop fantasy roleplaying as awesome as they remember it being.

How do you rekindle that fire? I'll tell you how: Start simple. Create a loose story based on iconic elements the players will find evocative. Introduce a compelling setup. Give the adventurers a variety of things to do and see, people to meet, and monsters to fight (with treasure, of course). Hook the line with juicy bate that keeps the PCs biting. Keep playing and see what happens, letting the campaign go where it will.

Really, that's all there is to it. The rest of this book will hopefully get you into the proper state of mind, open your eyes to new possibilities, and motivate you to start a new campaign or rejuvenate your current one.

Forget the rules that seem to bog the game down. Leave out mechanics that have nothing to do with roleplaying. Switch systems if you have to! Although, that may not be enough. Play style trumps system. There's an old school style of play that existed in the 70's and 80's which may be what gamers are looking for. Not that everything vintage or nostalgia-tinged is useful. Some of it definitely isn't. While I've tried to keep this tome rooted in my own kind of old school renaissance, you'd do well to google the free pamphlet known as Quick Primer for Old School Gaming by Matthew Finch.

The Waiter Analogy

A decent waiter goes through the motions. He does what's expected: getting your drink order and bringing that out, asking if you want an appetizer, taking your entire order and bringing that out, asking if you'd care for dessert. Maybe, if you're lucky, he offers you a refill on your drink.

A great waiter goes that extra mile. He doesn't perform like a trained monkey. He over-performs, over-delivers. He starts by taking the time to get to know you before the game. He's personable and engaging. You get the sense that he cares about you, about providing you with excellent service.

Beyond that, a great waiter anticipates. He asks if you need anything between orders, if you want lemon or lime in your water, a straw, extra napkins; he finds out if your food tastes good after the first couple bites. If there's anything lacking, he's on top of it – getting you a replacement or something more to your liking.

Behind the scenes, a great waiter is hard at work, making sure you're taken care of. That includes the bill as well. He should make sure you have the right one, all discounts, coupons, gift certificates, etc. have been properly applied.

Walking out of the restaurant, a great waiter should make the customer feel like he's not just had lunch or dinner but visited with an old friend.

You can probably see where I'm going with this. Waiting tables, which I've done in my checkered past, is like Game Mastering. Don't settle for decent. Be great or get the hell out from behind that screen! You're taking up someone else's spot.

And if you can look yourself in the mirror and tell yourself that you're a great Game Master, then you should also have an inner quality called self-respect. Don't get me wrong, the following should be a last resort and will hopefully never happen to you in your lifetime of Game Mastering.

But let's say you are continually being disrespected at the table – put down, undermined, ignored, and abused by your players repeatedly, despite telling them that shit doesn't fly in no uncertain terms. Do what any self-respecting waiter would do when getting a 1% tip. Push the money back to the customer and inform him or her that he or she needs the money far more than you. In your case, say: "I don't think this is working out," and get up to leave.

What do I mean by abuse? More than the usual disruption, inattentiveness, and chaos that many Game Masters experience. I'm talking about continual badmouthing, ridicule, yelling, and violence. If you're assaulted, don't bother saying anything at all. Just get the fuck out of there or tell everyone to leave your house immediately or you'll call the police. Start fresh with a clean slate.

Don't be a Pushover

On the flipside to the waiter analogy, don't try to make every single player perfectly happy all the time or you'll go crazy. As the saying goes, you can't please everyone. There will be a few players who dislike your style or approach or the fact that you don't let them get away with murder. That's fine. Keep your focus on orchestrating the best game you can while making the majority of your players happy most of the time. That's plenty.

Players will test you along the way. Stop bullshit at the get-go with a pleasant turn of phrase, such as, "Instead of going way outside the rules, let's just bend them a little," and find a compromise. If a player asks if he can make a character that's clearly going to tower over the other PCs power-wise, you want to shut it down without looking like a dick or control freak. Say, "Let's keep things within the realm of believability," or "How about we scale things back in order to keep anyone from feeling overshadowed?"

Tell them it's ok to go with that character concept as long as he's no more powerful than the rest of the starting characters. His fellow players should be supportive of that decision because the more powerful his character is, the less powerful their characters will seem by comparison.

If a player keeps conceptualizing light years beyond the pale, say this: "Absolutely not," or "Nice try." Feel free to smile or even laugh while saying it. It works on my kids, it should work for you. Simply saying "No" might create a shadow of doubt that an underhanded player could manipulate. "Absolutely not" couldn't be clearer. It signals to everyone that you're not fucking around, without making it personal. You don't want to make it personal, believe me. Saying something like, "No, I'm not going to let you get away with that." Will most likely start an argument or passive-aggressively stick in someone's craw, creating a negative vibe right off the bat.

Another worthwhile phrase, in the appropriate context, is this: "It's beyond my control." I learned that from the film Dangerous Liaisons. It's a refutation while subtly reminding players that even you have limits, that you – even a god of gods – are simply part of a greater mechanism.

Stress

Sometimes, you've got to run the game even when you don't feel like it. That's too bad, but oh well. The show must go on. Obviously, if you're at death's door, puking, diarrhea, etc., do everyone a favor and cancel with as much notice as possible. Just not in the mood or just found out you're being evicted or got fired? Put that shit out of your mind and do your fucking job – you're real job: Game Mastering! That's part of being the boss.

About a year ago, I opened a letter from one of the prison pen-pals I used to correspond with. Months before, he had sent me a bunch of unrequested artwork along with a handwritten occult manifesto. I had filed that stuff away somewhere because I wasn't going to publish it for him. In his latest letter, I read that if I don't send all his stuff back to him, he'll pay a visit to me and my family when he gets out of prison. So, I tore the house apart looking for his stuff, found it, and mailed it back to the correction facility on the way to the library where I was about to Game Master for ten strangers.

Sure, somewhere in the back of my mind, I was panicking about what if this happened or what if that didn't, but at the end of the day I knew that the game wasn't going to run itself. Game Mastering is my destiny; what I was put on this earth to do. I wasn't going to let the potential collapse of my personal life negatively impact that session. The game must go on.

Your Duties Include Adventure Writing

Not only are you expected to run the game smoothly, efficiently, and with pizzazz, you're also expected to edit, revise, and create encounters throughout the campaign, if not each individual session. This is not based on player expectations. They don't know what's going on behind the screen, inside your mind.

No, adventure writing is based on my expectations for you… because I expect you to Game Master like a fucking boss! Sure, you can use pre-made adventures and a lot of times I think that's the best way to go. Nevertheless, certain encounters will have to be massaged in order to provide maximize enjoyment.

Maybe a monster isn't tough enough or it's too tough or too predictable. Every session is an opportunity to inject your own 2 cents into the campaign, stamping your aesthetic DNA into it. Using bits and pieces from prior sessions also makes narrative sense. If it's discovered through play that all evil priests bear the blue mark of Turin upon their forehead, then revealing its meaning three sessions later while investigating an ancient religious tome should be a no-brainer, despite

using The Temple of Elemental Evil mega-dungeon as a staging ground.

Very few of us are novelists, playwrights and the like. We're not trained to see such golden opportunities. And yet, every one of us needs to give some thought to the campaign. Who is taking action behind the scenes? What's going on in the background? What current events are shaping the political, cultural, societal, religious, magical, and martial landscape? What connections can be made between what came before and what is about to come? All important questions! Answer as many as you can, as often as you can.

Who cares about Atlantean Glyphs?

Have campaign elements – specifically, those elements that are foreign or weird – directly affect the player characters.

Exposition often gets tuned out after a while or players intently listen but soon forget what you said about magical sleep or sliver blades because they didn't have any context, nothing connected that information to the players' alter-egos. Details need glue, in other words. Without something to keep little bits of information from slipping and sliding right out of people's brains, you might as well have kept your description of the entire world to three short sentences.

Going on about Atlantean glyphs won't do any good unless a PC has one… or maybe his squire or sister have some. If you want to introduce psionics, addiction to vampire blood, or the plateau of Sutaz into your campaign, then pick a PC to illustrate that element's relevance. Perhaps the party's thief has limited telepathic powers, the fighter used to be a vampire's thrall and will now do almost anything to drink their potent blood, the wizard has been to the Sutaz plateau only once… but that was enough to scar him for life.

Draw a Story Map

I've seen this sort of thing before, but the idea was brought home by my friend Vb Wyrde. Basically, this is a map that tells a story. It doesn't just include where one place is in relation to another, a story map includes little pictures that go hand-in-hand with each major location. These images bring the journey to life. Jotting down notes nearby is also a good idea - anything to jog your memory, as well as, adding mystery for curious players who take a peek at it. If you'd rather not draw it out, cut out pictures and paste them together like a collage. You could photocopy it all when you're done, adding colored pencil in order to make certain elements pop.

This goes along with an idea I had a couple months ago. Before embarking on a new campaign, create a vision board to go along with it. A vision board is merely a visual representation of your many adventures. Of course, this is easier to do after playing than before. A post-game session report full of pictures should be the least amount of effort you put into campaign visualization. But if you know the important pieces that will be prominently featured, either draw a story map or create a vision board so you can see the journey rather than just reading it. A visual record of events is key.

In Your Own Words

You can't always rely on published adventures or random tables to see you through. Creating an amazing campaign takes a steady hand on the wheel. You, the Game Master, are captain of this ship; you must rise to the occasion early and often, snatching victory from the jaws of defeat when the party zigs instead of zags or when the players' eyes begin to glaze as you read yet another boxed text full of tedious background information. You are in command. Lead, damn it!

Even with boxed text or a scripted narrative, you've got to make it your own. If you have to read a portion of what's written, that's fine. But, whenever possible, paraphrase! Put it into your own words. It'll sound different than reading to the players. It will have a more authentic, organic kind of sound – that's what you want. Try to read to the players as little as possible. If you end up missing a few details because you gave them a summary instead of verbatim description, that's ok. When the players have questions, they'll ask.

Not a Democracy

Democracy works (some of the time) when it comes to governing a country. However, there is no democracy when it comes to running the game. As the Game Master, you are one who makes decisions and sees them through. It's good to take the room's temperature, get feedback, ask for suggestions, etc. All that should go into your decision making process. It doesn't mean the game is run by a committee.

You're the king. Hopefully, a good king. Benevolent dictatorship is another way of putting it. Ultimately, you're the one who has to orchestrate all the little details and keep things in order, keep them running smooth. Don't lose faith when the going gets tough. Take charge!

Of course, too many bad decisions in a row coupled with obvious displays of arrogance followed by insecurity and hesitation can result in a kind of player revolution where the king is marched off to the guillotine. If it's not looking good, then admit that you screwed up, apologize, and try to make amends.

Building Encounters

Taking pieces of an encounter and breaking them into bite-size pieces can make it easier to create a fully formed scene or situation. The less you develop such details ahead of time, the more you'll have to improvise during the session.

For every encounter, you should have at least three elements, and for every element, you should have at least three aspects. Now, this may be overkill for some but if you want to go the extra mile, every aspect should have at least three characteristics.

For instance, the party sees a caravan stopped on the road up ahead. What are the elements of this encounter? The caravan has a broken wheel. The man driving it works for a wizard named Nicodemus. The caravan is carrying pickaxes, shovels, and various mining tools.

Breaking things further down into aspects: the broken wheel has come off because the horses got spooked by a dark figure crossing the road in front of them. It can be repaired but the driver cannot do it alone. The driver is named Harold. He has faithfully served his magic-using master for seven years. Nicodemus ordered him to take mining equipment to the caves of chaos late last night. The pickaxes and such are for reaching a rich vein of glowing indigo crystals.

How about some characteristics? Harold has a bushy brown moustache. He chews and spits tobacco frequently. He lost his right hand in a mining accident a few years ago (which is why he can't change the caravan's wheel by himself – also showing that Harold has experience in the mines).

Nicodemus had been scrying the night before and saw something about those crystals, that they would enhance his magic. The wizard has no love for the queen. He wears a cursed ring that makes him paranoid whenever he leaves his tower.

The mine is about two or three hours down the road by horse or caravan. It's full of low, narrow tunnels. Rumors claim that numerous undead (deceased miners) shamble through the deepest shafts.

Now give some thought to how all this background knowledge can affect the characters. How does this encounter intersect with the adventurers? Harold will tell the adventurers what he knows (which isn't everything – just surface details) if they help him fix the wheel. He'll even allow the PCs to escort him to the mine. "There's plenty for all, I'm sure."

Having a short quotation next to your NPC information can help in a variety of ways. If you get stumped for something to say, something's already written down. Your quote should give you some idea as to how the character talks and what his motivations are. It's easier to build off a quote and ad-lib from there than coming up with something from thin air. If there's an NPC likely to be encountered, come up with at least a line for him or her to say. Incorporate campaign-related background information whenever possible: "Looks like old Elias is ornerier than the three-headed dragon of Torth."

Unscripted

When every detail is planned out ahead of time, actually running the adventure can seem like chore. After all, you know what's going to happen – everything is written down in your notes. The players merely have to go through the motions to reach your foregone conclusion (maybe one of two conclusions, if the party's lucky). That's kind of boring. Boring sucks. Don't fall into that trap.

It's important for a Game Master to be surprised at least once every session. If you're hesitant, start with smaller stakes. Will the PCs get ambushed by the killer now or as they're passing by the library? Make a roll. The book says three goblins are supposed to attack. Roll 2d4 to see how many goblins they encounter instead of going by what's written. Is the chalice still hidden behind a loose flagstone or might it be in the thief's backpack? Let's find out!

Of course, without knowing exactly how something is going to play out beforehand, you'll have to improvise. Believe it or not, this is where the fun comes in for many Game Masters. Yes, they like being surprised from time to time. It makes them eager to keep gaming in order to find out what happens - just like the players. With practice, you'll be able to run an adventure with nothing more than a location, some NPCs, and a hook to get the PCs involved.

Not Everyone Likes the Same Things

Ideally, each session will have a variety of things to recommend it. You'll have some combat, some intrigue, some exploration, and a bit of roleplaying. Not everyone is going to love the entire session. There will be a few players who really enjoy combat but not much else, while others can't wait to poke around the ruins and figure out how to reveal the stairway leading beneath them.

That's ok. If a player or two look a little bored while the rest are enthusiastically interacting with the dark elf delegation or that dwarf who was supposed to be their guide but seems more hindrance than help, so be it. Don't suddenly cut the encounter short just because it's not unanimously enjoyed. After all, we all have our favorite TV shows. Yet, not every minute of our favorite show is fantastic. Sometimes, there are slow parts or things we'd rather fast-forward. But when watching it with friends or family, we keep watching, letting the anticipation build for those parts we're super excited about.

On the other hand, if you've been focusing on one pillar of roleplaying for too long, it's bound to irritate some people. Once the encounter has come to its natural conclusion, switch gears. Throw the PCs a curve ball that exudes one or both of the other pillars.

Keep it moving

Continually milk what you've got over and over without bringing anything new to the table and your campaign will eventually run dry. Instead of cautiously adhering to the status quo, you must occasionally risk it all, conjuring a new place with unfamiliar characters surrounded by intriguing wonders and unanticipated dangers.

Change is the only constant. Sometimes small changes, sometimes big. So, embrace chaos! But it must be controlled. Controlled chaos is key. Like Zeus moving figurines around in the original Clash of the Titans, actively guide the campaign so your influence is subtly felt. This should be done every once in a while. The rest of the time, leave mortals to their own devices, making what they will of the world and its inhabitants.

The formula for success is incremental progress. Little by little (with occasional leaps and bounds), the entire campaign should grow, evolving until the beginning bears only a slight resemblance to the middle, just as the middle only vaguely suggests the end. Foreshadow rather than telegraph what's going to happen.

You might be tempted to play it safe by keeping things the way they are. Resist that temptation. Yes, a few things will remain as they are - this only mirrors the real world. However, you should be changing things up on a regular basis. Add a new NPC like the divinity student who carries a ruby wand. Two sessions later, reveal his pact with Asmodeus (assuming you dropped a few hints along the way).

Remember that villain you got all the players to hate after he killed the wizard's familiar right in front of him? How about an even more evil and powerful villain directly behind him, hiding in the weeds? And the dungeon everyone's been crawling through for three sessions... well, it's actually an incredibly elaborate illusion perpetrated by a giant cerebral cortex with tentacles and a hundred little reptilian, eye-less servants drenched in a sort of bilious green amniotic fluid!

Remember, if you're going to throw a game changer at the PCs, you should drop at least three clues about it. These could be interspersed throughout prior sessions or in the last hour and a half. Perhaps, you've been dropping bread crumbs without even knowing it. It's amazing when you look back at seemingly random occurrences only to discover your subconscious mind had a plan in mind all along. Putting it all together is a job for your conscious mind. Train yourself to notice the little things by focusing attention on everything the players say and do... especially in-character. After a session's over, think about all the various moments your memory has collected. What can be used to your advantage, to the story's advantage, and to the campaign's advantage?

The Illusion of a lot going on

In order to make it seem like you've created a whole world, don't dwell on one or two things with paragraphs of detail. Instead, describe fifteen or twenty things with only the briefest of mentions. For instance: "The bazaar contains all manner of townspeople selling their wares. Walking through the square, your party receives nods of recognition, a friendly wave of the hand, and smiles from the clockmaker, bread maker, cheese maker, pastry chef, painter, puppeteer, toymaker, carriage builder, carpenter, blacksmith, alchemist, wizard's apprentice, and three local gardeners carrying bushels of vegetables. Even the royal jester is here, entertaining the town's children."

Sounds like the place is full of interesting people, right? A world with a lot of little things seems fuller than one with a couple of big things. Obviously, both would be ideal, but a Game Master doesn't always have the time and energy to flesh out each and every corner of his campaign world.

Rather than take a Five Minute Recess

Occasionally, it's helpful to have a little time, a respite from the game's constant demands on your attention. When a trip to the bathroom won't do and you'd rather not call for a break in the action, give the players a brain teaser to keep them occupied. The following is a little something I came up with.

> There's a metallic gizmo on the ground. It's difficult to determine just what it is or does. There's a sphere about the size of an apple, several coils, and a rod with several red buttons on its left side. [Wait for the PCs to investigate the thing]. When reaching down to pick it up, your hand is stopped a couple millimeters before it's able to actually touch the device. There doesn't seem to be any way of picking it up.

Sure, you might be inundated with questions and attempted actions, but after addressing them you should have a few minutes to yourself while the players deliberate. Use that time to regroup, tweak the next encounter, or find a way to bridge something from the campaign's past to its future.

Deeds of Might

Sometimes, a PC will want to do something extraordinary, an action that goes beyond what he's ordinarily capable of. Such amazing acts should be attempted sparingly. Though, too much discouragement is also bad for the game. But how does a Game Master allow such a thing while preventing mighty deeds from becoming the default option?

Have the player roll a standard attack but tell him that if he's going to attempt something outside his comfort zone, he'll be rolling at some kind of disadvantage. If he makes it, then his incredible feat succeeds. If he doesn't, then it's an ordinary failure… unless he rolled a natural 1, in which case, something really bad occurs.

If it's not attack-based, then give the skill check a disadvantage, following the above guidelines. If the deed of might is sorcery, grant the target a saving throw. If he already gets a saving throw, then give him advantage on it. If it's a different kind of spell (like increasing strength or turning rocks into mud), then give it a 2 in 6 or 33% chance of failure.

While shaving this morning, I came up with another variation of VSd6. This alternate version keeps the fantastic friction flowing without players constantly drawing from that particular well.

Each session, players receive 7d6 (3d6 if you want a more dark and desperate campaign or running a two-hour demo) which they can spend on doing mighty deeds appropriate to their race, class, experience, skills, abilities, and backstory. A player could roll 1d6 seven times, 7d6 once, 2d6 three times with 1d6 left over, etc. No matter how many dice are rolled together, only the highest result is counted. So, the more dice rolled at once, the better odds that one of them will hit a high number. Below is the scoring system…

6 = extraordinary success

5 = success

4 = mostly success but with some kind of drawback

3 = partial success / partial failure; could also be a push where there's no result or something incredibly weird happens!

2 = failure

1 = critical failure

Doesn't really matter what you come up with mechanically, just so long as players get the chance to do something truly amazing from time to time!

Divide and Unite

One of your chief duties is to divide the party and then unite them again. This is not done by force. Rather, you will present an environment ripe with opportunities for both separating coming together - usually because of a common goal or threat. This separation and recombination can be emotional, intellectual, and physical.

"The cavern before you has crude paintings on its eastern wall while a mischief of rats crawls around a sizable streak of quartz towards the southern part of the cave. To the north is the skeleton of an unlucky adventurer." Wait for them to choose an encounter. With a larger group, invariably some will go one way and the rest will divide themselves up between the second and third points of interest. Take a few minutes to savor each sub-group, answering questions and dangling the hook of intrigue whenever possible.

"What does he have on him, you ask? The corpse's bony hand clutches a lavender handkerchief. You want to examine it closer? The faint odor of tantalizing perfume still clings to it." At least one player will make the connection that something is amiss. If this adventurer died years ago, then why can the PCs detect perfume? More questions will follow. Such as, does the handkerchief look new? "Yes." Be direct and authoritative when need be. Can we then assume that the handkerchief was placed in his hand recently or he became skeletal because of something he encountered rather than years of decomposition? "Perhaps..." Be vague when it suits your purposes.

When you have a divided party (in the physical sense), it is important not to let any sub-group take up too much time before going to the next. Around ten minutes is good. Never let it go past fifteen. Any more than that and the rest of your players will grow antsy and bored, eventually leading to resentment.

Just before the separation has overstayed its welcome, rejoin them with a new discovery. Something on the ceiling is lowering as a klaxon bell reverberates throughout the cavern. Suddenly, everyone will rush to see (or hide from) whatever is descending. Now, they're a united party again.

Breakup the Campaign to make it last

Break the campaign into pieces to avoid the campaign breaking up. Somewhere between the 7th and 10th uninterrupted session, take a week or two off. If a holiday, birthday, vacation, etc. is coming up, then plan your break around that. Let the players know about the campaign intermission ahead of time so they can make other plans on days you're not gaming. Non-gamer friends, family, and significant others will also appreciate you and the players having a weekend free every other month or so.

A break will stave off Game Master burnout. That week or two of vacation will allow you to recharge your batteries, stay fresh, and see the campaign from a different vantage point. Rather than gaming for 15 or 20 weeks in a row and eventually dreading upcoming sessions, a planned pause will leave you wanting more. With renewed vigor, you'll set your sights on bigger and better sessions instead of the never ending slog that Game Mastering can sometimes degenerate into.

It'll also give you the chance to generate more material: new monsters, magic items, spells, NPCs, locations, and so forth. Because who hasn't fallen behind on their encounter creation when Game Mastering every single week for months on end?

Best of all, each respite allows you to see each portion of the campaign as its own book (with individual sessions being chapters). Each book requires some kind of beginning, middle, and end. Plan accordingly. With predetermined breaks, you can create a stand-alone mini campaign, two-parter, trilogy, or just keep going until the group has had its fill.

TV series are doing this more and more. Throughout a season, they'll take one or more breaks. Personally, I'm just as excited to watch the mid-season finale as I am the season's last episode. Game more by gaming just a little bit less. Embrace the hiatus!

Strangers at the Beginning

Don't force prior relationships (knowing each other) on the PCs the first session. Let their acquaintanceship build organically over the length of your campaign. If players come to you with an idea of being brother and sister, father and son, best friends or bitter rivals, that's fine. But generally, you want characters to be unfamiliar with each other. Why? Because it's difficult to fake the kind of familiarity it'll take to be convincing.

Camaraderie doesn't just happen when strangers meet or when the Game Master snaps his fingers. If you want it to feel natural, it's going to take time. Look, the characters have just been rolled. Even the players hardly know who they are (there's also a chance that the players don't know each other very well). Work with what you've got - a bunch of random characters adventuring together. Don't be too eager to get past the awkward stage of everyone getting to know one another.

So, why are they adventuring? Well, that depends on the kind of campaign you want to run and what kind of opening you want to use. It's so past cliche that it's now a classic: adventurers hear of an upcoming job and meet at the local tavern to get the particulars. As long as there are a few unexpected twists and turns in that first session, your players won't hold it against you. Or maybe the village is under attack by giants, orcs, or zombies. Did the PCs suddenly awaken from cryo-sleep in the same underground bunker? What about assembling at the castle by royal command?

Flexibility

Stick to your guns while giving in most of the time. Yeah, it's tricky balance. Don't be too eager to please, but it's a mistake being too rigid. Players don't want to be at the mercy of a penny-pinching accountant doling out gold pieces like they were artifacts. Nor do they want to be hemmed in by some screen monkey putting the kibosh on all their great ideas.

If you lavish the characters with riches, a castle, an army, or several immensely powerful magic items, then you'd be remiss to leave out the dark cloud surrounding those silver linings. Throw in a relentless mercenary who's been hunting for this or that most of his life. Consider the taxes! How about being coerced into tithing to local churches and donating to charities by the king's personal bodyguard and assassin?

And of course, one has to stay in the arch-mage's good graces or see all those piles of gold transformed into lead.

It might take time. Learning when to ignore several players' momentary whining and when to listen to one player's faint praise takes practice. Sure, there's common sense to consider and the tone of your campaign (cinematic vs. gritty), but most of all you have to be mindful of balance.

The balance factor is key because there is an underlying sense of fairness and fair play at work. It's not being tallied on a record sheet, but most players instinctively know when the Game Master and his side are getting the upper hand a majority of the time. Even if the PCs aren't getting killed, don't be the kind of Game Master who always has to "win" or make the important decisions. Lose occasionally and gracefully. Watch the players' faces when they pull one over on your clever NPC or fell your godling in a couple rounds. Those moments are part of why they're bothering to play at all. Indulge them from time to time.

I've learned that giving players a lot of small decisions can make them feel more like they're running the show. These little choices might be rather inconsequential when it comes right down to it, but having the power to decide, to choose is important. In return, the players will be more forgiving on those rare occasions when you force them onto a narrow track. Railroading, that's called. Sometimes, it can't be helped but don't make a habit of it.

Ideal Session Length

Decide on how long each game session will be ahead of time. Ideally, somewhere between 3 – 5 hours. My personal preference is 4 hours. That's long enough to get a lot of things done, covering a lot of ground - but not so long that attention spans fade and/or schedules conflict. Few individuals have 5 or more hours of free time to roleplay every week.

If you're within 15 minutes on either side of the game's end time, that's fine. Anything less and you should start scrambling to come up with another encounter. Anything more and you should find an appropriate stopping point – before combat begins if this next battle is going to take too long to resolve.

Preparation

My personal golden rule about prep time is half of the upcoming session. That means a 4 hour game requires about 2 hours of preparation. Shouldn't matter if you're running a published adventure or something you created. Obviously, the less time you prepare, the more improvising will have to be done. Sure, you could routinely go over 2 hours for all your sessions, but that's also part of Game Master burn-out… something we want to avoid.

The easiest way to prep is break things down into encounters. Come up with the basics first, like a band of goblins. Then go deeper into that encounter or come back to that later. Meanwhile, think up another encounter and how the party

and overall story might get from the first encounter to the second and the third, etc.

Throughout this book, you'll get a taste for many different methods of encounter creation: improvisation, relying on random tables, following the players' lead, going through the campaign checklist in Part II, etc. Do whatever comes naturally to you. If your process is onerous, separate the wheat from the chaff. Create the barest of bones, a session's skeleton. Embrace minimalism! I recommend *Sly Flourish's The Lazy Dungeon Master*.

Player Character Fixation

Occasionally, an encounter (or aspect thereof) makes the surrounding encounters pale by comparison. If the adventurers become fixated on a specific detail in the game, you have three options.

The least useful is to shut them down by outright telling them that there's nothing to see here and they should move on. The next option is to give them what they want or at least something tangible… a few crumbs to whet their appetite. Last, you could conflate the object of their fixation until it becomes the entire point of play, effectively dominating the entire session, if not the whole campaign. This option requires a fair amount of improvisation if you didn't come up with anything beforehand. If you don't mind thinking on your feet, I recommend the third option – the players are hooked (which isn't always easy), now just reel them in.

In a recent game, I described and drew out a 10' diameter seal, lid, door, hatch, or something buried in the ground beneath a crude stone altar used for human sacrifice. The seal was made out of an unknown metal with a mysterious symbol both protruding and indented upon its surface: an eye within a triangle within a circle. Originally planned to be a minor feature that I might exploit for some purpose at a later date, the PCs just would not let it go! They tried numerous things to open the thing or activate it in some way. Everything from meditating to spilling fresh blood upon it.

Though I assured them that nothing they were trying was doing any good (seemingly the first option), it wasn't more than a few minutes later before I successfully merged the next encounter with that mysterious seal. A visit from a dark elf the PCs had previously met allowed me to keep them on the hook. Of course, they showed her the seal to see if she knew anything. Surprise, surprise… it turns out she did! Unfortunately, she remembered seeing that symbol in a book back at her dark elf city library. Suddenly, the session took a most unexpected turn, allowing me to save what I already had planned for next week's session.

All roads should lead to whatever your players are super-excited about. Some of them will be short-cuts, others long and winding roads. Harness their fevered imagination and stall for time if you can't think of anything awesome on the spot.

Positive Affirmations

Throughout the campaign, your game will run smoother when handing out pleasantries such as… thank you, nice job, good one, indeed, quite right, correct, well done, awesome, swell, fantastic, agreed, nice catch, astute observation, well spotted, I'm glad you caught that, well played, much appreciated, huzzah, good on you, excellent, thank god for the cleric, or simply a high-five.

Rewards shouldn't be aimed at just the characters. Your players will respond favorably to praise and will, in turn, look more favorably upon your campaign, as well as, your Game Mastering. Do them a solid and give credit where credit's due.

Intermittent Rewards

Give out rewards all the time and they become expected rather than special and meaningful. Give out no rewards (or so rarely it's almost the same thing) and you're basically a dick. The key is to hand out the awesome sporadically. The majority of the time, there will be a rhyme and reason – a direct correlation between positive outcomes and receiving something cool. Occasionally, the reward is bestowed randomly.

Not only does it feel good to reward players and their characters, you get to see their faces light up and they're genuinely happy [undemanding] for a period of time… it also reinforces good behavior. Such conditioning may seem underhanded or inhumane (works great on dogs!), yet it's the foundation of civilization. Do good work and occasionally you'll receive something nice… maybe validation, a magic sword, or attention paid to the thief's backstory. Doesn't matter what the reward is. Applied intermittently and heavily weighted towards exceptional moments of gaming, you're campaign will evolve into something greater.

Making up for your Mistakes

As Game Master, you share some of the responsibility for record keeping, rule arbitration, and the legality of PC actions. If a player gets a spell wrong, miscalculates their damage, or assumes wrongly that his character gets a bonus or penalty, you'll most likely have to deal with it – occasionally, his fellow players will step up to correct the situation but a Game Master cannot rely upon such things.

My advice is to correct errors as quickly and best as you can without making a big deal about it. If the mistake came from an inexperienced player, the blame falls squarely upon your shoulders. Simply explain the fundamentals (again) briefly so it doesn't keep happening. Give them an easy formula, cheat sheet, or just circle the damned number if you have to.

In a recent session, a player brought an out-of-town friend to the game. He had never played a tabletop RPG before. I quickly created a 6th level fighter for him to play while everyone was working on their own characters. The fighter had two attacks per round. I wrote it on the sheet in big letters next to his weapon. However, I forgot to mention it to the player. A verbal explanation is three times more valuable than numbers and words upon a character sheet. It wasn't until halfway through the first battle that I remembered his fighter should be getting another attack each round. To make up for it I gave him three attacks on his next turn. After that, things returned to normal.

Admitting your mistake goes a long way towards showing the players that you're not only human but approachable. Sometimes, saying "I'm sorry" or "my bad" is all that's required to accept responsibility and move on. Of course, there's always doubling down on your error. Every once in a while you can skate through on that one, but I don't recommend it.

How can I put this as crudely as possible? Hmmm… If you're having sex with a woman and orgasm before she does (despite your best intentions), don't ask her if she wants you to eat her pussy. Just do it.

Rate of Encounter

On average, an encounter should take about half an hour to resolve, more or less. That means you should average about two encounters per hour. Sometimes, you'll only have a single encounter per hour, other times there might be three.

If we assume two encounters per hour, each encounter should have a beginning, middle and end. Every encounter begins with some kind of hook, even if it's "You see something moving over there". The middle involves getting to know this encounter. Players will familiarize themselves with the situation via their characters' interaction. An encounter ends when the players get what they need, go away empty handed, or spring some kind of trap.

In a standard four hour session, you should prepare for seven encounters. Yes, I double-checked the math. Seven encounters in four hours accounts for a few minutes eaten up at both the beginning and end of a session talking about the concert you saw last night and pre/post-game activities (leveling up, discussing rules, eating pizza, etc). Additionally, some encounters might take a little longer to resolve, especially the session's epic battle or figuring out the mystery whatchamacallit.

Seven is the magic number. Pay attention to it if you find yourself having trouble with encounter quantity. Before the game, if you don't have at least that many encounters or potential encounter ideas, you may have to improvise during the game. Knowing that a few encounters will have to be improvised should heighten your awareness and get your adrenaline going.

If the session ends before you can get to all your prepared encounters, save the rest for later. If you run out of encounters and there's still a lot of time, make something up or roll on an appropriate table. But let's say you're coming up blank. What then? Well, you can do a number of things… 1) give the PCs free reign to follow their nose, 2) circle back to an earlier encounter that wasn't fully resolved, or 3) page through a bestiary or manual of monsters until something jumps out at you.

If you're rolling for wandering monsters and such, that's definitely going to save you preparation and planning but there's a cost – those encounters will either seem random, straightforward, or both. My advice: even if your notes or published adventure calls for wandering monster checks, restrict random encounters to one per session, two at the absolute maximum. Why? Because at the end of the day, they're tangential obstacles that don't further the campaign. Keep filler to a minimum.

Go where the Game Leads You

If the session stars off the way you planned but current events are steering (or could easily steer) things in another direction, away from your predetermined course, abandon your notes and go with the flow. See where the game goes. You can always come back to your planned encounters later.

Listen to what the PCs are saying and doing but also pay attention to what the players are telling you, both verbal and non-verbal. If their eyes light up, they excitedly gesture, or an extra ounce of enthusiasm enters their voice, you'll know they're being swept up in the story. If that's the case, you may want to take a side road you never even considered.

This is part of your job! Allow them to go down that road… unless you're totally unprepared for what's coming next and just not feeling the improve vibe at the moment. If that's the case, then let them travel just beyond the first few steps before an obstacle appears. Maybe it's an iron door, swirling vortex of energy, or the way is being guarded by a three-headed dragon. This lets the adventurers know the path exists and will be there for them later. In the meantime, they can go back to their original direction.

Group Size

Any less than three players and I'd rather cancel the session. With only two, both players have to be exceptional (see Exceptional Players below).

As of right now, the largest group I've Game Mastered is eleven. Eleven players is a lot, but with this book, you'll be able to handle it. Twelve is probably the absolute maximum I'd ever go.

Ideally, your group should be between five and eight. Just like classroom sizes, smaller groups get more personal attention while larger groups, though they can be a handful, increase the total gaming overall. Looking at it as gaming hours, you take the hours per session and multiply it by the number of players. Five players at four hours equals twenty gaming hours. The more you run, the more experience for yourself and joy you'll bring to others.

Exceptional Players

The worst players are actively disruptive. They're generally annoyed, cranky, whiny, complaining, abrasive, rude, drunk, high, belligerent, loud, or asleep. These are problem players you should highly consider not inviting back or telling them that you're dropping them from the group.

Average players mostly just sit there. Occasionally, they pay attention, take their turn, ask a few questions, and participate in whatever's going on but will rarely take the lead. Chances are, they're a little bit reserved, shy, introverted, insecure, chill, or have a passive personality. About half your players (give or take a couple) will be average. Nothing wrong with that. In fact, you probably wouldn't have a game at all if you only relied on exceptional players to game with.

Exceptional players ask intriguing questions. They are the most active, instigating, pushing the action forward, yet know when to take a backseat… after all, not every encounter can be about them. They consider their character's history, background, personality, and so on before speaking or taking action. They take the time and effort to describe what they're doing and how they're doing it. They are consistently paying attention and looking for an angle. They make suggestions for expanding the campaign world. If they ever criticize you (which is unusual for them), it's always constructive criticism. Exceptional players go beyond the rules and will therefore push you to be a better Game Master.

If you have one exceptional player in your group, that's good. If you have two or three, then consider yourself very fortunate indeed.

Session Write-ups and Recaps

I've had thousands of conversations with my wife over the past few years we've been together and I remember about five of them. That's the nature of memory, especially when it comes to the spoken word. So, for god's sake, write it down!

Turn those hastily scrawled pre-game notes into a summary of what happened. If you don't want to do it, then find a player who does. Put it online if you like. Adding pictures to go with the text will help bring the session to life… just like having illustrations on hand during the game.

Before each session, have a player recap recent events – especially if you're coming off a break. Everyone should

be up to speed on what occurred last game – unless there's an in-game reason for their ignorance. If you notice an inconsistency between what players remember and what you mentally pictured, take a second to analyze that. If it's something obvious, like the lizard men were actually scorpion men, then correct away. However, if that player recalls the wrong command words of a magic weapon, then that player's faulty memory just so happens to coincide with that of the character. Of course, if the player mentioned that his character was writing the information down as soon as he heard it, then you've got to give him credit for knowing… assuming he got the right information in the first place.

Add another Layer

You don't want to overcrowd your campaign with an avalanche of details, encounters, villains, items, NPCs, places, special circumstances, and puppet masters orchestrating everything from behind the scenes, etc. But chances are, that won't be your problem. Instead, you'll be worrying about the reverse. Will there be enough? Will the meager setup, hook, and dungeoncrawl be enough to entertain the players? Will it give their characters enough to sink their teeth into?

Chances are, your session - somewhere along the way - could do with another layer. This might be a wrinkle, hiccup, inconvenience, or distraction that the PCs will have to contend with while saving the princess, the kingdom, or maybe just their own asses. Introduce an aspect of this new layer early on in the campaign.

As a suggestion, you could introduce an ancient method of transportation - how about a monorail system? First the adventurers stumble upon these stone monoliths rising high up into the trees. The tall, smooth stones have numbers chiseled into them. There's a lot of them - one about every 50'. Before the PCs can do any serious investigating, there's a band of bloodthirsty orcs at the ready. And one of them has a talking sword. It speaks only infernal so everyone assumes it is evil. But maybe it isn't? Perhaps that's the only language the blade remembers because it has been languishing in some plane of hell for a thousand years. And a dark sorcerer - the kind who wouldn't give a second thought to torturing the entire party - has been tracking it. Does the sword know about the sorcerer? What's their connection? Is there a third party… a fiery demon with yellow eyes that bridges the two? Perhaps the demon won the sword in battle, lost it during a freak dimension storm and now wants it back. Is that demon the sorcerer's patron?

Based on all that, you could add another layer by giving a 1 in 6 chance of encountering a dimensional storm every day the PCs are within 100' of the sword. What do these dimension storms look like? Are they a shimmering field of purple, magenta, and red illumination cut through with black lightening from some lightless abyss? If one is caught within it, is there a 33% chance of being sucked into hell or some other dimension... an alien world? What sort of creatures might escape from these storms? The oozing spawn of Cirellian 6? Are they immune to everything except crystalline weapons?

Getting back to the monorails, who might have been traveling them a hundred years ago? What did they leave behind... a wristwatch? Is there a super-computer on the other side of the world who wants it operational? If so, how many robots will it send in order to repair the monorail? Who controls the super-computer and who wants to see it melted down for scrap? There's always another layer just around the corner.

Flatlining the Burning Chrome of Chiba City

"This neuromance makes my motherboard hot." - Tron Girl

Back when I was fighting in the war of loose-fitting garments on New Venus, I received an x-txt from our friend with the triangle tattoo. Apparently, Zenfrill no longer feels like wizarding-up the eye of fuchsia flame. Let's go get that bastard, bring him down to the Bandstand Boogie!

Confusing, wasn't it? This is an important technique I wanted to show you. Did you know that William Gibson's *Neuromancer* was influenced by John Carpenter's *Escape from New York*? There's a throwaway line in the film, the Warden talking to Snake: "You flew the Gulfire over Leningrad, didn't you?" This casual reference implies things the audience on the outside doesn't know; making the fictional world seemingly larger and more complex. The largeness and complexity fools our brains into thinking that they're *more real*, when actually... it's all just a bunch of made-up gibberish, unfamiliar jargon and slang, and the likely combination of disparate words and phrases that our minds may conjure. Gibson knew the power of it, and now so do you.

Overuse will either confuse an audience or piss them off. In rare circumstances, confusion is a good thing – when it serves a purpose such as the disorientation of waking from a coma

or culture-shock of suddenly having to live in a foreign land. But more than likely, you're after a taste of strange, not a four-course meal. In that case, go for the casual reference with no more than three fictional words or phrases that you've manufactured... or stolen from something you've watched, read, heard, etc.

You get out what you put in

As Tyler Durden said, "You decide your own level of involvement." Players merely have to show up occasionally, answer the Game Master when he asks them questions, and roll the appropriate die upon request. These are your lowest common denominator players. Hopefully, a few of your players will put more of themselves into the game than that. I touched on this earlier (or if you're reading this part first, I'll touch on it later). Exceptional players and those in-between will go the extra mile, taking advantage of opportunities both during the game and after.

I enjoy reading post-session emails from players. Most of the time, they want to tell me about an idea they had - some point of interest for their character. It could be a possible hireling, search for information, desire for magical components, reading forbidden tomes, learning another language, basket weaving, etc. Whatever it's about, incorporate some or all of their ideas into the next few sessions.

Whenever possible, build on player feedback and character pursuits. If the party wizard wants to form his own secret society or magic circle, let him. If the party rogue desires his very own thieves' guild, capitalize on that. Not only does it reward players for putting more of themselves into the game, it takes a little of the creative burden off you. Of course, don't just leave it at that. Take a few moments to think about how events might come about or what could transpire after things get off the ground. Maybe several astrologers notice a disconcerting pattern in the night sky... a constellation promising strife and upheaval along the northern border. And that thieves' guild would surely attract a few charming con men who'd love nothing better than to artfully steal the guild away from the party rogue.

Now, you can bolster the percentage of players giving feedback by specifically asking for this information, but even that might not yield a majority of the table. Don't get upset about lack of post-game participation. Simply make use of what you receive and be grateful for that. Begging and

pleading is undignified and won't aid your cause. Chasing after players, hounding them for their post-session surveys also sends the wrong signal.

Visual Aids

Whenever possible, have something to show the players. It may be the picture of a monster, map, sketch of their latest hireling, or 3D model of the dungeon their crawling through. Every session, you should have at least one thing the players can see.

Sure, we can all visualize what the Game Master is droning on about in our mind's eye. Go the extra mile when you can. Even a toy maraca underneath the table could be the rattle of a giant snake further down the corridor. At the very least, you could write-up a blog post about the previous session, including pics found on the internet. Maybe you didn't sell the ferociousness of that demon lord when it attacked. A picture of him could really solidify what you intended – something that will seep into a player's subconscious. Better late than never.

Always Level Up after the First Session

I can remember playing in this Empire of the Petal Throne game a couple years back. Upon finishing the second session, our characters didn't have experience points to get beyond 1st level. We probably weren't even close! That was my last session of that game. Thankfully, that's not what I remember of old school AD&D games back in the 80's. A long, long time ago I played a fighter named Route. The odds were against him but I rolled pretty good and probably made a couple smart decisions along the way. Before I knew it, I was 2nd level, then 3rd, and not too long after 4th. Route (or maybe it was Root?) started looking like a hero. Progression is part of the tabletop RPG experience. Taking it away makes some players feel cheated.

At the end of the first session, even if that includes an hour or so of character creation, the survivors should achieve the next level. This does a couple of things. It shows progress, giving the players incentive to keep playing your game (they don't have to, you know). It also motivates the characters.

How realistic is it for adventurers to keep slogging through those caverns if they aren't improving their trade? Might as well turn back and keep ploughing that field!

Leveling up is a nice reward for a job well done. There's plenty of time to be stingy with experience points and granting levels down the road. But even if you decide to delay gratification, there's absolutely no reason to make the PCs wait more than two full sessions before reaching the next level or having experience points enough to upgrade their adventurers.

Experience

Some Game Masters like to go by the book, others would rather level the party as a whole when the time is right. No more than three sessions should go by before the next level is reached. Even if the PCs just seem to be farting around, not really doing much of anything. Because if they aren't finding adventure, the Game Master is partially to blame. Don't penalize the players or their characters because you like watching them squirm in the mud or dangling from your finely crafted fishhook. Stop being a sadist, get on with the business of creating circumstances ripe for adventure, and let's move the fuck on already!

One last thing about experience… if you aren't keeping track of the individual XP, pay attention to acts of bravery, as well as, roleplaying. If the party wants to risk it all by fighting something well beyond their abilities, the survivors must be rewarded accordingly. It stands to reason that those risking life and limb should gain levels faster than cautious types, even if the battle itself doesn't take more than a couple rounds. After all, things could have gone much different.

Initiative

The bigger the group, the more difficult it is to track who goes first, next, now, and who went last. Constantly looking back at your initiative order is tiresome and time consuming. Leaving it in the hands of a player, I've found, isn't much better.

For big groups, I just go in order of seating. First, I determine if the monsters have surprise. If it's unclear, make a roll. If the monsters get the jump on the PCs, then I start with myself. If they don't, initiative begins with the person immediately seated to my left. Once they've gone, it's the person to their left and so on. When it comes back to me, I have the monsters

attack and it repeats. While not terribly "realistic", it gets the job done when I have a group of 8 or more players.

If you have a small to medium sized group or just simply hate the idea, then come up with your own system or borrow one of hundreds available in various rulebooks and all over the internet. As long as you and your group likes it, it's fine.

Should NPCs be involved in Combat?

Frequently, there will be one or more NPCs tagging along. I like to keep these folks in the background unless they have something substantial to contribute. For instance, if an NPC hanger-on is an alchemist and the adventurers require some alchemy, then it makes perfect sense for him to step into the spotlight and do his thing. Fighting alongside the party is another matter.

There are three reasons for why I sideline NPCs during a fight (especially if you have a full table). One, the PCs are the heroes. As the Game Master, you don't want to be front and center, enjoying the attention. I've fallen into that trap; it leads to the dark side. Two, combat will inevitably take longer. If the party has more firepower, then you'll probably have to beef up their adversaries in order to make it challenging. Three, equal participation in battle should mean equal shares of treasure. Are the adventurers really going to be happy dividing the loot between everyone who charged the dragon?

If the players seem dissatisfied with that, there's always compromise. Let a player who's willing and able take on a single NPC during combat do so. You as Game Master will resume responsibility after the fighting ends. Such NPCs don't get special actions, class features, luck, advantage, bonuses, or anything special. They get to do one thing each round, that's it. If an NPC is up there swinging (or even in the back casting or firing arrows), he's a legitimate target. On the rare occasion where you might fudge a roll in order to spare a PC's life, never do that for an NPC. They deserve everything they get for attempting to hold their own next to the real adventurers.

Matching Dice

Mismatched dice might be your idea of shabby chic, but it usually comes across as sloppy. Like you didn't care enough to properly prepare for the game. Your dice should match or, at the very least, be color coordinated. It's just a sign of professionalism – that you're passionate about the craft. Having dice that look as if they all come from the same set makes you look (and hopefully feel) like a fucking boss of a Game Master. Even better, come with a spare set of matching dice that noobs and players who just came from work or the gym can use.

There is a corollary (with two parts) to my imploring above. 1) If a Game Master wishes his dice to be purposefully eclectic, he may choose a set of varying colors – though there should still be a singular quality to these mismatched dice. They might be black, yellow, red, blue, green, purple, etc. but maybe they all have white numbers or they're all solid plastic rather than translucent. 2) There is a certain appeal to the massive bag, box, or tub of dice. A receptacle containing every kind of die imaginable. If you must lob your dice horde onto the table, then proudly reach your hand amongst the dice until you've plucked just the one or ones you need.

Additionally, I like having a dedicated space in front of me for rolling dice. If you use a Game Master screen, that's fine. Roll behind the screen. If you don't use a screen or anything else, then it's possible your dice are frequently rolling off the table, into a player's dice, or into the pizza! That's just one added distraction you don't need. I have a 12" x 12" wooden dice tray that I love to use. I wood-burned sigils into it (which I occasionally use for giving results a little extra zing), stained it, sealed it, and love the thing to pieces. I never roll dice outside the box. Plus, it's handy for holding spare pencils, pens, dice, markers, cards, and lightweight books.

Ambience

Some Game Masters prefer a certain kind of ambience… candles (perhaps scented), soft lighting, bright lighting, barely any lighting at all, colored lighting (eldritch green?), dark ambient tones, heavy metal, the soundtrack to Conan the Barbarian or Star Wars, etc. Give some thought to what your gaming space says about the game you're running. If you have no control over the space, ask yourself what you can control. If the answer is hardly anything at all, then ask yourself if you should move your game to a more suitable venue.

If you prefer to have a neutral sort of ambience, then consider changing things up for the occasional special session. Are the adventurers exploring a strange new dimension? Have they entered the inner-sanctum of Mestema? Will part of this session involve a dream sequence? Are you taking a break from your usual fantasy RPG to investigate the cinematic universe of Dario Argento? If so, then break out the lava lamp, glow sticks, light bulb surrounded by thin colored fabric, colored light bulb, or whatever your imagination can come up with. Weird colors will give your game an otherworldly feel. So, if that's the vibe you're going for, then weird it up.

Strange sounds can also be extremely effective. Create an unusual sound underneath the table; use a tape recorder full of clicking, buzzing, and muffled screams; or use a CD containing appropriate audio. If it's just for a single session, go nuts! Your players will let you know if it's working for them or if this experiment was trial and error.

The Die is Cast

When the die or dice have been rolled, that's the way things go… unless there's a very good reason for ignoring them. Occasionally, you'll get an amazing idea while the dice are in the air or just as they're landing on the table. Sometimes, you're expecting a certain result (when there's a 90% chance of success or failure, for instance) and then the 10% suddenly becomes reality. Or you realize that amount of damage will kill Laveshorr the half-elf warlock who never gets an even break. In fact, you killed Ted's character last session and then two sessions before that, mostly due to poor rolling on his part and great rolling on yours. And the next scene was going to be Laveshorr's big moment, his redemption!

Yeah, sometimes you're going to want to fudge the results. Rather than seeing it like that, let's call it taking another path… the road less traveled. Do it too much and the players might start to feel that the game is unfairly weighted towards the Game Master's wishes – even when things tend to work out in the party's favor. Remember those sleepers in the Matrix who kept waking up because they lived in a Utopia (albeit an artificial one)? Entire crops were lost. Nevertheless, there will be occasions when making a conscious choice is better for the game than simply letting the dice decide an outcome every time.

Use their Character Names

When it's John's turn to act, I try not to say, "Hey, John, are you going to attack or what?" Instead, I might say, "It's Xarred's turn." Or, "What's Xarred going to do now that he's lost his right hand?" It's a small thing (as most of these suggestions are) but they add up. Using a character name whenever possible retains a bit more of the roleplaying than using a player's real name. Obviously, if you want John to pass you the bowl of chips, don't call him Xarred. But anything that could be construed as in-game or in-character should be Xarred, not John.

If you've got a decent sized group, you may have a difficult time remembering everyone's character name for the first

few sessions. Simply write out their name on a piece of stiff paper and have it facing you, right in front of each player. Either that or write out everyone's name on a sheet of paper corresponding to where each player is sitting.

That 15%

This suggestion goes for published adventures, too. No matter how complete the scenario you've purchased, it's not finished until you've put your own spin on it. That last little bit must come from you, your experiences, your preferences, and your aesthetics. If you use a pre-packaged adventure 100% "as is", something about it will feel hollow or forced or pale by comparison – maybe not to your players but deep inside yourself... you'll know. The adventure could have been better if only you had [fill in the blank].

Additionally, the way you run the game will make it inherently yours. Even with the same exact 85%, you and I would each be creating a unique gaming experience. Our performances would be different, the outcomes based on dice rolls would be different, and player choices would also vary. But most of all, the 15% makes it personal.

When tabletop roleplaying games become so standardized and predictable that you can't tell the difference between a live experience and a computerized one, then the game has lost some of its magic and we might as well be interfacing with a dragons and dungeons mainframe in some vault deep underground... hey, that gives me an idea for a new campaign!

The Saving Grace of 33%

Even with all the world's improvisation techniques, it's nice to have an ace up your sleeve. Mine is 33%. I've written about this multiple times because it's one of the most powerful instruments in my Game Master's toolbox. If you don't know about a certain thing, make a roll.

You will face many a decision at the table. There will be the logical outcome... but then there will also be a chance for something unusual and unexpected – the minority report. When you think of a possibility that might be hilarious, intriguing, awesome, tragic, or just plain bizarre, then roll the dice! You can either roll percentile dice or merely a six-sided die. If it's the former, a result between 01 and 33 means that weird possibility is happening or has already happened. If

you're over, then the normal outcome occurs. Same thing with the d6. If the result is a 1 or 2, narrate the minority report. If the result is a 3, 4, 5, or 6, then it's business as usual.

With a percentile, it can tell you a bit more. For instance, let's say a player says, "Don't drink it, may be poison." So, you roll to see if it is or not. A roll of exactly 01 means that, yes, the canteen's water is poisoned and not only that but it's a highly toxic save versus death kind of poison. While a 35 might indicate that the water is stale or that it's actually wine that has gone bad (tastes like vinegar). Maybe 98 means it's extremely fresh... from a nearby mountain stream. Does it have restorative properties? Either make a unilateral decision or roll again to see what the oracle tells you.

It's up to you if you want to divulge that information to the players. Knowing the stakes and your methodology shouldn't diminish their enjoyment, but sometimes it's best to keep them guessing.

Specific and Vague

You should alternate between the specific and vague. You might not know when to use one rather than the other (there's no hard and fast rule) but listen to them in your head before the game and watch for the players' responses during. Constantly referring to "the old church" will have a different effect than calling it "Houndstooth Abbey." "Fireball" has its uses, but so does "searing emerald flames closely followed by the smell of burnt flesh." The latter usually having more impact.

Repetition can make awkward or unfamiliar words and phrases sound commonplace. If you find the perfect wording for a thing, keep using it. The second or third time it's used, you might start feeling self-conscious. Disregard your insecurity. If it resonates with power, milk it for all it's worth until that word or phrase becomes a mantra... a persuasive litany that cannot be denied, seeping down deep between the cracks of reality until it coats the very foundation. Suggestions: her face like a golden mask; the idol's mesmerizing eyes and sinister lips; a violet dream-like cloud; an incessant, feverish drumming; the pungent fragrance of spicy, garlic shrimp; or he will come for you in the night.

I've been re-watching the TV show Lost. The dark territory is a swathe of jungle where most people shouldn't go. Of course, the name itself does a good job of warning people off. I mean, who except for intrepid explorers would travel to a place called the dark territory? Lost does the same thing with "the hatch", "the button", "the others"... you get the idea.

Using words and phrases such as "the stranger" are abstract enough to let subjective imaginations run wild, while being definite enough for everyone to get the basics.

What about cultists who keep going on and on about "the sacred object" or "the great work". Such phrases are both specific and vague enough for us to imagine what they're talking about while leaving enough room for our own interpretation. When the big reveal comes (if it comes), you can go one of three routes: 1) Anti-climax. Whatever it is is silly, dumb, or utterly ordinary. 2) Extraordinary. You do your best to either meet or exceed player expectations. 3) Obscure. Even though it has been revealed, there's still a good deal of mystery surrounding the object, work, etc.

Law of Diminishing Returns

Use it but don't overuse it. The more you rely on a certain trick or technique, the greater odds of it turning into a crutch. If you find yourself going back to the same well over and over again, chances are you need a change (maybe a drastic one) or else that particular well will run dry… assuming it hasn't already.

Surprise yourself by doing something totally outside your comfort zone for a session, then take a cold hard look at the campaign as a whole. If you've overused something to the point where it's predictable, go in a different direction… keep stretching yourself until you're Game Mastering evolves.

The Hidden Benefit of a High Charisma

So, I was running this game a few days ago. The half-elf tiefling warlock was obnoxious, instigating action from others by calling his fellow companions "coward" and pawning off his murderous intent on a fellow tiefling dwarf. Zatar was a blatant bastard of a PC.

It wasn't until the end of the session that Zatar's player mentioned something important - if it wasn't for his high charisma, he'd probably be thrown out of the party. Well, that's what this article is about.

Back in the old school days, charisma was kind of a dump stat. If you were rolling in order, you prayed for good luck on strength or maybe dex, int, etc. When it came time to roll

for charisma, there was no fear of rolling bad. Assuming you were able to move your scores around, charisma is where you put your unfortunate 6.

Modern editions have character classes that hinge upon charisma, but even gamers using the new stuff can make use of this hidden benefit.

A character with high charisma has license to be a jerk, cad, scoundrel, ass, buffoon, bounder, rake, scalawag, or creep. Why? Because a charming asshole with pleasing features and rapier wit can get away with loathsome manners and atrocious behavior without facing an exile ultimatum. And even after that PC pushes his luck, the heel can probably find a way to weasel out of expulsion.

Sure, the other players at the table might bristle at your detestable antics. Nevertheless, that high charisma shields you from their wrath. After all, you hold the group together with your magnetic personality.

So, the next time you find yourself with an extraordinarily charismatic character, remember that you can do more than attract followers. You can be an utter bastard, too!

Missed Opportunities part I

Every session will have at least one. I've only had a couple dozen perfect sessions in my lifetime of a thousand games. A missed opportunity doesn't mean anything went wrong, just that something could have been adjusted, mentioned, reversed, observed, disregarded, allowed, ignored, repeated, or shown in order to put that session over-the-top.

Highlighting these tiny moments after your sessions (writing them down in a session report helps tremendously) will go a long way towards remembering them. Remembering them is key because if you keep a missed opportunity in mind, there's a better chance of catching yourself when it counts. The goal is to see a missed opportunity in the moment, just before it happens and actually do something about it. This is Game Mastering in the zone.

Eventually, your sessions will have fewer missed opportunities and you'll be well on your way to perfect session after perfect session. Don't keep kicking yourself because you forgot to show the picture on page 23 of that gelatinous octagon, never bothered to come up with a name for that half-elf NPC, or didn't see the connection between the fire giant and the ice

trolls until after the PCs moved on to a different dungeon. You missed an opportunity to do something really special, to go one step further. Oh well. Like I said, it happens all the time. Simply be mindful of such things in the future.

Missed Opportunities part II

Game Mastering is hard work, partly because the job is never really done. Post-game analysis is just as important as pre-game prep and managing the actual gaming sessions themselves.

Speaking from personal experience, my post-game analysis consists of three elements: 1) pros - what went right. 2) cons - what went wrong. 3) missed opportunities.

The first couple elements are pretty self-explanatory. There are both high and low points in practically every session. Only a handful of 3 - 5 hour sessions in a lifetime either go unilaterally awesome or terrible. However, it's the third element I'm focusing on in this piece... missed opportunities.

"Wait a minute!" I think to myself hours after the players have dispersed. "I could have tied that first encounter to the last - framing the entire session with the cannibal secret of BlackHawk Manor." Or, "Damnation! Why didn't I go with the flow and improvise an encounter with a gnome gem-cutter as Dave suggested during character creation? Could have used my new stupid gnome hat table!"

Yes, even when an encounter or scene goes well, there's usually something that could have been done - something we usually think of later - that might have taken it to the next level. The game mastering equivalent of a critical hit.

Those missed opportunities are the gaps between a good Game Master and a great one. Pondering them is a start; realizing that a session could have been improved just by incorporating a spooky voice along with the magic sword, a special magical effect for being drenched in green slime, or a minor detail to illustrate that elven scroll.

Eventually, the conscious mind (our awareness of missed opportunities) seeps down into our subconscious mind (the primal creative fire). That combination betwixt conscious and subconscious is the process of Game Mastery.

To run the game without reflection (including self-reflection, of course) is to do the same thing over and over again without evolution, for no Game Master is perfect! Being mindful of the game, watching it with an eye (the third eye) open wide - the before, during, and after - that is crucial if we are to progress. That path leads to a better game. A mindful GM should incrementally improve every single session he runs.

Good luck noticing those missed opportunities. The more you look, the more you'll find. As I said, awareness is key. Knowing that improvement is possible will force a select few to struggle for advancement… over and over again. That inner-force takes over if the Game Master is willing. It's called initiation.

No Forward, just Failure

By now, I think pretty much everyone has heard of the phrase "failing forward". For those who haven't, here's the rundown. It's about saying, "Yes, you manage to grab the vine before plummeting to your death, but now there's a hungry Pterodactyl circling above." Or this, "No, the demon grabs the scepter before you can reach it; however, in the demon's haste, a ring fell out of his black pouch… the ring of power!"

To fail forward is just a path of partially successful stepping stones leading from one danger to another until the very end, when the heroes save the day. Things seem to only get worse – yet the protagonist is still alive, so there's always a chance he can turn things around. You see it a lot in movies, TV shows, and books. It's a worthwhile technique that definitely has its uses.

Indeed, depending on the system and genre, I think that's a great way to run a session or campaign. Something like Hollow Earth Expedition or Star Wars - that style is well suited to failing forward.

But then there's actual failure. The kind where things just do not work out and there's no silver lining to save anyone's ass. That's the old school stuff that some contemporary Game Masters eschew. I understand why. Players like it when they're given chance after chance after chance, like a never ending lifeline… the Game Master guardian angel waiting in the wings, making sure no one fucks up too bad. And if the players are happy, then the Game Master is usually happy. Everyone's having fun. It's a good game.

But do we always want a happy ending? Roleplaying can do a lot of things. It's not only for generating a 3 or 4 hour action adventure story that's fun for the whole family. Occasionally, gamers want something with teeth, that bleeds. A hardcore session or campaign that makes lesser gamers run home to their mommies.

Yes, sometimes we want to play a rough and tumble, quick and dirty, dark and deadly old school kind of game. I'm talking about the difference between pulp and noir. That's when failing forward can feel aesthetically wrong. If you want to recreate that 70's and 80's roleplaying vibe with games like original D&D, Call of Cthulhu, Cyberpunk, Traveller - even new games like Fiasco and Dungeon Crawl Classics - there should be plenty of dead ends and dead player characters along the way

Failure, in and of itself, doesn't have to be the end. Faced with a brick wall, the trail going cold, or a gun aimed at the back of your character's head, there aren't many pleasant solutions. Sure, failing forward is always an option, but with the right RPG and group, ordinary failure works, too.

As a player, I can remember doing something stupid or getting unlucky. I faced failure. The real kind - and died (horribly, most likely). Yeah, it stung. But it taught me a couple things. 1) Shit happens. 2) Prepare yourself for when shit happens.

You do your best and move on. Old school.

Focus on One thing at a Time

All of us... ok, most of us (a few of us?) want to Game Master better. Becoming a better Game Master will most certainly improve the game, and the game's the thing. That's why we play, after all. For the gaming experience and everything that entails.

The best way I know of improving is to take measured, gradual gains, one step at a time. Even if you could go rushing into a full-blown, hardcore Game Mastering overhaul, completely changing your referee style, I'm not sure that would be a great idea. Using multiple unfamiliar techniques all at once can be painful. You're never sure what new thing is working or making things worse.

Singularity! Focus on one thing at a time. Decide on a single aspect of your Game Mastering that you'd like to improve. Make that your priority for the next session. Otherwise, keep your eyes and ears open but let everything else flow as it normally does.

Maybe you'd like to describe combat so that players can really see it in their mind's eye. Or perhaps you want to incorporate a new gaming aid, like a random table. Interested in improvising? Do your players eagerly anticipate roleplaying with your NPCs?

There's got to be something you can do to Game Master better. Find out what that is and go for it. Consider giving yourself some well-deserved Game Master XP each time you illustrate the crushing of an enemy's skull, rolling on a reaction table, or nailing that smarmy duke's persona with a condescending chuckle.

Here's the thing about incremental progress... over time it yields huge changes and big results. Improving a little something in session #1 and then a little something else in sessions #2 and 3 can lead to a whole new you by #111.

Sure, this takes a bit of effort, but if you sincerely want to improve your Game Mastering technique, this is the way to go. How else are you going to reach 20th level - by kicking the dragon's ass at 1st? Hells no! It takes discipline to keep at it session after session until you look back at yourself one day to find yourself changed.

Unwanted Flirting

This isn't about the occasional comment or smile. This piece of advice is for those on the receiving end of constant, unwanted flirting, advances, and innuendos. Assuming that ignoring it hasn't made it go away, ask another player if you're misinterpreting things. If this is indeed "a thing", you'll have to do something about it before his or her flirting gets out of hand.

Speak to the flirtatious player outside the game. Tell them that their attention may be flattering but it's making you feel uncomfortable and distracting you, taking focus away from the game. If they persist, then kick them out of the group. You deserve to not be harassed.

Have a Backup Adventure Ready to go

For whatever reason, your planned adventure may get sidetracked, sidelined, shelved, ignored, or ruined by unexpected forces. That's ok… or it would be if you had a backup adventure ready to go. Create an unbelievably simple scenario outline at the campaign's start. Here's a sample in easy parts: 1) The party meets a bearded stranger who tells them not to go into the catacombs beneath his village. 2) Those catacombs are guarded by tentacled slugs with a dozen eyes. 3) At its center, the party will discover a seven corpses – each of them interred with identical onyx amulets.

That's really all you need. The rest can come about randomly, organically, or improvised by you in the moment. Chances are, you'll never need this backup adventure. But as the saying goes, it's better to have it and not need it than need it and not have it.

At the back of this book are some basic dungeon maps that you can use wholly or in part, either pre-meditated or on the fly. Feel free to keep them in reserve. You never know when you'll suddenly need an entire dungeon ready to go. If you have this book at hand, let it be the ace up your sorcerer's sleeve.

Attack Descriptions

In an ideal world, every Game Master would eloquently describe every thrust, parry, lunge, and spurt of blood flying through the air. We can't physically see combat so we have to imagine it in our heads. Merely saying, "He hits you for 9 points of damage," isn't conjuring a vivid picture. Where are the gory details?

I'll be the first to admit, narrating every hit or miss just isn't going to happen. After awhile, you'd become mentally exhausted or simply repeat what you said the last dozen times. So, instead of trying to make every roll bleed with life, focus only on the most important attacks, the ones that count: max damage, critical hits, called shots, sneak attacks, etc.

Aim for three descriptions per combat; a broken rib, crimson spray, sliced bicep, translucent goo dribbling down the wound, and an ever-widening pool of blood on the stone floor. That's the stuff your players will remember – and they'll hold you to it! If you mention the villain losing a couple fingers in a prior attack, adventurers might very well plan their attack based on that information. If it means the bad guys are easier to defeat because of some detail hastily-mentioned several rounds ago, then so be it. Build upon what came before.

Uncomfortable Players

George Castanza would make a terrific Game Master. His special, qualifying skill: "I always know when someone's uncomfortable at a party." That power of perception is something Game Masters need to have. I'm not saying do something about it every time a player seems uncomfortable – sometimes discomfort is useful or appropriate. However, the Game Master should be aware. His awareness is key to orchestrating a successful session. Out of multiple successful sessions comes a great campaign – the chief goal of every Game Master!

So, how does one hone perception? How can it be improved? Pay attention, obviously. Beyond that, watch for unusual patterns of behavior. If a player is talkative, then his silence might be an indicator. If a player is normally agreeable, then unexpected confrontational behavior will tell you something. If a player hardly ever makes a fuss but is suddenly argumentative, that's another clue.

Once you are aware, you can then decide if it's worth addressing now, later, or not at all.

Initiation

I'm a firm believer in rites of initiation. I use the plural because it doesn't just begin with the first adventure of the campaign and end when the PCs reach 2nd level. Initiation is an ongoing process. So, what is it? In layman's terms, not everyone's going to make it.

That doesn't mean some PCs have to die. On the contrary, the entire party may survive. However, it's important for them to feel as if they've lived through some kind of ordeal, a rite of passage. They should see themselves as survivors, perhaps even conquerors. That means at least one encounter must be inherently dangerous. Ideally, this encounter should come in the second or third hour of the initial session.

What we've been through in life makes us who we are; same thing with a PC's experiences. However, not all experiences are created equal. There should be a decision-point in the first session and every so often from then on that sets an adventurer apart from the common folk. This defining moment sets him on his own personal path, giving him purpose. From that moment on, he is not just a farmer holding a sword or carpenter waving his fingers about. Nay, he is something else... a hero destined for greater things!

As I mentioned earlier, there's seldom reward without risk. The risk of dismemberment, poisoning, being charred to a cinder, or eaten alive must be real. Although, the individual may not be aware of the danger until after his ordeal is over.

Why deadly encounters? Because it stands to reason that not everyone can be an adventurer, let alone a hero. It's the same reason not everyone can be rich or super smart or really, really ridiculously good looking. If everyone could be a hero, then there's nothing special about the hero himself. Life can be hard enough when we take the easy road, the one well-traveled. Taking the road less traveled is even more difficult. It has to be in order to keep things in balance.

This is one of the main reasons I prefer players to start out with three zero-level characters each, assuming I'm running a grim, gritty dark fantasy campaign with a quick and dirty (or streamlined) character generation system. That way, if one or two PCs die, it's no big deal, the game goes on.

Of course, if it really is no big deal, the concept of initiation is lost. Death must be a bummer or else it loses its meaning and we may as well be playing tiddlywinks! Fortunately, players grow attached to their characters all too easily. The process of rolling, choosing, and being randomly assigned various circumstances assures us that the life of each nothing-level explorer is meaningful. All of these lives matter; they have value. For the ones who survive, initiation only enhances that impression.

Death Dealing

As the Game Master, you're going to see a few PC deaths. That's to be expected. Death shouldn't happen all the time (I average about one PC death every three sessions), but it also shouldn't be completely absent from your campaign.

It's important to show empathy when it happens. Let the player know that it's unfortunate, that it sucks, that the gods have crapped upon his poor adventurer... then deliver the bad news. No sarcasm, no trash talk, no laughing – just a moment of true compassion. Death goes down easier that way and you won't look like the bad guy (as much).

Also, it's important not to say things like, "You die," or "You're dead." Reference the player's character rather than the player himself. Once a PC has croaked, it's no longer first-person time.

GM: (Roll dice) Ouch! That's 36 points of red hot fiery damage.

Player: But I only have 13 hit points left!

GM: (Sigh) sorry dude, it looks like Arryder was burned to a crisp. Did he shout anything memorable before the fire consumed him?

Player: Only that he will be avenged.

GM: Of that I'm sure. His companions can collect the ashes after this battle.

Backup Characters

You should decide what happens after a PC dies – before he dies! Have a protocol in place because eventually it will happen. Being caught off-guard by such a thing is Game Mastering like an intern, not a boss. The following are a variety of ways to deal with the situation…

- Have the player roll up a backup character ahead of time. He doesn't have to complete every last detail, but the new PC should be about 90% ready to go.

- Have a new PC ready for the player to adopt as his own. This could be an NPC already with the party, a character that you rolled up ahead of time, or another player's extra character sheet that's already been filled out.

- Have the player work on his new character right after the game. While you could allow him to roll and choose during the session if the character creation process is short enough, it might prove distracting. Of course, it's better than letting that player sit there for another two hours with nothing to do.

- Tell the player to just give you the basics, like his new character's name, best ability score, worst ability score, race, and class. Go with that, the rest can be handled after the session. You'd be surprised how much roleplaying can be done with just a character concept.

Pre-Game Questionnaire

Below are some questions I recommend asking via email before the first session. If you don't know a player's familiarity with RPGs, ask that as well. If these are guys you've gamed with for years, you might just learn something new.

1. Generally speaking, what kinds of things do you enjoy in an RPG?

2. What, if any, are your "must haves"?

3. What is something you definitely do not want?

The answers to those questions will give you an edge. Such information will help you craft a better roleplaying experience, leading to a superior game.

Starting Off

Begin the first session of the campaign with character creation. Ideally, generating player characters shouldn't take more than an hour. If you know that character creation is going to take longer than an hour, prepare for that by either streamlining the process or doing some of the foundation work for the players before they arrive.

If you see character creation drag, don't just shrug your shoulders and say, "Hopefully, it's shorter next time." Do something about it. Tell the players that not every detail of their character sheet needs to be filled out today. The rest of the information can either come through playing the actual game or when there's downtime after the session or before the next one.

Even though some players love the act of making their character, others won't. In any case, you didn't decide to make characters all day or on a weekly basis for the next few weeks, months, or years. You came to play. Get to playing!

Conversely, character creation shouldn't take much less than an hour (for the entire group). If it does, then important details are missing. I find it takes at least 45 minutes in

order to effectively bond with the character or characters being created. Without that time, the resonance won't be as strong. Remember that a player's character is not just a proxy for that player to experience the game world; the character himself must also be realized. A set of ability scores, race, class, and choice of weapon, armor, or spells doesn't speak to the character's personality, motivation, philosophy, attitude, likes, dislikes, physical appearance and sense of style/ aesthetics. As a player, what you had for breakfast that day – as your character - should be just as important as how many times you can take a five foot step after cleaving an orc with your kung-fu grip.

The first adventure should begin directly after character creation. Some Game Masters might want to devote time to character creation and then end things right there. That's a mistake, in my opinion. Strike while the iron's hot. If people can stay the full 3 – 5 hours, then play, damn it! Reward the players by giving them what they came for. Adventure!

Untrained Players

It could be brand new players or those who haven't done any serious roleplaying in years… at some point, you're bound to game with players who need a little more to go on than, "You could do anything, anything in the world, anything that you can think of – assuming it's reasonable. What do you want to do?"

For those players that just stare at you or look down at their character sheet with a blank expression, give them three choices. Whatever is the most likely or plausible, suggest those three things as possible options. Make it into a kind of choose-your-own-adventure book. Sure, three alternatives isn't a lot but it's better than one, two, or so many options that players can't even make a choice.

In time, such players will get the hang of it. They won't need three answers proffered to them like a multiple choice test. However, in the beginning, it might lessen the stress of choosing between one of a dozen options or the fear of choosing poorly.

Meditation

It might sound strange, but focusing your thoughts is easier when blocking out extraneous sensory information. Find a quiet place to sit, close your eyes, and think deeply about your campaign. Is it awesome? What about it makes it awesome? How can you expand the campaign's scope? How can you narrow your vision until it creates a singular effect? What doesn't seem to be working? How can your campaign surprise the players?

Twenty or thirty minutes a week could be the difference between a good campaign and a great one. Meditate on the campaign as a whole, recounting specific details. Ask yourself questions that may lead to interesting answers you wouldn't have considered otherwise. It's difficult to think clearly with all the tension, stress, and distraction of daily life. Look inward for campaign improvement.

Modeling

Is there a Game Master, author, artist, or public speaker that you admire? If so, use him as a model. If he uses grand gestures, paints psychedelic monsters, speaks with determination, or uses powerful words to describe a scene, then that can be something you borrow. Everyone has useful qualities. Emulate what you love about an individual, make that aspect part of yourself while Game Mastering.

How would Abed from the TV show Community Game Master this session? What would Nicholas Cage in Con Air handle the PCs decision to chicken out just when the going gets tough? How would Tango or Cash deliver that bit of dialog? What would happen if you were able to channel the moves of Mick Jagger? Everyone brings a little something of their own to the table. So, why not cherry pick from the very best, make it your own, and give the Game Mastering performance of your life? Go for it; even if you feel self-conscious. What have you got to lose?

What Do You Do?

Whenever possible, end your description with an unspoken call to action. The unspoken part is important. Don't simply conclude with, "What do you do?" or "What is Thorinson doing?" Believe it or not, Game Masters may be robbing their players' agency over their characters. By giving the typical response of "What are you going to do?" a player might interpret that as "I don't care what you, the player, thinks about the situation. Want clarification of details? Too bad. I don't want to hear your character's internal dialog; I just want to know about your character's physical actions."

Instead, I recommend staying silent. If, after your dramatic pause, there's no response from the players, you've failed to provide what's necessary for an encounter's description: a juicy enticement. However, I am in favor of periodically asking, "What does [character's name] have to say about that?" The difference is two-fold. First, it usually doesn't come at the end of the Game Master's description but after one of the players does or says something significant. Second, it's general enough so a player might respond with what his character might be thinking just as easily as provoking a verbal response. Open-endedness is key.

Enticements

There are flaccid descriptions and engorged descriptions. Yeah, avoid the limp dick variety. Illustrating a room in a dungeon, being introduced to a curly haired halfling, or picking up a demon sword for the first time should be intriguing. The description might be full of details, but is it interesting? Can the characters interact with what you've given them? Does it inspire action?

That's the key to a juicy enticement. If players want to mess around with something, they're temporarily fascinated by it. That means you've provided enough interest to pique their curiosity and make them either want to know more or do something about what they already know (or believe they know).

For instance, if the room has a pungent smell emanating from the creeping dungeon lilies that seem to grow in abundance on the north wall, that might be worth investigating. If the red-headed halfling winks at the party's thief or slaps the ass of the sorceress, that's going to heat up the encounter. If that demonic-looking blade not only has runes upon its blade but runes that remind the barbarian of something his father fearfully described to him many years ago when he explored

the caverns beneath the Tower of Norr-Goth, you've got something for the players and their characters to go on; they can find a purchase. Without something to grab hold of, a description or possibly the whole encounter will fall through the cracks as the adventurers keep searching for something that will capture their attention, and more importantly, their imagination.

At the end of the day, an enticing encounter should have the following: something captivating, something beneficial, and something hazardous. If there's no mystery, secret, or compelling aspect to the location, person, object, etc., then why bother? If there's nothing to be gained, then why bother? If there's no potential downside, then the Game Master is usually being too lenient. You don't have to include a save vs. death tag on the emerald-mist laden grotto, but at least give it a 1 in 6 chance of releasing a spectral shambler each time the PCs wade into it.

Flashbacks and Flash-forwards

This might seem like an advanced technique, but I don't think it is, necessarily. Simply say, "This is a flashback." or "This is a flash-forward." as a transition and then begin describing the scene. Maybe you mention the difference in time, "Five years ago, Iago was in the red-light district, searching for a fellow rogue."

There should be a reason for jumping ahead or back in time; don't just do it because it looks flashy and you want to impress the players. If there's no point, the technique will feel like a wasted effort. So, what's a good reason? To show an important point of some relationship such as the beginning of a friendship, the moment when two kings became bitter rivals, or when Lackless the Black decided to pledge his life to murdering his cousins or winning the heart of a local barmaid (why not both?).

The next campaign you run, try this: offer the players flashbacks that can help them out of a present-day jam. For instance, the party comes across a magic item that only a dwarf wizard can use. There is a dwarf PC but he's not a wizard. You and the player could quickly hash out the details of something that transpired years ago. Perhaps the dwarf had an uncle who could cast spells. So, the party's dwarf was left alone in an empty cavern with his uncle's spell book. A demon appeared, offering to be the dwarf's patron in the future if he ever needed arcane assistance.

The trick is to frame the situation (where, when, why, etc.) and give that PC a choice, test, or obligation without taking too much time away from the other players. Ideally, a flashback should take about five minutes. Anything over ten is too long.

Slow Burn

A lot of good films, TV shows, books, etc. start out rather quiet. A slow start allows the audience to see the characters, how they interact with each other and their environment, prominent NPCs, etc. They build slowly to the inciting incident – that's when the adventure really begins. Up until then, it's just prelude.

While you want the campaign to gradually accelerate, you can't wait too long. After all, the players aren't passively sitting back with popcorn and soda, enjoying what's on the screen or the artful wordplay of the author. Boring is boring. Don't be boring. If not much has happened in the first hour of the session, you need to get on with it. Kick things into high gear ASAP!

I wouldn't suggest starting a session in the middle of things (unless that's where you ended it). In media res might work with other forms of entertainment but not so much with tabletop roleplaying. Starting with combat gives the illusion of an action-packed game, but without proper context, the violence is rather meaningless. Start at the beginning. Go for the slow burn… but don't overdo it. Burn too slowly and there will be no fire.

Expectation of Strange

I was re-watching my beloved first couple seasons of Land of the Lost when I suddenly realized something. When Marshall, Will, and Holly accidentally stumbled upon something outré, it was more alarming than when they went looking for it. Adventurers who expect to discover something disturbing can only have one of three responses: 1) disappointment at not finding a strange new discovery, 2) satisfied at having their expectations met, and 3) surprised at having their expectations exceeded! Don't rely on number 3 dropping into your lap very often. The vast majority, the party will oscillate between numbers 1 and 2.

Now, imagine what would happen if the PCs were busy attending to some mundane task when they unwittingly trip over a disturbing object, creature, person, location, or incident. Yes, because they weren't actively looking for strangeness, the weird thing they find stands out. Such a cyclopean discovery would probably affect the entire session.

So, how do we accomplish this? How do we get players to expect the mundane just before serving them an eldritch entrée? Simply ask them questions related to their basic survival. You're thirsty. How are you going to refill your canteens? You're hungry. Where are you going to look for food? You come across the charred remains of a campfire but you see no one around. The grunting of a warthog or wild boar interrupts your conversation. You believe it's coming from that nearby cave.

Within the cave, or just outside, there should be one or two subtle clues… glimpses behind reality's dark curtain that not everything is as it seems. Yes, something's afoot! Crackling of energy in the air, the scent of dead flowers, a trail of phosphorescent liquid, sensation of cold, fragments of a cracked skull, barely audible whispering or twinkle like wind-chimes – something to introduce the strange before dropping it into their laps.

Remember, we're not looking for a cat jumping out of the closet scare but rather we are constantly chasing the dragon that is a slow, inexorable doom creeping over adventurers. The latter is cosmic horror but it won't be effective if PCs trip over it all of a sudden. The best kind of strangeness needs to build, it needs to surprise us while seeming almost inevitable.

Of course, not everything strange is inherently terrifying. If your campaign leans towards epic fantasy, that mysterious gizmo shouldn't contain radiation that will gradually poison the land and all who come in contact with it. In such a game, the unknown opens the door to dreams. It's only in a campaign tinged with darkness and horror that everything strange has the potential to melt your face off… or worse!

Special Abilities

Let the player characters use their special abilities, class features, racial advantages, etc. That's primarily why the player chose that concept or archetype in the first place. Make allowances so the player can do what he came here to do… what his character was born to do! Yes, even if it's not technically appropriate regarding the rules. If you can think of extenuating circumstances, make it happen. You're the Game Master! You are the rules and the game will become better as long as the players aren't feeling abused, their characters aren't unduly penalized, and everyone still feels challenged.

For instance, maybe the party's thief isn't exactly in the right position or benefiting from just the right amount of lighting to backstab an opponent. Give him the chance to hide in shadows or assassinate an opponent regardless. Perhaps the wizard lost all his spells early on and there's no time to rest… you can either allow him to channel those mysterious crystals he's been carrying with him for days or let him sit silently in the back of the party for the last hour of the session.

Bending the rules shouldn't be a constant occurrence. It probably shouldn't happen more than once or twice per session. Also, keep the extenuating circumstances and your exact wording in mind. If rule bending happens because the cleric was praying while pouring the fresh blood of his enemies upon his holy symbol, then that PC will expect the same results to occur next time, too. Either come up with a reason why it worked the first time or a reason why it didn't work the next. Is it god's will? Was it a one-time divine favor? Is it simply a mystery that no mortal can unravel?

Non-Player Characters

Visual details are an obvious go-to regarding NPCs. Flesh them out by describing their face, hands, eyes, clothing, armor, weapon, boots, scars, teeth, hair, height, size, etc.

But if you want your NPCs to come alive and not just be seen as coalescing experience points to be swiftly shived when the opportunity presents itself (as soon as his back is turned, most likely), have them reveal something personal about themselves - a bit of monologue that elicits an emotional response!

When the dwarf, Culough, with the long red beard and eye-patch tells you that he's an excellent cook; in fact, just last week having whipped up the best soufflé that Stone Stealer

MacGreggor had ever tasted, the PCs realize this isn't some random stats in your campaign notes.

The halfling Salinger sips on his ale in the local tavern, lowers his voice, and says, "My cousin always thought we'd die rich as kings. And we probably would've if that thieving goblin hadn't stolen our magic ring." That's the stuff keeping your magic-user from turning him into spell components.

Of course, not every single NPC will get (or deserves) such special treatment. However, as a general rule, potential long-term or recurring NPCs should be people first and exposition or window dressing second.

I've got one more thing to say about NPCs: don't be afraid to make some of them obnoxious. By definition, NPCs are not the main characters. If you want to see the non-hero equivalent in our world, just take a trip to Walmart or anywhere that has an all you can eat buffet. Yikes. The unwashed masses are not only everywhere but they're gross, too. Give your campaign's NPCs that kind of treatment. Describe them as slobbering all over the place, picking their nose, laughing like a spastic hyena, cross-eyed, 300 lbs. with a hunchback, hair like well-oiled grease, reeking of cow manure, prideful of their one good tooth, etc.

Similarly, you have free reign to give them awful personalities to match. That's one of the things I love about horror movies. Most of those people are going to die before the film is over, so why not portray them like ordinary, horrible (or at least mildly annoying) people. Make a few of your NPCs hostile, foul-mouthed, cowards. It'll make the adventurers look even more heroic by comparison.

Backseat Game Mastering

Back in the day, RPG rulebooks were short, sweet, and the exclusive domain of the one running the game. Game Masters had to interpret what there was and decide the rest based on whatever ruling seemed appropriate at the time, given the circumstances. These days, rulebooks are quite large, covering a lot of ground. And half your players might own them. Game Masters are assumed to follow what's written in those rulebooks, even though almost every RPG states that the rules are really just guidelines. This throwaway line in the introduction or preface of the book is essential… and yet, like the warning label on a pack of cigarettes, it has little impact on most people.

You might not know every rule in the book, monster's vulnerabilities, or cost of a healing potion. That's fine. You don't have to. But what are you supposed to do when one or more players tell you that you're wrong about how fast a zombified sea-scorpion can swim? Simply tell them the following: *"Not every single aspect of this particular game is being run "by the book". In order to preserve the mystery and magic of the unknown, a few details have been slightly altered, intentionally."*

Feel free to paraphrase. Basically, you want to convey your right as Game Master to mix things up without it seeming that everything is malleable and unformed until defined by your almighty will. Yes, it's a balancing act. You want certain things to be concrete while deliberately obscuring a few details here and there in order to keep things interesting.

Those continuing to pester you that "you're doing it wrong" should get the above statement repeated. If they want to debate the wisdom of your decision, they must save it until after the game. Whether they know it (let alone believe it) or not, you're actually doing them a favor. The game is better, for the most part, when players are kept in the dark. When the players know every single rule in your game, it's like walking through a haunted house with the lights on. Not scary, not surprising, and not very much fun.

Of course, I'd be remiss if I didn't point out the flip side. Occasionally, a player will make you aware of a rule that improves the game. Maybe it proves your original point, clarifies something you're struggling to adjudicate, silence a persistent rules lawyer who has it wrong (yes, even they can be mistaken), or resolves a conflict easily and efficiently. When players are offering rule assistance rather than rule lawyering, thank them.

Don't Name him Bob

About a third of the campaigns I run include a player who wants to name his character Bob or something equally inappropriate to the genre. For years, I tolerated it because I didn't want to interfere too much with players' artistic license. Basically, I was being a non-confrontational pussy. Learn from my mistakes – don't allow it. You're not crushing that player's dreams by laughing briefly and saying, "Sorry, it's got to be a name in keeping with the medieval type fantasy world he'll be living in." And if it turns out you are crushing that player's dreams, well… that's just really fucking sad.

What's wrong with naming a PC Bob? Well, it's a distraction. Some distractions are ok, even good. However, a distraction that takes you out of the game, out of the setting, is bad. An ongoing distraction that serves no purpose other than that particular player's laziness (in not coming up with a suitable name) or humor (after the first few seconds, how funny is it really going to be?) is even worse. Derivations on the name may or may not be acceptable, such as Bobwin or Large Robert. At this point, I'd still tell that player to keep thinking or roll on a table full of random names.

Once something is communicated, it exists

I've often heard the advice that you don't need to create the entire campaign all at once. Rather, deal with what's in the immediate vicinity and those things likely to have an impact on the PCs. It's good advice, and I'm not going to argue with it. Why detail all the fish in the ocean an entire continent away when the adventurers may never even get there, let alone want to study aquatic life.

Similarly, leaving things unmentioned allows you to do whatever you want with it. But once you talk about the three moons or seven suns, there they are. Avoid changing the facts if at all possible. The campaign loses a bit of credibility when you say that all the world's elves live below the surface and then a few sessions later you tell everyone about the elf ghetto in the city's center. Allow me to segue into one of the Game Master's chief duties.

You must walk the razor's edge between all the various realities the players have been able to piece together from your descriptions. Players remember the things you say and will create a picture in their mind, but keep in mind that his picture is still a work-in-progress. Without throwing black paint all over their mental canvas, there are opportunities to introduce new facts, creating a fresh layer of reality.

For instance, let us say you've already introduced the three moons and seven suns, the subterranean elves and the surface city containing a small elf population. Now, the players are asking why the land resembles medieval Europe instead of the harsh desert conditions they expected, and how about those elves living above ground… what gives?

Hopefully, you've given this some thought between sessions. Of course, there will be details you miss along the way. If

you never considered the brutal heat of the suns and what that might do to the world, you can either come up with something off the top of your head or wait until the session ends to invent a logical explanation. Feel free to tell the players that they cannot explain the discrepancy during the interim. The players won't know they've caught you between irreconcilables unless you tell them.

With several days before the next session, you've got time to think. Maybe the suns are very far away? Perhaps there's a magical barrier shield that keeps out the majority of harmful rays? Could all those moons somehow counteract the suns' power? Are the surface elves in hiding from the subterranean elves? Are they a recent addition to the city's center? Are they only here for a couple days each year to sell their wares or buy weapons to defeat the giant spiders? Is it possible that those surface elves aren't really elves at all but a mutant strain of human or half-elves that favor their human side?

The things that seem contradictory at the outset are the very same things that will add character and nuance to your campaign world. It might take a little extra thought to come up with a rationale for why "A" and "B" don't jive, but it certainly beats the alternatives: ret-con your campaign into oblivion or give the PCs so little information that they have almost nothing to go on.

Know Thyself

You realize that today is Mardi Gras. It's been awhile since you've eaten at New Orleans Take Out, a fantastic little Cajun/Creole hole in the wall not too far from where you work. Obviously, it's going to be crowded, festive, etc. Do you go or plan on visiting it next week?

You've just come back from vacation. Looking at your DVR, you see there's three episodes of five different shows recorded. Do you watch all the Big Bang Theories and then move on to The Walking Dead or watch a little here and there? Maybe you save them all and put on a movie instead.

There's a rock concert playing in the early evening, the same exact time as an art gallery exhibit across town. Which do you choose?

What I'm getting at is that everyone is different. We have preferences based on who we are. If you haven't already, take some time to sort through yourself... or selves, examining what it is you like, don't like and why. What is it that drives you? What are you passionate about? Whatever that is, realize that's where your best gaming lives.

I'm not saying find a niche and never explore anything else. Branching out is good for you. However, your Game Mastering abilities will shine brightest when you're delving into territory that you love. Sometimes, that will chafe with your players. After a campaign or two, a few of your players might need a break or might want to find another group. That's ok. Not everyone wants to watch action movies on a weekly basis. Some people hate scifi. If you have to satisfy others, then do it knowing that you're making others happy over yourself. Constant people pleasing is another cause of Game Master burnout.

Finding a balance might be the best thing. You just won't know until you know yourself. Self-reflection is key. Once you're in contact with your inner-self, the decisions get a little easier.

Obvious vs. Creative Choices

The following section is full of neat things for Game Masters to employ during a campaign. How you approach them will be a determining factor in the campaign's success. At least once per session, your choice should be creative rather than obvious.

For instance, say you've chosen to incorporate pirates in the upcoming session. There's the obvious: the party crosses paths with a gang of shipwrecked pirates looking for booty, arrrggghh! And then there are more creative alternatives: on the horizon, the party notices a ship at sea with black sails. After a few moments, they hear the sound of cannons. Pirates are attacking the coastal city of Zannzibar! Or what if the party stumbles upon a torn flag, black with the familiar skull and crossbones emblazoned on both sides? That could lead to the party stumbling over a dead pirate who drew a crude message on a cave wall with his own blood.

All I'm saying is that just because you've decided to feature dinosaurs in your campaign, that doesn't mean a T-Rex should chase the adventurers into the lost city as soon as they arrive. Maybe a Triceratops is battling several Velociraptors on a nearby plateau or the party learns that the primitive natives of the island worship a Pterodactyl. Don't be so damned literal. You're free to interpret and re-interpret suggestions as you see fit. Occasionally, avoid the obvious. Put in that little extra bit of creativity; surprise yourself.

Improvisation via Covert Solicitation

GM: You know what would make this situation perfect?

Player 1: If the T-Rex from earlier in the session crashed through the protective dome?

Player 2: Or the wizard's spell actually made the giant robot bigger instead of smaller because of its magic-resistant exoskeleton?

Player 3: Wait, I know. This isn't even our planet – we're still on Ultron 5! We push the button, blow the whole enchilada, and wake up in the citadel of black tentacles!

GM: Actually, Harold got pretty close. Have you been glancing at my notes, dude? Haha. A semi-corporeal enchilada abomination seeps through the dome, attacking you with its guacamole tentacles!

————————

You could say something similar or completely different. You don't have to pick any, assuming the players have offered a decent theory – you could use their suggestions to jog your own creative juices or create a hybrid from multiple theories. Really, any variation should be fine.

The point is that players are an untapped resource of good ideas. Occasionally, one or more players may volunteer their opinion, however, if you solicit their opinion using an innocuous phrase such as, "I bet you can guess what is coming next." they'll never know you were grasping at straws, improv-tank bone dry. Even if the players are tongue tied, it gives you a few extra seconds to come up with something truly awesome. In fact, just asking yourself that question is a step in the right direction… what would make this situation even better? Perhaps you'll be able to answer it yourself before the players have a chance to speak.

Remember, players are sitting their soaking up everything you're telling them. Though they're using their imagination to visualize the world, the part of their brain that does all the creative heavy lifting is sitting back in the sun, sipping a piña colada. It's fresh and ready to work. Plus, these are the guys who are on the outside looking in. They'll be three times more likely to spot an inconsistency, loop-hole, loose end, or something you forgot about along the way.

Of course, if you were to admit that you're totally out of ideas and needed help, that would also get results (probably)… but at what cost? Instead of Game Mastering like a fucking boss, it's more like you're passing the weed around a drum circle in some kind of hippie commune. Ask covertly and take credit for their work like any normal boss would do.

Peewee's Playhouse Paradigm

If there's one thing I've learned from watching Peewee's Playhouse, it's that there's always something going on. That's because the TV show has dozens of characters, animated objects, and special segments at the ready, about to go off or walk into view at a moment's notice. How can we not be entertained or at least occupied by all that stuff lurking in the wings, just waiting to be used.

Just because you have a limited location or premise for your campaign, that doesn't mean it can't be one crazy thing after another – sometimes overlapping at breakneck speed. If I was designing a campaign based on Pewee's Playhouse, I'd start with a d100 table of encounters. Take time before the

campaign starts to briefly outline a hundred possible things that could come up during the game: NPCs, monsters, things the inhabitance do from time to time, meteorological events, and oddball occurrences that can't be predicted – they just happen when they happen. Every time there's a break in the action, roll on the table to see what happens.

Chances are, an encounter is going to pull the adventurers in a certain direction and that's where the session will go. Obviously, this is an improvisation and gonzo heavy approach to managing a campaign. If you're running the right kind of game, it's bound to be action packed and full of craziness!

Investigative Horror Scenarios

On the set of Silence of the Lambs, I'm sure Anthony Hopkins didn't tell himself, "Ok, this guy is bad. Really bad. Alright, I'm ready to do the scene."

An investigative horror scenario should have equal parts exploration, social interaction, and combat – just like your typical sword and sorcery campaign. And yet, it's not quite the same thing. Obviously, you must contend with the "real world" instead of some pseudo-medieval kingdom, but there's something else… a secret I'll share with you.

When I sit down to write a scenario in the aforementioned vein, I know that I must prepare myself mentally and emotionally. Such authoring requires that I get in touch with my dark side. Not the usual dark side that I'm familiar with. No, I'm talking about the stuff you never show anyone – not even your everyday self. One's conscious mind is thankfully shielded from such things. Let me explain.

I imagine what I would do in an individual's circumstances assuming I had no moral or ethical compass whatsoever, not even a shred of conscience. I must set myself adrift in an ocean of pure egoism and unchecked desire. It's a scary place, but that's where I have to go in order to temporarily inhabit one or more principle NPCs influencing events. When one is centered in darkness, one can envision committing all manner of atrocious acts. Letting go of society's restraints – to say nothing of nature's – one can imagine what one would do next and after that and after that.

To merely conjure up some anonymous villain who wants to bring the Great Old Ones back, take revenge upon an ex-lover, or amass power is taking the easy way out. Anyone could write that. What you'll have is a villainous cardboard cutout that will inspire terror in no one. He's merely something that must be stopped in order to win the day, rescue the girl, or save the world. Except for a couple noteworthy actions, this kind of scenario will be forgotten as soon as it's over.

What you want is something that will stay with the player for years to come. In order to do that, the antagonists must be not only reprehensible but human… all too human. The only way they can be sufficiently humanized is through you. You must become them for a time, thinking as they think, acting as they act, and lusting for whatever is in their twisted hearts. Without putting yourself in their shoes, their motivations, behavior, and plans (including fallback plans) will ring hollow. If the horror is drip with reality, you must make it real. In the end, perhaps you'll be able to find their humanity – somehow justifying the torture, serial killing, or turning their back on mankind. But more than likely, these unfortunate souls have painted themselves into a corner and will grasp the most insane and desperate of straws in order to not pay the bill once the check comes.

The following shouldn't need to be said, but I'll say it anyway. Once your investigative horror writing is over, you leave that dark, dark place behind. It may take a few minutes to come back down to earth. Meditate if you have to or watch some cartoons. You don't want to carry those awful people inside of you. Let it go. When it's time to roleplay, bring it back at the appropriate time. If you need a picture, word, phrase, or something to jar yourself into unrepentant evil, come up with it before the session – ideally when you're inhabiting that black space. Once the game's over, it's again time to release that corruption and move on with your life.

Whimper or Bang?

Change is the only constant. All things end, eventually. As much of an awesome good time you guys are having with your RPG of choice, it won't last forever. The silver lining is that you have a hand in how the campaign ends.

Given a choice, I'd rather go out with a bang than a whimper. Sometimes I can tell when a game is winding down. Perhaps enthusiasm is waning, a couple players have obligations coming up where they won't be able to game regularly, or I simply feel ready to put this particular campaign to rest. Whatever the reason, see it coming and plan for a conclusion in advance.

I wouldn't suggest cutting it short unnecessarily. Going out on top when your campaign is at its peak allows you to end

on a high note, but robs you and the players of the chance to keep playing when everything is working really well. A wise Game Master will end things before the game is in trouble. Warning signs might include players asking if they can take a turn at Game Mastering when you're done or whenever you need a break. Also, if the group of players you started with does not resemble the group of players currently at your table. Although, that could also mean it's taken you a little while to find just the right player dynamic. Perhaps this is effectively a new campaign without your knowing it?

So, how do we go out with a bang? Hopefully, your campaign has been leading up to something. If it hasn't, that's a problem and needs to be corrected ASAP. On the other hand, look carefully - perhaps the campaign was going in a certain direction the whole time and you just missed it. Regardless, it's time for the climax. You need a big event - thee big event - to happen. It could be the planet's ecosystem collapsing, the resurrection of a powerful arch-mage, destruction of a town, or release of a dragon or Old One. Now, the players have to deal with it... and soon!

The time for drawing things out and leaving breadcrumbs along the way is over. Tidbits of information will no longer do. Time to start bringing out Mr. Exposition. Start explaining, decrypting, and revealing! Let the PCs in on most of the secrets you had running in the background. Pull back some of that darkness so they can see what was hiding in the shadows. Don't give away everything, but enough so it looks like the adventurers have finally arrived, that they have some measure of control and influence in the story.

Once the epic struggle has concluded, give some thought to an entertaining and interesting aftermath. The stuff that happens after the final battle. The last hour or two of the campaign should be about closure. Tie up those loose ends. Call back to those NPCs, forgotten magic items, and history lessons from a dozen sessions ago. Make it feel like your campaign has an ending. If it must end (and at some point it must), do it properly. Let everyone catch their breath, shake hands with those they've helped, and reminisce about the ones they've lost. Give the players closure and a feeling of resolution.

Also, don't be afraid to leave just a hint of doubt. Remember those movies where the villain jumps out of the darkness after the credits have rolled? It's OK to set things up for a part II (even if you don't think there will ever be a continuation), to end on a minor cliffhanger or question mark. Yes, the heroes have won. But then, when all seems quiet, an adventurer reaches his hand out to touch the mirror because he has to know that it's over. Just as it seems like something weird,

terrible, or shocking is about to happen, the screen turns black and we're left to wallow in the dark of the unknown. That can be a lot of fun and even more satisfying than riding off into the sunset.

Assorted Game Mastering Wisdom

Lead from behind; lead by expertly following. Be the invisible hireling who wants to know what's going on, who's ready to break camp but won't do anything until the adventurers tell him to start moving. That invisible hireling notes the obvious, "Indeed, the cave might be dangerous" and "Perhaps you will be successful if circumstances are favorable". It takes sensitivity, intuition, and a light touch; not easily done.

As the Game Master, you will influence the flow of events without interfering and direct the action while maintaining objectivity. Use in-game means rather than stating it outright. Here are a few examples: tell the party they're really feeling that last battle and are still a bit stiff and sore from yesterday's encounter. Serena (the half-elf NPC) mentions her love of elvish wine as soon as the party enters a tavern. Both moons are full and bright, providing enough illumination to see who's coming down the dirt path.

Say what they perceive instead of saying that they perceive it. Telling the players that their characters can smell an acrid odor in the air or that they can hear water dripping is redundant. Simply describe what their senses tell them without reminding them that their characters can sense it. "You can see a dark shape scuttling 20' up ahead" versus, "A dark shape scuttles 20' up ahead." Cutting out the "you hear", "you see", and "you feel" makes the experience more immediate and real.

As I've mentioned before, if it's a choice between manual control and automatic pilot, choose the former as often as you can. It could make the difference between a ho-hum game and a stellar one. Going through the motions without examining what's going on moment to moment is easy. It's no wonder Game Masters do it all the time! We fall into a comfortable rhythm and next thing we know, the session's over.

Rather than be asleep at the wheel, decide to run the game the best way it can be run. Manual control. Breathe life into your game by deciding that it's a good time to roll on the strange spell effect table or the NPC doesn't get a saving throw – instead he goes up like a ball of flame, but is able to

hurl himself into the wizard's flesh golem before dying… and now there's a berserk flesh golem on fire that the party has to deal with! When we do things the way we've always done them, without conscious thought, something inside of us sleeps. Awaken the sleeper!

When the Music's over

Occasionally, Game Mastering feels like a thankless task. GMs give and give and give. Sometimes they receive an accolade here or there, other times the scornful, disapproving eyes of ungrateful bastard players! Hopefully, that's a rarity at your table, but yeah, GMing isn't always glamorous.

That means a long-term Game Master must find fulfillment in different ways. Chiefly, his achievement is the power of creation, and sometimes that alone must sustain him in the dark times of whining, looking up stupid irrelevant stuff on one's internet-capable cell phone, and weasel-esque avoidance of any possible damage or ill effects. Just as God (assuming He exists) must be thoroughly disenchanted with the sentient beings running roughshod over his world, there has to be a certain amount of satisfaction in knowing you made something cool, something alive… and that it wouldn't exist without you.

But this section really isn't about Game Mastering so much as returning to playerdom. Yes, a mere mortal again - or vampire, half-orc, mutant, etc. It can be quite a shock. A comedown. Instead of manifesting a world and controlling nearly everything in it, you're now little more than a scavenger trying to survive another night.

Yes, Game Mastering is one hell of a rush. It's a power trip, a drug. The withdrawal can make you feel powerless. And that's not where the best gaming comes from, no matter which side of the screen you're on. But you make do, you do what you can; filling out that character sheet, hoping the RPG gods will be with you, paying you back for services rendered.

There's a mindset that comes with running a PC for a change. The GM-turned-player wants to make up for lost time. You see, he's watched all his players blasting away at imperial stormtroopers, beheading trolls, drinking blood, smashing cars, manipulating shadow, committing treason against the computer, and summoning nameless servants for dark purposes. There's all this awesome stuff that a career Game Master has voyeuristically lusted after for months or even years. Suddenly, it's within his grasp!

Prepare thyself, GM, for a brutal reality-check. Chances are, a former GM's player experience won't live up to a sliver of what he was hoping for. These days, I've become a master at managing my expectations. Years ago, I fell into that trap. I thought my years of faithful Game Mastering entitled me to a fantastic experience in front of the screen. I was due, right? Haha! Not so. A combination of bad rolls, bad luck, player inexperience (yes, years of GMing can corrode forms of common sense), and trying too hard… they all put me in my place.

I recently played in a friend's Call of Cthulhu one-shot. As GMs tend to agree, it was a refreshing change of pace. Playing is its own kind of fun, different from Game Mastering but still a good time.

Older and wiser, I now let the game evolve organically, as well as, my place within it. Mostly, I was comic relief. An impossibly handsome and intelligent drifter without much education and the worst dice rolling possible. In the end, I played my character as if I was him. Didn't try to be the best, outshine the other PCs, save the day, accumulate fantastic loot, or do a bunch of radical super-maneuvers to impress anyone.

My expectations in check and sense of entitlement gone, I had a lot of fun. And better yet, I was able to better facilitate the table's fun rather than hot-dogging it, failing miserably, and becoming indignant. Focusing upon my character allowed the screen monkey (oh, how quickly we forget) to do his thing and the other players to do theirs. Sure, I was wounded, driven insane, and seemed kind of NPCish next to my companions… but that's the life of an investigator sometimes. His experience isn't always glamorous, either.

But I was playing and made myself realize how fortunate I was to be roleplaying at all. I welcomed the idea of not having the session's success rest solely upon my shoulders.

So, if you're normally a GM and about to play, keep that in mind. You may not slay the dragon or roundhouse kick Dread Cthulhu in the eye, but fun can still be had. And if you're a career player, then do something nice for your GM this week - send him a "Great game, man!" email after the session or buy him a 12 pack of his favorite soda or even volunteer to GM for a night.

The Checklist

The following should be considered for inclusion in every campaign. Obviously, there's a lot here. It would be impossible to include everything from this list if you're only running a short one, let alone a one-shot. So, don't even try. If you're only going to be playing for less than a couple months (assuming weekly sessions between 3 – 5 hours), then include what you can and feel free to mix and match elements together.

It should go without saying that a fantasy campaign would benefit from adventuring in cities, dungeons, and subterranean tunnels and caverns. These three environments should be the mainstay of your campaign. Feel free to veer off from them when appropriate but always come back to where the action is. Personally, I've never found exhaustive journeys that take more than a session to get through worth the effort. Traveling can provide excitement but being on the road constantly kind of sucks… just like it does in real life.

Additionally, there are subjective elements you might include but are too specific for me to make blanket recommendations about. I'm talking about the possible inclusion of a sequence of numbers (mysterious), a demon sword (cool), and describing odd pairings of color when encountering another plane of existence or witnessing a new spell being cast (try getting this image out of your head - turquoise in a ménage a trois with chartreuse and tangerine)!

While I can recommend all those things, I wouldn't recommend you include those things in every fantasy campaign – unless they truly resonate with you. If that's the case, feel free to use and reuse them until they become almost cliché… and then change them up a little so that they seem different. Basically, I think you should focus on the stuff you love, that you're passionate about without forgetting the other hundred things that will juice up your campaign when subtly incorporated here and there.

Something Disgusting

Revulsion is a powerful emotion because it's rooted in fear. Remember what Lovecraft said about fear and fear of the unknown? Even though hardly anyone at the table wants to be repulsed by your description of a fleshy, ribbed, sweating, aqua and magenta control center in the middle of an alien starship where coordinates are birthed out of dripping nodules hanging limply from the ceiling… that doesn't mean it's not appreciated on some level.

At some point, an encounter should contain a gross, possibly slimy, probably organic creature, location, event, structure, spell effect, etc. Unless this is a motif you want to fully explore, disgust should be illustrated sparingly. Also, you don't have to describe every vein, pustule, or fluid being excreted, a few details should be enough. The players' imaginations will do the rest.

Something Grisly

Now, this should be saved for either investigative horror or dark, sword & sorcery games. Playing in an epic fantasy or gonzo post-apocalyptic mutants in the future RPG, one doesn't want to be burdened with the spiritual corruption of stumbling upon dead children, a partially dissected human head, a corpse where taxidermy has been performed so the victim looks like its DNA has been spliced with an octopus, or a person forced to eat human remains. Yuck!

Again, include encounters with something truly sickening only if your game is of an appropriate genre.

Spell Failure

Most of the time, failed spells just fail quickly and quietly without much notice. That's great. There's too much going on to focus on every little spell failure. However, I recommend you include an encounter or aspect of your campaign the deals with magic gone wrong.

At some point, there was a spell (perhaps, a great one) that didn't go off like it was supposed to. Possibly someone or something interfered, the planets were in the right or wrong alignment, or another magic-user was actively opposing it or contributing but in the wrong way. This has led to an anomaly that cannot be easily explained.

The following are suggestions. Some part of the cave system the party's exploring contains open space with stars, planets, comets, nebulae, and so forth. Dropping objects into a well makes them reappear in an open field a mile away. The swamp deadens magical activity so spells are roughly half their usual effectiveness. The snow on the mountain comes alive and attacks those who trespass too close to Queen Ilsa's ice palace. Those who touch the wall between worlds are suddenly drenched in feelings of utter hopelessness.

Powerless

At some point in the campaign, either the entire party or various individuals should feel completely helpless, unable to protect themselves. Adventures should bounce from survival to kicking ass and taking names and then back to survival. If you've ever watched The Walking Dead, you know what I'm talking about. When PCs are powerless, it creates a realism and emotional depth that's useful.

So, how should you convey that sense of helplessness? You could describe how easily the beast's claws and teeth rend flesh – even when protected by armor.

Give them a sense of scale... there are so many zombies shambling across the open field that no one can see the green of the grass, for miles and miles grey dead flesh streaked with dried blood is all there is.

Have an NPC tell the party that it took five weeks for the last shipment of prisoners to die of dehydration, owing to the intermittent trickle of water dripping from a nearby stalactite. But that trickle of water was only shared by three men, so the PCs will probably expire in less than a month.

In Media Res

Even though I advise not starting a campaign in the middle of an action sequence, it's an interesting choice and could be used to good effect somewhere down the line. After a dozen sessions, things will start to look the same: hook, struggle, and resolution. You're players will welcome the rarity that is opening with combat, being chased, torture, or delivering the killing blow.

Something the Players Have Never Seen Before

Yes, I said *players*, not characters. And, yes, this might be difficult. Each campaign should contain at least one thing that's unique, that players have never encountered or experienced in previous roleplaying games.

Sometimes, this can be achieved by merging two or three familiar ideas together. Why not borrow a device or item you've seen in a movie? Design a monster influenced by Cambodian folklore and the paintings of Salvador Dali. Maybe a trap you've read about or lair that came to you in a dream...

You might have to dig deep in order to come up with something original enough that players are taken aback, remarking on the encounter's strangeness. Do this at least once per campaign and your gaming will start to feel like more than just a traditional fantasy backdrop – it will become a captivating world.

Planes, Trains, and Automobiles

I'm talking about throwing in a fantastic method of transportation. It could be riding giant lizards, dragons, or spiders. Maybe levitating disc, monorail, teleportation, hitching a ride on the back of a slow-moving giant, or being carried on wooden planks by the undead. Sometimes, you'll want the transport to match the rest of the setting. Occasionally, you'll want something anachronistic... something that pops.

Getting from A to B doesn't always have to be boring. For the most part, walking or riding a horse should be fine, but every once in a while you should throw an alternative at your players. Something that will make them feel like their actually living in a realm of sorcery or on an alien planet.

Whimsical

At some point, introduce something whimsical into the campaign. It could be a ridiculous NPC who only speaks in riddles, a talking magic item that's always wanted to play the lead in a Broadway musical, a fiery sword that sprays foes with water instead of flame, or an encounter with a black hole where only indigo objects are pulled into its vortex.

Whimsy is defined as playfully quaint or fanciful, especially in an appealing or amusing way; capricious. Your game shouldn't be serious all the time. Introduce something extraordinary or find a way of tweaking something ordinary so that it becomes unpredictable, frivolous, and comical.

Now, an alternative to whimsical would be surreal or absurd. Surrealism (occasionally defined as "super real") is dreamlike, fantastic, disorienting, and maybe even hallucinatory. Juxtapose something commonplace like a druid's grove with something bizarre such as dragon made out of diamonds. If

you're going for the absurd, then perhaps that dragon is made out of broken promises. Don't fall into the trap of making things too ridiculous. Perhaps things seem absurd to the outsider but are quite normal to those who've grown up with them. Maybe when the fighter crits with his magic sword an angel's wings are torn away by a voracious demon; trials are judged by interpreting the pattern of spilled entrails or how many times a monkey touches an ivory statue fashioned in the likeness of Theya, goddess of justice. A segment of some desert-dwelling society wears blue robes and makes the familiar Vulcan hand gesture… why? Did a magazine devoted to Spock fall out of the sky one day and influence an entire culture?

Pyramid, Ziggurat, or Trapezoidal Structure

There's something impressive, primal, and evocative about "primitive" structures that are orders of magnitude more complex and advanced than the boring rectangle buildings we have today. Maybe it's a forgotten temple, place for human sacrifice, tomb of buried kings and secrets, library filled with sorcerous tomes, or prison for some kind of preternatural beast of legend. Somewhere in your campaign's world, you should include an impressive piece of architecture that exudes excitement, adventure, and mystery.

Don't feel that you need to just make it an ordinary Egyptian pyramid or Mayan temple. You can go wild with strange details couched in epic fantasy, horror, science fiction, etc. If you have a picture, even better. Describe it with due reverence, use your hands, let your voice betray some measure of awe, make it grandiose. The players' intensity will match your own. Such a place could become a mainstay of the campaign or perhaps only a few encounters before the earth swallows it up… and even then, the sunken ruins might be explored at some point.

Lost City

There's something about the idea of a lost city. The concept resonates with mystery and begs for exploration. Even if an encounter or series of encounters doesn't take place within the lost city, it could be a great backdrop, something exotic and timeless in the background. On the other hand, most players will want to personally investigate (through their characters, of course). Have some details ready!

Does it resemble anything on earth? Architecturally, it could look Arabic, Roman, with bizarre angles, or like a spaceport. Is it made of gold? Can a barely audible hum be heard from the outskirts? Maybe it's in ruins or perfectly intact. Model it on something you've seen on TV, movies, described in a book, or rendered somewhere on the internet. Personally, when I read the words *Lost City*, I can't help thinking of Land of the Lost. I grew up watching that TV series and there's something about it that sticks with me. Really, all we got to see (as an audience) was the front of a stone building that had seen better days and interior tunnels full of Sleestaks and occasional crystals, god-pit, matrix table, and pylon. And yet, that lost city makes all others pale by comparison.

Your campaign will benefit from containing the remnants of an ancient civilization. Start with why the city's lost. Who built it? Were they alien to this world? Did a cataclysm kill them off or was the city swallowed up by a nearby dimension? Maybe there was a nuclear war or mutually assured destruction via thousands of amped-up magic missiles…

Standing Stones

There's something primitive, mysterious, and ancient about standing stones. They feel both fantastic and mired in the real world simultaneously. Just as we don't know exactly how or why there are so many standing stones all over the world, they will become just as mystifying to the players and their characters.

Do the standing stones in your campaign honor the dead, correspond with celestial movements, radiate magic or correspond with patterns of magical energy like ley lines, is something trapped/encased within them, are they encrusted with gemstones, carved with an eye inside a triangle, is there a circuit board panel full of red and blue buttons attached to the side, do they mark the location of a metallic hatch buried just under the dirt?

Players will recognize the significance of your campaign's standing stones, even if they're not exactly sure why. The

concept will resonate with them, allowing you to build upon their subconscious expectations down the road. Once you put in the stones, make them memorable somehow!

Gambling

Who doesn't like a game of chance? Even for risk-adverse individuals, there's something about risk, probability, luck, and the excitement of making a small wager. In the real world, there's good reason to stay away from gambling. I've spend many an hour inside casinos playing poker. For all its glitz and glamour, there's a seedy underbelly that makes such a degenerate pastime barely worth one's time. And yet, I can't go a month without wishing I was back on that green felt playing poker, bluffing, raising, and calling my opponent's down to the river with top pair, top kicker.

However, in the campaign world, why not? There's sure to be peculiar and unscrupulous individuals hanging around gambling dens – a great place to engage suspicious NPCs. Even if it's not a tourist attraction or shadowy sanctuary, there could be individuals laying odds and speculating on cards, dice, movements across a board, the number of scales on the back of an ancient dragon, tentacled cock fighting, predicting the weather, rock/paper/scissors, etc.

As Paul Newman said in The Color of Money: money won is twice as sweet as money earned. At least a couple players will be willing to test their luck if you present them with the opportunity. And if it involves some form of in-character competition or worthwhile spectacle like gladiatorial fighting, they'll be even more eager.

Stolen Property

The PCs are on the receiving end of thievery. Someone or something steals their property. Maybe it's a magic item, article of clothing, or small chest full of gold. The thief could be a roguish halfling, a mysterious elf who calls himself Midnight, or a small group of scoundrels using an amulet of silence to make off with the party's loot.

The bigger the theft is for the characters emotionally, the more your players will be Hell bent on tracking the thieves down in order to get their stuff back (and probably dole out some deserved payback).

Extreme Prejudice

This goes beyond the normal everyday prejudice that might creep into your campaign. Sure, a commoner might make a derisive comment about the party's dark elf or half-demon. Or walking around town without proper vestments on Sunday morning could elicit some nasty looks from overly religious types. Those are fun little things to pepper into a campaign here and there.

Above that, you should consider including some extreme prejudice into your campaign. People have certain ways of doing things, particular mindsets that form their beliefs. Disrupting the foundation of their society and culture is a big deal. So, if wizards enter a realm without an eye within a triangle within a circle tattooed upon the palm of their left hand, they might find themselves about to be lynched. Usually, prejudice isn't an individual thing. It's a group attempting to disenfranchise another group. Maybe it's based on fear more than hatred. Perhaps the prejudice comes from a good place (like trying to protect half-elves) but is skewed because of centuries of tradition or a few radicals who want nothing more than bloody revolution.

If an individual or group is being treated unfairly, this may cause some adventurers to make things right. Now, you've engaged their emotions and gnome genocide isn't something that can easily be swept under the rug - especially if there's at least one gnome in the party. Prejudice has been known to fragment and ruin civilizations, so incorporate it into your campaign at some point.

Insult

Rather than injury, at some point in the campaign have a PC insulted. Perhaps a noble refuses to deal with someone of obvious low birth, a fellow tavern patron compares his mother to the whore he slept with last night, or the half-orc everyone assumed was a street thug is actually a renowned warrior in disguise… and he claims the party ranger has little to no honor for whatever reason. Maybe the ranger treated him like the sewer rat he appeared to be?

Ridicule can be a good motivator. No one likes being mocked or put down. How one deals with an insult should reveal something about an adventurer's character, what he's like deep down inside, how he really feels about himself and the external world.

Wizard's Duel

Your campaign could do with powerful magician's squaring off against each other. The party magic-user doesn't have to be involved directly. Perhaps he was mentored by one of the dueling wizards. There's also a remote chance that both wizards are destroyed. In that case, who gets all their stuff? Magic items just lying around next to smoking robes and charred pointy hats!

Maybe there's a special place where sorcerers do battle against other sorcerers, such as an enormous sea-cave curiously shaped like a trapezoid. Maybe this duel will decide the fate of all the wizards in the realm. This might be a duel between hopeful apprentices, vying for tutelage under Aerellus the wicked.

Gladiators

This could be an ignoble pit fight or sands surrounded by stadium seating, an audience of thousands watching every blade stroke and blood splash. No matter the arena, you should include gladiatorial games somewhere in your campaign.

Think about the people fighting but also about the larger culture. Is this in a big city, the outskirts of a quiet village, at the center of a thriving empire? Do the onlookers crave spectacles of violence, is this a matter of honor, part of the justice system, the will of the Gods or their sinister High Priest? There's something thrilling about gladiators, so include them when the opportunity presents itself.

Altars, Statues, and Pools

Old school dungeons were full of these in the 70's and 80's or, at least, that's the way it seemed. Such fixtures provided temples and lairs with a bit of weirdness, intrigue, and fun. PCs will almost always stop to take a look at an altar, statue, or pool they come across. They'll want to know why it's there, who built it, and what strange properties it possesses.

Occasionally, an altar, statue, and pool won't be special. They'll be decorative or will add a bit of history to the place and that's it. The majority of the time, though, you'll want these things to be more than they seem. A statue might come alive or start speaking in a demonic tongue. The altar might be made out of black marble with green veins or have blood stains. The pool could be filled with a gold-colored liquid or water that contains magical properties. Mining the ideas of old school modules should provide you with tons of ideas. If something unique comes to you in a flash, definitely write it down and use it ASAP.

Artifacts and Relics

Include a magic item so powerful that it creates an imbalance in the campaign world. Most likely, this object will be incredibly old. There should be legends, folklore, old wives' tales, dreams, visions, and rumors about it. Intrepid explorers will seek it out if it's lost and great men will raise armies in order to possess the thing if they know its whereabouts.

Usually, the artifact or relic will be visually impressive as well. However, you could challenge player expectations by describing it as very plain and ordinary. Perhaps it changes its appearance to go with its surroundings or it appears different to everyone who eyes it. Maybe it's invisible or so hideous to behold that individuals looking directly at it turn to stone or purple jelly?

Whatever the magic item, make your players dimly aware of it when the campaign begins or shortly thereafter. Build curiosity slowly with various clues, references, and a fellow who nearly lost his life merely for asking about the thing around the wrong people. Finally, introduce it with all the reverence and awe you can muster. Stop short of Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark ending, but that's a good place to start.

The trouble of showing your artifact or relic too soon and without the proper introduction is that adventurers will simply see it as yet another magic item to be collected. However, that's not what such items are for. Artifacts and relics can reshape the entire world in the right hands. Of course, you could throw it into the mix as if it were nothing more than an enchanted ring with the PCs none the wiser… until later in the campaign when they realize its gargantuan power. After all, the PCs don't know how to unlock its potential, do they?

Nudity, Sex, and Eroticism

Such a fundamental part of life and what it means to be human. After power and riches, it should really be the next motivating factor. Unfortunately, it can be awkward to talk about that sort of thing with a table full of guys or even a mixed table of men and women. Sex is usually an activity for couples. I can't remember describing an orgy in my Game Mastering history, but it's an intriguing possibility. Barring that, everyone at the table besides the one or two players involved have nothing to do but sit and listen to people describe their carnal knowledge. Probably best to say something like, "She falls into your awaiting arms, trembling… yadda, yadda, yadda, you wake up the next morning with her sleeping next to you."

Unfortunately, there's no in-game benefit for scoring with one's character. Let's say I describe this delicious ham and cheese sandwich to the players. It's on the other side of the ballroom. There are guards, pickpockets, and other potential dangers standing between the adventurers and that delicious sandwich. I'd be surprised if even one PC tried to go for it. Why would he? The player gets no tangible benefit from eating it, and his character receives nary a bonus, advantage, enhancement, or anything. In game terms, it's useless. Even though we strive to make our roleplaying experience something more than just a game with dice and pretend swords and fireballs, it's difficult to elevate proceedings and maintain that lofty position.

I've thought about creating in-game benefits to having sexual relations with someone the PC finds attractive but haven't gone that far yet. I've read several posts on adventurers benefiting from drinking, which is kind of similar. If your RPG of choice has rules for carousing, you could elaborate on those.

Even though you don't want to go into detail on the love making, the seduction itself leading up to it could be worthwhile from a storytelling perspective. At the very least, it wouldn't hurt to describe a handmaiden's shapely legs or barbarian's bulging biceps. Sometimes, the hint of arousal is enough to whet players' appetites. Keep your audience in mind while being true to yourself and the campaign.

Archetypal NPCs

Sure, your NPCs can be unique little snowflakes with their own randomly rolled or hand-crafted personalities, quirks, and motivations. There's nothing wrong with that. However, I encourage you to use broad archetypes, too.

Include the wise old mentor, scoundrel with a heart of gold, naive farm boy from Iowa, scorned woman with vengeance on her mind, chivalrous knight so burdened with honor and doing the right thing that his hands are tied, etc. These characters are familiar because we've seen them countless times. But they're more than cliché, they're timeless classics. Don't be afraid to use and re-use them with a twist here or there.

Mystery

Don't full the full story. This should be easy. Leaving important backstory details out might be something you do unintentionally. Whether intentional or not, you've saved something for next time… whenever that may be. Not only does that allow you to come up with something better than whatever you would have conjured up on the spot, you're

doling out bits and pieces of information a little at a time. This creates the illusion of layers and a deeper mystery, even if there wasn't any when the session began.

The not knowing will drive the story forward because your players and their characters are motivated by curiosity. The unknown is a powerful force. Don't abuse it by making the discovery worthless or lame. The bigger the buildup, the bigger the payoff needs to be. Otherwise, it will seem anticlimactic and everyone will think you suck. So, avoid sucking by giving the players a thrilling secret at the end of your breadcrumb trail.

Perhaps the "ice people" tapped in their cryogenic chambers aren't from the distant past but aeons in the future! Maybe the infamous witch-cult the adventurers have been dealing with is led by a demon possessed by an ancient dragon. Or the island they shipwrecked on is not only sentient but full of self-loathing, wanting the PCs to destroy it utterly.

Three Things at Once

Doesn't have to be three, but any more than that and the scene will start to get confusing for everyone (including you). At some point in the campaign, you should have multiple events or encounters occurring simultaneously. This will cause a bit of chaos and confusion... not too much, just the right amount. And then they'll have to make choices. What do they do first? Will each of them decide to take on separate tasks or all try to accomplish the same goal (if so, which one first?)

For example, your party is trying to pilot a starship while it's plummeting to their home world. It crashes. Luckily, everyone's still alive, though one or two PCs might not be conscious. As the PCs are struggling to exit the ship, they're notified by the ship's computer that the nuclear reactor core will blow in five minutes unless something is done about it. Meanwhile, the ship is crawling with zombies and the planet is teeming with dinosaurs. In fact, a T-Rex is menacing the crashed starship as we speak.

The players might look at you shell-shocked, as if to say, "Is that it? What the Hell?" Just look back at them, ready to narrate the effect of their action or inaction. This could be one of the most exciting moments of the campaign. Overusing it, like almost all of these techniques, is a bad idea. However, implemented sparingly, it will provide a satisfying scramble, sweeping the players up in its current.

Jokes

Even if your campaign and Game Mastering style are super serious, it's nice to provide a little levity. "You've cornered the sorcerer without means of egress. With a snarl and nasal whine, he says, 'Cal-gon, take me away!' At which point, a phoenix glowing with orange and red magical fire swoops in from out of nowhere, grabs the sorcerer in its claws, and flies him away to safety." That's probably going to get a laugh or two. Lightening the mood can make the darker areas of the campaign even more shadowy. So, don't be afraid to go for the funny every so often.

In a recent campaign of mine, the party tiefling managed to acquire a flaming sword... eventually realizing that its command word was "Penelope." That running joke was a pleasure, delivering laughter with every utterance. Combine an encounter with something both expected (a genie in a lamp) and unexpected but silly (everything cool wished for must be yanked out of a giant chicken's butt).

Language

Language must be the building blocks of communication. It's so important that it has become commonplace. It's everywhere! Often, we don't see the necessity of language and how language can be used to influence our conception of the world.

That's why I suggest giving some thought to the names of people, places, and things, everyday expressions used by folks of that region, and pretty much everything NPCs say. Language is at the heart of your campaign. You only need a few linguistic missteps before your world appears more "fake" than a woman competing for the same man. Say the name of your campaign's home city aloud just to make sure it doesn't sound stupid. Use Latin if you can't think of anything evocative in the way of spells. Pay attention to any words surrounding your favorite NPC.

Notice the difference between the following names: Garret. Garret the red. Garret Starkfellow the Red. The former doesn't really make us think of fantasy. The second is better; adding "the Red" gives "Garret" an extra something so that it qualifies as pseudo-medieval. It would be fine if that NPC was merely doing a cameo in your campaign (like a single encounter). The last is suitable for a recurring NPC that the adventurers will be talking to (and about) for multiple sessions. The more prominent the character, the longer his name should be. Pay attention to these naming conventions and whatever seems suitable to you.

Like creating encounters, it's alright to take two existing

names you like and merge them in order to create something new. For instance, say we have Zaknafein and Thundarr. How could we hybridize them to make something cool and unique? Zathund... Tarrfek... Urrkez... Nerrthak... Nuthafein... Aezarr, etc. Obviously, they're not all going to be winners, but chances are you'll find one or two that you like and all it took was a couple minutes or rearranging letters.

If you have the ability to create interesting and setting-appropriate names, then do so. If you find it difficult, then do your best to borrow those you hear or read throughout the week. At the end of this book I've included a language I created called Viridian. It's meant to be a dark language, occasionally used for ritual magic. If you need a weird name for something in a hurry, feel free to dive in.

Factions

Your campaign needs factions. Factions are groups of people with differences. Those differences bring them into occasional or constant conflict with each other. This is life. Without factions, you have a world that doesn't look very much like ours.

So, what kind of differences should these groups have? Maybe some of them wear masks while others wear black robes or a crimson sash. Perhaps one faction hates orcs while another harbors orc immigrants. Is there a valuable but scarce commodity that multiple factions want? Certainly, religion is as good a reason as any to divide people. What about education, equality, division of labor, disparity of wealth, location, food, sex, etc.?

Factions are especially important in sandbox type adventures. There should be multiple groups that PCs can talk to, bargain with, escape from, hunt down, and coerce into doing their bidding. Once you have several groups that want different things, you have an unpredictable (maybe even fragile) ecosystem ready to play with. The adventurers are the x factor capable of changing everything. That means some or all factions will pay attention to newcomers who might become the key to getting what one or more factions want.

Prophecy

Prophecies are a powerful way of conveying information because they're mysterious. There's so much players don't know about them. For instance, how does one become a prophet in your campaign? Are (or were) prophets revered, worshiped as gods, denounced as witches and warlocks, ridiculed when they were alive? What about after they've died? Are prophecies considered visions of the future, dream-like revelations that must be interpreted before they're written down? Was the prophet a time traveler who actually knew what was going to happen? Are these prophecies discerned from cyclical patterns in history? Are some of them lucky guesses? Are they contained in a book, hologram, crystal shard, oral tradition, written upon the sand, painted upon cave walls, carved onto temple shrines, or into the flesh of true believers? Who acknowledges these prophecies anyways?

Including a prophecy doesn't have to be a huge deal. They can be quickly referenced and then forgotten, perhaps like the prophets themselves aeons ago. Or maybe your entire campaign is based around strange beliefs hatched centuries ago by a mad philosopher, octave of wizards, or tribe of amazons.

Slavery

We live in enlightened times, far removed from a barbaric age when fighters wielded big ass swords and sorceresses showed a bit of leg and cleavage. They had slaves in those times. Slaves who did all the manual labor (building temples, farming, digging ditches, etc.) and fighting (gladiators, soldiers, cannon fodder, etc.)

For many civilizations, slavery was a way of life. How prominent should slavery be in your campaign world? If slavery has been abolished, then think about how that came to pass. Assuming that having slaves is the norm, how are they treated? Badly is the obvious choice, but go deeper than that. Are they constantly abused to the point where slave revolts and suicides are a problem? If one slave revolts, are the rest of a household's slaves put to the sword? What about their families? Can a slave buy or win his freedom? Maybe slaves automatically become free after a certain period of time, like 10 years? How about a humanoid convicted of a crime? Can he choose to live as a slave instead of wasting away in a cell?

How much does it cost to buy a slave? What if the PCs capture an enemy but don't want to kill him or let him go? How much gold would they expect to get from selling a goblin, orc, gnoll, or dark elf into slavery? Perhaps freeing slaves becomes

the campaign's ultimate purpose. Conversely, what if the PCs' main objective was to enslave an entire realm and its people?

Time Travel

At some point, include time travel in your campaign. Perhaps a human or humanoid time traveler from the future or past, an object moving through time, a vehicle, or merely an arcane volume discussing time and relative dimensions in space.

Feel free to base it on magic, quantum physics, demonic entities, or some curious force outside the known universe. How it works doesn't matter as much as the cool factor of actually having time travel in your game.

This allows your players to go back in time and correct mistakes they made and find out what happens to the world based on actions they took, with opportunities to make a few gold pieces along the way. Be forewarned, Game Master, at least a couple adventurers will want to try it out. Even if you put the possibility beyond their reach, they may "waste" several game sessions moving heaven and earth in order to travel through time.

One of the best sessions I've ever run incorporated time travel. The PCs took part in this dark ritual to awaken an Elder Thing. They discovered what a bad idea that was after it was too late. However, a temporal gateway nearby allowed them to fix things by preventing the ritual from being completed in the first place.

Seinfeld

Ah yes, the show about "nothing". I encourage you, through eccentric NPCs, to make a big deal about the little things, such as polishing a sword from left to right in order to get the best shine, not laughing when gnomes tell a joke (it only encourages them), or praying to the god of fruit before biting into a pineapple because not only is he very sensitive for a deity … he's also incredibly vain. Failing to do so may cause the pineapple to go sour, draw monsters, or lead to diarrhea (so much diarrhea!)

It is the idiotic characters the adventurers meet who create the sound and fury signifying nothing. These NPCs must be personable in some way but not necessarily likeable. They also have to be convinced that they know something important, something which must be shared – like the Duke's daughter

propensity for wetting herself while laughing. On the face of it, such information is stupid and meaningless (in the context of the party's goal). Yet, it's also intriguing enough to get one or two PCs wrapped up in events and one thing leads to another. Perhaps the fighter and rogue wish to test this information out and if it's true, use it to their advantage somehow. So, they come up with a few bad jokes and start telling them to the Duke's daughter, Lysandria. Of course, that makes Lysandria's suitor jealous because he was about to suggest they take a romantic moonlit stroll. So, her suitor orders one of the waiters to pants them or accidentally pie them in the face.

Done right, whole sessions could be dominated by some weird social etiquette, faux pas, pet peeve, or idiosyncrasy. Keep in mind, not every player will be jazzed about this turn of events. Some players may find it downright stupid. If that's the case, keep your Seinfeld moments few and far between.

Familiar Monsters but with a Twist

Given the choice between standardized game-play and non-standardized, most gamers will choose the latter. After all, the unknown is a hell of a lot more interesting than boring same-old-same-old. Ideally, every single session should have either a monster the players have never seen before (difficult but not impossible) or a familiar monster that's been tweaked (easier than you'd think). Surprise is the name of the game!

Come up with a monster that everyone's seen before: troll, ogre, goblin, giant, dragon, demon, and so forth. Now think of a clever twist such as the following: it resembles a scorpion, spider, squid, or ooze. Make that familiar monster the Lovecraftian aberration version of its kind. Make it a spell-caster, undead, or cybernetic. Give it a magic item, enchantment, or psionic power. Perhaps it's hyper-intelligent and came up with an ingenious trap to spring on intruders as the creature defends its lair. Maybe the thing is only slightly different, like a natural adaptation – instead of its poison draining constitution, the venom imposes a kind of rigor mortis, stiffening joints so that one has disadvantage on attacks, physical-based skill checks, and saving throws.

Sometimes, just using a different name will give a familiar monster an air of mystery. Instead of a hobgoblin, call it a boggen or hogobb. If you prefer, go with a brief, vague description: orange-skinned humanoid just a few inches taller than a dwarf. Make them glow in the dark or give

them black eyes as if possessed by a demon. Coming up with a mechanical difference would be nice but isn't necessary. Even juicing up superficial aspects will be appreciated.

Treasure

It's one of the rewards that come with adventuring. Sure, there's experience, recognition, satisfying curiosity, and knowledge of a job well done; but it all pales in comparison to loot! Make it useful (or at least interesting), make it memorable, and keep it coming. This should be self-explanatory but let's go through it anyway.

About half the treasure the PCs acquire should be at least usable by an adventurer if not immediately useful... with one or two items potentially ass-saving down the road. At least one piece of treasure per haul should be interesting enough to literally write home about. Maybe it has a rich history (once owned by the Marquis de Sade), does something no other item can do (allows you to play checkers with Azmodeus), or looks a certain way (encrusted with hexagonal night-opals that have sparkling mineral crystals growing inside of them). At the very least, give it some runes, set it off with a decent sized ruby, or have the thing play a Cliff Burton bass solo when no one's looking.

Lastly, don't forget that awesome treasure should be a staple of your campaign. We've all heard about the Game Master who thinks it a good idea to let the first dozen sessions eventually lead up to a +1 sword. Sure, after eleven sessions of nothing, it may seem like the Holy Grail by comparison, but that's just being stingy in my book.

Showering PCs with obscene amounts of wealth is also recipe for disaster (unless it comes with a hefty price tag later on), especially if you're doing it every session. Even though I love doling out powerful magic items and chests full of gold pieces, there are occasional sessions when they get nothing. However, that's the exception rather than the rule.

Throughout the campaign, characters should have the opportunity to bolster the economy. Buy, buy, buy! Why horde gold, gemstones, wands, and magic swords if they can't be used to purchase items both necessary and frivolous? Towards the end of the campaign, assuming they haven't squandered all of it, perhaps they stumble upon a tower for sale, the mining rights for Mythryk Mountain, or an armada of invincible naval strength. What if the party's rogue comes across a set of monogrammed thieves tools made out of ebony and steel with pearl inlay in the shape of a dragon,

housed in a matching case with black velvet interior? Could he resist such fine instruments at ten times the going rate? Personalize it, make it unique in some way – not everything needs to be magical.

Need to fleece the mid to high level PCs of their largesse? How about that castle or stately manor they purchased? Upkeep, furnishings, enchantments, parties, guards, guides, advisors, artists (are they not patrons of the arts?), hirelings, dancing girls, taxes, lawyers (who's going to make sure those contracts are kosher?), bank fees, damages, expenses, research, bribes, protection money, supplies, rations, bad investments, loans, etc. Real estate depreciates. The men need entertainment. Boats require an undercoating. Anonymous peasants come out of nowhere to pick up the crumbs the party leaves behind. Merchants can smell a juicy deal and con men opportunity. Is the party an easy target for thieves?

Conspiracy

You're not paranoid. Everyone is, indeed, out to get you. Who doesn't love a good conspiracy? If your campaign world is as big and bold as it should be, there will be desperate, insane, or ambitious individuals who either want power for themselves or to introduce a frightening change to the realm (possibly both).

At some point, the PCs should accidentally (or purposefully) bump into this cabal of movers and shakers. If it's going to be later rather than sooner, I recommend leaving a mystery along with a difficult to discern clue here and there in order to build believability. The crazier this conspiracy is, the more you'll want to corroborate their existence with a half-burned letter, animal mask, strange symbol, newly-minted foreign coins, feverish rambling of a dying man, dreams, secret handshakes, and late night meetings.

Perhaps there are multiple conspiracies happening? Are they connected to well-established factions? Are they splinter groups or rogue agents? Does every member of the organization subscribe to the same belief system? Maybe it's not an organization at all but completely autonomous zealots or a single thief. Is this what the council of wizards gets up to during a horned moon?

With a conspiracy, there should be a feeling that reality is so labyrinthine - obscured by dark secrets, half-truths, and the corrosion of time – that it might always be shrouded in mystery. Certain individuals will stop at nothing to conceal what they have done or plan to do. When dealing with

subordinates, they either lie or get rid of loose ends. No captured NPC – no matter how strong his interrogation – can reveal the entire plan. The shadowy network goes on as it always has because there's something at the core of a good conspiracy that drives it and keeps driving it. What is the secret?

Thieves and Assassins

The underbelly of your campaign world will be filled with characters both utterly reprehensible and mildly shady. There's a vast middle ground taken up by thieves and assassins. What they do is illegal (most of the time), but it's also extremely profitable if done right. It's profit that creates networks around such artisans of shadow. These networks eventually become organizations, houses, leagues, lodges, clubs, companies, guilds, sects, cabals, and cults.

Thieves don't play fair. If they did, they wouldn't be thieves. An expert thief, especially one belonging to a guild, won't take kindly to other thieves poaching his back alleys. He'll want his cut, and he'll know where to go if he needs enforcers.

Do the thieves of a certain city bend the knee before some kind of lord, kingpin, mastermind, sinister sorcerer, or villainous were-rat? Are the city's assassins his private executioners? What if a realm has multiple bosses? Maybe a territory's thieves and assassins work in harmony or perhaps they're constantly at odds with each other. Are there some pockets that thieves aren't allowed to pick? Would an entire house of assassins be annihilated if a well-connected noble were murdered? How easily could a guild of thieves or assassins be infiltrated?

When it comes to the criminal element, don't expose any secrets too quickly. Nothing ruins shadows more than the bright light of truth. The dregs of society know this and so should you. Information (assuming it's accurate) should be doled out a little at a time, probably interspersed with disinformation that might get the PCs into trouble. Such as this tip from a bottom-feeding rogue: Cardinal Re'Chelaise will be the Jackal's next victim. Unfortunately, the adventurers might not learn the truth until it's too late - that Cardinal Re'Chelaise is the one hiring the Jackal to assassinate an ecclesiastic rival.

Pretty Woman

Nope, not talking about prostitutes – though, it might not be a bad idea to include a few ladies of the evening in your campaign. Rather, this item is about the intoxicating allure of a beautiful woman: her lips, eyes, nose, hair, breasts, butt, hips, legs, feet, scent, her walk, the way she carries herself, etc.

In this civilized age, people forget. Before TV, movies, magazines, DVDs, video games, the internet and all that stuff, a wizard or warrior got to see a drop dead gorgeous female once in a blue moon. And that's usually when he was adventuring in a large city. If he stayed in his little village or the dungeon, forget about it. So, in that world, bearing witness to such heavenliness is akin to glancing at a +5 vorpal sword of dragon slaying. Powerful stuff.

Indeed, sexy women make the world go round. Without going overboard, pepper your campaign with exquisite curves, creamy thighs, and delicate ruby-red mouths. Seduce the players with her physical attractiveness. Compare her to a famous celebrity like Megan Fox or Kristen Bell. Better yet, come prepared with a picture of some unknown woman from the internet or evocative piece of RPG art.

Unreliable Narrator

You should give adventurers enough information to make a choice, to take action. Most of the time, this information will be correct. As the Game Master, you are their five senses. Without accuracy, the world will seem two-dimensional at best and yet another way to screw the PCs at worst.

This brings me to one of those few times when you deliberately give the adventurers false, incomplete, or misleading information. At some point during the campaign, you'll sow the seeds of disinformation. There's a number of ways to do it…

1. A couple PCs will be given one side of the story, a couple PCs will have a slightly different version, and a third group will either know nothing at all of the events in question or something radically different.

2. An NPC will knowingly lie to one or more of the PCs.

3. An NPC or group of NPCs will tell the PCs what they believe to be true but is actually false.

4. All evidence leads the PCs to a certain conclusion, a wrong one, as it turns out.

5. Legends, rumors, old wives tales, and folklore mislead the PCs.

Separating the party, if only for a few moments, is a good way of disseminating contradictory information. Perhaps one of the characters finds a scrap of paper on the ground. Maybe a note is slipped into another character's backpack. Magic can be a useful tool, allowing a PC to visualize prior, albeit skewed, events in his mind's eye.

As the Game Master, you are free to pass notes to players as you like. This is information that a single character receives, not meant for the entire table to overhear. Seeing private notes being passes will certainly make players question what's going on. Who do you trust and how far? Is my companion giving me the whole truth or concealing something from me? These are the kinds of questions you want the adventurers to ask themselves. Like anything else, overusing this technique turns your fantasy RPG into *spy versus spy*.

Religion, Priests, and Divinity

Presumably, you have some form of worship in your campaign world. If not, make sure that's mentioned in the beginning – especially if anyone's thinking about playing a cleric. Why shouldn't clerics be able to draw on Mother Nature like druids or pain and pleasure like some kind of Clive Barker priest? You can do a lot with religion and the gods. It doesn't have to be a major part of your setting, but it should be included somewhere.

Is there more than one god? Do the gods get along or do they hate each other? Are they well known or shrouded in mystery? Are human beings merely pawns in a great battle between gods? Do they demand sacrifices… human sacrifices? Is there one god above the others or one group in charge of another? Do they pre-date the world or time itself? Are they recent additions to the world? Are the gods dying? Do devil-gods exist as well, or are the most powerful devils banished to the lower planes with their demonic brethren? Besides priests and clerics, who else cares about the gods and why? Should wizards bother about divinity? Is there a god of magic?

What if the gods are actually aliens? What advancements or wisdom did they bring to the people? What if they are extremely powerful creatures of legend? Can the gods be killed by mortals? What if someone used an artifact or relic from ancient times to slay a god? What would that do to the fabric of reality?

Rather than focus on the gods and following the ripples moving outward, you might want to focus on the people and allow their behaviors, customs, and traditions reveal the powers-that-be and their motives. For instance, what do the citizens of a particular city-state do in order to assure themselves a place in the afterlife? How do the townspeople of Daadros stave off otherworldly punishment, curses, or plagues? What does a certain realm fear? What gives them nightmares? Whom do they turn to when the end seems near? Why do all of them wear such strange yellow masks?

Let's say the god of true seeing forbids humanoids to have more than two eyes. It may seem to the metagaming-minded players that there's no reason why the people of Thin Mountain would burn out a third eye if any human was found to bear such a thing. After all, no one in the party has a third eye and they're not after anyone with a third eye – so why should it matter?

Well, for one thing, there's more to a campaign world than getting adventurers from point A to point B. For another, you're showing players that dwellers on Thin Mountain don't just casually pay homage to some out-of-touch deity with a short prayer before the last meal of the day. No, religion matters to them. There are conventions, duties, and edicts that have to be observed. Now, it's your job as Game Master to think of a reason. Is the god of true seeing jealous? Is he afraid of men finding out his dark secret? Is there a prophecy about a three-eyed man bringing destruction to Thin Mountain that only the god of true seeing knows about?

The more questions you ask (and answer), the better understanding you'll have about religion in your campaign. You want a balance between unique and same old, same old. Strangely familiar but still mostly unexpected – with a nod to the really out there! Religious extremism probably exists in every world. And if it doesn't, you'll need to come up with a good reason why that is the case. Why? Because religion makes certain people fucking nuts! If a religion or religious leader can convince people to give into their most basic instincts and darkest desires while adhering to their noblest sensibilities and loftiest principles, something is born akin to the Crusades, Salem witch trials, and Nazi Germany. Sometimes all it takes is the right place, right time, and a charismatic leader.

Council of Wizards and the Nature of Magic

If you're running a fantasy RPG, there will be magic. Though magic is outlandish, you must take it seriously in the game. It must be internally consistent, obeying the same physical and supernatural laws as everything else in your campaign.

Think about what our world would be like if magic (like shooting fireballs out of your hand) were real and practiced by… say, 10% of the population. Would society treat them like mutants in the X-Men? Would royalty covetously keep wizards all to themselves?

Is there some kind of guild or council? Who watches magic-users to make sure they aren't trying to take over the kingdom? What if they already have taken over? Are sorcerers bound to a code, oath, or demon? What environmental impact does magic have?

Even if magic feels pedestrian in your world, there's sure to

be at least one secret society – a cabal of sorcerers who have a particular goal. This shadowy group needs protection, influence, wealth, and power… maybe an army, too. How and where are they going to get that? Will they start small by annexing Strausburg or hold the entire realm for ransom by threatening to poison cloud everyone to death unless their demands are met? Magocracy, bitches!

This, of course, feeds into how wizards get their power. Your RPG system of choice will probably have a few answers, but that doesn't mean you can't fill in the gaps or go off in your own direction. Want things more sword & sorcery? Magic-users must make pacts with demon lords and dark gods. Want magic to be more mysterious? Fine, it's some outré force that only a few individuals have the ability to tap into. How about starting off mysterious and then coming up with a pseudo science-fantasy explanation? Something borderline ridiculous… like midichlorians. If magic comes from performing rituals with pentagrams, sigils, gestures, and just the right words in Latin or infernal, then perhaps books are more valuable than chests full of gold.

How does magic appear to other wizards? How does it appear to common folk? Like a zap of lightning; glowing yellowish-green mist covering the ground; or tiny imps leaping to action, carrying out their master's bidding? Is there a scent of sulfur and brimstone attached to certain incantations? Maybe it smells of the sea? Would a spell's potency be greater if performed under a horned moon, during a blood sacrifice, or in front of a black mirror?

Rather than simply telling the players all this, let such things be revealed slowly. Scrolls and tomes aren't just for giving PCs one-shot spells and rituals. Instead, such mystic papery things may initiate wizards into the ways of dream magic, flesh magic, or even candy land magic!

Universal Truth

Ideally, there should be a moment in your campaign that reflects or exemplifies a profound, universal truth. A moral to the story, if you will. It could be that power corrupts, you get out what you put in, there's no honor among thieves, evil prevails when good men do nothing, love conquers all, the self is an ever-changing mask we wear, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, or that the love of money is the root of all evil.

Universal truths can help you develop an underlying theme to your campaign. Don't beat your players over the head with it. Let it keep to the shadows until it becomes obvious… nay,

inevitable that Senna, the dark elf princess, would betray the Queen in order to obtain the Nyazian scrolls. That inevitability is what you want from time to time, possibly elevating your scenarios to the level of Graeco-Roman theatre.

Alien Technology

There's something believable about extra-terrestrial life. Science fiction is, after all, based on science (to some degree). Most of your players would have to admit that sentient life on other worlds is possible and maybe they've already visited earth in the distant past or are already here in the present.

Where there's aliens, there's alien technology. Besides believability, alien technology is a familiar genre trope. And in my personal opinion, the best fantasy is science-fantasy. Even if most of your campaigns strive for medieval authenticity, every once in a while I recommend you throw a laser pistol, trans-mat beacon, gravitational displacer, or polarity reversing omni-tron into the mix.

How to describe such a thing to the PCs? Well, there are a few different ways... 1) Try to describe everything as best you can from the characters' perspective. The players might not understand what you're talking about, which is fine because neither should their characters. 2) You can come right out and say that this is advanced, unfamiliar technology which the characters can't fully fathom. 3) You can show them a picture, reminding everyone that this looks unlike anything the characters have ever seen.

If someone from that alien or advanced civilization is present, even better. You can draw out the explanation through roleplaying or simply tell the players that X'endarr explains the device in question using basic terms and simple analogies so that the characters have a rudimentary understanding of what a fragmentary grenade is and/or does.

Volcano

A mountain range is nice and all, but including one or more active volcanoes is the cherry on top. Some players will be expecting it, others will be pleasantly surprised to discover molten lava flowing down, villages swallowed by black rock, or a bubbling red lake of fire once they've reached the top.

Can it be dormant? Yes, but it should still be on the verge of being active. Maybe the scenario is about keeping the volcano from erupting or perhaps it must erupt in order to

oust the shadow mage from his villainous hideout.

Volcanoes are found all over the world, from South America to Scandinavia – even underwater! There's something cool about them. Nature at its most primal and destructive! Besides dinosaurs and glaciers, it's one of the only subjects I wanted to learn about in grade school science class. Include one or more volcanoes in your campaign.

What about an ice volcano that spouts icy molten sludge so cold it burns? An entire city might be frozen, perfectly preserved at the base of such a volcano.

Seasons

What time of year is it and what does that mean for the land and its people? Not only are the seasons realistic, they're also metaphorical. Everything changes, yet within that change there are cycles, patterns, and recurrences. When the campaign shifts, I encourage you to show the PCs a seasonal shift.

Consider the weather, temperature, flora, fauna, terrain, etc. Is the winter mild or harsh? Is the summer welcoming or brutal? If much of the campaign is happening underground, does the present season affect the PCs? Would a seasonal change make any difference? It might if giant ice worms burrowed their way up to collect water for their young. Perhaps a spring thaw creates subterranean lakes where before there were only shallow pools. What about some kind of weird season that's alien to us? For example: black flower petals falling from the sky; the ground continually cracking beneath your feet, opening up chasms everywhere; or alternating hot and cold temperatures on a daily cycle.

First frost could be honored with all manner of traditions, such as gift giving, feasting on the flesh of a three-headed dog, or a week of celibacy. What about the 5 or 6 weeks of drought in the middle of summer? There's probably water conservation rituals observed by the citizens of Thyr.

Significant Events

These significant events are still in the realm of the ordinary world and "real life". Things like weddings, funerals, rites of passage, births, birthdays, anniversaries, retirement, christening boats, celebrating victory in battle, the grand opening of a business... you get the idea.

Such events might seem minor in comparison to dragons burning villages to the ground, ruthless warlords enslaving the local population, and the world about to be sucked into a Hell dimension. In fact, they are. But just because they're minor doesn't mean they're not worth mentioning. Adding a significant event here or there can add depth and verisimilitude to your campaign.

Girly Stuff

Rainbows, unicorns, pegasi (winged horses), mermaids, and princesses in flowing pink ball gowns, etc. Are there any women in your gaming group? If the answer is yes, then including something girly is a good idea. If not, then it could go either way.

"Girly", of course, is a subjective and sexist term. Oh well. Even if things like unicorns and rainbows are more associated with tween trapper-keepers than fantasy roleplaying, they still have their place in the genre. Why not an encounter that includes crystal shoes, a diamond ring, enchanted nail polish, or mascara that gives advantage to seduction rolls? Throw in some pixies, fairies, and sprites. Let your pastel flag fly!

Over-the-top Villain

Almost every great story needs a great villain. Someone memorable, someone deliciously evil, someone worth hating! Do not underestimate the power of an unspeakable adversary. He or she will fuel the adventurers' fire, becoming their prime motivation for adventuring.

The PCs have to witness the villain doing or saying something reprehensible, like sentencing a peasant to death for not averting his eyes or deciding to pay the party only half of what was promised because of some meaningless technicality.

However, being an asshole alone does not a great villain make. He or she must also be fascinating or compelling in some way. Make the villain physically impressive, incredibly secretive, obnoxious but still charming, covered in serpentine tattoos, wearing an eye-patch with a ruby in its center, having a cybernetic arm, or honey-blonde hair that her blue-scaled monkey plays with incessantly while perched upon her shoulder.

Even if you're not one for accents, distinctive patterns of speech, gestures, etc. try to make this over-the-top villain come alive for the players. Make him or her memorable. I

suggest more than a single quote prepared ahead of time for this NPC – have several good lines jotted down before play begins. Perhaps a favorite word or phrase such as "Ingenious", "My thoughts exactly", or "Sharper than a serpent's tooth is the tongue of an ungrateful child."

This could be a recurring villain the PCs confront frequently, a puppet-master operating in the shadows who uses pawn to do his bidding but occasionally shows himself to deal with crucial matters, or someone who appears at the campaign's beginning and then not again until its conclusion. Multiple villains are also fine, though maintaining the high level of roleplaying needed could be an issue after a while. After all, great villains take work.

Gonzo

Gonzo isn't the easiest thing to describe, people know it when they see it. But let me try...

Hunter S. Thompson was a journalist who wrote from a subjective, stylized point of view. Frequently, Thompson's articles would be written in the first person. By putting himself at the center of things, not only was objectivity lost but something else was gained – a perspective of immediacy, authenticity, and accessibility, albeit skewed by the individual in question.

For most of us, gonzo just means wild and crazy. A lot of my wild and crazy ideas come from pop-culture. Though, you don't necessarily have to borrow from TV shows, movies, novels, and comic books in order to go gonzo. Your gonzo ideas could be unique and so outside-the-box that players don't quite know what to make of it.

Here's something gonzo that I've wanted to try out for a while now: The Kool-Aid "man". Yeah, it's off the wall. But why should everything in our campaigns make sense? Why not a Kool-Aid golem? Why stop there? I own a t-shirt with a Cthulhu Kool-Aid monster with tentacles and an elder sign on his pitcher of demonic, red sugar-water. Throw that into the mix. Perhaps it's cross-over from the real world, the real world gone mad, a wizard's nightmare, the Necronomicon, an author cursed by the Nameless One so that his literary creations come to life, or maybe there's no explanation at all. It just is.

Gonzo isn't for every campaign. In fact, there are some RPGs where gonzo just wouldn't be right. Take your serious investigation, hard scifi, or vampiric storytelling games. No sense in throwing Egg Chan and his tour bus of China Town

into the mix… unless 1) you're feeling extremely bold, 2) it's a convention game (that sort of thing is almost expected), 3) one-shot, or 4) you're able to make it more subtle homage than giant neon-sign of a reference.

But it you're running a quick and dirty fantasy campaign, I encourage you to throw in some gonzo encounters here and there; probably no more than one per session, unless you and the players want to go all-in. If you and the majority of the table love that kind of thing, then don't be afraid to crank it up to 11. What if the party traveled around the kingdom as passengers of KITT from Knight Rider, battling a super-triumvirate made up of bizarro Superman, the mirror version of Spock, and Space Ghost? Sure, it could easily devolve into something stupid, but it might also be elevated to stupid-awesome given the right table dynamic.

Test of Wills

At some point, there should be a test, an evaluation determining who has what it takes and who does not. Along the way, I'm sure your campaign will have obstacles that can be navigated by strength, intelligence, charm, and wits. But it should also contain an obstacle that measures an adventurer's willpower.

I was watching a re-run of Big Bang Theory last night and saw the episode where Howard and Raj stuck their hands in a box containing a big, furry spider. The first one to remove his hand loses. That's a test of will (assuming one loathes spiders). In the Flash Gordon movie, there's that big green lump with holes in it. Put your arm in without getting a poisonous bite from whatever lives inside and you've proven something about yourself. A similar thing happens in Dune. Paul needs to keep his hand in that box, even though it feels like his flesh is burning away. Russian roulette is another example. What about in The Lost Boys, where everyone is hanging onto the tracks for dear life as a train goes over them… and then after it passes they just let go.

Come up with some kind of test that reveals one's character and build an encounter around that. It will be memorable because of the sustained levels of stress your players will feel. Of course, you'll need to provide some stakes before the test begins. Maybe the PCs watch someone take the test ahead of them – with dire consequences.

Rescue

Someone needs to be rescued. Maybe its slaves mining crystals, prisoners of a necromancer, or the princess being forced to marry the half-demon duke. Perhaps the PCs themselves are in need of rescue… or escape!

Imprisonment is one of those things everyone understands. It's terrible. It also doesn't end (unless there's a particular sentence that has one). So, if the adventurers don't succeed the first time, they can try again. The same cannot be said of a deadly trap. Once that goes off, it's curtains for the victim. But confinement against one's will is always an option, always a crowd pleaser.

Those confined are usually desperate. They'll probably do just about anything to get out of prison. Evil humanoids can offer their services, knowledge, loot, etc. for release. The PCs aren't obligated to free anyone they don't want to, but such encounters will certainly add to a session's roleplaying appeal.

Stillness

As fun and exciting as it is going from one fight to another and triumph after catastrophe, your campaign also needs at least one point where nothing is going on. Things should be continually happening around the PCs, in the background or foreground, but every once in awhile there should be nothing. A point of stillness. Characters can use this respite to reflect, chat up the barmaid, count their gold or blessings, or take an uneventful stroll through the park.

You can think of it as a reward, a reset button, or the quiet before the storm. However you want to perceive it, it's a good idea.

Revenge

Somewhere along the way, the PCs will have inconvenienced, ridiculed, crossed, double-crossed, left for dead, murdered, or in some way wronged an NPC or group of NPCs. Not all NPCs take that shit lying down. Every once in a while, they fight back – tooth and nail.

Your campaign will probably be full of opportunities for revenge. Although, if the adventurers are careful, honest, and noble this will rarely come up and if it does, it might be a case of mistaken identity or some other form of miscommunication.

Remember that this is not you taking revenge upon the players. Rather, the party has earned the wrath of another due to their hack first and ask questions later attitude. The NPC taking revenge (along with his or her possible party members and hirelings) might wait in the shadows, biding their time until just the right moment. Conversely, the revenge-seeking NPC might strike whenever the person of interest is within range.

In the campaign I'm currently running, there's a chaotic neutral rogue, Arik, who slit the throats of two thieves that were captured while raiding the PCs' castle. The thieves had been hired to steal a magic weapon in the PC's possession and were cooperating fully. When their usefulness had ended, Arik put them to the sword, even though several party members mumbled a feeble protest in the name of mercy. That's going to be the perfect opportunity for revenge. One of the thieves had a brother who is now looking for a little payback. Perhaps he'll leave an unintentional clue or his calling card behind. Or maybe he'll hide in the bushes and fire a poison arrow when Arik leaves the castle. Lots of possibilities.

Dinosaurs

Who doesn't love dinosaurs? There's just something awesome about them. Dinosaurs are like the dragons of prehistoric earth. If the existence of dinosaurs is possible millions of years ago on this planet, then why not on the fantasy version of earth? If dinosaurs exist, then other things are possible. It raises interesting questions about the world – is it similar to earth's past? Are there also cavemen? Will some natural disaster eventually wipe them out as well?

It's no accident that you see dinosaurs all the time on TV, in movies and books, etc. There's a lost world quality about them that speaks to many a gamer. We've all imagined ourselves back in time, fighting and fleeing dinosaurs. Why not the PCs? By the way, prehistoric creatures also count. What about a Kraken-like squid or leviathan living deep in the ocean?

Want to be original? Create your own alien hybrid dinosaur. Maybe there's a dinosaur that looks kind of like a giraffe or spider. Don't feel like reinventing the wheel? Just use the standard tyrannosaurus rex, brontosaurus, triceratops, pterodactyl, and velociraptor.

The Book

Every civilization worth writing about has some kind of written language. Presumably, there's a single document or collection of documents where that civilization's knowledge is recorded. Use something like that in your campaign.

Keep in mind, it doesn't have to be a traditional book. It could be stone tablets, a really long scroll or several shorter scrolls, telepathic crystal, some kind of black mirror for scrying past events, or you could go with the standard gigantic tome bound in iron (or human skin). This document could contain ancient wisdom, religious teaching, contemporary philosophy, demon resurrection passages, forbidden secrets man was not meant to know, dire prophecies, dreamlike revelations, or some combination of the above.

Have NPCs mention the Nyazian scrolls, Necronomicon, or Psalms of the Silent way before revealing the document itself. And whenever it is talked about, it should be in hushed voices, whispered in dark alleys followed by a forlorn glare or sign of the cross. You want to build the book's reputation so that if or when the adventurers happen upon it, they treat the thing with a bit of reverence instead of tossing it on the pile of undivided loot.

Gothic

To a certain degree, this is what tabletop fantasy roleplaying is all about: combining historical medieval and marrying it with both the supernatural and skeptical realism.

It was a dark and stormy night. The villagers often talked about the land being cursed, rumors of witches and bargains with the Devil circulated throughout the kingdom of Greyvein. Of course, scholars and learned men of science knew it was something else… Doctor Kendrick had learned how to pass through the barrier of dreams into a startling new dimension!

Lovecraft (hallowed by thy name) was a master of it, too. As was one of his greatest influences, Edgar Allen Poe, and one who was greatly influenced by him, Thomas Ligotti. Lovecraft combined folklore and geometry, rational logic and instinctual panic, disbelief in anything supernatural with the realization that human beings cannot fully grasp the natural world. These seemingly irreconcilable differences fascinate us. Basically, you cross-pollinate the darkly fantastic with the mundane (yet creepy) until you have something that doesn't look like fantasy or realism. Having qualities of both,

it creates an amplified effect in some readers more potent than either genre taken separately.

Within your campaign, include a crumbling castle delicately perched upon a lonesome hilltop, bloodstains that can never be cleansed, a character's disquieting obsession with dead bodies, black magic, debauchery, and people changing into monsters.

Don't be too self-conscious about dipping into gothic territory. The line between parody and gothic authenticity are blurred. If it feels a little too much, cheesy, indulgent, and so forth, then you're probably right there in the sweet spot.

War

War is woven into the fabric of civilization. It shapes everything. Even the threat of war and recovery afterwards has a great impact on the world. So, it stands to reason that your campaign should include one or more details regarding war. When a PC asks why that bridge is out or how come that tower is demolished, an NPC can always answer, "It was the war."

Are the elves constantly fighting against the dwarves? What about a civil war between gnomes or half-orcs? Perhaps one group is fighting another they barely know. Or that species is on a different planet. Maybe it's people versus plants or beings made of pure energy. Certainly, conflicting factions will likely be part of your campaign, but how big is the conflict? How invasive is the fighting? Does every member of the Yellow Sect hate the Purple Order or are most ambivalent with only a few foaming at the mouth? Perhaps the Seventh Way Practitioners despise Those Who Wet The Monolith With Their Blood but they, in turn, do not despise the 7th Way. Maybe they make war reluctantly or only fight in self-defense…

Many things become tougher in war. Supplies dwindle, food gets scarce, the will to fight is broken with years of horror and regret. Of course, those coming back from war is another issue. Sure, they'll have tales to tell but they'll also be changed by their experiences. The war never quite leaves them. Carrying such memories makes for interesting - sometimes tragic - NPCs.

On the other end of the spectrum, a few profit from war. Maybe they're arms dealers, sell rare spell components, or mercenaries who can do some of the fighting across the border. War profiteers are occasionally derided as opportunists. Do most people see them as cold-hearted vultures or smart business men?
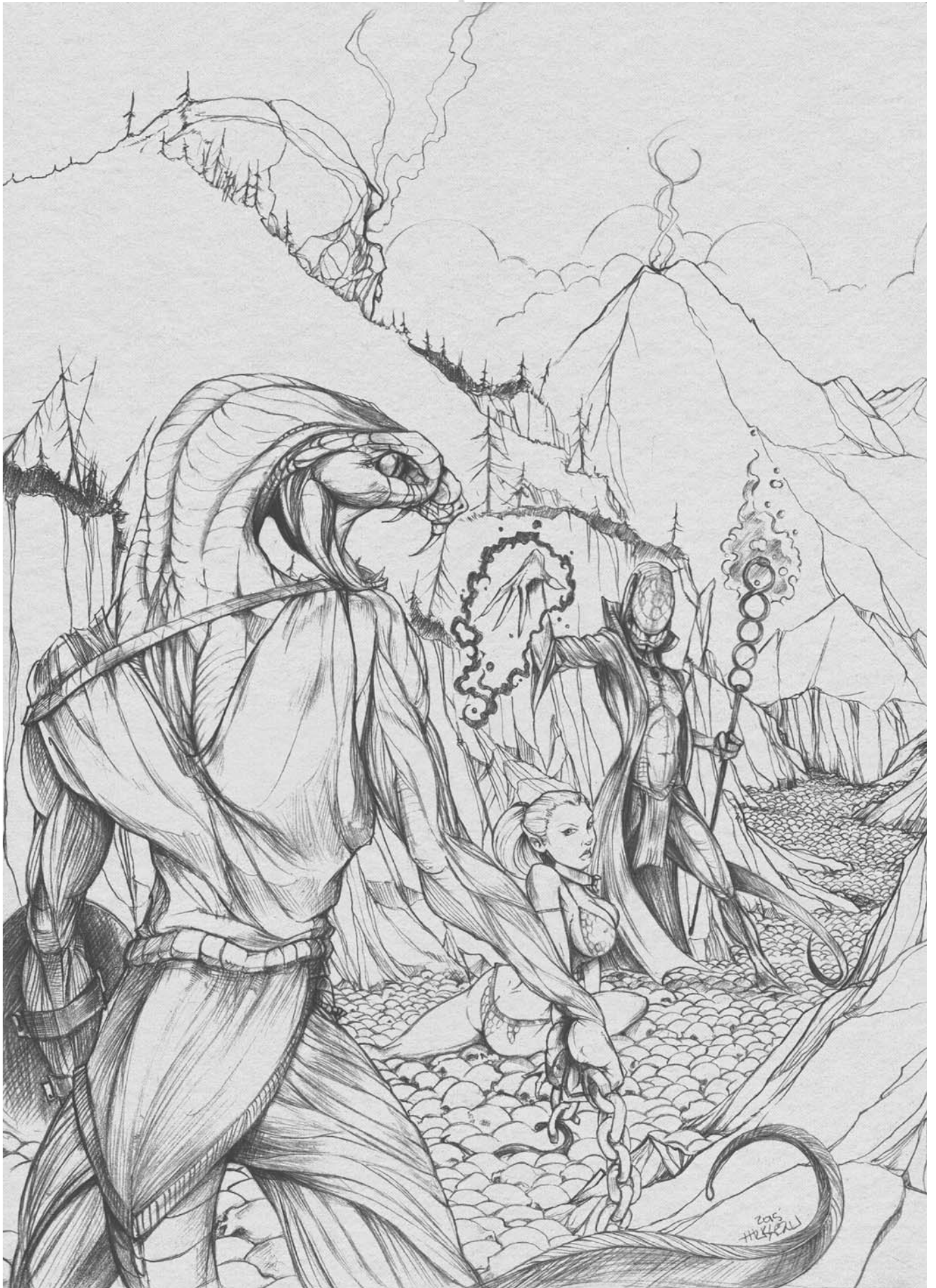
Common Misconceptions

Every so often, highlight what people are thinking, what they believe… the order of the day. Especially when it comes out wrong! Conventional wisdom is usually relegated to the background, such things as the sun rising and setting every day, that wizards use spell books, and dragons horde gold. That's because a lot we take for granted. If it's not pointed out, then we assume it works like the real world.

But what if some things weren't the way the common folk imagine. Maybe there's no sun at all; instead, an enormous magical sphere is trapping star light, comets, and astral phenomena in order to light and heat the planet. Not everything can be weird or off-kilter; however, it's fun to play with conventions every so often.

Rather that coming right out and saying that wizards don't carry around spell books like the players or their characters assume, show the misconception by narrating events. For instance, "A sorcerer walks out of the local tavern, carrying a trapezoidal tablet, its surface shiny and black. He runs his fingers over it, as if looking for something. As he passes, you can hear him mutter 'Now, where is that spell," under his breath. That's going to do more for your campaign than telling everyone, "Wizards use tablets rather than spell books in this realm."

Random Tables and Miscellaneous

WHO CAN I BLAME FOR ALL THIS?

Sometimes, you need a scapegoat. This table will tell you who's to blame for what's been happening lately.

WHOM TO BLAME

1	The Scarlet Keepers of Doom
2	Race Murdoch from the Robot Development Cartel
3	The Baleful Sorcerers of Tsathag'kha
4	An ultra-violent faction of the K'tulu cult
5	Outer guardians of Yogsoggoth
6	Demon worshiping dark elves from the Purple Islands
7	Adolescent twins born to the Witch-Queen
8	The crimson, three-headed dragon that sleeps beneath the world
9	A stark raving mad Priest of R'lyeh named Illtaire
10	The emerald-eyed android of Sarnoth
11	The thing that lurks beyond the threshold of dreams
12	Envoys from the lower planes, wearing noxious, blood-spattered death shrouds

Everyone has a Past

You may have generated a few numbers and slapped a race, class, and alignment on top… and possibly even a name, but that doesn't mean he (or she) is a full-fledged character. Player characters comes from somewhere. Adventurers might be born different but it usually takes a significant event to ignite the fires of change, forming a catalyst for delving into dungeons, exploring the remote corners of the planet, and facing wizards, demons, and dragons.

These are unusual life events from a character's past, before today… before they became adventurers!

PAST EVENTS

1	You were subjected to a level 4 mindscan in the psions' under-city. [+2 save vs mind-altering effects]
2	Sentenced to serve 7 years in the prison without walls, you were released after only 3 on a technicality – the sorceress you fornicated with turned out to be from another planet. [Advantage on seduction skill checks]
3	During the Challenge of Fire and Ice, you managed to strange an uncircumcised Slorr with the help of an elf named Kaelix. [+1 to strength]
4	You were lashed to within an inch of your life upon the altar of Ashcrom for a crime you didn't commit. Even the scars upon your body have scars. [-1 to constitution, but 2pts of damage resistance]
5	Out of your mind on uncut nyborg, you and your brother watched attack ships on fire off Orion's shoulder. After disembarking from that voyage, your brother was charged by a rampaging unicorn and killed. It should have been you but he dived in the way. [once per session, re-roll a natural 1]
6	For your heresy, you were exiled to the dreamworld of Zan. There, a grotesque idol fell into your possession. Dark forces have pursued you ever since. [once per day, you have the ability to enter or leave Zan]
7	Because of your betrayal, the synthoids of Xard demolished your coastal homeland. Stranded in the ocean, you made a vile pact with some aquatic demon that now possesses your soul. [ability to breathe underwater]
8	In exchange for murdering a wizard's rival, you were allowed to gaze upon the floating skull with psychedelic eyes. [+1 to wisdom]
9	As punishment for disobeying your former master, you were chained to a sacrificial rock on the sore of the purple islands. [you have advantage on skill checks related to escape artistry]
10	As a reward for assisting the slayer of Zirnakaynen, snow elves of the north celebrate your birthday with a gluttonous feast. Also, there's a delectable cranberry sauce named after you. [advantage on diplomacy and seduction skill checks with snow elves]
11	Your father was a member of Project Alpha Omega. As a result, you were branded a traitor by the Servants of Flame. [2 in 6 chance of immediately knowing when someone is lying]
12	You helped construct the black pyramid. Everyone involved with the inner sanctum's construction was murdered in the night to keep the pyramid's secret. Everyone, that is, but you. [acute hearing; advantage on listening checks]
13	Your mother knew the location of Star One. Because of this, you were conscripted into a devil-worshiping death squad of cybernetic-enhanced reptoids. [you have advantage on any attack following a round of uninterrupted concentration]
14	Due to your extraordinary bloodline, the vampire prince Chakhan massacred your entire family, though you were protected by an infernal pact with a demon lord. [+2 to hit and damage vs. vampires]
15	You were hired by a band of vicious pirates to help plunder the black coast. All the pirates were eventually caught and hanged, however, you managed to disappear into the forbidden zone. [you have advantage on disguise and hiding skill checks]
16	You were forced to compete in the Blades of Thrace. Though you didn't win, neither were you hacked into bloody pieces. [+1 to hit and damage when wielding a sword]
17	Your people came from a great city lost to the ocean aeons ago. The sunken remnants of that city still call to you. [Once per day, there's a 5% chance that Dread K'tulu will intervene on your behalf]
18	You were raised by snake-men living deep within the northern mountains. They were constantly at war with dwarves who believed the mountains belonged to them. [+2 to hit and damage dwarves]

19	A dimensional anomaly created theta vibrations resulting in a sub-humanoid meltdown. Most of your friends and family went berserk before liquefying into soft lumps of multi-colored plastic. [+2 save vs. magic]
20	You failed to summon one of Yogsoggoth's spawn in the cyclopean hole left by the meteor. After that humiliating failure, you studied every volume of ancient lore you could get your hands on. [+1 to intelligence]
21	You barely survived the tentacle pits of Denval Urden. [+1 to dexterity]
22	You are the ninth person to ever perform the Rites of Savaahesh in front of the trapezoidal gate of emerald flame. [you only take half damage from fire]
23	You succeeded at communing with Yogsoggoth in the chasm of nigrescent milk. [+1 to wisdom]
24	For an entire month, you attended a foul and perverted priest of the Dark Gods as he commanded a shambling army of unspeakable horrors. [you are invisible to the undead]
25	You were forced to join the metal militia in the Delos Quadrant. [advantage on intimidation skill checks]
26	You were charged with heresy and exiled to the Mountain of Outer Chaos. [once per day, you are able to cause temporary madness in a humanoid after staring into his eyes for an entire round]
27	Was about to be eaten by a slavering theskasaurus but saved at the last moment when the ground erupted with tentacle, man-eating burrowers. [once per session, you get a +1 bonus to any roll]
28	When only a child, your people were wiped out by the Junn horde. [+1 to charisma]
29	You impregnated the jeweled vessel of Yar within a temple of the night-serpent. [That evening, you stole a magical dagger from the temple]
30	You were about to be shackled before the bilious pit of nurrgle-slime but escaped into the jungle during a ground tremor. [+1 to dexterity]
31	You ate the tongue of a baleful sorcerer of Tsathag'kha for his insolence. [advantage on intimidation skill checks]

32	For your delusions of grandeur, you were thrown into a pit as sacrifice to the pungent Squaal of Azurkithe. Lucky for you, it had just eaten an hour before and slumbered while you made your escape. [once per session, take a natural 20]
33	You nearly died in a violet wyrm's petrified corpse fighting the Ara-Keen, saved only by a dark elf that carried your unconscious body to safety and nursed you back to health. [you are Kytanu's indentured servant, according to dark elf law]
34	You faithfully served the Seventh Emperor, journeying back and forth from the ice caverns far below the surface. [half-damage from cold]
35	You were sold into slavery, bought by a sorcerer of yellow jade who nearly sacrificed you to his loathsome deity before he was killed by a rival wizard. [either able to cast spells at one level higher than normal or +2 save vs. magic]
36	You interrupted a wizard's duel taking place on the rim of an active volcano. Your disturbance caused both spell-casters to lose their footing and fall into molten lava. [start the game one level higher than your companions]
37	You were routinely hunted for sport on the Glib Plateau across the purple mists of Satara. [advantage on hide and move silently skill checks]
38	On a dare, you ventured into the lair of a spider demon, finding a silver ring just inside the entrance. You put it on. You fought tooth and nail to stay alive while somehow managing not to get stuck in the creature's web. [you wear a magic ring of free action]
39	The wise woman of your village prophesied that you would one day kill a ruthless tyrant. [+2 to attack and damage vs. the most powerful evil humanoid in a group]
40	You apprenticed under Elzek the vile, an artificer who crafted dark objects in exchange for chests full of gold and gemstones. [able to craft a magic item in half the usual time and at half the usual cost]

41	You wandered the desert of nameless sand for several days and nights before a pale-white sorceress with raven hair and emerald eyes took you in and made you her plaything. You narrowly escaped while she was preoccupied with a gigantic sand squid. [+2 save vs. mind-altering effects]
42	Forced to spill innocent blood in the gladiatorial arenas of Vega, you somehow managed to survive without being particularly adept at fighting. [+1 dexterity]
43	You fought in a slave revolt at the spice mines belonging to Vekker, the butcher of Zaelius 3. [you score a critical hit on rolls of natural 19 and 20 when using a melee weapon]
44	You and your companions chased down a demon in the forbidden zone. That soulless creature slaughtered everyone but you. [+1 to hit and damage demons and devils]
45	You learned the dark ways of your master on Silk Road... where depravity has no limits. [advantage on persuasion and gathering information skill checks using torture]
46	While serving a powerful noble, you carried his accursed magic item for months – its corrupt energy constantly flowing through your body. [you are sensitive to both magic and evil and instinctively know when either is near]
47	You helped repel Zanthos' android army at the Citadel of Long Shadows. [+2 to hit and damage vs. robots]
48	Just now, the wizard Kaal hands you a crystal shard, glowing purple from within. Whispering "lost Carcosa," the shard warms your hand like the promise of sin. [once per day, that crystal allows you to see into the mind of an evil humanoid or creature]
49	Your father wrested the largest ruby he'd ever seen from the eye-socket of a gigantic demon idol. Until the end of his days, the man was plagued with misfortune. Cursed, the townsfolk said. [you have a 2 in 6 chance of sensing danger seconds before it happens]
50	Before adventuring, you were an artist's model. Delucci captured your likeness in a variety of sculptures. [either advantage on skill checks related to keeping still or +1 to charisma]
51	On his deathbed, a cleric devoted to the Dark Gods gave away all his worldly possessions. By the time you arrived, all that was left was an ink-stained, multi-page letter the cleric had received years ago. The letter was from a Master of the Fourth Way, detailing the arduous struggles involved in achieving higher consciousness. [to the right buyer (perhaps a monk or NPC interested in esotericism) this brief manuscript would be worth something in the neighborhood of 500 gold pieces]
52	Assigned to a wanderer class freighter, you traveled the galaxy in search of valuable mineral deposits. Attacked and boarded by an enemy ship, you were stranded on this particular world. [advantage on skill checks involving high-tech]
53	You were born into a parallel world where apes evolved into the dominant intelligent life form instead of humans. Caged like an animal, you escaped – running into a swirling portal of silvery aqua energy which teleported you here. [+2 to dexterity, -1 to intelligence]
54	During a routine salvage run, you discovered a mechanical badger. It befriended you. [you travel with a mechanical badger artificial animal companion]
55	You are from either the far future or distant past where reptiles are everywhere and snake-men rule the planet. About to be sacrificed, a magical side-effect opened a gateway to this world. You escaped through the gate before it closed. [+1 to hit and damage reptiles]
56	While testing an experimental weapon, you were doused with a high level of gamma radiation. [+2 to strength and -1 to wisdom]
57	You stowed away on a pirate ship hoping to seek your fortune. Upon discovery, Captain Nero took you under his wing instead of slitting your throat. He showed you a bit of the seafaring life before his ship was destroyed by a royal navy vessel. [advantage on skill checks involving swimming, sailing, and navigation]
58	You assisted the high priest of a K'tulu worshiping cult before he was devoured by a nightmarish entity from outside this universe. [advantage on skill checks involving persuasion]

59	You fought a dragon and lived to tell about it. [+2 to hit and damage dragons]
60	You were mercilessly whipped for hours upon the altar of Moschrov; some shambling horror from the nearby graveyard attacked the executioners before you broke. [extra 2d4 bonus hit points]
61	You left the domed city of your own accord, stifled by their antiquated ways and tired of the over-protective, 72 degrees artificial habitat you've always known. [you know how to read, write, and operate simply machinery]
62	Apprenticed to a wizard constantly hunted for his crimes against nature, you moved from the place to place… frequently at night. [advantage on sneaking and hiding skill checks]
63	You arrived extremely late to the Lich's tomb after he'd been slain. Almost everything had already been looted. However, behind a crumbling pillar you found a mauve-colored mask. Though rather bland and expressionless, it was better than nothing at all. [when the mask is worn you receive a bonus saving throw vs. death upon reaching negative hit points, success means you're alive but unconscious]
64	Even though you were conceived by a man and woman, as a fetus you grew and were eventually born from a yak's womb. You assume sorcery was involved but no one has been able to furnish details. [advantage on skill checks involving animals]
65	You sought one of the Death Masters for some secret purpose. When you finally found him, he looked at you, screamed horribly as if witnessing something unfathomably awful, and melted into a puddle of disgusting green goo. [immediately after a weird event, you get advantage on your next d20 roll]
66	You defiled a temple of Set by stealing the Serpent's Eye. Unfortunately, your old partner stole the jewel away from you shortly thereafter. Then you stole it back again, but soon lost it to yet another thief. [advantage on skill checks involving thievery]

67	You were a prisoner of an ice demon until a barbarian wielding a sword whose blade burned like the sun vanquished him, freeing you of the demon's icy bondage. [resistance to cold, frost, and ice]
68	You were nearly a wizard's blood sacrifice when the ground opened up like a gigantic, worm infested maw and swallowed him whole. [once per session, you may re-roll a natural 1]
69	Your native land became a battleground between two warring wizards. The epic conflict between the wizards was fought by countless human slaves. [+2 bonus to armor class vs. humans]
70	As a thunderstorm devastated the plateau of Leng, you watched as lighting struck the huge purple crystal that always hung in the air, just above the highest point of Leng. That crystal was rumored to keep balance between the forces of light and darkness. Upon being hit by lightning, a shard broke off which you somehow retrieved in the storm. [+1 bonus to all saving throws]
71	Awhile back, your hand turned evil, forcing you to cut if off with a chainsaw. Fortunately, you were able to attach that chainsaw onto the stump where your hand used to be. [chainsaw hand: full round just to get it running and it might need gasoline after several uses, but it does 2d6 damage]
72	During a raid, you were cut down by the Lich King. As a result, the slash across your chest is subtly glows with a bluish-grey illumination. Perhaps you are marked for something… [undead will avoid you, never attacking or barring your way]
73	You started hunting chicken of the cave (bats) for food. Your brother saw a way to make some coin and opened up a tavern specializing in fine ale and chicken of the cave, fried and served with a spicy dipping sauce. [either a +1 to hit and damage winged creatures or start with 250 additional gold pieces]

74	As a youth, you were kidnapped and tortured by a psychopathic clown. Freedom only came when your tormentor developed an allergic reaction to the face paint, slicing off his own face with a straight-razor. [during an interaction, you are able to cause fear in an individual 33% of the time]
75	Your entire village, crouching at the base of a volcano, was about to be engulfed in an endless stream of molten lava when gnome wearing a strange hat blasted you with his wand. Next thing you know, you woke up in some forest over a hundred miles away. [you have a guardian gnome whom you may communicate with telepathically once per session]
76	Your first adventuring party was devoured by giant frogs. You hid under a lily-pad until the crunching and slurping was over. [advantage on hide and sneak skill checks]
77	You recently learned that your estranged father is a Death Master ruling over the eastern quadrant of the forbidden zone. [There's a 33% chance you will be regarded as nobility to those privy to your background]
78	Years ago, you visited an under-city of synthoids. The synthoids taught you a few of their secrets. [you have advantage on skill checks involving high-technology]
79	You fell off the black pyramid while defending it from doom-hawks, breaking your back. Fortunately, a benevolent cleric laid his hands upon you, fusing your backbone together so that it was stronger than ever. [+1 to strength]
80	Your legs were blown off in the war of Atraedes. A friend of the family paid for you to receive a mechanized lower half. Instead of walking, you roll around on tank treads. [-1 to dexterity but you get 2 points of damage resistance]
81	Your uncle was a wartime profiteer in the clone revolution. With the money he made and the available technology, you have a clone "brother" waiting in the wings. He will activate upon your demise. [basically, you get a second chance at life]
82	You convinced an interstellar gangster to loan you the money for a starship. Your ship is small, older, and needs work… but it's still a goddamn starship! [unfortunately, you owe gangster 10,000 credits – equivalent to 10,000 gold pieces]
83	The seven Lords of Creation watch over this world and its people, incrementally influencing events in their favor. Not many are aware of this fact but you are. [Once per day, you have a 33% chance of recognizing that some person, place, or thing is actually an illustion]
84	You were born with an odd, triangular birthmark. [once per session, a humanoid will either be convinced of your greatness or (33% chance) perceive you as a convicted criminal]
85	Your people murdered every man, woman, and child living within the tents of Goth as retribution for insulting Hyrkuulath the God of pride, ambition, and retaliation. [Hyrkuulath gifted you with a +1 to charisma]
86	The first man you ever killed was at the foot of a mountain carved into the likeness of the demon prince Malik. [each time you end a creature's life, you receive a +1 to hit and damage for one minute]
87	You're originally from a planet with three blue suns. [+1 to intelligence]
88	Nothing. Everything before today is a total blank. You woke up this morning with no memory. [once per session, you can decide that something encountered is familiar and describe your connection to it]
89	You were baptized in the oasis of Zarth by a man claiming to be a messenger from god. [1% chance per day (cumulative and resetting after each success) of petitioning an appropriate deity with prayer and having it answered]
90	Born of a fire wizard and ice sorceress whose magic canceled each other out, you are particularly resistant to spell-casting. [20% magic resistance]

91	Though you valiantly fought against the mighty flail snail of Kith, your entire party was slaughtered, except for you. Luckily, you were carried off by a winged monkey's tentacle. [you have a tentacle flying monkey as familiar or animal companion]

92	You were sent from the future to warn humanity of an impending doom. The apocalypse isn't far behind. There's no fate but what we make.

93	You were nailed to a cross by the cyber-theocracy, left to die. However, your inner resolve kept you going until a band of adventurers saved you. [once per session, you may add 1d6 to any roll]
94	You were recruited by a shadow government of wizards with an eye for world domination. [once per day, spell casters within 10' of you (not including yourself) may increase a single aspect of their spell (damage, duration, range, etc.) by 33%]
95	There's a prophecy about a monstrous, alien, godlike entity breaking through the barrier into this universe and drinking the souls of all non-believers. This prophecy also mentions several individuals by name; yours is one of them. [your sense of purpose allows you a (bonus) saving throw if you die]
96	You traveled to the lost temple of Tjocanth. It was filled with grotesque statues, immoral bas reliefs, leering demonic faces, and degenerate bone-white priests who cut out their own tongues in order to be closer to some silent and bloodthirsty divinity. [you have advantage on skill checks dealing with evil or insane humanoids]
97	You are a dark, possibly evil version of your race or sub-race. Aside from looking exotic, most humanoids will stay out of your way due to fear and superstition. [advantage on intimidation skill checks]
98	You were approached by a gnome with lavender, maroon, and pastel green striped hat (almost as big as him), polka-dot clothes, and jeweled slippers. This gnome was looking for investors in some new project he's working on. As a free gift for listening to his pitch, you received a transparent cube about the size of his little gnome fist. [once per day]
99	You were raised in the gladiatorial pits of Choam where you learned how to kill with efficient brutality. [you crit on a natural 19 and 20]
100	Roll twice!

- Having resistance to something equals half damage; vulnerability equals double.

- Advantage could grant a +4 on your d20 roll, re-roll a natural 1 (only the first time).

- If you have advantage on a particular skill check, assume you're also proficient in that skill.

Character Questions

During character creation, backgrounds are nice. Everyone has some kind of story. These questions are here to help players round out their character's story, giving them a little more to go. Most of these can be answered quickly but each of them begs for a more detailed answer.

I've played in campaigns where I was handed a seven page packet full of essay questions to fill out by the next session, campaigns where you rolled your stats, got some starting equipment and just started exploring a dungeon, and everything in between. A little goes a long way, in my opinion. While tabletop roleplaying is more than showing off slick maneuvers and telling authority figures to shove it, we don't want this to be a study in novel writing or storytelling workshop. Look under the hood enough to see what's going on and then get on with the game. Basically, whatever you can get done in an hour, do that. If you've already used that initial hour of character creation up, then quickly roll or suggest things for players to ponder between sessions.

I recommend rolling three times per character. That'll get things going without going overboard. Also, encourage players to consider who their character is without pushing them to dig deeper than they're comfortable with. Don't make it a chore. This is supposed to be fun, after all.

1D100 TABLE OF QUESTIONS FOR CHARACTERS

1	Who was your mentor growing up?
2	Why did you choose your current profession?
3	Do you ever think of choosing a different career path?
4	Have you ever met a truly accomplished wizard?
5	Do you have any brothers or sisters?
6	Are your parents still alive?
7	Have you ever been robbed?
8	Have you ever stolen something of great value?
9	Have you ever killed a man?
10	Do you enjoy the sights and sounds of battle?

11	Besides adventuring, what would you be doing with your life?
12	Have you ever been in love?
13	Do you have a significant other?
14	What's your favorite food?
15	What's your favorite drink?
16	What's your favorite color?
17	What are you afraid of?
18	Do you believe in luck?
19	Can you cook?
20	Who was your favorite person in your hometown (not related to you)?
21	When was the first time you held a sword?
22	Have you ever used a wand?
23	Have you ever fallen into a pit trap?
24	What's the toughest monster you've ever faced?
25	Which of the seven deadly sins best describes you (sloth, wrath, lust, gluttony, pride, envy, and greed)?
26	How would others describe you?
27	What's your three year plan?
28	Where are you from?
29	Do you have any children?
30	Have you ever visited a brothel, bordello, or red-light district?
31	Have you ever questioned the gods?
32	Do you believe that you have a special plan for this world?
33	What is your type, regarding physical attraction?
34	Do you have a recurring dream or nightmare?
35	Ever broken any bones?
36	Would you let one of your friends die in order to kill three enemies?
37	Do you have a treasured item of little objective value?
38	What's the last book you've read?
39	How do you really feel about dwarves?
40	How do you really feel about elves?
41	Do you trust easily?
42	When do you give your loyalty?
43	Have you ever broken an oath?
44	Do you have a sense of humor?

45	Are you more obsessively clean, a total slob, or somewhere in between?
46	Have you ever repented, atoned, or confessed your sins to another?
47	Do you have any political affiliations?
48	Do you have an appreciation for the arts?
49	What's your pet peeve?
50	Are you optimistic, pessimistic, or somewhere in between?
51	When was the last time you got blind drunk?
52	If you were an animal, what kind of animal would you be?
53	Do you gamble?
54	Who is your mentor now?
55	What's something you want to learn in the near future?
56	What's the most valuable lesson you've learned so far?
57	Is there a history of mental illness in your family?
58	Have you ever met a saint, holy man, or witch?
59	Have you ever seen a demon in the flesh?
60	Is there anything you've been taught about the world that you don't believe?
61	Were you rebellious growing up?
62	Are you set in your ways?
63	Did your family or town have a strange tradition or celebrate an off-beat holiday?
64	Have you ever visited a fortune teller, oracle, or mystic?
65	Have you ever referred to sorcery as "the black arts"?
66	What do you daydream about?
67	How do you cope with stressful situations?
68	Is there anything you actively try to avoid?
69	Do you consider yourself heroic or villainous?
70	Do you have an annoying habit?
71	Have you ever partaken of a mind-altering substance?
72	Do you have a hobby?
73	Have you ever been kicked out of a tavern?
74	Have you ever fought in the arena or competed in a wizard's duel?
75	Have you ever danced with the Devil by the pale moonlight?

76	What is the meaning of life?
77	Would you stop a fellow party member from shedding innocent blood?
78	Have you ever had to fire a henchman or hireling?
79	Which is more important to you: reliability or loyalty?
80	What would you do (if anything) to a noble or aristocrat who disrespected you?
81	Can you play a musical instrument?
82	How do you feel about manual labor?
83	What's your favorite pithy saying or turn of phrase?
84	Do you have a favorite book?
85	Are you superstitious?
86	What's your preferred climate?
87	Do you prefer traveling around the world or staying in one realm, territory, or kingdom?
88	Have you ever used a pseudonym?
89	Is there a special word you use more often than you probably should?
90	Have you ever wielded a magic sword?
91	How well acquainted are you with advanced technology?
92	Who taught you how to wield a blade?
93	What's your favorite flavor of pie?
94	Where's a region or realm you've always wanted to visit?
95	If you weren't a _____, what profession/ vocation would you have chosen?
96	Name your most impressive or fondly remembered sexual conquest.
97	What's more important to you than gold?
98	Do you have a life philosophy?
99	What's your father's name?
100	What do you think the average life expectancy of an adventurer is?

20 REASONS THE CHARACTERS ARE TOGETHER

1	Lifelong friends
2	Romantically involved or would like to be (could be in love with the other's sister)
3	Related – blood is thicker than water
4	Enjoy similar hobbies, interests, and/or passions
5	Started looking out for each other back when they had nothing and no one
6	Bonded over a long military campaign
7	Hired by the same individual to do a job or series of jobs
8	Frequent the same tavern
9	Apprenticed under the same master
10	Are bound by similar oaths
11	Have the same goal(s)
12	Things got real bad; stuck with the only survivor(s)
13	Charmed or otherwise magically linked
14	Reminds him of someone he used to know very well or love
15	Each sees the other as a chance for gaining power
16	Shared the same prison cell
17	Met in an insane asylum
18	Share the rights to an object, piece of land, abode, etc.
19	One is mentoring the other for mutual benefit
20	Roll twice!

Secondary and Tertiary Motivations, Desires, and Goals

Every NPC worth scribbling down on the margins of graph paper should have a primary motivation, desire, or goal. What makes them tick, what drives them to act the way they do? There's a handy table to character motivations within Liberation of the Demon Slayer.

The following are secondary motives that will add another dimension to your NPCs. Or, feel free to have players roll if they prefer that to making up one of their own. Note that just because these motivations, desires, and goals are secondary, that doesn't mean they aren't of primary importance right now, just that overall, influence might be that character's driving force. Want a tertiary motivation, desire, or goal? Roll again!

SUBSIDIARY MOTIVATIONS

1	Restore glory to the Ving Ho dynasty (or the Kezakahn empire).
2	Execute as many treacherous Zorkaan dogs as possible.
3	Master the art of lucid dreaming
4	Find a crimson cloak or wizard's robes to match his family crest.
5	To discover what lies beyond the overgrown ruins.
6	Protect his dark secret no matter the cost.
7	To pay back the 1,000 gold pieces he owes Maax the wicked high priest.
8	Desecrate anything related to the Dark Gods / Great Old Ones / Ancient Ones
9	Praise and exalt anything having to do with the Dark Gods / Great Old Ones / Ancient Ones.
10	Discover his divine purpose, his special plan for this world.
11	Would do just about anything for a delicious, fresh baked pie… 1) apple, 2) blueberry, 3) cherry, 4) pumpkin.
12	Collect ladies undergarments.
13	Win back his lucky coin from a gambler, the notorious Iago.
14	Learn the meaning of a cryptic message or dream.
15	Cause trouble and strife; sociopathic instigator.
16	Locate a spaceship that crashed not too long ago.
17	Find the perfect emerald to impress the duchess of Steel Haven.
18	Humiliate a local bard who sings lewd songs about his wife.
19	Always wanted to see another planet, dimension, or plane
20	Natural born problem solver – will try to fix every problem that comes up.
21	Loves to argue, always in the mood for a juicy argument.
22	Wants to disprove the theory of… 1) evolution, 2) gravity, 3) objectivism, 4) science!
23	To find the perfect horse, just like the one he used to have years ago.
24	Locate an especially rare spell component.
25	To collect seven hairs from a devil's beard.
26	Find a trade that's more exciting than chartered accountancy.
27	Discover what happened to his cousin who explored the dungeon beneath Blacklore castle a year ago and never returned.
28	Lose those last stubborn ten lbs.
29	Think up a really good joke or riddle.
30	Summon a demon; maybe even make a pact with him.
31	Outlive everyone in the tontine (google it) to collect 100,000 gold pieces.
32	Learn to write as well as Cardyn the wily wordsmith.
33	Train for a drinking competition which he intends to enter and win in a month's time.
34	Either prove or disprove the existence of ghosts.
35	Convince as many people as possible that there should be eight days in a week.
36	Prove to his father that he can make his way in the world.
37	Give his worldly possessions away to someone worthy before he dies (2d4 days left to live).
38	Find a suitable mate.
39	Cleanse his guilty conscience.
40	Commission an artist to paint his portrait.

41	Meet a fitting traveling companion or companions.
42	Discover the meaning of life.
43	Find honest work.
44	Become a legitimate "tough guy" – needs to get into 500 fights.
45	Wants to start a club for fighting but can't really talk about it.
46	Wants to watch c-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhauser Gate.
47	Grow the world's largest potato.
48	Become the villain his brother always feared he would turn into.
49	Rid the realm of vampires.
50	Serial killer who can't seem to get enough blood on his hands.
51	Always wanted to be with two women at once.
52	To acquire a highly artistic but also highly illegal set of French lithographs.
53	Wants to die without regrets.
54	Always thinking about strategic and tactical war games; planning his next move, etc.
55	Discipline himself so that his attention does not wander.
56	Flagellates self on all holy days.
57	A sausage connoisseur who wants to taste every kind of sausage in the world.
58	Fed one too many people to the alligators, now he's on the run.
59	To rid himself of that accursed ring (without hacking off his finger).
60	Desperately wants to learn how to play the mandolin.
61	Wants to become a royal taster for the king some day.
62	Learn sorcery, despite being a carpenter his entire life.
63	Run away from his nagging wife and whiny, complaining children.
64	Wants to fight a dragon.
65	Looking for a magic sword.
66	Always trying to learn peoples' secrets.
67	Was right about something once and now always thinks he's always right about everything.

68	Wracking his brain trying to figure out what he was supposed to remember.
69	Master the art of calligraphy.
70	Invent a new kind of cheese.
71	Learn how to make something called a "pizza"; tried a couple slices and it changed his life.
72	Get the weird purple visions out of his brain.
73	Start his own religion; become a charismatic cult leader.
74	Looking for the perfect toy for his daughter's fifth birthday.
75	Learn to be self-reliant in the wild.
76	Survive the rite of wailing witches or the initiation of Aetrades.
77	Cure his sister's vampirism.
78	Teach that rat-bastard Fingr Skillguilty a lesson!
79	Recover his leather pouch filled with iridescent marbles from the King's assassin.
80	Find a way to the seven monoliths of Irra Natal.
81	Get drunk!
82	Drink milk from the breasts of a Burmese maiden.

83	Create a deadly trap either for general defense and security or targeting a specific creature or person.
84	Climb the tallest mountain in the land.
85	Be sacrificed to the dark forces in nature.
86	Purchase a house in the nearby village.
87	Wants to be left alone to read his books.
88	Reclaim the soul he lost to the demon lord Ixaxaar.
89	Loves decapitation; wants to make his magic sword vorpal.
90	Putter around in his garden.
91	Usurp the throne!
92	Pull the sword from the stone.
93	Drink from the fountain of eternal youth.
94	Explore the ancient city built by subterranean elves.
95	Write a ripping yarn about dragons and wizards with some hot gypsies thrown in for good measure.
96	Find his super awesome red bicycle with all the bells and whistles.
97	Recover a cursed idol – the bad luck eye of the little yellow god!
98	Construct a death ray.
99	Sail away to some deserted island.
100	Become a high-ranking member of either the thieves' guild or sect of assassins.

Profound Musings of an NPC

Occasionally, an NPC will say something witty or deep or prophetic. Here's a table of random quotes you might give some mouthy NPC in your campaign. After each quote is its source.

1	*"Hope is the pillar that holds up the world. Hope is the dream of a waking man."* - Pliny the Elder
2	*"Without self-knowledge, without understanding the work and functions of his machine, man cannot be free, he cannot govern himself and he will always remain a slave."* - Gurdjieff

3	*"The human phenomenon is but the sum of densely coiled layers of illusion. Each of which winds itself on the supreme insanity that there are persons of any kind, when all there can be is mindless mirrors laughing and screaming as they parade about in an endless dream."* - Thomas Ligotti
4	*"Desire is when you do what you want; will is when you can do what you do not want."* - Ouspensky
5	*"I break away from all conventions which do not lead to my earthly success and happiness."* - Anton Szandor LaVey
6	*"I can't explain the unexplainable."* - Rani from Land of the Lost
7	*"The word impossible is only found in the dictionary of fools."* - Dr. Hans Reinhardt
8	*"Discipline is the bridge between goals and accomplishment."* - Jim Rohn
9	*"We cannot become what we need to be by remaining what we are."* - Max de Pree
10	*"He who lives in harmony with himself lives in harmony with the universe."* Marcus Aurelius
11	*"Always seek out the seed of triumph in every adversity."* - Og Mandino
12	*"The truth is not for all men, but only for those who seek it."* - Ayn Rand
13	*"Power is always dangerous. It attracts the worst and corrupts the best. I never asked for power. Power is only given to those who are prepared to lower themselves to pick it up."* - Ragnar Lothbrok
14	*"Beyond a certain point, the whole universe becomes a continuous process of initiation."* - Robert Anton Wilson
15	*"The only clear view is from atop the mountain of your dead selves."* - Peter Carroll
16	*"The whole and sole object of all true magical and mystical training is to become free from every kind of limitation."* - Aleister Crowley
17	*"A man who is doing his true will has the inertia of the universe to assist him."* - Aleister Crowley
18	*"Initiation cannot be gained through a ceremony: a person initiates himself through his own understanding. However, though we can make modifications, we cannot change ourselves without help from outside."* - Gurdjieff
19	*"No good deed goes unpunished."* - Kerr Avon
20	*"I Am that I Am."* Or *"I Will Be what I Will Be."* - Old Testament God

Cults

Guess what? You probably need some kind of cult activity in your campaign! Want the PCs to stumble upon something they shouldn't have seen? The following five tables will give you the big picture.

WHO ARE THE CULTISTS?

1	Triad of the Violet Flame
2	Servants of the Forbidden Truth
3	Celebrants of the Emerald Visioin
4	Initiates of the Ninth Angle
5	Worshipers of K'tulu
6	Order of Nothingness
7	Disciples of the Devourer
8	Messengers of Creeping Death
9	Sect of the Unspeakable One
10	Servants of Yogsoggoth
11	Keepers of the Unholy Word
12	Blood of the Dark One
13	Cult of the Nameless Horror
14	Practicioners of the Black Path
15	Seekers of Ineffable Lore
16	Initiates of the One True Way
17	Crimson Cult of He Who Is Shrouded In Madness
18	The Six-Fingered Purple Hand of Zygak-Xith
19	Violators of the Pale Empress
20	Heralds of the Blasphemous Dawn

CULTIST AFFECTATION

1	They wear masks. Maybe it's only during rituals or at night or all the time.
2	They greet each other with a secret handshake.
3	They make a specific hand gesture – especially when something cult related is being discussed.
4	They wear some kind of necklace, medallion, amulet, or pendant around their neck.
5	They have one or more tattoos. The symbolism has a deeper meaning that only a cultist would know.
6	They shave their heads. Alternatively, they could all have long hair or a mo-hawk.
7	They wear specific robes, cloaks, sash, scarf, or garment. Usually, this article of clothing will be a specific color or colors and might also contain a cult symbol.
8	They have a particular word or phrase which they repeat like a mantra or mnemonic device. It might also be a call and response type thing - one cultist starts it and a second ends it.
9	They all have the same ritual implement. It might be a hand-made wand, athane (ceremonial dagger), statuette, incense burner, chalice, gazing crystal, etc.
10	All of them are missing a pinkie, eye, or earlobe; maybe they have a scar on their chin or lash marks upon their back.
11	Every member of the cult has the same vibe, look, mannerisms, personality, or essence. Usually, this will be an indefinable characteristic that feels strangely similar.
12	Roll twice.

Cult leader

All a cult leader really needs is three things… 1) the self-confidence to call himself a cult leader, 2) some kind of motivation or goal besides cult leadership, and 3) to demonstrate some kind of value. This last one "proves" that he's special in some way, deserving of the office. If this cult is religious in nature, he'll usually be referred to as High Priest. If it isn't, then maybe the other cultists call him "sir" or "the chosen one"… perhaps he won't have an official title at all.

The following table will tell you what kind of value this cult leader has demonstrated in the past and (for his sake) currently demonstrates. Decide ahead of time what kind of cult this is. If his followers are less than three, then there really is no cult – just some crazy dudes getting together. If his followers number between three and ten, roll on the table once. If his followers number between 11 and 32 roll twice. If his followers number 33 or more, then roll thrice. If the cult has over a thousand members, roll four times! If you get the same result twice, re-roll until you get something new.

WHAT'S SO SPECIAL ABOUT THIS CULT LEADER

1	Named or described in a prophecy or sacred writing
2	Appears in cultists' dreams
3	True believer who has risked life and limb to further the cult and its goals
4	Unflappable; always calm, cool, and collected
5	Extremely fortunate; seems to land on his feet every time
6	Either rich or has access to valuable resources
7	Knows one or more powerful secrets
8	Has magic item or mystical object (33% chance an artifact or relic)
9	Has magical, supernatural, psionic, or psychic abilities
10	Able to hypnotize people
11	Genius; not only extremely intelligent and creative but able to convey big ideas to the simpleminded
12	From the future, alternate dimension, or parallel universe
13	Keeps a ferocious, cunning, or deadly animal companion
14	Actually being propped up as a figurehead by the true leader waiting in the shadows
15	Not human or partially human
16	Protected by unseen forces
17	Con man who knows how to discover what a person is emotionally invested in and exploit it
18	Has his own lair, base, headquarters, temple, or command center
19	Inherited his position from father or grandfather who used to be the cult leader
20	Earned the leadership by killing the previous leader in ceremonial combat

WHO OR WHAT IS ABOUT TO BE SACRIFICED?

1	Young, nubile girl native to the area.
2	Young, nubile girl who is a stranger or foreign to the area.
3	Physically strong tribesman (likely a warrior) or physically weak tribesman (such as a wizard).
4	Scientist who has discovered a dark secret about the land or the cult's leader.
5	Pregnant woman.
6	The cult leader (or next in line) who believes he'll either be reborn or ascend to a higher plane.
7	Piece of advanced technology – like a computer or alien technology like a pulsing ultra-star.
8	Robot, cyborg, or android.
9	Humanoid creature different than those sacrificing him.
10	The entire congregation is about to commit mass suicide by drinking poison or giving an annihilation sphere an astral hug.
11	Mature, alluring woman whose hyper-sexuality frightens the men-folk.
12	Ancient artifact or relic that has great magical powers (possibly cursed).

WHAT ARE THE CULTISTS SACRIFICING HE/SHE/IT ON?

1	Crude altar made of stone.
2	Dressed stone altar adorned with bas-relief of demons, devils, or tentacled entities.
3	Sigil(s) drawn in chalk upon a stone floor or colored sand poured upon another surface.
4	Shallow pond, grotto, underground lake, or deep within a well.
5	Pentagram constructed of human and animal remains.
6	Smooth, streamlined rectangle made out of plastic or similar artificial material.
7	Part of an enormous machine… Hail to the Metal Gods!
8	Mountain, hilltop, or highest point of a temple.

9	Organic altar of tentacles, eyes, tongues, and slimy moist flesh.
10	Energy source that either absorbs or destroys the sacrifice upon contact.

Monsterpalooza!

This table is for generating an entity's overall appearance. I recommend rolling 3d20 each time you want to describe a new creature to the players. Based on your results, choose what comes naturally, best fits the situation, or inspires you in the moment. There's no science or mathematical formula to creating the perfect monster. If you roll an 8, but you suddenly notice something in number 9 that sounds intriguing when paired with something in number 4, then go with that. Or don't roll at all and just pick something from rows 11 and 12. This is an idea generator, not lightning in a bottle. There are no guarantees that rolling randomly will produce something awesome every time.

Let's say you roll and get results of 3, 3, and 17. "Shambling down the corridor is an indescribable, simian demon." Based on that brief description, the players won't know what the hell it is… and that's half the fun.

CREATURE FEATURES

1	Gelatinous, coagulated, jellied, oozing, or gummy
2	Emaciated, cadaverous, ghoulish, or skeletal
3	Indescribable, unspeakable, nameless, or sanity-destroying
4	Glistening with ichor, slime, or ooze; slimy, pungent, disgusting, revolting, or muculent
5	Sorcerous, demonic, bestial, icy, frozen, fiery, gaseous, or made of pure energy
6	Iridescent, radiant, luminous, or glimmering, shimmering, glittering, or shiny
7	Swollen, obese, or corpulent
8	Semi-corporeal, translucent, transparent, shadowy, or invisible
9	Elongated, truncated, elastic, plastic, polyhedron, or geometric
10	Foul, hideous, grotesque, noxious, or tentacled
11	Amorphous, nebulous, starry, shapeless, formless, or indefinite

12	Crystalline, glassy, glass-like, mineral, jeweled, or quartz
13	Fungoid, cancerous, tumorous, or polypous (like a polyp or covered in polyps)
14	Reptilian, serpentine, ophidian, slithering, or draconic
15	Amphibian, scaly, batrachian, or spidery, insectoid, troglodytic
16	Feathered, bird-like, bat-like, avian, or winged
17	Simian, gorilla, ape-like, loping, or vaguely human
18	Vegetable, Vegetative, flowering, fruiting, lush, leafy, cactile, or proliferous
19	Eldritch, unknowable, alien, extra-terrestrial, ultra-telluric, incongruous, impossible, ineffable, or beyond comprehension
20	Metal, metallic, electronic, silvery, robotic, cybernetic, technological, or computer-like

SPECIFIC STRANGENESS

1	Way too many eyes, no eyes, cyclops, or gaze attack
2	Muttering, whispering, shrieking, ululating, chanting, squelching, or calling to the Old Ones.
3	It has 2d6 tentacles, may be suckered, poisonous, or extra slimy
4	Scorpion's tail, shark's teeth, human face, or spider legs
5	Horns like a goat, ram, bull, unicorn, impala, kudu, hartebeest, etc.
6	Insane, crazed, wild, mad, furious, desperate, inconsolable, or covered in blood
7	Can only be hurt by magical weapons and/or spells, magic resistant, magic nullifying, spell-casting, carrying or wielding an artifact or relic
8	Undead, vampiric, parasitic, or in some form of metamorphosis
9	Cannot be destroyed – merely banished to the crystal, gem stone, magic item, book, lamp, statue, idol, or talisman from whence it came.
10	Unusual size – either giant or tiny.

11	Capable of flying, levitating, floating, hovering, teleporting, or disappearing in a puff of weird-colored smoke (see following table).
12	Psionic; has one or more of the following: telepathy, telekinesis, precognition, read surface thoughts, empathy, and mind blast.

COLORS

1	Lime green
2	Turquoise
3	Emerald
4	Violet
5	Worm purple
6	Blood red
7	Lilac
8	Mauve
9	Gold
10	Silver
11	Onyx black
12	Midnight blue
13	Eggshell blue
14	Sea-foam
15	Sea-glass
16	Azure
17	Yellow ochre
18	Leather brown
19	Orange
20	Periwinkle
21	Indigo
22	Forest green
23	Crimson
24	Rust
25	Charcoal grey
26	Pink
27	Jade
28	Aqua
29	Fuchsia
30	Stark white
31	Beige
32	Magenta
33	Colorless
34	Color from out of space (such as jale and ulfire)

35	Bilious green
36	Salmon
37	Battleship grey (greige)
38	Lemon yellow
39	Olive green
40	Lavender
41	Honey
42	Maroon
43	Burgundy
44	Bronze
45	Copper
46	Cream
47	Caramel
48	Coral
49	Cyan
50	Tan
51	Raspberry
52	Eggplant
53	Tangerine
54	Amber
55	Chartreuse
56	Teal
57	Mint green
58	Navy blue
59	Plum
60	Puce
61	Hot pink
62	Royal blue
63	Vermillion
64	Rose
65	Bone
66	Vanilla
67	Mustard yellow
68	Terra cotta
69	Platinum
70	Honeydew
71	Orchid
72	Aquamarine
73	Amethyst
74	Coffee
75	Kaleidoscope
76	Almond
77	Apricot
78	Desert sand
79	Electric indigo

80	Pearl or pearlescent
81	Light absorbing
82	Chameleonic (based on environment)
83	Color changes based on mood
84	Some kind of nebula, constellation, or outer-space coloring or pattern
85	Color can only be seen in the dark (roll again)
86	Metallic version of (roll again)
87	Florescent or Day-Glo version of (roll again)
88	Darker, shadow version of (roll again)
89	Pale or pastel version of (roll again)
90	Drab, dull, or muted version of (roll again)
91	Sparkly version of (roll again)
92	Striped (roll again, twice)
93	Polka dots (roll twice – first roll is background, second is dot color)
94	Marble - dominant color (roll again), streaked with (roll again) veins
95	Color (roll again) appears to be throbbing or pulsating
96	Roll twice
97	Roll twice
98	Roll twice
99	Roll thrice
100	Roll thrice

Mutant Magic Items

There must be a hundred different RPGs in existence that deal with character mutations. Chances are, you already own a couple of them and can extrapolate from there. This table, on the other hand, is more or less unique. Now, what sort of occurrence would make a magic item mutate? Here are a few examples: passing through a dimensional portal, blasted by an artifact or relic, subjected to gamma rays, or trying to combine magic items together.

Roll upon the table below in order to see how a character's magic item mutates. Roll once, and only for magic items that exceed the "ordinary" – a sword +1 or wand of lightning bolts isn't going to cut it. Roll thrice for the truly extraordinary, such as artifacts and relics. The following table deals with duration.

MAGIC ITEM MUTATION

1	Item becomes intelligent with an overbearing personality. If item was already intelligent it now has a split personality (see The Islands of Purple-Haunted Putrescence for complete list of personality quirks).
2	Item can fly of its own accord or when commanded to do so.
3	Item is constantly secreting a viscous slime or mucus (roll for color).
4	Item is faintly luminous, emitting an eerie glow (roll for color).
5	Item has or grows a gemstone or crystal that calls to demons or summons (but doesn't bind) devils.
6	Item has the ability to cast a new spell (something from one of Venger Satanis' books or Draconic Magazine – GM's choice).
7	Item births a putrescent yellow eye, allowing wielder to see what the item sees… but who or what else can see through it as well?
8	Item can transform into a person for 3d6 round per day.
9	Item can influence the weather with a 4 in 6 chance of making it rain, shine, snow, windy, storm, or whatever the wielder wishes. Weather influence lasts 1d4 hours.
10	Item has a 1% chance (not cumulative) of poisoning the wielder each time it's used – save versus death!
11	Item summons 2d4 pink bunny rabbits that will follow the item and occasionally lay pastel, multi-colored eggs. These rabbits cannot be destroyed!
12	Item begins speaking infernal when used. There's a 1 in 6 chance per day that the item communicates with a dark god, demon lord, or old one!
13	Item sprouts 2d4 suckered, slimy green tentacles. Each tentacle is approximately 18" long.
14	Item has voracious sexual appetite and wishes to be intimate with… 1) human or humanoid female, 2) items similar to itself, 3) any magic item, 4) monsters, 5) infernal beings, 6) sorcery and spells.

15	Item becomes difficult for the primary user to wield. There's a 1 in 6 chance of the item suddenly not working per attempt.
16	Item grows scales and fins. It knows how to swim and can breathe underwater, allowing the wilder to swim and breathe underwater as well – but only for 3d4 minutes per day.
17	Item becomes attuned to a greater item, force, or intelligence (such as the purple islands). Item will serve its new master faithfully while being used by the wielder.
18	Item can sense the presence of... 1) pastry and tasty baked goods, 2) gold, 3) gemstones and jewels, 4) magic items, 5) infernal beings, 6) priests, sacred items, and holy places.
19	Item also acts as a computer – calculating, analyzing, and interfacing with other technology.
20	Once per day, the item allows the wielder to teleport up to one mile. There's a 1 in 6 chance per teleportation that wielder is transported to a random location – GM's choice.

DURATION

1	1d4 minutes
2	1d4 hours
3	24 hours
4	One week
5	One year
6	Permanent

Save versus Cosmic Horror

A few RPGs have a mechanic determining what happens when human beings encounter something that's so far outside the box it may squash their sanity like a grape. If you're playing one of the many games that don't have such a mechanic, here's a table for you to roll on. Keep in mind, this type of thing is and should be rare – break glass in case of emergency. Fantasy RPGs are full of weird monsters and dark gods, so don't go overboard. On the other hand, the Great Old Ones and their ilk should be treated with respect. PCs should genuinely be apprehensive about reading forbidden tomes, summoning shambling servitors, and communing

directly with Nyarlathotep, Ubbo-Sathla, Shub-Niggurath, Azathoth, and so on.

If adventurers come face to face with a manifestation of cosmic horror, roll 1d6. For instance, not the thing itself but a byproduct, side-effect, or power given to a High Priest… like a spell, monster, depiction, knowledge, or device. Those facing the full brunt of cosmic horror – K'tulu, Yogsoggoth, Tsathag'kha, etc. or true understanding of man's frightful position in the universe must roll 2d6.

COSMIC HORROR

1	Individual gains 1d6 on all d20 rolls for the next 1d4 rounds
2	Nothing happens
3	Individual cannot speak coherently for 1d4 rounds
4	Individual is dazed for 1d4 rounds
5	Individual cannot move for 1d4 rounds
6	Permanent Individual must either flee or cower in the fetal position for 1d6 rounds
7	Individual goes catatonic for 2d4 rounds
8	Individual loses consciousness for 3d6 rounds
9	Individual goes berserk, attacking anyone or anything nearby
10	Individual develops a serious phobia (fear of the dark, spiders, tentacles, slime, blood, etc.)
11	Individual is marked for later use by either the cult or their awful god
12	Individual becomes a worshiper and faithful servant of some loathsome divinity

Stupid Gnome Hat

This table will reveal what sort of stupid hat that gnome in your campaign is wearing. It's mostly for comic relief, but then… so are gnomes. ;)

THIS GNOME'S STUPID HAT IS WAY TOO...

1	Tall and narrow
2	Short and squat
3	Curved like a snail
4	Extra wide

5	Pointy
6	Small
7	Large
8	Threadbare with multiple, off-color patches
9	Tilted or leaning to one side
10	Floppy
11	Religious
12	Embroidered with gnome's name
13	Squid-like or Octopoid
14	Laden with fruit
15	Blooming tropical flowers
16	Shaped like a bird
17	Draconic (normally, it would look badass but on a gnome it just looks ridiculous)
18	Stolen
19	Roll twice
20	Roll thrice

AND...

1	Striped
2	Polka-dots
3	Wavy lines
4	Geometric design
5	Magic-looking sigils (not actually magical)
6	Solid color
7	Jackson Pollack (abstract splotches)
8	Possessed by a demon
9	Furry, fuzzy, or hairy
10	Containing a windmill, propeller, or whirligig
11	Rainbow pattern
12	Roll twice

ALONG WITH...

1	Bells
2	Tassels
3	Fringe
4	Gemstones (all fake)
5	Sparkles
6	Secret compartment

CONTAINING...

1	Half-eaten apple
2	Circuit board
3	Fake poop or vomit
4	Vial of strange-looking liquid (2 in 6 chance of being poison)
5	Thingamabob
6	Doodad
7	Whatsit
8	Dinglehopper

Complications

Shit happens when you're out adventuring. There's you and your comrades vs. the enemy, but every once in a while, something else creeps in, becoming a minor or major issue, depending on what it is, when it occurs, and how efficiently it's dealt with. Yeah, I'm talking about complications.

Now, the new DMG has one or more tables for this as well. What can I say? This one is different. Variety is the spice that extends life and expands consciousness... ride the snake!

Roll no more than once per session and no less than once per three sessions...

1	One of the PCs suddenly has an embolism, seizure, stroke, allergic reaction, or waves of untenable nausea. That dude's going to be out of commission for awhile, probably needing some kind of medical attention, rare herbs, or divine resuscitation (not just a cleric laying on hands or providing a healing potion).
2	Some kind of natural disaster: earthquake, cave-in, landslide/mudslide, flood, etc.
3	One of the PC's magic items starts whispering dark things, either barely audible by the wearer/bearer or the communication is telepathic. These utterances might be 1) obscene, 2) gruesome, 3) nonsensical, or 4) backstabbing such as, "I will betray you."
4	One of the NPCs starts hearing voices which drive him insane, resulting in 1) catatonia, 2) going berserk, 3) paranoid delusions, or 4) compulsive lying.

5	The enemy has either seen the error of his ways or knows defeat is imminent. Under a white flag of truce, he tries to negotiate a peaceful resolution. Additionally, he confesses his pact with a powerful demonic entity who must be dealt with swiftly and surely.
6	A damsel in distress cries out! Her peril has nothing to do with what the PCs are currently dealing with. She was wandering around and got captured - now she's about to be devoured. Hurry!
7	The PC's principle benefactor, employer, or mentor appears floating lifeless in a large cylinder full of sea-glass colored liquid.
8	The local authorities have the wrong idea, believing the PCs are to blame for whatever ills have recently befallen the land. Dead or alive, you're coming with the royal guards, town mob, hired assassins, or wizard's council envoys.
9	One of the PCs discovers a spy in their midst. He/she/it has been eavesdropping on the party for a while and getting messages to his/her/its master.
10	A competing party of adventurers has beaten the PCs to the punch. They now have the macguffin (loot, artifact, ancient map, book of secrets, wizard's lavender scarf, head of the half-orc Garcia, etc.) with any blame falling upon the PCs themselves. What are the PCs going to do about that?
11	A king has been newly crowned. Remember the old king? Well, this guy (girl, demon, servitor of Yogsoggoth, etc.) is the total opposite. What's more, he's laying down proclamations left and right. What happened to the previous king? Good question!
12	The deity of the party's cleric has just suffered a major defeat (perhaps he's even dead). For the next 24 hours, there will be no healing, spells, or assistance of any kind. Maybe a holy quest is required to strengthen his deity.
13	The corroded metal exterior of a suspended animation capsule can be seen glinting in the sun. It contains an odd-looking humanoid with strange powers. He will stop at nothing to find and awaken his brothers before taking over the realm.

14	Someone calling himself "the Dungeon Master" suddenly appears. He challenges worthy opponents to survive his contest – trial by fire. Challengers must wrestle the digital chartreuse flame of Excalibrate in cyberspace!
15	A holographic sorcerer named Pajoal has been trapped within crystal shard for centuries. Pajoal was imprisoned because he knew that the universe wasn't real, only an elaborate and ultra-convincing hologram. He also knows about a well-hidden escape hatch.
16	PCs stumble upon the polished surface of several large stones embedded in a wall. If one waits in front of it long enough, the polished stones will show scenes of future events.
17	A peasant is running for his life. He comes across the PCs, telling them the name of a demon chasing him. The demon's name must be spoken when they stand before a set of glyphs carved upon the blade of a magic sword.

18	At the base of a mountain, PCs notice a cave wherein burns a blue flame that never dies. Legend states the azure fire has restorative properties.
19	A cultist is on his way to consult the accursed Necronomicon. The book will only be available at the Dark Night Temple for another 12 hours before it returns to its home plane, inaccessible for another seven years.
20	Barbarians are raiding the area! Dozens of bearded, axe and sword wielding Northmen are rampaging through the countryside, city, etc. Everyone in their way is getting hacked to pieces.

Unique Non-Player Characters

1	**Oskk** - Male half-orc barbarian with black disheveled hair and long scars along his left arm; he wields a two-handed sword. Never smiles. Hates staying in one place too long.
2	**Ururau** - Male human warrior of the Cabbou tribe; muscular and wearing animal skins. He wields a warhammer. Ururau hates sorcery and distrusts elves.
3	**Zaralynn** - Female dark elf cleric who worships the Great Devourer. She has aqua hair with white streaks; one eye blue, the other gold. Zaralynn wields a dire flail and comes from the subterranean city Trehallvyn. Her primary motivation is collecting enough gemstones to decorate a statue of the Great Devourer.
4	**Seej** - Male human rogue with a short black beard and wearing a burgundy hooded cloak. He wields a dagger, its hilt adorned with a single garnet. Seej is hungry and looking for a nice meal and maybe a safe place to sleep.
5	**Bornoth** - Male dwarf from the northern mountains. He has a long reddish brown beard, wears mithril armor, and wields a great-axe… which he keeps misplacing. Bornoth dislikes goblinoids and distrusts humans who are too soft on monsters and monstrous humanoids. He's seeking gold, of course. Lovely gold!

6	**Hamogg** - Male half-orc warrior and thief who looks more like his human parentage than orc. He wields a short sword with a nasty-looking edge. Hamogg is looking for a death priest nearby but doesn't know the priest's name or what he looks like. "I'll know him when I sees him."
7	**Sigrid** - Female human from a nearby town. She has curly raven hair, green eyes, and dark red lips. Sigrid borrowed money from an unscrupulous lowlife named Dorzo weeks ago but hasn't paid the debt back yet. She's on the lookout for anything valuable which she can sell for gold… or perhaps give to Dorzo to keep his henchmen from breaking her pretty legs.
8	**Vasheen** - Male half-demon with exotic features and crimson-tinged complexion. He wields a scimitar and wears flowing black robes like that of a sorcerer. Vasheen is curious about everything and everyone and constantly refers to himself in the third person. "Vasheen would like to know how you came across such an elegant wand."
9	**Sephir** – Female half-elf with platinum hair. She is beautiful and intelligent. Sephir carries no weapons. She's of royal blood and wears a protective amulet. Sephir seeks a worthy suitor.
10	**Ellar** – Male elf, scholar. He knows a little about a great many things. No weapons.
11	**Dornan** – Male human, noble and envoy of the King. He wears fancy, jewel-toned clothing.
12	**Chenweth** – Male half-elf, sorcerer's apprentice with pet frog. He knows a few cantrips.
13	**Gyllen** – Male gnome illusionist wearing periwinkle robes and a dragon's eye amulet.
14	**Oswalt** – Male halfling sorcerer wearing blood red robes lined with golden brocade. He's obsessive-compulsive, always writing things down in his spell book (now up to seven volumes). Oswalt writes everything he says, does, or thinks of and has done for the last few years.
15	**Winslow** – Male human wandering minstrel with an eye-patch and forest green cloak. Concealed inside his right leather boot is a magical dagger.

16	**Sandar** – Male human merchant from the southern isles. He wears yellow and orange silk robes with a white turban and wields a scimitar. There's a 33% chance that he's accompanied by a woman in semi-transparent magenta silks. She has dark, alluring eyes. Her name is Casahn and she's a slave.
17	**Lactres** – Androgynous elf rogue with expertise in disguise. Lactres carries a magic short sword and wears grey robes with brown boots. The elf also romantic partnerships with individuals of both sexes.
18	**Tennik** – Male dwarf from the mountain stronghold to the east. His beard is as black as his heart. Tennik is an evil old bastard who'd squeeze copper from a dying orphan if it didn't take up too much of his precious time. The dwarf wields a magic warhammer given to him by his uncle who stole it from a red dragon's horde decades ago.
19	**Orin** – Male human, tall and wiry. He wears the clothes of a noble, though they're tattered, stained, and in need of mending. Orin has no weapons but wants to acquire a magic sword as soon as he can, "To teach my brother a lesson he'll never forget."
20	**Bethany** – Female half-elf, strong and proud. She fought in the Iron Wars years ago and wields a long sword chased with a semi-precious iridescent stone of unknown origin. Bethany laughs easily but trusts with great difficulty.

WHY IS THERE CONFLICT BETWEEN FACTIONS?

1	Those others have something we want.
2	Those others want something we have.
3	Those others like or enjoy something we loathe.
4	We loathe something they like or enjoy.
5	We worship different gods with opposing views.
6	We worship the same god(s) but in a different way.
7	We're too similar and our similarities push us further towards ruin and recrimination.
8	Irreconcilable differences.

9	We are too permissive; they are too restrictive.
10	We are too restrictive; they are too permissive.
11	Our leaders despise each other.
12	Deceit and betrayal (on both sides) have poisoned our relationship with them.

Reaction Table

Sometimes, it's fun to be surprised. Not like when a tribe of Lizardmen marches into your camp while you're buttering up a busty blonde hireling. No, I'm talking about when the players and Game Master alike don't exactly know how an encounter with humanoids is going to go. If your improv skills are up to snuff, then get out your 2d6 and have at it, hoss.

REACTION TABLE

2	Hates the adventuring party with a purple passion.
3	Bloodthirsty maniacs.
4	Natural misanthropes.
5	Distrustful and/or prejudiced against adventurers.
6	Treasure-hungry and looking for easy pickings.
7	Ambivalent towards adventuring party but serve one or more Dark Gods.
8	Neutral but ambitious - will try to steal valuables and/or conquer weaker beings when opportunity presents itself.
9	Favorably disposed towards the party... for now.
10	Well met, traveler! Noticeable commonalities between groups.
11	Admire and respect the adventurers.
12	View the adventurers as demi-gods of some kind.

———————

A charismatic PC attempting to parlay with humanoids may move the rolled result one space higher, assuming he ingratiates himself to the strangers with something like a small gift, lavish praise, sensitive information, tales of incredible adventure, etc. A demonstration of superiority

also does the trick.

Conversely, adventuring parties who immediately insult, offend, or antagonize a strange group of humanoids (like sticking an orc head on a pike and carrying it around or wearing a goblin ear necklace) immediately move their reaction one space lower. Showing an inordinate amount of weakness, stupidity, and/or riches will have the same effect.

Understanding the Universe

What is that missing variable? The "x" factor randomizing success, failure, or something in between? Some might call it luck, others skill. A select few realize it's a very special technique: understanding the universe and our place within it.

Frequently, my wife makes mention of my "extraordinary fortune". If we go out to a restaurant and one of our meals is screwed up, it's hers. A parking spot will suddenly open up just as I'm driving up to our destination. Stuff like that. Not always, but a lot of the time things just sort of work out for me. That can be frustrating for those who don't have that knack or set of skills. Danielle hates it – except when she needs my favorable vibes to help her out.

Well, guess what? It can be taught. The following are 10 steps to good luck; however, it's not simply luck I'm trying to instill but powerful insight that will set you upon the correct path and keep you there. Most of these you've probably read before in one form or another. I've internalized a lot of philosophy from such gurus as Anthony Robbins, Gurdjieff, and Anton Szandor LaVey.

1	Do what you were meant to do on this earth. Recognize your unique gift or special talent and use it as often as you can.
2	Don't be jealous or envious of others' success. Instead, use their accomplishments as motivation for self-improvement.
3	Be generous, kind, and considerate when it costs you nothing.
4	Have a higher purpose. There's a reason why you're here, not just to take up space and eat as much cake as possible. Tie your own goals to a larger, ultimate goal that fits with the universe's plan.
5	Be grateful for what you have rather than whining about what you don't.
6	Positivity is key. Expect good things but don't get upset when obstacles appear.
7	Have high expectations for yourself. Sometimes you'll mess up. That's ok. Aim high regardless.
8	Keep your sense of humor. You'll need it.
9	Always be looking for opportunities and take advantage of them.
10	Don't give up. Keep pushing. Success is about incremental progress, daily efforts… slow and steady wins the race.

Those are my 10 steps. I hope they help. Aligning yourself with the universe also means you might have to oppose it from time to time – especially in the beginning. The universe will test your mettle. Down the road, it may become an ally; however, don't be surprised to discover that it's currently your enemy.

10 Ways to Alter your Purple Consciousness

[Originally published on Geek Native, March 19th]

This piece was going to be called Ten Tips for Running Purple. But then I realized that I already wrote about that in the book itself. Plus, you'll most likely run it in whatever style makes you feel most comfortable and/or awesome. What other way is there? So, really, this article contains ten utterly non-essential encounters or encounter fragments for you to stir into the hex-tastic eldritch gumbo of sci-fantasy gonzo that is The Islands of Purple-Haunted Putrescence.

There's already a ton of loosely related encounters waiting to be haphazardly strung together or carefully interwoven into a meaningful tableau. Whether you're running a one-shot for your regular gaming crew, an ongoing weekly campaign, or convention game, I think there's a wealth of sexist B-movie schlock to do with as you please. But, sometimes, more is… more. Can you have too much of a good thing? Don't know. I've been eating pizza with Hidden Valley Ranch Dressing and drinking Mountain Dew every meal for a few weeks now… to the point where I can't leave my house to search for the answer.

I wrote The Islands of Purple-Haunted Putrescence back in good old 2014. Seems like a while ago now… So, why not a

special ten-month anniversary tribute? 'Cause if you can't shake things up with a few random ideas that just popped into your head genetically spiced with pop-cultural pandering, then what good is it? Any of it?!? You might as well put the phone down and NOT order that pizza, for Christ's sake.

Alright, here goes nothing…

1	A year ago, the disciples of Zygak-Xith discovered several green pods growing in a botanical dome on Kravian. Those pods eventually sprouted into sentient vegetation. The plant creatures, Xynoids, adopted the appearance and killed the first beings they encountered – the Zygak-Xith worshipers. Whenever the PCs encounter a disciple of Zygak-Xith, there's only a 2 in 6 chance that he's the genuine article, instead of a shape-changing vegetable disguised as human. What are the Xynoids' goals? To dominate the islands themselves while feasting upon all the animal life they can absorb.
2	There's a disused monorail system throughout the islands. Every 50', adventurers notice concrete supports (with numbers and letters molded into them) that reach high up in the air. Perhaps the rail system begins inside a skull-shaped mountain. Is that car from the Dungeons & Dragons ride part of if, or is the monorail more like a scifi 70's shuttle a la Disney World? Presumably, this transportation system has been around for decades (maybe even centuries). Who exactly built it and what happened to them? Each hex the party moves through, there's a 1 in 6 chance of either minor damage to the rail or some kind of small malfunction.
3	Somewhere along the way, maybe in one of those "empty" hexes, the PCs discover a little girl's pink notebook full of stickers (unicorns, rainbows, fairy princesses, etc.) However, it also contains a skillfully drawn winged squid-like demon in purple crayon. There's something alien and unsettling about the creature. Adventurers who know something of the Cthulhu Mythos could probably make an educated guess.

4	The party stumbles upon a bathroom straight out of the 1980's. The interior is adorned with wall-to-wall black marble tile and columns veined with white. The rest is violet neon-rimmed mirrors, decorative glass block walls surrounding a jetted Jacuzzi tub, and toilet with bidet. There's a crumpled, soggy blue and orange cheerleader uniform on the floor next to the toilet. Is the plumbing connected to an inter-dimensional sewer system or is the waste simply being flushed underground?
5	A group of three Purple worshipers have split off into their own sub-faction. They currently wear purple robes spattered with a milky white liquid (now dried). Each has had a vision – possibly given to them by the island(s) – that the Purple Putrescence is a very bad thing – it's the ruin of men and a new golden age of civilization can't begin until The Thing That Rots From The Sky has been vanquished. One of them has a cunning plan. He knows a way to destroy the godlike monstrosity but can't attain the object in question (Vibo-Tron 5,000) without the help of others.

6	Pizza Pit! Yes, most of this pizza-serving restaurant has somehow arrived on an island. With the old Devil's head logo and lightning bolt, Pizza Pit is ready to take your money! Within, there are booths upholstered with cracked red pleather, yellowish-grey stuffing pushing through the cracks. Within a glass case, several individual slices and full pizzas with missing slices (pepperoni, sausage, and cheese) sit under a heat lamp, orange grease pooling upon the surface. There's a large cardboard sign advertising Mountain Dew. Incidentally, that's the only fountain drink that still works. Adventurers who imbibe 12 or more ounces of Mountain Dew receive a 30 minute boost in energy before crashing. Strangest of all, a half-demon (tiefling) named David works the cash register. He doesn't seem surprised to be here or to see the adventurers. "Demon Dave" has been making pizzas all his life and knows that his pizza-making routine shall continue until he's no longer able to toss the dough.
7	Upon a hilltop, the party sees a ghostly pale bride wearing a lavender dress; her arms outstretched as if pleading for some kind of mercy, her face is hidden by a similar-colored veil. Under the veil, she actually has no face… only a blank, porcelain surface devoid of humanoid features. Those attempting to interact with her eventually notice the edges of a 3" square appearing in the center of where her face should be. The square opens like a little door. Inside: nothingness; black space reaching into eternity. The rest of her can, of course, be used as either a flotation or sexual device (she's anatomically correct)… such fetishistic objectification could be used to heighten the effect of certain spells.

8	Mutant Death Squad! A drow arms dealer named Asher has recently equipped the mutant humanoids of Korus with automatic weapons, lasers, and fragmentary grenades. Now, they're a mutant death squad looking for food, shelter, magic items, high-tech gear, and all around good times… including female companionship – they're a lonely bunch :(
9	The adventurers see a tomb half-sunk in the mud. Bas-reliefs of sub-human creatures writhing around the mausoleum's exterior gives the viewer an uneasy feeling. Within, a collection of miniaturized planets under glass domes. Each one has its name etched upon a brass plate. Are these real planets or movie-quality replicas? Is this the fate of Razira, too? Can these planets be restored to normal size? If so, how? Tune in next week. Actually, just make something up. I won't be here next week.
10	A group of humans calling themselves the Nirvana Initiates have located a unique pocket of electro-magnetic energy far below the surface of Kelis. This could be the island's heart or what gives all three islands their je ne sais quoi. Drilling down (approximately 100') will cause Kelis to drown in an ocean of oozing purple napalm that burns the skin and probably turns humanoids into strange, cone-like beings from Alpha Centauri.

Viridian

This section includes a magical language I created a few years ago called Viridian or the green tongue. Make as much use of it as possible. You never know when strange sounding words will come in handy.

A

A' – cold, emotionless

Abva – lubricated, lubrication, greasing

Acal – we

Adorahk – infect, infected, infecting

Ahjhan – vibration, resonance

Ahmar – blood, bloody

Ahraev – formless, disembodied, incorporeal

Ak – is to be, destined

Angekok – wizard priest

Ankor – distort, distorted, misconstrue

Anth – dark, darkness

Apreth – to do, doing, done

Arnsht – man

Arrh – distance, range, restraint

Ashith – knowledge, information, raw data

Asqulund – octave, returning to the root, symmetry

Astor – community, communal

Atahe – octopoidal, squid like

Ateen – black motives

Athik – symbol, symbolic

Azo – a, an

B

Babilya – kneeling

Bahl – sleep, being asleep

Baktah – intent, intentional, on purpose

Barham – wormlike, low, base

Bekt – you

Bektz – your, belonging to you

Besya – council, ministry

Bey – pure, purity

Blask – pulpy, meaty bulbous

Bnae – wet, liquified

Byzt – old, learned, ancient

B'zin – art, artist, artistic

Bzol – question

C

Calaa – fiendish, nefarious

Canak – macabre, morbid, death, deathlike

Chakra – center, central

Chn – glowing, luminous

Cho – skin, flesh

Cikah'neshra – xenolith

Cohm – sitting, kneeling, prone

Cora – persistent, tenacity

Coroza – stain, stained, marking

Crom – twilight, dusk, dawn

Cyaz – work, effort, responsibility

C'zhan – Godlike

D

D' – on, upon, above

Daera – enduring, sustainable

Darb – taste, taster, tasting, savory

Daw – beloved, loved one

Delgado – create, creation, creating

Deg – beneath, under, fundamental

Deth – layer, layered, layering

Dhim – protection, guardianship, conservation

Dorate – skull

Doxa – honor, honorable

Draegor – ninth

Drekth – hideous, disgustingly terrifying

Dsheeva – lies, dishonesty, falsehood

D'tort – yellowish

E

Ebonai – carnival, circus, chicanery, trickery

Ebth – cancer, cancerous

Eeyash – exotic, unfamiliar

Ellisa – nasty, dirty

Elubrae – majority, bulk, assembly

Erain – machine, mechanical

Esbara – predestined, providence, prearranged

Eska – buzzing, howling

Est – religious, religion, spiritual

Etbrae – nameless, indescribable

E'visht – starry, from the stars

Eznet – vicious, ferocious, depraved

Ezra – brief, subtle, short

F

Fena – inconsolable, comfortless, discouraging

F'eid – magician

F'eidal – magi

Fhal – awful

Fley – beautiful, lovely, gorgeous

Fornu – stone, rock

Fsirie – power

F'thoad – momentary awareness, being aware of every moment

Fyayack – because

Fzopa – house, dwelling, abode

G

Gagh – abyss, gulf

Gath – danger, dangerous, insecurity

Gekta – torn, mutilate, split

Gevlyvan – soon

Gigphael – overgrown, thick, wild

Glith – arrival, approach

Gmahkshaul – love, appreciation

Gontara – desire, lust, craving

Gorah – worthless, abandoned

G'pock – cryptic, obscure

Groag – demon, demonic

G'th – noble, aristocratic

Gyalo – exploitation, perversion

H

H' – privileged

Haiasi – fortune telling, oracle

Haji – desert, desolate, barren

Hath – give, given, gave

Hashtan – complexity, intricate

Heb – combination, aggregate

Hek – womanizer, using women to satisfy one's needs

Hesh – honored, close, valued

Hijab – modest, modesty

Hivnoht – scale

Hizrek – fighting, combat, contest

Hob – chance, risk, accidental

Hohgth – astral

Holit – fire, flame, inferno

Hzail – female, feminine

I

Ia – yes, hail, triumphant

Iagga – beast, bestial, brute

Ibtorka – inattentive, unobservant

Igrog – unspeakable, speechless

Ijad – language, linguistic

Ikest – rehearsed, practiced, prepared

Ikss – illicit, criminal

Ilt – calm, tranquil

Inha – the

Ipshae – current, stream, flow, river, torrent

Iredo – feline, catlike

Irryd – lawless, heretic, renegade, rogue

Ishliem – submission

Islingvyr – eternity, everlasting, immortal

Isqua – fungi, fungus, decay

Ith – savage, barbaric

Ivsha – whispering, murmur, secretive voice

Iyath – struggle, battle

Izkagrectchort – unification

Izratan – temple

J

Jahorv – many, multiple, majority

Jeem – tentacles

Jezir – leadership, authority

Jith – betrayal, treachery

Ji'zahd – strive, pursue

J'kasan – transcendent, abstract, sublime

Jorath – curse, death magic

Joznara – zealotry, preach, conviction

Jush – aborted, abortion

Jzarkash – deep, profound, subterranean

Jzentkal – nubile

K

Kafj'th – shining, iridescent

Kai – nightmare, nightmarish

Kaiul – essential elements, nucleus

Kaizen – constant improvement

Kalool – interpretation, interpretive

K'ara – divine, Godhood, absolute

Kashto – overflowing, flood, submerge

Kava – beckon, summoning, call

Kaynin – restless sleep

Kesh – passion, strong emotion, suffering

Khkt – master

Konza – degenerate, decadent

Kort – eldritch, alien, dread, Lovecraftian, Cthulhuesque

Koth – shell, vessel, structure

Kriet – unknown

Kshta – elastic, flexible, malleable

K'theen – wandering, pilgrimage, deviation

Kurket – zeitgeist

K'zin – beyond

L

La' – patient, enduring

L'ahn – wearied, disheartening

Levmin – present, moment

Li – festering, rotting, spoil

L'gorva – corpulent, obese, heavy

Loth – spiritual, intangible

Lozrean – joke, amusement

Lurvenyan – greetings, compliment, gratitude

Lut – devoted, devotion

Lybstok – this, that

M

Mada – weird

Mansk – fortuitous, unforeseen

Mek – crystal, crystallization

Mhira – gibber, gibbering, babble, yammer

M'oath – introduction, baptism

M'seth – tedious, monotonous, tiresome

M'zathrinah – lord

N

Naal – night, knighted

Namor – envelope, enveloping, container, cloak

Nath – trinity, triad, trichotomy

Nefth – dream, vision

Nekpa – minority, few, handful

Nesh – existence, being, substance

Nect – traveler, journeyman

Neth – potency, capacity, essence

Noch – will, intention, directed consciousness

Noco – uncertain

Noxqua – outer, outside, without

N'thsoon – ooze, oozing, oozed, slime, slimy

Nuszeth – black

Nygh – slither, slithered, slithering

Nylvor – exalt, praise, show thanks

O

O'krn – shadow, shade

Onah – defense, defensive

Oola – is

Oolo – are

Orrat – reasonable, diplomatic, diplomacy, mediator

Ot – of, from, with, by

Ozra – will be

P

Pahreji – voluptuous, curvy

Paz – and

Pesha – do, shall, can

Ph'n – ineffable

Piamel – textured, texture, pattern

Pilada – wisdom, wise, insight

Plirak – steal, thievery

Povlesht – intuitive, viscerous, instinctive

P'reji – beyond

Pyrath – tendency, disposition, habit

Q

Q' – profane, crude, disrespectful

Qaqua – in, inside, within

Qev – voluminous

Qortenth – hope, longing, ambition

Qulornok – orgy, orgiastic, group sex

Qureth – pregnant, ready to give birth

Qxon – with

Qzosh – influence

R

Ra – serve, servant, serving

Rahm – serpentine, winding

Reeri – gateway, portal

Respa – murder, slaying

R'han – design, plan, arrangement

Ritee – chaos, chaotic

Rivdgian – gnosis from an alien source, the chartreuse hue

of the void

Rossa – ancestry, ancestor

R'zith – personal glory

S

Sabt – clear, translucent

Sahn – independence, independent

Serbahk – quantum

Shanta – turbulent, shaky, agitated

Sharaz – unseen horror, hidden terror

Shenth – subjective, personal

Shtort – glisten, glistening

Sigth – madness, insanity

Siknar – revelation, apocalypse, prophecy

Smahk – estranged

Soba – poison, poisonous

Sooprune – enchantment, enchanted

Stret – command, ordered, charged with

Swib – ceremony, ritual

T

Talek – consciousness

Tahn – matter, seemingly real, illusionary layers

Tevik – zone

Thalis – infernal, order, cult, organization, bring together, manifest

Than – pale

Thorna – stealth, stealthy

Thoth – sorcery, sorcerous

To'et – thin, narrow

Tornasuk – supreme elder Devil, Satanic figure, or Satan

T'zahr – oblivion

U

Ubath – supposedly, hypothetically

Ulth – zero

Umla – sad, saddened

Uoon – continue, continual, continuance

Urdzan – speak, speech, say

Urvoon – massacre, bloodbath, carnage

Usib – psychology, mental state

U'zahd – collective, group

V

V' – colorful, full of dancing hues

Vathik – early, earliest

Vaurelar – handful

Vazn – hallucinogen

Verins – unnatural, preternatural

Vhrat – how, in what way

Vhtrun – tell, pronounce, proclaim

Vib – that, this, these, those

Voraxith – Prisoner

Vos – triangular, pyramidal, tertiary

Vrk – sexy, alluring

Vul – self-effacing

Vzahl – teach, instruct

W

Wai – mentor, teacher

Wgah – please, pleased, pleasing

Whorgt – ultimate, final

Withrazshykt – inner, interior, esoteric, secret, unseen

Wosk – necessary, necessity

W'teen – time, temporal, temporary

Wyahzu – respect, esteem, admiration

X

X' – menace, menacing

Xan – tropical, jungle

Xestria – evolve, develop, synthesize

Xhith – bless, blessed, blessing

Xoqtan – have, has

Xor – feast, feasting, appetite

Xultur – assassinate, kill in secret, supress

Y

Y' – welcome, open

Yahz – who, what, when, where, why

Yath – brother

Yathizka – brotherhood, alliance, union

Ydan – frozen, freeze, freezing

Yeth – ghoul, ghoulish

Yev – key, crucial, pivotal

Yidathroth – reconciliation, harmony, balance

Yith – faithful, ardent, constant

Yzrai – squirming, seeping

Z

Zaalt – awake, awakening, activation, rise, stimulate

Zamiel – inclusive

Zazigor – opinion, assumption

Zelt – understand, understanding, understood

Z'gaht – ziggurat

Zinjun – line, crossroad, divergence, intersection

Zirna – dark

Zishred – conscious

Zodul – red, crimson

Zohzst – prophecy, prophetic, prophet

Z'tari – fantasy, imagination

Zuun – our, belonging to us

* * *

A

A, an – azo

Abode – fzopa

Aborted, abortion – jush

Above (also on, upon) – d'

Abstract (also sublime, transcendent) – j'kasan

Abyss – gagh

Activation – zaalt

Admiration – wyahzu

Aggregate (also combination) – heb

Alien – kort

Alliance – yathizka

Alluring (also sexy)- vrk

Ancestry, ancestor – rossa

Ancient (also old, learned) – byzt

Appetite (also feasting) – xor

Appreciate – gmahkshaul

Ardent (also constant, faithful) – yith

Are – oolo

Arrangement (also design, plan) – r'han

Arrival, approach – glith

Art, artist, artistic – b'zin

Assassinate (kill in secret, suppress) – xultur

Assembly (also majority, bulk) – elubrae

Assumption (also opinion) – zazigor

Astral – hohgth

Authority (also leadership) – jezir

Awake, awakening – zaalt

Awful – fhal**

B

Babble (also yammer, gibber, gibbering) – mhira

Balance – yidathroth

Baptism (also introduction)– m'oath

Barbaric (also savage) – ith

Barren (also desert, desolate)- haji

Base (also wormlike, low)- barham

Battle (also struggle) – iyath

Beautiful, lovely, gorgeous – fley

Because – fyayack

Beckon – kava

Being (also existence, substance) – nesh

Being asleep (also sleep)- bahl

Belonging to us (also our) – zuun

Belonging to you (also your) – bektz

Beloved – daw

Beneath (also fundamental) – deg

Bestial, beast like – iagga

Betrayal (also treachery) – jith

Beyond – k'zin

Beyond – p'reji

Black – nuszeth

Black motives – ateen

Blessed – x'hith

Blood – ahmar

Bloodbath – urvoon

Brief (also subtle, short) – ezra

Bring Together – thalis

Brother – yath

Brotherhood – yathizka

Bulbous (also pulpy, meaty) – blask

Bulk (also assembly, majority) – elubrae

Buzzing (also howling) – eska

C

Call – kava

Calm (also tranquil) – ilt

Can – pesha

Cancerous – ebth

Capacity (also potency, essence) – neth

Carnage – urvoon

Catlike (also feline) – iredo

Center, central – chakra

Ceremony (also ritual) – swib

Chance – hob

Chaos, chaotic – ritee

Chartreuse hue of the void, the (also gnosis from an alien source) – rivdgian

Chicanery (also trickery) – ebonai

Clear (also translucent) – sabt

Cloak (also container, envelope, enveloping) – namor

Close (also honored, valued) – hesh

Cold (also emotionless) – a'

Collective (also group) – u'zahd

Colorful – v'

Combat – hizrek

Combination (also aggregate) – heb

Comfortless (also inconsolable, discouraging) – fena

Command, ordered, charged with – stret

Community, communal – astor

Complexity (also intricate) – hashtan

Compliment – lurvenyan

Conscious – zishred

Consciousness – talek

Conservation (also protection, guardianship) – dhim

Constant (also faithful, ardent)- yith

Container (also cloak, envelope, enveloping) – namor

Continue, continual – uoon

Corpulent (also obese, heavy) – l'gorva

Council (also ministry) – besya

Creation – delgado

Criminal (also illicit) – ikss

Crimson (also red)- zodul

Crossroad – zinjun

Crucial (also key, pivotal) – yev

Cryptic (also obscure) – g'pock

Crystal, crystallization – mek

Cthulhuesque (pertaining to / of Cthulhu) – kort

Cult – thalis

Current – ipshae

Curse (also death magic) – jorath

D

Danger, dangerous (also insecurity) – gath Dark – anth

Dark – zirna

Death (also deathlike, macabre) – canak

Death magic (also curse) – jorath

Decadent (also degenerate) – konza

Decay (also fungi, fungus) – isqua

Deep – jzarkash

Defense, defensive – onah

Degenerate (also decadent) – konza

Demon, demonic – groag

Depraved (also vicious, ferocious)- eznet

Desert (also desolate, barren) – haji

Design (also plan, arrangement) – r'han

Desire – gontara

Desolate (also desert, barren) – haji

Destined (also is to be)- ak

Develop (evolve, synthesize) – Xestria

Deviation (also wandering, pilgrimage) – k'theen

Devil (supreme elder Devil) or Satan – tornasuk

Devoted, devotion – lut

Dirty (also nasty) – ellisa

Discouraging (also inconsolable, comfortless) – fena

Disheartening (also wearied) – l'ahn

Dishonesty – dsheeva

Distance (also range, restraint) – arrh

Distort, distorted (also misconstrue) – ankor

Divergence – zinjun

Divine – k'ara

Do – pesha

Doing, done, to do – apreth

Dread (dreaded) – kort

Dream (also vision) – nefth

Dwelling – fzopa

E

Early, earliest – vathik

Effort – cyaz

Elastic (also flexible, malleable) – kshta

Eldritch – kort

Emotionless (also cold) – a'

Enchantment, enchanted – sooprune

Enduring (also patient) – la'

Enduring (also sustainable) – daera

Envelope, enveloping (also container, cloak) – namor

Esoteric – withrazshykt

Essence (also potency, capacity) – neth

Essential elements (also nucleus) – kaiul

Esteem – wyahzu

Estranged – smahk

Eternity, everlasting – islingvyr

Evolve, evolution (develop, synthesize) – Xestria

Exalt – nylvor

Existence (also being, substance) – nesh

Exploitation (also perversion) – gyalo

Exotic (also unfamiliar) – eeyash

F

Faithful (also ardent, constant) – yith

Falsehood – dsheeva

Fantasy (also imagination) – z'tari

Feasting (also appetite) – xor

Feline (also catlike) – iredo

Female, Feminine – hzail

Ferocious (also vicious, depraved) – eznet

Festering (also rotting, spoil) – li

Few (also minority, handful) – nekpa

Fiendish – calaa

Fight, fighting – hizrek

Fire, flame – holit

Flesh (also skin) – cho

Flexible (also elastic, malleable) – kshta

Flood (also overflowing, submerge) – kashto

Flow (also stream, river, torrent) – ipshae

Formless – ahraev

Fortuitous (also unforeseen) – mansk

Fortune telling (also oracle) – haiasi

From (also of) – ot

From the stars (also starry) – e'visht

Frozen, freezing – ydan

Fundamental (also beneath)- deg

Fungi, fungus (also decay) – isqua

G

Gateway (also portal) – reeri

Ghoulish – yeth

Gibber, gibbering (also babble, yammer) – mhira

Give, given – hath

Glistening – shtort

Glowing (also luminous) – chn

Gnosis from an alien source (also (the) chartreuse hue of the void) – rivdgian

Godlike – c'zhan

Gorgeous (also beautiful, lovely)- fley

Gratitude – lurvenyan

Greasing (also lubricated, lubrication) – abva

Greetings – lurvenyan

Group (also collective) – u'zahd

Guardianship (also protection, conservation) – dhim

H

Hail (also yes, triumphant) – ia

Hallucinogen – vazn

Handful – vaurelar

Handful (also minority, few) – nekpa

Harmony – yidathroth

Have, has – xoqtan

Heavy (also corpulent, obese) – l'gorva

Heretic – irryd

Hideous – drekth

Honor, honorable – doxa

Honored (also close, valued) – hesh

Hope (also longing and ambition) – Qortenth

House – fzopa

How (also in what way) – vhrat

Howling (also buzzing) – eska

Hypothetically (also supposedly) – ubath

I

Illicit (also criminal) – ikss

Imagination (also fantasy) – z'tari

Immortal – islingvyr

Improvement (subtle and constant) – kaizen

In (inside) – qaqua

Inattentive (also unobservant) – ibtorka

Inclusive – zamiel

Inconsolable (also comfortless, discouraging) – fena

Independence, independent – sahn

Ineffable – ph'n

Infected – adorahk

Infernal – thalis

Influence – Qzosh

Inner (interior) – withrazshykt

Insanity (also madness) – sigth

Insecurity (also danger, dangerous) – gath

Insight (also wisdom, wise) – pilada

Intangible (also spiritual)- loth

Intent, intentional – baktah

Interpretation – kalool

Intersection – zinjun

Intricate (also complexity) – hashtan

Introduction (also baptism) – m'oath

Intuitive (instinctual) – povlesht

In what way (also how) – vhrat

Iridescent (also shining)– kafj'th

Is – oola

Is to be (also destined) – ak

J

Joke (also amusement) – lozrean

Journeyman (also traveler) – nect

K

Key (also crucial, pivotal) – yev

Kill in secret (assassinate, suppress) – xultur

Kneeling – babilya

Kneeling (also sitting) – cohm

Knighted (also night) – n'

Knowledge – ashith

L

Language, linguistic – ijad

Lawless – irryd

Layered, layers – deth

Leadership (also authority) – jezir

Learned (also old, ancient) – byzt

Lies – dsheeva

Line – Zinjun

Liquefied (also wet) – bnae

Lord – M'zathrinah

Love – gmahkshaul

Lovecraftian – kort

Lovely (also beautiful, gorgeous) – fley

Low (also wormlike, base) – barham

Lubricated, lubrication (also greasing) – abva

Luminous (also glowing)- chn

M

Macabre (also deathlike) – canak

Machine (also mechanical) – erain

Madness (also insanity) – sigth

Magi – f'eidal

Magician – f'eid

Majority (also bulk, assembly) – elubrae

Malleable (also elastic, flexible) – kshta

Man – arnsht

Manifest – thalis

Many (also multiple) – jahorv

Massacre (also bloodbath, carnage) – urvoon

Master – khkt

Matter – than

Meaty (also pulpy, bulbous) – blask

Menacing – x'

Mental state (also psychology) – usib

Mentor (also teacher) – wai

Ministry (also council)- besya

Minority (also few, handful) – nekpa

Misconstrue (also distort, distorted) – ankor

Modesty – hijab

Moment – levmin

Momentary awareness – f'thoad

Monotonous (also tedious, tiresome) – m'seth

Multiple (also many) – jahorv

Murder (also slaying) – respa

Murmur (also whispering, secretive voice) – ivsha

Mutilate (also torn, split) – gekta

N

Nameless – etbrae

Narrow (also thin) – to'et

Nasty (also dirty) – ellisa

Necessity – wosk

Night (also knighted) – naal

Nightmarish – kai

Ninth – draegor

Noble – g'th

Nubile – jzentkal

Nucleus (also essential elements) – kaiul

O

Obese (also corpulent, heavy) – l'gorva

Oblivion – t'zahr

Obscure (also cryptic) – g'pock

Octave – asqulund

Octopoidal (also squid like) – atahe

Of (also from) – ot

Old (also learned, ancient) – byzt

On (also upon, above) – d'

Ooze (also oozed, oozing, slime, slimy) – n'thsoon

Opinion (also assumption) – zazigor

Oracle (also fortune telling) – haiasi

Order – thalis

Organization – thalis

Orgy, orgiastic (also group sex) – qulornok

Our (also belonging to us) – zuun

Outer (outside) – noxqua

Overflowing (also flood, submerge) – kashto

Overgrown (also thick, wild) – gigphael

P

Pale – than

Passion (also strong emotion, suffering) – kesh

Patient (also enduring) – la'

Pattern (also textured, texture) – piamel

Personal glory – r'zith

Persistent (also tenacity) – cora

Perversion (also exploitation) – gyalo

Pilgrimage (also wandering, deviation) – k'theen

Pivotal (also key, crucial) – yev

Plan (also design, arrangement) – r'han

Pleased, pleasing – wgah

Poison, poisonous – soba

Portal (also gateway) – reeri

Potency (also capacity, essence) – neth

Power – fsirie

Practiced (also rehearsed, prepared) – ikest

Praise – nylvor

Predestined – esbara

Pregnant – qureth

Prepared (also rehearsed, practiced) – ikest

Present – levmin

Prisoner – voraxith

Privileged – h'

Profane – q'

Profound – jzarkash

Pronounce (also proclaim) – vhtrun

Protection (also guardianship, conservation) – cora

Psychology (also mental state) – usib

Pulpy (also meaty, bulbous) – blask

Pure, purity – bey

Pursue (also strive) – ji'zahd

Q

Quantum – serbahk

Question – bzol

R

Range (also distance, restraint) – arrh

Reasonable – orrat

Reconciliation – yidathroth

Red (also crimson) – zodul

Rehearsed (also practiced, prepared) – ikest

Religious, religion – est

Renegade – irryd

Resonance (also vibration) – ahjhan

Respect – wyahzu

Responsibility – cyaz

Restless sleep – kaynin

Restraint (also distance, range) – arrh

Returning to the root – asqulund

Revelation (also apocalypse and prophecy) – siknar

Rise – zaalt

Risk – hob

Ritual (also ceremony) – swib

River (also stream, flow, torrent) – ipshae

Rock (also stone) – fornu

Rogue – irryd

Rotting (also festering, spoil) – li

S

Saddened – umla

Savage (also barbaric) – ith

Savory (also taste) – darb

Scale – hivnoht

Secret – withrazshykt

Secretive voice (also whispering, murmur) – ivsha

Self-effacing – vul

Serpentine (also winding) – rahm

Servant (also serving) – ra

Serving (also servant) – ra

Sexy (also alluring) – vrk

Shade (also shadow) – o'krn

Shadow (also shade) – o'krn

Shall – pesha

Shell (also vessel, structure) – koth

Shining (also iridescent) – kafj'th

Short (also brief, subtle) – ezra

Show thanks – nylvor

Sitting (also kneeling) – cohm

Skin (also flesh) – cho

Skull – dorate

Slaying (also murder) – respa

Sleep (also being asleep) – bahl

Slime – n'thsoon

Slithering – nygh

Soon – gevlyvan

Sorcerous – thoth

Speak (speech, say) – Urdzan

Speechless (also unspeakable) – igrog

Split (also torn, mutilate) – gekta

Spiritual (also intangible) – loth

Spoil (also festering, rotting) – li

Squid like (also octopoidal) – atahe

Squirming, seeping – yzrai

Stained – coroza

Starry (also from the stars) – e'visht

Stealth, stealthy – thorna

Steal (also thievery) – plirak

Stimulate – zaalt

Stone (also rock) – fornu

Stream (also flow, river, torrent) – ipshae

Strive (also pursue) – ji'zahd

Strong emotion (also passion, suffering) – kesh

Structure (also vessel, shell) – koth

Struggle (also battle) – iyath

Subjective – shenth

Sublime (also transcendent, abstract) – j'kasan

Submerge (also overflowing, flood) – kashto

Submission – ishliem

Substance (also existence, being) – nesh

Subterranean – jzarkash

Subtle (also brief, short) – ezra

Suffering (also passion, strong emotion) – kesh

Summoning – kava

Supposedly (also hypothetically) – ubath

Suppress (assassinate, kill in secret) – xultur

Sustainable (also enduring) – daera

Symbol, symbolic – athik

Symmetry – asqulund

Synthesize (evolve, develop) – Xestria

T

Taster – darb

Teach – vzahl

Teacher (also mentor) – wai

Tedious (also monotonous, tiresome) – m'seth

Tell – vhtrun

Temple – izratan

Tenacity (also persistent) – cora

Tendency (also disposition and habit) – pyrath

Tentacles – jeem

Textured, texture (also pattern) – piamel

That (also this) – lybstok

That (also this, these, those) – vib

The – inha

These (also this, that, those) – vib

Thick (also overgrown, wild) – gigphael

Thievery (also steal) – plirak

Thin (also narrow) – to'et

This (also that) – lybstok

This (also that, these, those) – vib

Those (also this, these, that) – vib

Time – w'teen

Tiresome (also monotonous, tedious) – m'seth

To do – apreth

Torn (also mutilate, split) – gekta

Torrent (also stream, flow, river) – ipshae

Tranquil (also calm) – ilt

Transcendent (also abstract, sublime) – j'kasan

Translucent (also clear) – sabt

Traveler, journeyman – nect

Treachery (also betrayal) – jith

Triangular – vos

Trickery (also chicanery) – ebonai

Trinity, triad – nath

Triumphant (also yes, hail) – ia

Tropical – xan

Turbulent – shanta

Twilight – crom

U

Ultimate – whorgt

Uncertain – noco

Unfamiliar (also exotic) – eeyash

Unforeseen (also fortuitous)- mansk

Unification – izkagrectchort

Union – yathizka

Unknown – kriet

Unnatural – verins

Unobservant (also inattentive) – ibtorka

Unseen horrors – sharaz

Unspeakable (also speechless) – igrog

Upon (also above, on) – d'

V

Valued (also honored, close) – hesh

Vessel (also shell, structure) – koth

Vibration, resonance – ahjahn

Vicious, ferocious, depraved – eznet

Viscerous – povlesht

Vision (also dream) – nefth

Voluminous – qev

Voluptuous – pahreji

W

Wandering (also pilgrimage, deviation) – k'theen

We – acal

Wearied (also disheartening) – l'ahn

Weird – mada

Welcome – y'

Wet (also liquefied) – bnae

Whispering (also murmur, secretive voice) – ivsha

Who (what, where why, when) – yahz

Wild (also overgrown, thick) – gigphael

Will – noch

Will be – ozra

Winding (also serpentine) – rahm

Wisdom (also wise, insight) – pilada

Wise (also wisdom, insight) – pilada

With – qxon

Within – qaqua

Without – noxqua

Wizard Priest – angekok

Womanizer – hek

Work – cyaz

Wormlike (also low, base) – barham

Worthless - gorah

X

Xenolith – cikahʾneshra

Y

Yammer (also gibber, gibbering, babble) – mhira

Yellowish – dʾtort

Yes (also hail, triumphant) – ia

You – bekt

Your (also belonging to you) – bektz

Z

Zealotry – joznara

Zeitgeist – kurket

Zero – ulth

Ziggurat – zʾgaht

Zone – tevik

Afterword

Keep paper and pencil roleplaying games evil! There, I said it.

Ok, perhaps not actually "evil" per se, but anything that is beyond good or evil will surely be regarded as evil, dangerous, Satanic, and so forth by the ignorant masses. They have such a difficult time understanding the third side, not to mention the Devil's Prism.

Personally, I'd rather embrace that perception than water RPGs down. This hobby is more than a pleasant and safe diversion for teenagers. It's analog virtual reality! Don't sanitize it and, by the gods, don't you dare underestimate the value of RPGs. Squandering their potential might be the greatest sin of all.
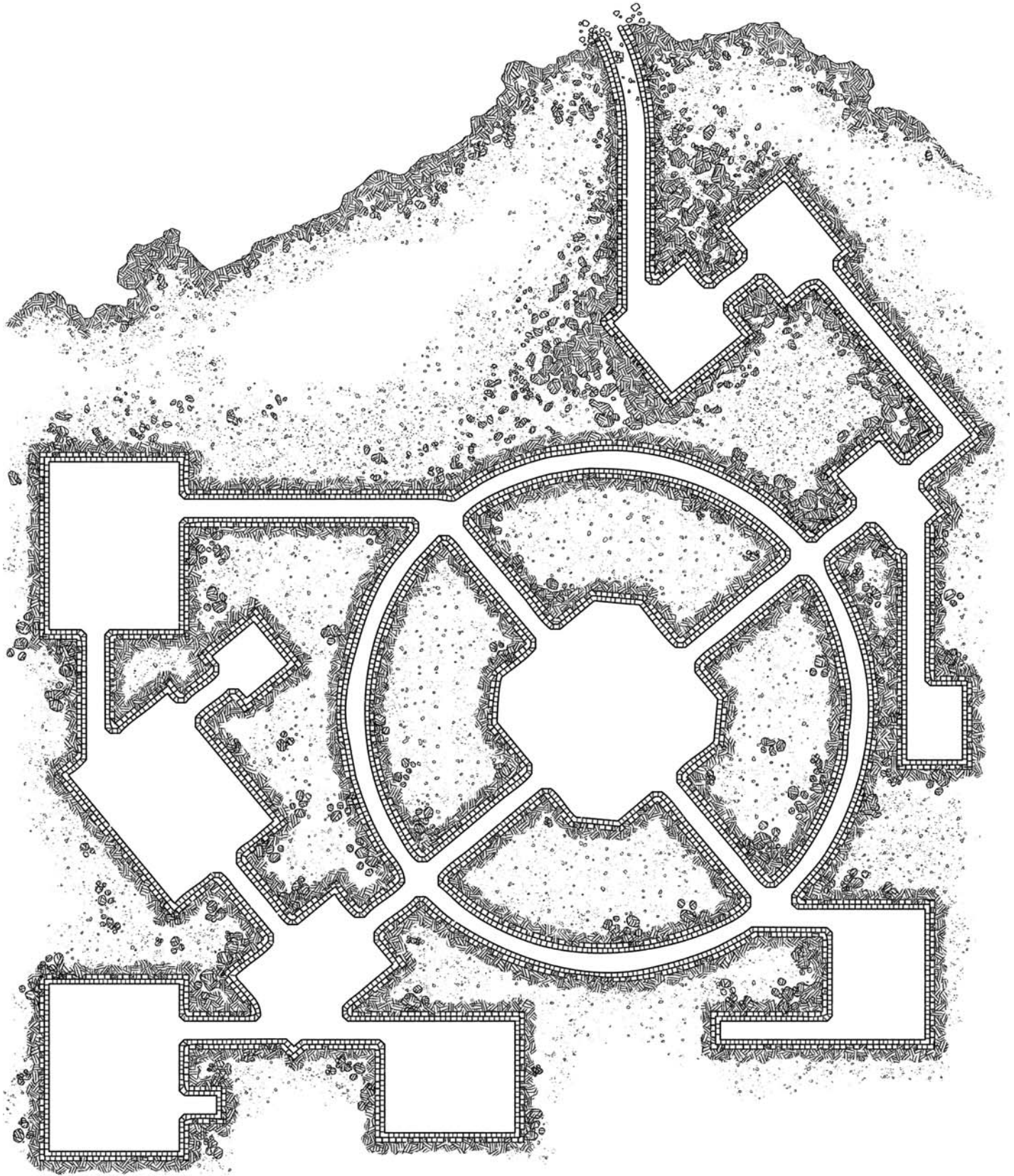
Well, this is the end. I hope you've enjoyed my book. More importantly, I hope you find it useful. If you do, then please don't hesitate to send me an email, talk about it with friends, blog about it, mention it on forums, or even write a review.
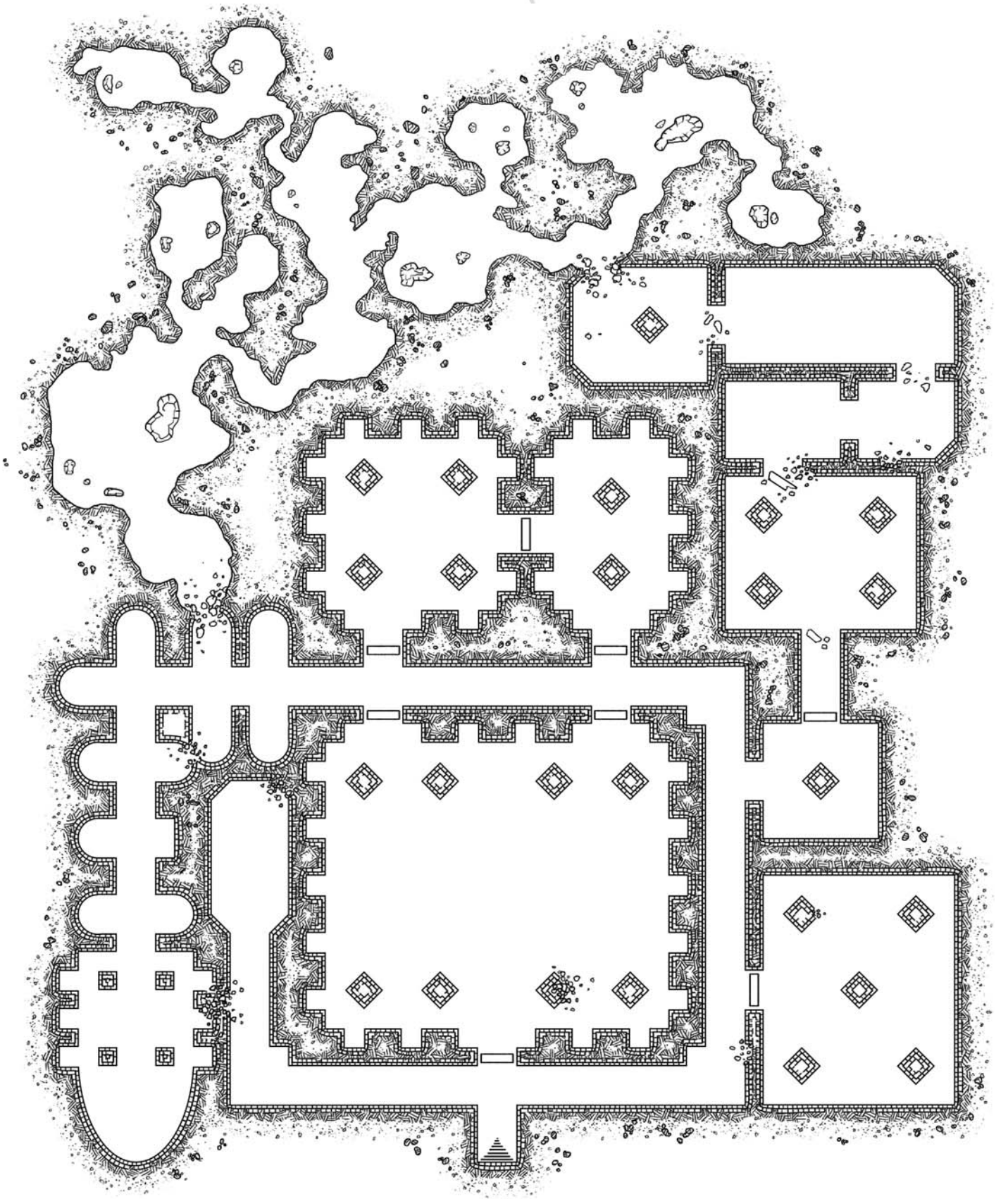
Along with this book, I've also written the following: *Liberation of the Demon Slayer*, *The Islands of Purple-Haunted Putrescence*, and *Revelry in Torth*. By the time this comes out, I'll probably be working on *The Outer Presence* and *Alpha Blue.*
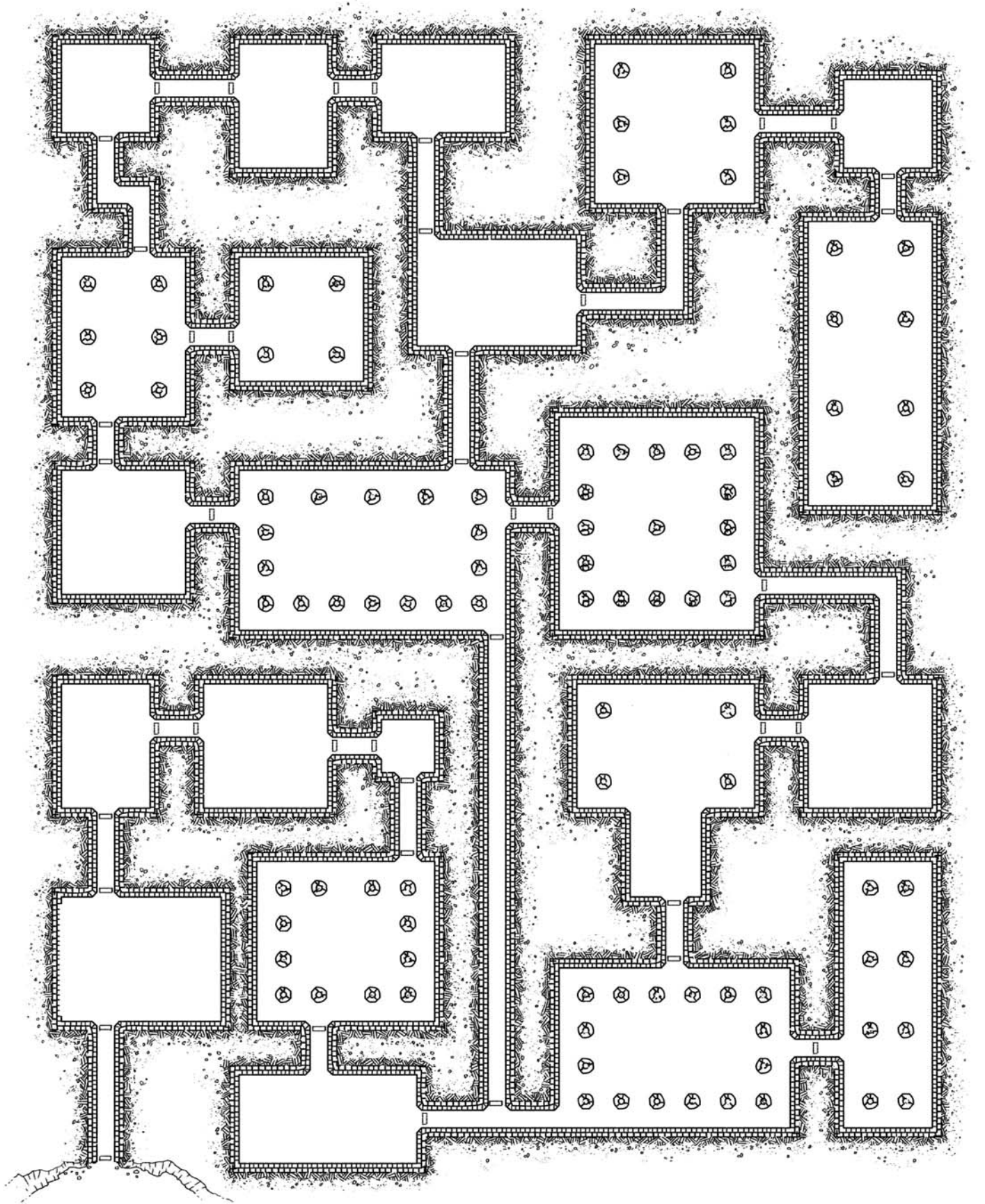
Besides working on my own stuff, I'd love to see yours! I'm available as an RPG consultant; providing my three cents regarding your product... should you desire my consultant services. From now until the end of 2016, I'm charging $1 per page (25$ minimum). For that, I'll read what you've got and tell you what I think, along with my thoughts on how to improve it.

See you on the other side,

VS

As my wife is fond of telling me, I don't have hobbies. I have obsessions. She's right, of course. I don't just run a weekly game and leave it at that, I turn each session over in my mind... encounters, characters, descriptions, environments, themes, gaming aids, etc. I examine every square inch of the campaign until it has been checked and double-checked. I'm not only looking for weak spots but points of strength and golden opportunities. Why? Because I have a screw loose. Probably a bunch of them.

Becoming the best Game Master in the world (at least the best I can be) is my latest and greatest goal. It's what I was put on this earth to do. It's my destiny. My obsession is not simply a manifestation of will. It has taken practice, study, discipline, and the application of unorthodox theories. One must experiment with a wide variety of variables, testing and re-testing.

Originally, this book was meant only for me; a collection of secrets that I could refer back to time and time again. But wouldn't it be selfish to keep that lore all to myself? Why not teach my discovery, allowing my insanity to illuminate Game Masters throughout the world? You hold in your hands a chronicle of my journey: the Draconic Method. Thirty years of Game Mastering knowledge is now at your disposal. Use it wisely... or don't. I don't really give a fuck.