The KOBOLD™ Guide to
Game Design

Volume I: Adventures

by Wolfgang Baur
with Keith Baker, Ed Greenwood, and Nicolas Logue

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A Compilation of Essays from OPEN DESIGN

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Acknowledgments

Foreword

I expected that Open Design would be a learning experience. I didn't expect that I would be the one doing so much of the learning.

I was not a novice in adventure design two years ago, but I had never been asked to explain myself before. I knew that I preferred story-driven adventures to purely combat-driven ones, and that I liked giving Dungeon Masters sandboxes rather than railroads. I have a deep and abiding faith in the ability of good DMs to take a solid outline and bring it to life for their players. My job, I thought, was to inspire DMs with adventures they wanted to run, NPCs they enjoyed roleplaying, and combats that would be amusing or terrifying.

Great. Fine. Wonderful. Now explain how to do that. That's the part that I promised, but wasn't at first sure that I could deliver. The early days of Open Design were panic-stricken behind the scenes. What if the commission funds couldn't be raised? What if everyone just wanted to argue? How would I keep everyone entertained until the project either launched or (shudder) belly-flopped in a big and public way? (None of this came to pass by the way.)

I wrote a couple of essays about adventure design to tide people over; private posts and musings that I didn't think of as part of the project. These essays proved to be immensely popular (with the very small audience of the time), and were later published by Wizards of the Coast as their *Adventure Builder* series. Others followed, some of them becoming *Dungeoncraft* entries in **Dungeon** magazine. They started people talking.

Born out of desperation, the design essays became a delight, a way to get out of the small, tactical discussions to take on larger issues of DMing and design, to look at the panorama rather than the cameo or the miniature. Since the end of **Dungeon**, the essays jumped to **Kobold Quarterly**, with entries in the Dungeon Design series by Keith Baker and Ed Greenwood. People keep asking for more.

I think we might be onto something here.

They helped me start a conversation about the issues all designers face. I hope these discussions make you think about what you love best in gaming. I like to think that they may strengthen your designs.

Even if you disagree, the conversation about *why* is the first step to a deeper awareness of what drives your design, whether it is a love of action, setting, character, or plot. Everyone's approach may be different. But these essays are the children of almost 20 years of design. They're all grown up, and ready to go out into the world.

Wolfgang Baur
February 11, 2008

Open Design Projects to Date

Originally conceived for the Open Design patrons, the essays in this volume also showcase these ongoing projects. For the new reader, the projects to date are:

- **Steam and Brass**, a clockwork adventure scaled for 6th, 8th, or 12th level characters and set in the Free City of Zobeck. The most exclusive and first Open Design creation.

- **Castle Shadowcrag**, an adventure for characters of levels 10 to 11 that takes place in a shadow-haunted castle near Zobeck.

- **Empire of the Ghouls**, a sourcebook and adventure full of hungry undead beneath the surface of the world. This mini-campaign covers levels 9 to 12.

- **Six Arabian Nights**, an anthology of short tales for levels 5 through 10, taking place in and around Siwal, City of Gardens.

- *Forthcoming:* **Blood of the Gorgon**, a murder-mystery and intrigue adventure in Zobeck, for levels 8 to 10. Written by Nicolas Logue, and developed by Wolfgang Baur.

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The Three Audiences

September 20, 2007

As an adventure writer, you always have three audiences. You need to please all three to be successful. They all want "great adventures," but that phrase means different things to different audiences.

The first is the editor; if your pitch or query is too dull, too mechanical, or too long, you'll never get it approved. The other audiences don't matter because they will never see your work. The editor wants to please his readers; he knows their tastes, he knows what's being talked up on the boards, he knows what products Hasbro's marketing department will want him to push. Yeah, the marketing angle is tacky, but true. You can get work playing to the Hasbro release schedule, but you'll hate yourself. I don't recommend it. To please your editor, write a pitch on a topic that you know his audience loves, and do it in a way he hasn't seen before. Easy, right?

The DM is the audience you need to please next. The person who edits has to like your work, acquire it, and publish it, but someone reading it needs to respond to it. What do DMs like; what do they need? You know all this, but sometimes it's easy to get distracted. DMs like enough backstory to understand the setup, without so much detail that they can't import something into their

> *"The players are the ultimate word of mouth authority, who will recommend your adventure or pan it to others, despite never having read a word of it."*

own campaign. They need concrete, short readaloud text that sets up an encounter. They need accurate stats, ideally ones that they can't just pull from the **Monster Manual**. And they need a compelling sequence of encounters with some transitions. Most of all, it has to be exciting fantasy, with creatures and villains that are ideal for fun gameplay.

You will have noticed that the player comes last. The adventure is really for both the DM and the player, yet there is surprisingly little overlap between the two audiences. The DM needs something that gets the players pumped up, that saves a bunch of work, and that makes running the session smoother. The player wants to be the hero at the center of the action: killing bad guys, stealthing around or whatever fits his hero concept.

Here's the last audience's secret: If the DM loves the scenario, you are 80% of the way there. The player sees the game through the DM's descriptions; if the DM doesn't choose to run it, the player doesn't see the adventure at all. At the same time, the adventure needs to be sprinkled with opportunities for all core classes to shine, and it can't be padded with information that the players never see.

In other words, the whole thing revolves around the player, though the player never reads the adventure text. Yes, your final audience doesn't necessarily own a copy of your work. But they certainly know it. There is nothing better than hearing from a group that played through your adventure and liked it. You can never be sure whether that's your design or their DM's talents that made it a success. (If they hate it, was it your bad design or their DM's lack of ability?)

The players are the ultimate word of mouth authority, who will recommend your adventure or pan it to others, despite never having read a word of it.

2
Shorter, Faster, Harder, Less

June 10, 2007

Freelance game designers are often paid by the word, just like many other types of writer. You might assume that all those RPG supplements that resemble phonebooks are padded, fluffed up, and filled with redundant mechanics and long-winded rules examples. You know, as a way of expanding a starving freelancer's paycheck. It would be logical, right?

You would be wrong, but not for the reason you might think.

Small Beats Big

Successful game design doesn't depend on wordiness, despite a few notable counterexamples. In fact, many 1E and 2E D&D adventures that are remembered as exemplars of RPG design are exceedingly brief. **Queen of the Demonweb Pits**? All of 32 pages, and considered large for its day.

Steading of the Hill Giant Chief? Exactly 8 freaking pages long. That's it.

These days, RPG companies determine project length based on sales data and expected profits. Usually, the marketing department aor brand manager says "We need a big book for August" or "We need a short adventure for January." It is not just the companies that tend to prefer big books to little booklets. The Open Design modules have all run long, in response to patron requests. People think they are getting more value for their money if the book weighs more.

This is the same mistake that readers make when they compare a novel like **The Dying Earth** (156 pages) with one like the craptacular **Sword of Shannara** (726 miserable pages). Length has absolutely nothing to do with quality.

Magazine editors and freelance coordinators both know this. The reader is as likely to enjoy a 4-page article proposing a new class for witches (**Dragon** #43) or a simple system for ennobling PCs (**Kobold Quarterly** #2) as a much longer work. Short material is accessible and fun. So why isn't there more of it out there?

Small Writers Starve, Compact Writers Thrive

A freelancer who writes only for short projects will starve to death. Long projects are a requirement to make a living. The same holds true for book publishers, such as Wizards of the Coast. They print bigger books because they can charge more for them, and usually reap bigger profits. Yes, there is a point of diminishing returns, where a book is so big that no one wants it or the publisher cannot charge what it is really worth. But as a rule of thumb, "lightweight" is pejorative.

Writing tight and short is a critical skill for a freelancer, even though it would seem to make no money. I offer three reasons for every freelancer to value short, tight prose:

1. All your pitches for long work need to be short.
2. Magazine and web editors adore short articles.
3. Even long works must to use compression to succeed.

The Art of the Pitch

You may remember that I cut a prospective writer's pitches for **Six Arabian Nights** down from 4,000 words to around 400. You may have heard that the Paizo Open Call was limited to 800 words or less. You may know that **Kobold Quarterly** wants pitches done in a matter of paragraphs, not pages. Hollywood likes movie pitches in a sentence.

You need to know how to convince someone to use your proposal from among the hundreds they see every month. The first step is to convince them in a very short amount of time.

Periodicals Are All Instant Gratification

Regarding point #1, consider **D&D Insider**'s content goals. Their guidelines ask for adventures under 10,000 words. That's less than half the length that **Dungeon** printed every month; on the web, short is king. Wizards of the Coast does not want to provide competition for its own mega-adventures. So the **D&D Insider** adventures will be fairly scrawny things. Furthermore, since their articles are meant for computer screens, they top out around 4,000 words.

It's not just WotC. Putting on my own publishing hat for a minute, **Kobold Quarterly** will happily run shorter articles more often than the long ones. They fit neatly into gaps in layout. They make their point and move on.

Give people a thrill with a cool idea. If you can't put three cool ideas down per page, it's time to wrap up the article or project. Yes, gamers are a patient audience that will read longer work complete with charts and tables, but this is no excuse to be dull and expository. Give them sizzle *and* rules, and keep it reasonably short. No one wants a 30-page treatise on boots. Ok, almost no one.

Long But Short

Even when you write an **Empire of the Ghouls**, a 154-page adventure and sourcebook, there's not enough room to do everything. Every encounter has to pull its weight.

> *"Never write a single encounter that takes more than 3 pages."*

Each encounter in **Steading of the Hill Giant Chief** is brief: a room, monster name, hit points, and treasure. That's the essence of D&D. Don't forget those elements, and give the reader just a little more. I don't mean that 3E stat blocks are a nightmarishly long compared to 2E. I mean, provide the DM with a sensory or tactical hook that makes the encounter memorable without taking a page to describe. **Steading** did the whole adventure in 8 pages. Never write a single encounter that takes more than 3 pages (or roughly 2, 500 words).

Six Secrets of Text Compression

There are many ways to learn how to write short, and the most important is practice, practice, practice. Write it once, and then rewrite it shorter with each later draft. Here are six other hints.

1. It's Not About You

Avoid falling in love with the sound of your own prose. Text communicates with an audience, to make that audience care about what you have to say. You should entertain that audience with surprising, wonderful, inventive glee. Which is a good goal throughout: don't be dull just because you are being accurate. The designer's job is entertainment first of all. Developers and editors will tell you when you are inaccurate. Oh boy, will they tell you.

2. Don't Bore Yourself

One trick of writing short is to write an outline, and drop everything that bores you. Then write the article, and drop everything that bores you about the article. Do you have a long, awkward setup? Cut it all, go straight to the good stuff. Does the middle drag with lots of historical detail that even you find numbing? Cut it all down to the bloody, murderous, and exciting bits. Are the stats and mechanics overwhelmingly boring? Minimize the stat blocks by using page references to core materials, by standardizing monsters, or by dropping the filler sections.

3. The Clunker Readaloud

Read your writing aloud when practical (obviously, this is for pitches and short articles, not for 40,000-word sourcebooks). You may notice lots of "*in order to*" or "*the result of*" or "*as the army was taken possession of by the spirits of the ancestors*" or other long-winded, passive constructions. Flag them as you read, and cut them all. Use active verbs instead. "*Ghosts kept the soldiers marching*" is concrete and shorter.

Don't try to fix everything right then; keep reading. Every time you trip over your own tongue, mark the passage to smooth it out later.

4. Avoid Abstractions

I call this the barbarian test. If Conan doesn't care about it, neither should you.

Unless you are writing a treatise on worldbuilding, no one wants to hear your military philosophy or the economic implications of a bit of fluff. Stick with material that drives the game, directly relevant to the DM or player. In D&D, that means active magic, violent mayhem, and golden plunder, plus a smattering of sex and power.

Political theory, merchant manifests, ancient history, military strategy, magical theory, art history, character's childhoods, and a dragon's ten favorite lost treasures are all amusing, but probably have little to do with the action of an adventure game. Use them sparingly.

5. Sensory Appeal

Concrete language is a ticket to compression. Taste, smell, sight, sound, feel, and temperature should be elements of any scene—but not all at once!

Pick two and go with those: "*The derro grunts as he lifts a corpse onto a meathook. His back is turned to you, and the air carries the iron tang of blood.*" That's all you need to set a scene. Describing the walls, the clothes, and so on distracts the players from what's going on. Sometimes you want distraction, but do it deliberately (see *Using and Abusing Misdirection*, page 31).

6. Know What Matters

The most powerful trick to compression is to throw away detailed explanatory material, such as backstory. Instead, focus on the one key element of your piece. In an encounter, mention the monster or NPC before the last sentence of a readaloud. In background or in the rules, focus on goals, motives, and tactics. Roleplaying encounters should feature NPCs with concrete plans or intentions. Trust the DM to figure out how to present those intentions to the players.

That last bit is crucial. Over-explaining mechanics or an encounter kills them. Present the intended core material, and then get out of the way. As the designer, your strongest ally is the DM. Feed a DM good ideas, solid flavor, and rich mechanics, and you win them over forever. Weak flavor, tired ideas, and derivative mechanics will lose your gamer audience every time.

Compression helps you inject extra flavor into your manuscript. It makes your text stronger, richer, meatier. Word for word, paragraph for paragraph, tight prose wins over editors and readers.

So cut line by line, tighten language, and avoid flabby topics. Don't think about it as cutting word count. Think of it as improving your game.

What You Gain

If you do tighten and compress language, not only will editors fall all over themselves to green light your proposals, but your text will crush the competition. Even as your range of projects grows larger and larger, your design and your prose will retain their power, because it is concentrated.

Armies use the same principle to win battles: von Clausewitz called it the *schwerpunkt*, the focal point of a battle where forces must . If you concentrate your effort on using the most powerful language where it will do the most good, you will win over your reader. If you spread your efforts around, then, like a weak line of battle, your design will collapse.

Watery game design is a waste of everyone's time, including yours. Brew yours rich, distill it down, and watch the world beat a path to your door.

3
Why Writers Get Paid

This was a locked entry for the supporters of Open Design that I made public because sharing one's pain is good for the soul.
It's a bit of a rant, but that always happens to me at a certain stage of the design process. The adrenaline gives me the ruthless edge that takes a manuscript to where I want it.

July 17, 2007

Here I am again, trying to close down a first draft that keeps slipping away from me. The second draft is going to be fairly ferocious on this beast, and the maps are not all drawn and I am sure some of the monsters suck. Or at least need major surgery.

Welcome to the muddle in the middle. In any large project (or even with smaller projects for newer writers), this is the stage where it all goes wrong. It goes hideously pear-shaped. The project is beyond recovery, it's all trash, ohmigod, it's so much *work* to make it not suck.

Ah ha. This is why writers get paid.

The early stages of a project are always sunshine and unicorn giggles, laughter and frolic, all the tasty outer frosting of the writing cake. I love the early stages. I don't have to make any hard choices yet. I don't have to yank entire sequences, or worse, rewrite them to fit new continuity. I don't have to revise a crucial encounter to include more minions—and then remap the area to give the minions space to move. No, there's just the Good Parts of writing: making stuff up, setting NPCs in motion, doing up the fun stat blocks and the clever bits of readaloud.

Unfortunately, at some stage the Good Parts dry up. Every writing cake, as it turns out, has a railroad spike hidden in it. You have to eat the whole thing. Once the frosting is gone, you stare down at dull dry bits of iron left, and even those don't fit together. Allow me to count them for you:

1. The minion stat block with the template that doesn't quite work.
2. The spell selection that needs tweaking. Because it's boring.
3. The backstory that isn't going to untangle itself.
4. The backstory that needs to be cut in half.
5. The shiny intro that … is a mass of rust under a chrome veneer.
6. The missing encounters. Where are they?

7. The sections of city detail that are all in your head, but still not on paper.
8. The flavor text that has no flavor, but only clichés that need to be terminated and completely replaced.
9. The big finale that you've put off writing because you know exactly how it's going to work. Except that you haven't written any of it.
10. The mechanics that playtesters flagged, and they are right.
11. The map that is functional but not exciting.
12. The monster write up you kept *meaning* to fix.
13. NPCs who seemed engaging but are, in fact, completely lame.

And oh so many more. Drawn completely at random. Completely. At. Random, I swear. Stop looking at me like that, readers.

This is when most people give up. Only stubborn pigheaded bastards continue to bull through the grind of fixing things, smooth out all the inconsistencies, add the connecting bits, check that the logic mostly works (mostly), and that the worst holes are spackled over thoroughly.

Writerly Tip: If the spackle isn't quite heavy enough, I recommend mortaring recalcitrant text in place with chains near a cask of amontillado, then bricking them into the wall with courses of stone. That'll learn 'em.

Anyway. Toward the end of a project, there tends to be less fine craftsmanship and a lot more covering things up with paint and glitter. The point is that there's always a stage where writing is *absolutely no fun*. No kittens, no frosting, no unicorns. Certainly no oversexed half-fiendish sorceresses. And just because it's no fun, that is not the point where you stop and send it in.

On the contrary, this is the point where you dig in twice as hard.

Because if you are a good writer or hope to become one, you know the manuscript's every weakness, every hard choice you dodged, every shortcut you took saying "I'll fix it in the rewrite" (O fateful words!) The mojo is weak and you know it needs work. Now, this self-loathing is perfectly normal and it can be overdone. It is possible to print a manuscript and go through with a red pen and fix it. That seems hard, and the fixes can take long hours where no word count is added and many of your favorite bits are cut.

Sometimes you do this revision once or twice, if your first draft was sound. Sometimes you do it eight or nine times, if you are perhaps a perfectionist with lots of spare time. Writers who don't revise or even read back through their work do not fool anyone. (See the Erik Mona interview in **Kobold Quarterly** #1 if you don't believe me; he's seen both sides of this fence.)

3. Why Writers Get Paid

Most would-be game designers want the process to be fun all the way through, and that is a recipe for failure. A big part of success in the field is sitting down and working over rules, math, and text for core rules design. For adventure design, that means writing, weighing playtest results, and rewrites. The important element is that you try to improve your text enough that someone else can read it and enjoy it. You are manufacturing joy for other people. That doesn't mean joy for you, necessarily. It's joy for them because you have honed that joy out of a bitter slab of granite.

Most people don't ever get through this stage. For me, I have music that helps, uptempo stuff, cheeseball 80s tunes, Britpop, and worse. No, I'm not proud that Mike Oldfield's "Moonlight Shadow" helps me get in a writing groove, but there it is. For other people it's booze (not recommended), massive caffeine, or staying up late surrounded by heaps of pens and notebooks. Recite the immortal words of that hack Dr. Ben Jonson: "No man but a fool ever wrote but for money." Whatever gets you hitting the keys.

Everyone finds their own way to a writerly discipline. Until you do, you will fail to design to the standards you set for yourself, and you will not meet deadlines consistently. You may get queries accepted, but you will fail to follow up on those queries in a timely way. You will not publish.

(That last point, by the way, was a source of much consternation to me as a young editorial assistant. At TSR, we sent out twice as many acceptances for queries as we could use each month, because we knew half of them would never result in an article. This drove me crazy, especially because some of the queries that went missing were for really cool stuff. I learned that I should never reject myself, which is what those writers were doing. If you are fortunate enough to get a query accepted, write it and send it in. It's the editor's job to accept it or reject it. Don't do the editor's job, especially in the rejection department.)

Game designers, artists, and writers are all creative people. Doing our best work is demanding because there is a level of craft to learn, and a level of self-control to be reliably productive even on off days. And it requires a level of willpower to face the problems with your manuscript and be absolutely ruthless about fixing them.

Everyone will have advice for you about how you should proceed and what you should fix. At the bulldog stage, you need to ignore everyone and just maintain momentum on the things *you* know are broken, and that you can improve. The editor will weigh in with other issues; fine. Plowing through the ugly late stages of a draft is about persistence and self-confidence in the face of rising insecurity. Can I make this character work? Can I meet the deadline? Can I keep it remotely near the requested word count? Yes, yes, and yes. Be ruthless. Throw side plots and distracting shiny rules subsystems overboard.

I wish I had some pithy Pollyanna platitudes at this stage. They would say that working hard on the draft will make you feel better about it and your editor will hail you as a genius and your work will surely be published to great acclaim. That doesn't happen.

You may get a sense that the manuscript is as good as you can make it. That is a fine place to be. You probably won't love the manuscript at that point, and you are way too close to it to know whether anyone else will either.

> ## *"No one loves rewrites. Tough it out."*

If you wait until you are 100% happy with a manuscript, you will never stop fiddling with it. At some point, you will be sick of it, but somewhat content, I suppose. The damn thing doesn't compel you the way it once did. You've worked all the magic on it that you know, and it's still not exactly what you might wish, but it's okay. The editor will probably like it well enough.

Yeah, I know, this is not a rousing endorsement of second and third drafts. But in your designer brain, at some point you may find that you are just tinkering with the adventure. All the big problems are fixed to your satisfaction. You are probably still not satisfied with it, but if you catch yourself tinkering just to tinker (like messing with fonts, or punctuation, or Craft skill points), then it is definitely time to shove it out the door.

So that's my advice: *Finish it, and send it in.* Hell, I should tape that over my monitor, right next to "Zeal never rests" (motto of HMS *Ark Royal*).

Now will you look at me? I've just procrastinated for over an hour. Enough talk about grinding through it: Back to the keyboard! I have many design sins yet to atone for, and I fully intend to bury the biggest ones as deep as I can.

Okay, maybe that came across as cranky. No one loves rewrites.

Tough it out.

4
Fantasy Realism

This one's a bit of a rant as well, but I think there are some points worth considering.

July 14, 2007

I hate the common critique of fantasy adventures and settings that they are "not realistic enough." At the same time, I totally understand. The critique is not about realism. It is about depth and plausibility.

A realistic setting does not have wizards, 20-pound battleaxes, or half-naked Amazon elves. Or giants, dragons, or beholders. Or anything fun, really.

A fantasy adventure has all those things, plus flying carpets, cloud castles, clockwork monkeys, and earth elementals of pure diamond. If you present these things in a serious, respectful, and coherent way, it wins over more fans than if they are munged together haphazardly. The magpie tendency to want to do everything cool is a powerful force. As a designer, you must resist it.

Or rather, you must channel it. Choose only the shiniest baubles, and make them fit together in a new way that astounds all who see it.

Serious Fantasy

Fantasy literature has a weird image among the mainstream. Some people still believe, despite all evidence, that fantasy is just kid's stuff of wee goblins and faery princesses, essentially escapist trash ever since the Brothers Grimm. Others believe, despite all evidence, that fantasy is pernicious soul-eating rot. Harry Potter is accused of witchcraft or Japanese tentacle porn anime is accused of indecency, quite understandably.

These are fantasy junk food. The Grimm stories are bowdlerized folktales; **Harry Potter** is a vigorous hybrid of boarding school novel and fantasy clichés, and the anime? Teenage boys have needs. Apparently tentacles are big in Japan.

I sense I'm getting off track.

What I mean to say is that every genre has its introductory, broad audience writers, plus its more obscure variants. The perfect example of the serious strain in fantasy is Tolkein. He devoted a lifetime to scholarship and devoted himself to genealogies, linguistics, alphabets, and sagas. He wrote heavy action-oriented material at times, and light-hearted songs and pastoral characters at other times. He always took his acts of sub-creation very seriously. That's why

his books come with appendices. There's something primally satisfying about a fantasy world that says, "This could have been. This is grounded in sagas as deep as oceans, and this world will never end."

Tolkien did that. Middle Earth still resonates as one of the great touchstones of literature. Fantasy can be compelling, but only if its power is respected rather than treated lightly.

Does D&D do this? It's arguable either way. Do the smaller indie press RPGs treat fantasy with respect? I'd argue that more creatively successful games do so, and less creatively successful games don't. Certainly financial success is not correlated with depth or serious treatment of the subject.

> *"There's something primally satisfying about a fantasy world that says, 'This could have been. This is grounded in sagas as deep as oceans, and this world will never end.'"*

Not everyone is interested in Big Serious Art Fantasy. And that's fine. I'd argue, though, that the settings that thrive and find new readers over long periods build on a foundation that take their premises fairly seriously. Laughing at your audience is a recipe for failure. Laughing with them is a sure sign of shared vision.

Respect for Players and Setting

Success in RPG fantasy comes from treating your characters and setting with some respect, even if it contains light-hearted portions or humor. If the whole thing is an elaborate punch line (Terry Pratchett's **Discworld** notwithstanding), who will remember it in 5 hours, much less 5 years?

What does this mean in practical terms?

A setting should have a scale, characters, and conflicts that match the real world to some degree. Large empires don't spring up from the dust. No magic can change the nature of the human heart, either its noble impulses of bravery, kindness, and generosity, or its weaknesses in greed, cruelty, and abuse of power. That's really what makes tabletop games shine, when they do shine. The human element.

Which means both the light and the dark side. Don't cop out and make cardboard villains. Don't let heroes weasel out and become mercenaries time after time. A great setting requires heroes to step up and be counted. I've seen a lot of that overplayed as cheesy. I've seen it ignored in favor of Monty Haul loot-dungeons.

A little basic respect for the intelligence of NPCs and monsters usually solves the problem. Creatures in a good setting act in their own interests. Even goblins seek some way to better themselves, even if they go about it by cattle

raiding, kidnapping, and banditry. If they act the way raiders, kidnappers, and bandits acted in the past, they're more challenging for the players, and more credible. That's the trick of good NPCs. Stupid NPCs may be easy and fun for heroes to slaughter, but they don't build respect or depth for the setting if that's all the adventure offers. Tougher, smarter foes do more than make a combat stronger; they make a setting more credible as well.

Coherent and Plausible

To show respect, you need to actually know something about history, geography, religion, myth, and the medieval period. You need to think about how pieces fit together. And you need to make some choices. The kitchen sink approach (while perhaps good for sales) makes for garbage settings.

Both **Forgotten Realms** and **Eberron** suffer from trying to put all possible flavors on the map. This makes them useful as sales tools, because everyone can find something to like. Designing for them is annoying because there's no consistent framework to use as a fulcrum for logical extensions. Or rather, you have your choice of logical extensions—you can justify whatever you like: the settings include fantasy technological states, Dark Ages regions, riffs on Eskimos and jungle adventure, everything. The logic of extending the kitchen sink is simple: everything is available to the designer, so hard choices are never required. Every area on the map is identical in terms of rewards for various play styles, and every culture has a certain sameness. This is convenient, but unlikely.

When gamers say "unrealistic," they usually mean "implausible even in a fantasy context." They mean a kitchen sink of ninjas with lasers, pirates with magic wands, and dragon folk with breasts, all in the same world. Sure, it's fantasy. But most gamers draw the line somewhere.

I'm not saying that every designer needs to be a historian and every setting should be a gritty historical grind. That would be dull. If you design a wild pulp Hollow Earth setting, it would pay to understand both the real science and the genre conventions, and to read a few of the foundation novels. Dinosaurs would fit right in, but Men in Black probably would not.

I guess I'm saying lazy designers piss me off.

The game design that swipes a historical trope and reinvents it in a fun, approachable fantasy way that doesn't exclude people who don't know the background impresses me. The reinvention of the golden age of piracy by the **Pirates of the Caribbean** is one example; the reinvention of the samurai epic by **Legend of the Five Rings** is another. No one would claim those are "realistic," but they are plausible and internally consistent. They are serious about the genre they work within, while subverting and expanding it with other strains of fantasy.

So, "realistic fantasy" still makes my teeth hurt, but yeah, I know what people mean. I want what most gamers want, namely fantasy that puts down a few markers of style or explicitly excludes some sub genres, to make the most of what it does have. Give me fantasy I can believe in, not fantasy that is convenient to a designer, set designer, or novelist. Work for internal balance. Fans will respond to the plausibility and resonances you create, taking echoes of that logic into a thousand fanfics.

What are we really doing here?

A few patrons made two great points in response to this essay. The core job of a DM is never about worldbuilding or maintaining a complex narrative; the core job is retelling stories that have been around since mankind first gathered around a fire and spun a yarn. Not a carbon copy, but another take on a few key elements that everyone knows, is what people like to hear.

If you remain true to the tradition or genre, players will forgive implausible things; in a swashbuckling pirate game, for instance, juju zombies, mummy horror, monkey islands, and even "Lost World" elements all fit the overall themes and tone. Plunder your genre tropes, and that genre's "realism" is yours by default..

The audience expects realism from the type of story you are telling.
If you make it clear what genre the players are in at the very start, you give them a set of expectations. They'll give you lots of leeway regardless of what might be plausible in some other subgenre, but you need to live up to those expectations. Switching genres halfway through asks for boos and disappointment.

<p style="text-align:center;">5</p>

Worldbuilding

<p style="text-align:center;">April 30, 2007</p>

> *"To make a Secondary World… commanding Secondary Belief, will probably require labour and thought, and will certainly demand a special skill, a kind of elvish craft. Few attempt such difficult tasks. But when they are attempted and in any degree accomplished then we have a rare achievement… indeed narrative art, story-making in its primary and most potent mode."*
>
> —JRR Tolkien, *On Faery Stories*

Worldbuilding is an enormous topic. In fact, all forms of it can be distilled down into a few principles. I did that every summer in June for several years at a worldbuilding seminar for authors called Writer's Weekend. It covered all the usual elements: setting, characters, logic, and throwing rocks into ponds.

Ponds, you ask? Yeah, they are a useful analogy for scoping this sort of work. Bear with me. I have five more general points to address first.

Point 1: Gaming Ain't Fiction

The worldbuilding I do with those fiction writers tends to be all about the telling detail, building the world from the character out (or building the character from the setting), directing reader attention to just the parts that matter, and so on. None of this works for gamers because, as a designer, your first audience is the DM, not the players. Even if the DM likes the worldbuilding, you have little control over how it gets bent, twisted, spindled, and mutilated to suit a homebrew, or a corporate campaign setting, or some combination of the two.

So your worldbuilding had better be bulletproof.

What do I mean by bulletproof? You need to hit a very particular sort of middle ground. For fantasy settings, it needs to be the-same-but-different, a tricky target if ever there was one. If you build a clichéd set of elven havens, hobbit shires, and dwarven mines, nobody will give a damn. They have seen it before.

Likewise, if you build something so odd and exotic that the only way to understand it is to read it all, play the simulator, and chart some graphs, well, not many people will follow you there either. For settings like **Jorune**, **Dark**

Sun, **Spelljammer**, **Empire of the Petal Throne** or **Blue Planet**, you may have a small-but-devoted hardcore following. That's the best you can hope for.

The trick is that you must offer a core concept that's easy to grasp, and fun to play once the shiny cool factor has worn off. Bulletproof worldbuilding starts with a big idea that is so cool, other people will import it wholesale into their homebrew. They will make room for it in the **Realms**, **Eberron**, **Greyhawk**, **Freeport**, or **Ptolus**. This is easier to do with an adventure or region than a whole campaign setting.

What's that big idea? That is up to you; it's your world. But if you look at **The Free City of Zobeck** (forthcoming from Open Design) or the **Empire of the Ghouls**, it is pretty obvious what the setting hook is. Your hook should be just as clear.

Point 2: Genres, Action, and Big Ideas

What do you want the world to do for players, and for the DM? Ask that question when you start worldbuilding. What it does for the designer or the corporation should always be secondary.

Think about your goals and touchstones in genre terms. Is it steampunk or power fantasy? Is it dark fey kingdoms or low-magic intrigue? You know the kind of big choices I'm talking about. This approach has limits: most genres are already familiar to the reader.

You might try melding multiple genres, but you will weaken the setting if you try to do too many things at once. If you want a historical, ethnographic setting (drawing on, say, samurai Japan or mameluke Egypt) you are looking at a lower-magic world. If you want a Manichean world of pure white and black, with heavy emphasis on magic, ancient gods walking the earth, and wizards in different colored robes, that's tough to build with a gritty, low-magic approach. Choosing one of these approaches enables certain heroic actions (gunpowder, or combat feats, or chaos magic) and eliminates or reduces others. Druids and rangers in an urban campaign can work, but it's a lot harder to make it to work well. Every choice carries wide-ranging consequences.

Naomi Novik's **Temeraire** series melds genres well, blending Napoleonic nautical fiction with dragon fantasy. Likewise, **Harry Potter** melds the traditional English schoolboy story with traditional fantasy. The goal is to find two genres that complement each other. TSR's **Steel & Bone** mini-setting combines the Vikings as honorable barbarians and a race of intellectual necromancers who venerate the past. Other examples include the nautical and space faring fantasy of **Spelljammer**, the Cold War and Cthulhu mythos in **Delta Green**, or the combination of planar/time travel and Hong Kong action in **Feng Shui**.

You can create your world large enough to contain multitudes, as in the kitchen-sink approach of **Eberron** and the **Realms**. This creates problems, which I'll get to in a minute.

I use an alternative way of thinking about big ideas in worldbuilding, namely that worlds are verbs. You can describe city streets, architecture, and the typical tavern all day long, but what matters in gameplay are the actions of the inhabitants and the resources of the setting. Are the NPCs cowardly? Make it plain that no one but the PCs is going to save this town. Are the NPCs too bloodthirsty? Make it painfully obvious that they're going to war and a lot of innocents will die, unless the PCs stop it.

Think of the main type of action that you want to enable (whether that's pulp adventure, sword & sorcery, or musketeers vs. necromancers). You can build places, organizations, and characters that support that conflict. With that idealized action in mind, you can quickly find whether a cool new idea helps your setting or just muddies the water. It's a streamlining tool.

There is a time to be coy with your readers, and to give yourself room for future growth in the setting. When you are laying down the foundation conflicts of the setting is Not That Time. Spell it out. If someone asks you for the two-sentence description of "What is it all about?" you better be able to give it.

Point 3: Hide Your Work. Bury It Deep

SF writer M. John Harrison said (and the resulting discussion on ENWorld at http://www.enworld.org/showthread.php?t=193738 may be worth your time):

> *"Worldbuilding is dull. Worldbuilding literalises the urge to invent. Worldbuilding gives an unnecessary permission for acts of writing (indeed, for acts of reading). Worldbuilding numbs the reader's ability to fulfill their part of the bargain, because it believes that it has to do everything around here if anything is going to get done.*

> *"Above all, worldbuilding is not technically necessary. It is the great clomping foot of nerdism. It is the attempt to exhaustively survey a place that isn't there. A good writer would never try to do that, even with a place that is there. It isn't possible, & if it was the results wouldn't be readable: they would constitute not a book but the biggest library ever built, a hallowed place of dedication & lifelong study. This gives us a clue to the psychological type of the worldbuilder & the worldbuilder's victim, & makes us very afraid."*

Fairly harsh. He's largely right, as far as fiction is concerned. You don't want big data dumps in a novel or short story, though many writers find they need to do worldbuilding in text that never appears in their novels. Those notes are cut early, but they have served their function: to help the writer map out the logic of the setting. In good fiction, the reader shouldn't be burdened with that.

Games aren't fiction. In an RPG, the requirements are different: the worldbuilding in **Empire of the Ghouls** isn't necessary to the adventure. It is necessary to the DM, who needs tools and backstory to carry an adventure when it goes off in unexpected directions. A novel or story controls the reader's point of view; a game session doesn't and can't control the player's point of view, so there needs to be some kind of fallback.

Setting up fallbacks goes on with good worldbuilding. A lot of material fades into the background. A DM reads the sourcebook or skims the relevant material on an institution, class, or society, and uses that to power their storyline, either through their adventures based on the backstory, or through published adventures in whole or part. Worldbuilding should not be dropped on players in big lumps. Dropping it on DMs in large, weighty tomes seems to make everyone happy: it defines setting for the designer (allowing you to establish shared ground), it explains material that the DM wants for context, and it doesn't interfere with the player's focus on their characters and heroic action.

> *"As a freelance rule of thumb, keep your backstory and worldbuilding down to* 10% *of the total word count of any adventure if you can."*

But it can be a problem. A DM showing off his worldbuilding to players who just want to get on with the story does not serve his audience well; he's too self-centered to address the characters as the primary source of action and drama in the campaign. Do the worldbuilding you need to set up a story, then do the same thing novelists and story writers do: bury it deep in a research file.

If you do, you will have the satisfaction of knowing all the secrets. The players just want to skim the cream of all that work, just as readers skim the surface of setting in a novel. Readers and players are there for characters first, setting second.

As a freelance rule of thumb, keep your backstory and worldbuilding down to 10% of the total word count of any adventure if you can.

Point 4: Logic of the Setting

Internal consistency is crucial. The logic of the setting should be ironclad. Once you set up the rules, never break them. If the moon goddess is the villain in your campaign, keep her that way. Switching her into a sympathetic role halfway through loses all the credibility you have built up.

The upside of consistency is that players know what to expect. The downside is a smaller palette to play with for any one world or campaign. You may love both historical simulation and anime, but combining the two won't work to either's advantage. At best, different kingdoms operate under different rules or expectations (the way the Moonshaes are quite a different tone than Waterdeep, or that Khorvaire is not the same as Aundair).

This kitchen-sink approach is the default for the main D&D settings (despite my earlier grousing), and it's not entirely bad. Every DM finds some part that appeals to them. The weakness of the kitchen sink is that, by trying to appeal to everyone, every one of its flavors becomes muddied. The players will want to use elements from all over the setting. Your Aundairian wizard knights will stand arm-in-arm with Khorvaire's undead captains and the Silver Flame's prissy paladins. If you mix styles and flavors too often (within the same adventure, say) you dilute the overall campaign tone. Certainly a price you might be willing to pay; just be aware you are paying it.

Empire of the Ghouls has a simple, consistent logic: it is all about cannibalism, about sick hungers and undead power-mongers and the weird ecology of the underdark. Switching into a light-and-fluffy or humorous tone won't work, even for a single encounter. That undermines all the work. This doesn't mean that your players won't find humor in the scenarios, NPC names, their own actions or failures. That is not the same as throwing in a goofy stoner pseudodragon, an undead hobbit minstrel, or a set of exploding smiley-faces. While those might be fine in an April Fool or light-hearted adventure, you need to know the logic of your adventure and stick with it throughout.

Point 5: *Empire of the Ghouls*

Speaking of the Imperium, how did that worldbuilding start? What is the logic? It is a strange setting, so I'll just say a few words about it.

The logic of **Empire** derives from something that **Dragon** editor Roger Moore said to me in, oh, 1994 or 1995, namely "Wouldn't it be neat if ghouls or something ran the Underdark?"

To which I said, "Heck yes, the undead should definitely be kicking drow butt. I'll write up a proposal." Little did I know how obsessed I would become with it (four drafts, I think, to keep the word count down). Or that it would take a year to write. Or that it would be so well received. It's dark in tone, what with the cannibal, claustrophic, drowning, and generally morbid elements that permeate it.

The setting has a fun "what-if" logic, giving ghouls more power, more magic, a society, civilization and culture. *Kingdom of the Ghouls* managed to do a lot of that in its 22,000 words or so. The logic of the premise is easy: ghouls gain food or offspring every time a foe falls. They march and work tirelessly. They fight with a paralytic touch and with power equal to drow or dwarves, but without needing silly things like clean air or water. In a hostile environment like the underdark, their undead state is a huge advantage.

The ghouls seem likely to succeed in their dreams of conquest. Naturally, they also reflect a lot of things that I layered on as important to the flavor, such as remembering their prior lives (giving them access to skills and magic of the surface), tying them to shadow energies, advanced necromancy, and a martial and quasi-feudal social structure.

Empire takes all of these things further. The society has been around longer, the scale of the empire is bigger, and the goals are more than just the conquest of the underdark. They now have domesticated animals (giant carrion beetles), an underclass (the beggar ghouls), a more complex lifecycle (with bloated, sated, and bonepowder ghouls), and professional legions to fight for the imperial center. The class system is still fairly fluid, and clawing your way to the top is most ghouls' goal. But the society is more complicated and interesting: multiple strange cults, more varied equipment, specialized magic, the slave system with deadmind powder and guardian wraiths, the backstory of consolidation of the Hundred Kings, and so on. The mechanics are different, the flavor is much richer, but the logic beneath it all is based on the same what-if.

I'm confident that the adventure itself could have been published without the backstory chunk. Working up that level of detail is great. Much of it is not visible to the PCs except though Knowledge and Lore checks and discussions with NPCs. Both are narrow channels. One of the beauties of publishing with Open Design is that I provide all the additional material that people want. Maybe not all of that backstory will work its way into each DM's adventure, but it's there for everyone if they need it.

At Last! Pond-Oriented Worldbuilding

Finally, back to throwing rocks into ponds. I imagine the pond as the size of the worldbuilding project. The rock is the place where the party arrives and changes the world in some way. The trick is to write only the section where the rock lands, or at least to accomodate any option. You can do this in three ways:

1. You can shrink the pond into a rock-sized aread (that is, you narrow the size of the setting),
2. You can guide their hand (railroading the plot), or
3. You can offer the players a huge pond, so that no matter where they land, the effect is a small splash (a commercial, kitchen sink setting).

My recommendation is you keep it small to start.

The world really only needs to be big enough to envelop the actions your players take, and to show the first ripples. Think about how many areas you need to detail/fill with water for a world to work like that. Ideally, it's just the space right under the rock where the players meet the world, plus little ripples nearby. In fiction, that's exactly the amount of worldbuilding you need, as John Harrison suggests, since the author guides the reader's viewpoint every step of the way. In gaming, you need a margin of error to account for player actions and decisions.

For most campaigns, you get the most dramatic campaign with a narrow focus. Any splash seems larger in a smaller pond than in the ocean. With a narrow focus, the only worldbuilding you need to do is what the DM and

players need for a very limited time period: the first few adventures in a campaign setting. For the most powerful impression, avoid the kitchen sink. Stick to a particular genre, a particular conflict, a particular kingdom and make it matter (see Ed Greenwood's essay, *On the Street Where Heroes Live* on page 46).

Set-up

I recommend setting clear limits on character types: ask players to stick to a subset of the core classes. Barbarian, ranger, druid, and bard define a setting,— and so do fighter, paladin, cleric, monk, and wizard. If you make 31 flavors available, be sure that your players will try to use at least that many ("I'm a half-dragon Aundairian wizard with halfling scout levels"). I exaggerate, but not by much.

Likewise, you may get a more focused party (and tighter connections to other setting elements) if you restrict PC races to human plus one or two others. Zobeck, for instance, is really about humans, dwarves, and kobolds. Everything else is a bonus.

Tight Focus

Most of what constitutes "worldbuilding" in RPG products is padding, things that give a sense of the setting without being in any way useful to anyone. Padding makes it sound more negative than it really is; flavor, short fiction, and epic histories all add to the reading experience, to the broader understanding of the setting, and to the DM's fun of running the game. Just because something isn't "useful" doesn't mean it's not fun. You can build a huge pond with waterfalls and bridges and duckweed and streams. But don't be surprised if your players stick to their own little lily pad.

As a hobby, worldbuilding eats up as much time as you want to devote to it. If your time is limited, direct the vast majority of design time squarely at the gameplay elements, such as flashy feats, deadly monsters, dangerous terrain, new spells. I don't just mean crunch, of course: plot twists, planned set pieces, handouts, lines of dialogue that reveal crucial information, or the details of traps and treasures are critical ways to show what the world is like. As long as the players will see it, it's worth your time. If you have time left over to write a creation myth, a centuries-long history, a set of extinct creatures, or a lost form of magic, great.

To avoid either overdoing the backstory or undercooking the flavor, nail your worldbuilding early. Use a one-sentence bit of logic for the world or each major region. Keep a set of actions in mind that fit into that narrow tube called "Playtime at the Table." Know your big idea, your tone, and your story goals, and let things proceed from that. If you are good at improvisation, I would say spend your time on plot and tone, and ignore the historical, the mercantile, and the mechanical sides of worldbuilding.

The easiest method starts with a single village, city, or kingdom. Deliberately ignore the rest of the world until the party asks about it or is ready for it. "I'll tell you about that next week" is always an acceptable answer. Invent the ancient empires and the lost form of magic when the party is ready to go find their dungeons and loot them. Then have the new magic burned into their brains by the last surviving ghost of their archmagi. But leave the epic sweep out of all your initial plans. Epicness shows up on its own soon enough, if your villains and their current plots get most of your attention.

Conclusion

Players find a world irresistible if it offers them immediate hooks to act heroic from the first time they gather together, and just enough detail to keep them coming back. DMs love a setting if it offers them endless stories to tell, without the minutiae that just clutter their ability to keep a campaign moving.

Action is your secret friend in worldbuilding: set (real or figurative) boulders on top of cliffs, leave levers for the DM and players to pull, string high-tension wire between the major factions – and trust that the gamers' experience will do the rest. Your ultimate worldbuilding goal is always to create a powder keg that the heroes inevitably explode or preserve through their actions.

Worldbuilding for MMOs

A patron asked, "How do you think the creative process differs for MMORPGs? From a design perspective, it seems like the worst of all worlds. You need to start out with a (nearly) complete world from the get-go, expecting that every nook and cranny, every hook, every NPC will be explored by the players."

I know a lot of MMORPG designers who used to be RPG designers. Their complaints show some of the differences.

The main thing is the built-in limitations of the launch code; the game starts as a collection of well-defined (or if you prefer, heavily railroaded) adventures. Art assets are hugely important; if there is no animation of the action, you are stuck writing around it.

At the same time, MMORPG designs are really about the hundreds of small set pieces (the quests), plus enabling players to set up and play among themselves (guilds). The crunch is, oddly enough, secondary to the art and software assets and what the engine enables.

Some of the paper RPG designers seem to enjoy the highly scripted nature of MMORPG design (trigger/asset/text string, repeat). Others seem eager to find ways around those limits. Which sounds a lot like the WotC/indie split in tabletop design.

6
Pacing

January 29, 2007

Pacing combines a feel for what's going on at the table with an understanding of what events generate momentum, and which ones tread water, no matter how flashy.

Pacing

This topic was a bit of a nightmare for me, because pacing is not really a design element at all.

In books and movies, the author or the screenwriter has complete control over the pacing. The audience sees what the writer describes, full stop. In adventure design, the designer has almost zero control over the pacing. Instead, the DM and the players control the speed at which things unfold.

Neither the DM nor the players control pacing absolutely as an adventure plays out though. That's why this topic gives me fits. Design controls or mitigates flaws in mechanics, presentation, and challenge. Pacing in RPGs is a matter of improvisation, intuition, or feel.

Definition

Let's back up a second. What is pacing? It is that rate at which "things happen" in a narrative or adventure. It is not a mechanical elemental, but it is crucial to successful narratives, including RPG adventures. If things happen too slowly, players get bored and tend to start wandering off in search of their own entertainment. If things happen too quickly, they get confused and irritated.

Good pacing requires advancing the plot toward a finale quickly enough to keep everyone entertained, without leaving anyone behind. Which is fine, as far as it goes. The tricky question is, what are the things that happen to increase or decrease the pace?

Combat and Pacing

Since RPGs are action-heavy, you might be excused for thinking that "things happening" means combat. When the heroes fight, lots of stuff happens: attacks, spells, and saving throws are all important changes to their strength and resources. This is a misunderstanding of pacing, though.

Combat influences pacing by creating a sense of motion. This can be an illusion. A whole session of fighting might still leave the PCs no closer to the adventure goals. This will only frustrate them. The elements that really affect pacing are the story results, of combat, of roleplaying, or any other type of scene.

Why this distinction between story and combat? Because for pacing purposes, the information that matters about a combat is whether the party defeated a foe that figures in the larger adventure arc. Random encounters are meaningless to the plot, which is why they are usually left out of good designs. They are a quick sugar fix for combat junkies, but they put the adventure on hold. Nothing happens to advance the adventure during a random encounter; this is why good design tends to avoid them entirely. They're filler.

> "*More time spent on combat resolution actually means less time spent on maintaining a pace of adventure events.*"

When the party wins a fight, they may learn something from a prisoner, they may follow the tracks of a retreating monster, they may even gain a treasure that tells them something crucial about their mission. The melee/ranged/spells part of the fight, though, is a sideshow to the adventure goals. Third Edition D&D combat tends to slow the pace of an adventure rather than speeding it up; combats take longer than they did in 1E or 2E, especially against large groups of foes and at higher levels.

Since you know how long a 3E D&D combat can last, be sure it is worthwhile. If you want quick, violent action, consider an ambush of arrows (such as the one in **Castle Shadowcrag**'s hauntings), or a warning shot spell from a villain followed up by a threat (that's really a bluff – the villain runs if called on it). Just say, "You defeat the kobold miners" if the PCs take on foes that are beneath them rather than breaking out the battle mat.

This is in no way intended as a knock on combat-heavy game sessions or a plea to run adventures without combat. I'm not saying don't run combats. I'm saying choose your combats carefully, and make sure they carry a little dramatic weight: the win or lose of the combat is about more than who's tougher, it's about who deserves the sword of the Kobold King, for instance.

Combat is exciting for its own sake. It gives players a chance to show their power, and it is the single best reusable obstacle to throw at the PCs as they fight to reach their adventure goals. However, it is just an obstacle, not the goal itself, and you need to be sure it doesn't overwhelm your game. More time spent on combat resolution actually means less time spent on maintaining a pace of adventure events. And events drive adventure pacing.

Events and Pacing

As a DM, you already know that events and scenes move an adventure ahead: you may even have felt that too much combat "bogs down the story." There's a good reason for that feeling. You need time at the table for both the adrenaline rush of combat and the steadier thrill of plot-linked events. Those events constitute the "why are we fighting" part of the game.

Standard events that keep the pace quick include initial hooks, a crucial dialogue, item discoveries, clues, betrayals by NPCs, new information, getting lost, and increasing stakes that the party fights for. All these "things happening" keep the players focused on the adventure.

Take, just as a random example, a shadowy castle adventure that features five major flashback scenes, a finale scene, and a dozen "shadow events." The party perceives the adventure happening depending on how quickly those five major scenes happen: the shadow events are, like random encounters, filler to keep the party on their toes. If you run short games, you could use a simple hook and run one flashback per game session, ending with the last flashback and finale in the fifth session. The pace would be steady throughout.

A better alternative might be to run it in four parts:

1. The hook and first flashback in the first session,
2. A flashback, some shadow events, and lots of NPC scenes,
3. Two flashbacks and more shadow events, ending with a cliffhanger,
4. The final flashback, finale combats, and success/failure scenes (no filler).

The first two sessions contain one major scene each; the second two contain two and three major scenes each. There's a sense of "more happening" in the later games. Better still, if you reveal that the castle is in danger of sliding into shadow in the third session: that raises the stakes.

The Expansion Phase of Play

Players always look for shortcuts and simplifications of the scenario, while you as DM look for complications, misdirections, and expansions to draw out the game. This is normal. If the players knew where the big villain and the treasure hoard were, they would go there and be done with it. But the more you add options (new courtyards, the mines, hunting the werewolf lord, the treacherous dwarves) beyond the original goal, the more you force the players to expend resources, think things through, and act as heroes.

When there are no more clues, rooms, or monsters left, the expansion phase of the adventure is over. Your players are ready for the finale.

The Secret of *Castle Shadowcrag*'s Pacing Structure

Shadowcrag superficially looks like a location-based adventure. To some degree it is. Visiting every room in the castle and every passage in the mines is a waste of time from the player perspective (or a valuable expansion and drawing out of party resources, if you prefer). The real structure is entirely contained in the hook, the first character introductions, the five flashbacks, and the finale sequence. Everything else is padding, to some degree.

Now, padding in a novel or supplement is usually a waste. Padding in an adventure serves a purpose: it gives the party somewhere to spend their resources, goals to meet beyond the main goal, and a sense of exploration and the passage of time. Some of the non-core, padding encounters are a ton of fun, either in combat or roleplaying terms. The groom Zarek is a blast to play, for instance, and likewise the werewolf lord—though neither is part of the core path to the adventure goals.

You can run **Shadowcrag** in as little as 8 major scenes: hook, dwarves/Zarek at the castle, a quick set of flashbacks, and the finale. That's the secret core of the structure. But I would not necessarily recommend it. In good adventures, just playing the important bits may miss the point. Padding serves a mechanical purpose by using up resources. It also creates opportunities for encounter variety and changes in the pacing.

Variety

Gamers like to perfect their skills, doing the same thing over and over until they have got the perfect combat tactics down, or the perfect stealth combo, or whatever. That feeling of mastery is a good thing. You should definitely encourage it rather than trying to deny it with a petty "Oh yeah – try this!" encounter.

However, mastery can quickly turn to boredom. Vary the formula just enough so that players never feel they are grinding through a level, and that each new encounter is a discovery. Lull your players into a false sense of security with the shadow events or friendly ghosts or repetition in **Castle Shadowcrag**, and then spring something completely different on them (such as having Silverwing talk to them, or having Evander change alignment, or what have you – the adventure is full of twists).

Front-Loading

One way to reduce the combat burden and meet party expectations is to start each adventure session with a short combat. Just saying, "Roll initiative" gets everyone's attention, and means you're not wasting time.

This is related to hooks. I did a whole discussion of Hooks and inciting incidents (published on the WotC site). I won't repeat that discussion other than to say, it's best to start each adventure with action, either combat (such as a boarding action by Imperial troops to a capture a princess) or an intense

roleplaying episode (such as the deadly aftermath of a raid, when Luke finds his foster parents dead). Grabbing everyone's attention prevents the deadly "slow start," which can turn into a slow game overall.

As the DM, you can experiment: For example, you could start your first sessions of **Castle Shadowcrag** with the party already traveling in the forest, and begin with the shadow fey/mastiff ambush sequence at sunset. Novels and films often start *in media res* because it grabs attention. It sets a quick pace, because the players must scramble to catch up with events, and that immediately draws them into the action and carries them along with it.

Doing it every game session is overkill, but I find an early combat is surprisingly effective. It promotes a quicker pace of play throughout the session.

Cliffhangers as a Resting Place

Ending a session with a cliffhanger is a good way to encourage attendance at the next game, and to keep players thinking ahead. This is especially true if, for instance, your "problem player" is the one who caught by Vasilios Stross' exquisite suffering touch ability and dragged down into the dungeons, or if a character is caught by the explosion of the dark stalker's death in the kobold mines. Leaving a character in deadly peril is the best cliffhanger, but sometimes a crucial saving throw can also be a good time. "You hear the last of the shadow fey's arcane speech. Next time, we roll your Will save against her seductive magic. Thanks, that's it for this week."

You can see why players might come back. The early serial movies were totally right about the use of cliffhangers. Be shameless. Leave them hanging after the first or second session of a new adventure.

Increasing Speed by Raising Stakes

While you can create the illusion of a fast-paced session by just stringing together combat on top of combat, you will set a more compelling pace by combining physical danger to the heroes with an increase in the stakes. For dramatic reasons, your opening hook should never, ever be the main threat of the adventure. If the PCs hear the main threat in the first scene, there is no way to increase the threat. It is better for the opening menace to be just a part of the threat.

For instance, if they are out to find a lost artifact, they learn from a dying foe that the artifact will soon be destroyed. They may learn that the destruction of the artifact will do far more magical damage than they suspected, or that a PC's mentor has already tried to find the artifact, and been captured.

The typical methods for raising the stakes are to set a timer on the adventure, threaten a wider disaster, or make the danger more personal. Every time you up the stakes, the pressure on the players increases. This makes the

adventure both more compelling and makes it seem "faster."

Variable Pacing for Investigative Adventures

Typical fantasy adventures assume a pace where adventures (and sessions) start with a compelling incident, grow quickly more intense, and end with a bang. I call this "avalanche pacing." It certainly works very well for sword and sorcery.

For mysteries and horror scenarios, I prefer for the players to set the pace, poking into corners or not as their curiosity drives them. This is a very languid, punctuated style: events only happen when the players take action, so I call it "triggered pacing." There's no rush except the pressure that players put on themselves, or the timers they discover as they reveal the plot. Different genre, different pacing needs.

Setting Up the Finale

The most important pacing sequence leads up to the finale. Meeting the BBEG for the first time need not happen at the end; he could be hinted at earlier, met in disguise, or he could even be considered an ally earlier in the adventure. But by the time they meet him at the finale, they will want to kill him quick.

Don't let them.

Finale pacing ruthlessly denies the PCs the chance that they so desperately want, which is to hack their hated foe into tiny pieces or to recover the person or item they have been chasing this whole time. Tease mercilessly. Throw minions in their path as they see the villain run or *teleport* away. If they make it into melee, have the foe suddenly *levitate* to force ranged combat. If they finish off the guards, the minions, and the underlings—have the villain (falsely) offer to surrender.

Beyond that, use description and atmosphere and weird terrain and tactics to stall this combat. To feel satisfying, it needs to run longer than the standard "four rounds and done." I usually hope for seven or eight rounds—and if it's part of a continuing series or campaign, the villain may well have a *contingency teleport* or *contingency displacement* or other trick.

Whatever you do, don't let the final fight be "just another combat." Make sure that the villain has lines to speak, or surprising tactics, or an alliance in an unexpected place. Pull out all the stops to challenge the players tactically and surprise them in narrative terms (see Nicolas Logue's essay *Stagecraft* on page 41).

Denouement

There's a reason that **Lord of the Rings** shows us a lot of the trip to Mount Doom, but hardly any of the trip home. The return trip is boring and anticlimactic. Unless your campaign is all about rations and simulation, I recommend you skip it, gloss over it, and minimize it to keep your campaign

momentum going. If you are a great DM, you will set the hook for the next adventure before the prior session—making sure that the pace of play never falters as players try to figure out "what's next."

Conclusion

Pacing isn't so much design as it is reading the table and noticing when your players are not engaged. To get them back into the swing, use both the quick payoff of combat and the appeal of events that advance the storyline. Combine opening combats, closing cliffhangers, and long finales for maximum appeal.

Player Pacing

DMs can set a pace, or encourage a rhythm of play. But players who want to play out every last detail can slow the game to a crawl. My own personal preference is to move by days, weeks, and months whenever possible. Skip over long overland travel through safe kingdoms, skip over healing periods, skip over periods of research or training. In my game, I like those things to take 5 minutes, unless there's some very good reason to focus on the minutiae. My players sometimes want to prepare something more elaborate.

Players often drag the game out for fear of "missing something" (such as the XP of random encounters or a vital clue). This is illogical, since a good DM will never cheat the party out of the fun bits of action, narrative, and adventure. There are at least three fixes:

Narrative summaries: Just sum up the events as the DM. "Time passes, and you are all healed" works, as does "The sea voyage is uneventful, and a month later you arrive in Newhaven."

Reassurances: Sometimes players just feel that they need every advantage. Gently push the group to move along if they stall for too long. Set events in motion around them when other characters urge them to act "before it's too late" and when oracles and prophecies point to the current time as propitious. Make it clear that too much waiting and planning is a poor choice that strengthens the enemy as much as the party.

Advance the Plot: Give the party some smaller goals before the main event. If the city is under siege, give them tasks to scout and raid the besieger, escort a vital shipment by air, keep the Thieves Guild from gouging panicked buyers of stolen foodstuffs, etc. This keeps players busy and makes a summary or reassurance work.

The design problem with forcing the pace of RPG play is that it can upset the tone of the game and the DM/player chemistry. So it's really hard to predict. Some groups power through stuff in 5 minutes that other groups handle in 3 long sessions. At best, design can ameliorate this with good use of readalouds and side treks.

7

Using and Abusing Misdirection

January 16, 2007

Castle Shadowcrag makes heavy use of misdirection to keep players guessing, and to send the PCs in the wrong direction. This is part of its formula for success and an ENnie nomination.

Players Making Bad Choices

There's a reason to lean on misdirection as a tool: forcing a player to go down a single, unpleasant path is much less fun than being offered a choice of paths and the opportunity to avoid the danger. Being forced into a particular action, area, or routine more than once or twice per adventure becomes a burden to players, who grow to resent it. Being offered a choice is suspenseful and entails risks that the player voluntarily assumes. It's a key distinction when considering the player reaction to an area, trap, or NPC.

One of my few worries about the design of the flashback scenes in **Castle Shadowcrag** was that they are initially a one-way ticket. Worse, they are a ticket to something that the PCs don't control, at some random location they didn't choose to travel to, and buried deep in the past of the setting. Fortunately, these scenes make up for this quickly, because the setting is exotic (novelty is worth a lot to players), plus the party has the chance to learn to manipulate Shadow a little bit in the first scene. As soon as their normal powers are restored in the second and flashbacks, the growing sense of "Hey, we know what that black wind is about" outweighs any sense of "Oh no, not again, we're powerless and confused every time we hear that damn wind." It's a fine line.

Misdirection leads the players to make assumptions that lead to entertaining (but wrong) choices for the heroes. Sometimes it's just about a rose garden: when players notice that the roses change color (they will notice, if you mention it often enough), they start trying to figure out what it means. The shadow fey could answer them, and so might Moira, the insane cleric — but the important thing is that they will try to use the roses. They may burn some detection spells, use Knowledge skills, or simply try to figure them out. Nothing comes of it directly, because the rose color is a symptom, not

a lever of power. The entire garden is a red herring, the simplest form of misdirection, because it doesn't actually *do* anything but draw attention.

Misdirection in Read-Alouds

The obvious place to design misdirection is in the read-aloud text. That's the first impression players get of a character or location. In **Shadowcrag**'s crypts, there's this description of one room:

> *Skulls sit on shelves next to a small shrine. Small silver sickles, white candles, and an empty oil lamp sit on an offering altar. Behind the altar is a painted screen showing a boatman, a river, and a mass of ghosts and zombies in the water – on the far side of the screen is a golden city glowing on a mountaintop.*

> *At the far end is a heap of bones arranged as steps leading up to a chair made entirely of bones. Over the chair hang a tattered black banner and a crossed set of two silvery, untarnished scythes.*

The danger is right there in the open (the scythes are part of a trap), but you will have noticed two things. First, the language leading up to the scythes includes sickles (similar but less dangerous) and is all about the Underworld and the undead. Second, the scythes are "silvery, untarnished" items, which to many players is code for "magic weapon." When I describe the chair of bones in detail, I shift the focus of the description:

> *The chair is made of bones and inlaid with black adamantine runes, showing a carved crown and many names and dates: Kranos Stross, Leander Stross, Adrastus, Haides, Kleitos, Isidoros, Podarge, and a dozen more. The bones themselves include small ones that might be kobold bones, larger human bones, and others that can only be giants, horses or dragons of some kind.*

This follow-up doesn't mention the scythes at all. Players follow up or base their actions based on the highest-priority thing they heard in the readaloud, or the last thing they heard. Highest-priority often means a combat threat or a possible treasure. In a case like the throne, which offers a possible treasure in the shining scythes, the idea is to convince a player to inspect the throne with an Appraise or Search check or to just sit in it.

Fey as a Misdirection-Based Subtype

On a tangent, I have a theory about why adventure design neglects the fey subtype, and why we're unlikely to ever see a "Big Book of Fey" like the **Draconomicon**, **Libris Mortis**, or **Lords of Madness**. The fey creature type succeeds through misdirection: illusion, trickery, and cheating are their main survival strategy, because their hit points are terrible. layers (especially rogues and bards) enjoy these strategies, except when they are used against the party. Part of this is just the difficulty of the mechanics involved (illusions and disbelief are a pain in the neck, even in 3E). Part of it is the irksome nature of having tricksters pulling tricks on you; players naturally prefer to be the ones pulling the tricks in the game, rather than being the butt of fey mischief.

When you overuse misdirection and the fey always get the better of the party, it can grow annoying. Annoyance is a great motivator for players, but for some reason, being annoyed by wussy little fey is a little more grating on heroes than, say, being annoyed by brain-sucking aberrations. There's also the matter of fairness.

Misdirection and Fairness

The ability of the DM to present illusions and hide secret doors means that even when you're describing something to the party, it ain't necessarily so. This can be great fun: Pit traps under woven silk carpets! Illusory chests of gold! A few *mirror image* orcs make the raiders look like a mob!). But it quickly becomes self-defeating. Players don't want to memorize fine points of the disbelief rules. Offering choices and encouraging foolish PC actions is the stronger design approach: you are making the player complicit in his or her own undoing.

> *"Predictability is the enemy of GM style."*

To be fair, you can't offer a choice without any context. Even in the most perfect illusion or trickery, there should be a hint that something is not quite right. This is part of the bargain of fairness; players who ask the right questions or have invested in the right skills or spells can make the right decision. In a way, it's similar to the bargain that mystery novels offer to their readers: even if you don't guess whodunit, a proper mystery (or game situation) should contain hints that seem obvious in retrospect.

It is always fair for creatures within the setting to use misdirection based on magic. This is different from the DM deliberately setting out a red herring; it's more tactical, and often an NPC bases it on their skills and powers. An illusory mob is a fine bit of misdirection by an illusionist. Even a simple *ghost sound* is a good bit of misdirection for a bard who wants to claim that he has allies in the rafters. It's one thing for the DM to point player attention in a particular direction. It's another for NPCs to apply misdirection on their own behalf. You need only be careful with the first form of misdirection.

Treasure Misdirection and Appraise

At some point, characters want to find the loot. You could use Search checks, but they're pretty dull. I prefer a degrees of success list for the interesting treasures (ok, I prefer degrees of success for lots of checks— I blame **Alternity**'s fantastic success system for this.). For instance, the party finds the stuff on tables and under a flagstone with DC 10 and DC 20 respectively. Finding the gems "hidden" by being incorporated into a chandelier requires that they especially search the chandelier or make a DC 35 Search roll. That way, you reward players who think of looking somewhere interesting, and you reward players who do invest in Search ranks by not having to think…

The same applies to the appearance of treasures once found. The Holy Grail should look like a carpenter's cup, not like a gem-encrusted emperor's chalice. A famous holy sword might look like a mercenary's well-used blade, not an officer's parade sword with an emerald-studded hilt. Things aren't what they seem.

Why does appearance matter if the party is just going to take everything and let *detect magic* sort it out? It matters for flavor reasons (players want to hear that treasure is really "the good stuff" and description is part of that) and it matters for those times when they can't carry everything or must flee (for instance, a dragon's cave when a dragon returns to find her mate dead and her eggs being carted off). For another example, characters might need to seize loot before a pirate ships sinks, or as a castle is being dragged off into Shadow… Just like the Search check versus the "description and choice" approach, both approaches reward those who have Appraise ranks and those who just have a good sense of what is truly valuable.

Conclusion

Misdirection keeps the game interesting for you and for your players, by keeping them guessing about where the threats and rewards really lie. You will need a variety of constantly evolving misdirection strategies, as your players will catch on to some fairly quickly. That's when you move to a rotating strategy: lie, lie, tell the truth. As long as you keep them guessing, your players will enjoy the game more. Predictability is the enemy of GM style.

The DM and players have an eternal catch-up between DM expansion of the play space (with misdirection, emphasis on different skills, etc) and players narrowing the play space (as they learn all your tricks and optimize against them). This is why I run a 50/50 mix of homebrew and published materials: it keeps the players guessing whether a scenario is based on my own style, or someone else's.

8
Monster Hordes:
Epic Heroism vs. Smooth Skirmishing

August 7, 2007

"No one will remember today except that two stood against many. I ask you, Father Crom, grant me victory, grant me revenge. And if you will not grant them to me; then the hell with you!"

—Conan the Barbarian (1982)

You know the classic scene. Conan lifts his broadsword and wades into battle. He slashes down foes by the handful! Hail Crom!

In books and films, the epic stand against overwhelming odds is a fantasy staple. On the tabletop, it's a rarity. While 3rd edition D&D characters can have Cleave, the DMG says they shouldn't have too many opportunities to use it.

Page 49 Says "No Way"

3E has a chip on its shoulder about using too many monsters to challenge the heroes. It calls out the problem in the DMG encounters section, page 49, where it says any encounter that has more than twelve creatures relies on monsters that are not a sufficient challenge. And thus, the table lists no ELs for large groups of foes.

This is problematic for heroic fantasy. Feats like Cleave depend on having large numbers of weak foes. The 3E suggestion to avoid encounters with more than twelve foes eliminates at least three fun encounter types, namely nuisance encounters (a gang of thieves), mooks-as-terrain, and the fun of massive, epic brawls. It eliminates the "defying the odds" brand of heroism.

Mass epic combats are not encounters for evvery game session, but occasional swarms of brittle or weak foes should be part of any decent campaign. They can play to PC strengths, and they can give a major villain an army of minions that at least *look* impressive. The rules solution to making large numbers work is to use swarm/mob rules (e.g., the mob scene in **Castle Shadowcrag**) or to streamline the die rolls as needed. The DMG is right in one regard: large numbers of foes can slow down combat to a crawl, and they are a challenge to design properly and to DM properly. Here are some suggestions for making epic battles worth the extra effort.

How to Handle Hordes

The DMG prohibition is meant well, because it is meant to maintain a combat challenge. It's limited advice; weak undead in particular are useful in droves because they can burn off Turn attempts. A large number of monsters aren't meant to be a combat encounter at all. Instead, it is a roleplaying encounter in which the numbers are just a threat or scenery, or the numbers are part of the terrain, meant to keep the party from catching up to the fleeing master villain. This is certainly the case in **Six Arabian Nights**, which has at least two adventures where bystanders or crowds of monsters make encounters more challenging. Crowds are a useful tool; but how can you make them work in practice?

One Stands for Many

My favorite trick is to have three or seven kobolds attack a single character and key their attacks off a single die roll. I roll one d20, and then stagger the results up and down. If I roll a 14 and the kobolds have a +1 BAB, the middle roll is 15. Staggering in sets of three might mean a result of 12, 15, 18 – meaning that one kobold hits an AC 17 fighter, or two kobolds hit an AC 15 rogue, and all three hit the AC 12 wizard.

For a set of five attackers, I might stagger in sets of two. The same roll of 14 and a +1 BAB would yield a result of 11, 13, 15, 17, and 19. The AC 17 fighter is hit twice, three hit the AC 15 rogue, and four hit and likely kill the AC 12 wizard.

This approach has the advantage of being fast, and you can attack three melee characters with minimal die rolls (three for monsters with a single attack form). In the case of monsters with multiple attacks (claw/claw/bite being the classic ghoul example), you can still go through a round of monster attacks with just nine attack rolls against three PCs, rather than 27 or 45.

The downside is that the monsters do have a "good round" or a "bad round" against each PC. If your one roll is high, the PC might be hit by four or five foes in a single round, taking lots of damage and possibly multiple saves. If the roll is low, a single foe or none might hit the PC. It's a crapshoot. I like this effect, as it reflects a horde either overrunning a hero from all sides, or hesitant and fearful, but it is more dangerous for heroes. One attack roll of 20 can lead to multiple confirmed criticals and a dead hero in a hurry.

The Swarm Subtype for Mobs

Whether it's masses of rats, zombies, or villagers, the Swarm subtype works pretty darn well. Treat the mob or menace as a single creature. When it takes enough damage, it stops acting like a mob and returns to individuals.

This mechanic is especially nice if you have Good-aligned players driven by an urge to protect the innocent. You can twist the knife if the mob contains

women, children, and innocent bystanders caught up in the moment. The NPCs might be wracked with guilt (giving clerics or others a chance to console and absolve them), and the PCs might feel bad about having to stop the mob with fire and sword.

Cleave and Be Damned

Declare a house rule that anyone can cleave a creature of 4 CR lower than a character's class level. They are not getting much XP at this point, and there's precedent in the old 1E rule that creatures below a certain number of HD could always be cleaved.

Single Point of Failure

Mobs should usually have a single ringleader or officer. If the party can reach him (which should be difficult) and kill him, they may break the morale of the rest. Worst case, if the party inflicts heavy damage, the mob leader may decide to cut his losses and sound an orderly retreat while dragging some unconscious PCs with them as hostages. Give the party a head to chop off, but make sure that it's not a hydra. One leader who may or may not be in line of sight is plenty. Make it clear that there is a single "big" leader (who could be a Small size evil gnome, but you take my point).

> *"Think of a crowd as terrain that separates the heroes from the Big Bad."*

As long as that second creature is a single foe, the party can try to knock him out with a spell or focused melee efforts. If that second creature is a group of monsters spread around the battlefield, there's no way to easily contain the big guys' special attacks or firepower. For more experienced players, I'd recommend making the leader hard to Spot, possibly magically hidden, or disguised. Some leaders should be cowards exactly because they know they are prime targets.

Flee!

The best solution is to describe and show the whole horde but functionally only use 15 or 20 foes. When those enemies are defeated or the single point of failure dies (and the heroes remain undaunted), the 50 or 100 others lose heart and retreat. They might trickle away at first for a round, then mostly disappear, then outright throw down their weapons and surrender, depending on the party's style. Intimidate checks are appropriate for convincing a foe to surrender.

Crowd Rules

I've written crowd rules a couple of times, in **Al-Qadim**, for the **Book of Roguish Luck** (Malhavoc Press), **Castle Shadowcrag**, and elsewhere. A simple movement penalty is a great start: if the crowd is hostile, the party should always count as flanked, and it should always count as difficult terrain

(imposing a movement penalty). Think of a crowd as terrain that separates the heroes from the Big Bad. Using a crowd as a grappling foe works. You may want to permit Intimidate checks for a hero to force the crowd to part for him.

If the mob is truly fast moving, require Balance checks or a hero suffers trampling damage underfoot. This sounds a little strange, perhaps, until you remember that death by trampling in a mob happens in the real world all too often.

Beyond mechanics, remember the important flavor element and describe the feel of the bloodthirsty mob. This can unnerve a player; describing "12 orcs with spears" is setting up bowling pins. Describing a tribe of "50 hobgoblins advancing as a phalanx, spears leveled, large shields interlocked," is something else.

Crowds can be menacing, dragging people down to be trampled to death. Crowds with weapons are called armies. Make them sound dangerous; the weight of numbers is a heroic challenge.

How NOT to Handle Hordes

Some approaches to mass combat are sure to fail, and others must be handled with extreme care. Here's some to avoid:

"Unhomogenousness"

Trying to run a crowd of goblins or ogres with different ACs, weapons, or initiatives is a mess. For all hordes, standardize everything, including hit points. These are faceless evil minions; differentiating them is counterproductive. All flying monkeys of Oz are identical for game purposes. Hordes should be faceless.

Waves of Foes

A party that meets a few enemies, fights them, and then draws in more and more foes from the surrounding barracks or caves is more likely to end with a TPK than the party that sees all the foes at the Black Gate at the same time. The problem is that once the players commit to the fight, even smart players are reluctant to retreat. The size of the horde must be obvious from the start.

Strong Mooks

Masses of foes should be pathetically weak. I suggest a CR at least 4 below the party level (and 5 or 6 lower is much better). They should be slow, and have terrible attack rolls, and low damage. Why? Because they will quickly separate PCs and have eight attacks per round against them. A horde encounter lasts more rounds than a normal, one-strong-monster encounter because it takes longer for the party to fight many foes. Their magic can't turn the tide, even if it can burn off masses of enemies.

If your mooks are too strong, the PCs can't kill a single one quickly. The

hp total for a single more-or-less average foe should be in the range that the party's best fighter can dish out in one or two rounds. The fighter should knock down at least one foe per round. With 20 foes, the fighter will knock down half in ten rounds. It's heavy going.

Nothing But Numbers

It's easy to get lost in the initiative and number-crunching with masses of foes. Roll dice, determine damage, roll again, and keep it moving.

This is a mistake.

Every round choose half the combatants for "flavor duty." Describe how those ghouls work together to drag a paralyzed PC off the field, licking their lips with long forked tongues. Or describe how a half-dozen spears all jab at Sir Abelard the Paladin — and all miss, turned aside by his magical armor. Remind the party every round that they are outnumbered. Sometimes, that weight of numbers will convince a party to withdraw, or to use better tactics than "we fireball and charge."

This need not be entirely a DM thing. If you have a player you trust with that sort of description (i.e., someone who won't bend descriptions to favor the players), give them the assignment of providing a 10-second burst combat description for one PC each round. That way, everyone gets some glory, and you can keep crunching numbers.

Conclusion

There's no reason not to occasionally throw mobs of stuff at the party. Players will soon learn that sometimes that mass of crocodiles should be avoided. Smart parties will find a way around some hordes. Sometimes that mob of foes can be outwitted instead of outfought (illusionists and bards live for this crowd-based stuff and even clerics can use *enthrall* to good effect against a mob). Sometimes a party just wants to wreak massive havoc with the feats and area spells that do exactly that. If you set it up properly, you can make a great impression without completely bogging down your game.

Other Rule Variants for Waves of Combatants

Waves of foes can be fun when low-powered creatures arrive, are defeated, and (this is crucial) give the party just enough time to recover or get creative before the next wave hits. Mid-to-high level heroes have a lot of spells and firepower available, enough to take out lots of mooks and minions. Waves stagger the attack, so that no particular spell takes out a majority of the foes. Everyone has a chance to shine.

The Green Ronin book **Skull and Bones** has a twist on this, namely giving the mook monster all the firepower, attack bonus and AC of a normal creature, but hit points equal to their Constitution. A 10th-level town guard can still hit a PC in a town brawl, but he does go down very quickly when hit. This is ideal for minions who brawl in town, and for balancing offensive and defense. (The mooks have a chance to hit, which, say, goblins never would).

One last option Monte Cook suggested: make all rolls in advance to avoid fumbling with dice. This allows for a very large battle, though it falls apart after 15 rounds or so. If you combine this with Excel and the staggered dice rolls mentioned above, you could reduce the time spent rolling and emphasize the tone and tempo of the combat itself.

9

Stagecraft:
The Play is the Thing

by Nicolas Logue
February 11, 2008

Ah, roleplaying. What exactly is this wonderful addiction? Why do we do it? How does the fun grab us by the deepest reaches of the soul and never let go? What exactly are we looking for when we sit down with our friends on a Friday night with gallons of our sugary beverage of choice, and enough snacks to slam us right into diabetic shock?

Could it be the dice? Could it be that rare escape from bills, nine-to-five, and all the real-world drudgery? Especially with a jaunt into the liberating days of high adventure where all that matters is the good cold steel in your hand and fire in your heart. Maybe it is the feeling of triumph as you face down a demon overlord in the bowels of the Abyss. Maybe it is the fits of laughter that sneak up on the table when the dice take a dive at the most hilarious of times.

Drama. The play is the thing. For a few hours a week we get together and tell great stories with the help of our best friends and our luckiest dice. We are part audience, part actor, part writer, and all fun.

The number crunching rush ("I just did 245 points of damage!") is part of the fun, but the numbers doesn't really come alive without a gripping tale to back it up. That natural 20 means so much more when you roll it against the evil Duke who destroyed your village and crushed your character's happiness like an egg shell.

To tell great stories in our games, let's take a look at how the pros do it. Screenwriters and playwrights boiled down the art of story craft to a few essential components. Mastery of these intrinsic storytelling elements comes in handy when we step behind the DM screen. Let's explore some of the basics of conflict and drama though the most elementary pieces of a play or script. We can steal them to inject vibrant drama into our games and to bring our great stories to life.

Structure of the Story

Before you draw your dungeon, or stat up those NPCs, sketch out a rough adventure plot structure. Novelists, playwrights, and screenwriters employ the following structural elements, so let's bring them to our wild world of fantasy gaming. There are three: the *inciting incident*, the *revelation*, and the *climax*.

The Inciting Incident

An inciting incident is the pebble that brings on the avalanche: that moment in a play or movie that if it didn't happen, the rest of the story would never occur. It's not always the first scene in the play, but it can be. It's an important moment that drives the rest of the story into high gear and sets the central conflict into motion. The inciting incident is hard to quantify. It's worth trying. Understanding the nature of the inciting incident can give the DM a powerful sense of how to introduce conflicts and storylines to a regular weekly game.

What's the inciting incident in **Hamlet**? Some people say it's the appearance of Hamlet's father's ghost. Truly though, the central conflict of Hamlet is between young Hamlet and his Uncle Claudius, a tale of revenge that ends in multiple tragic deaths. Therefore the inciting incident is the moment when the ghost of Old Hamlet reveals the story of his betrayal and murder to young Hamlet. Now we're cooking with gas. We've got a conflict; we've got drama. Hamlet's no longer moping around and pontificating on his too too solid flesh. He's plotting against his uncle, planning to find out the truth of his father's death and thirsting for revenge. Now that's a story worth telling (obviously, since we've been telling it on stage for hundreds of years).

What will the inciting incident of your next game be? Nail it down; make it pop with tension and drama. Is it the appearance of a ghost with a story to tell about a PC's past? Is it the discovery of a PC's wife in bed with a guardsman loyal to the evil Duke? Is it when the PCs meet a group of mercenary scum "chastising" a serving boy at the local inn with bone-breaking kicks? Pick a real show starter: thrust them into the conflict in a way that makes them grip the story's reins and hold on tight.

The Rising Action

Alrighty, the first scene has us moving. Now what? We need tension. We need a pot to boil, so that come climax time, steam fills the air and the heat is on. Playwrights use these three things to build up the tension and ratchet up the conflict: *exposition*, *complications* and *revelations*.

Exposition

Exposition is the least sexy tool, but sometimes the payoff for a great backstory is worth the time it takes to tell it. Exposition is what happened before that the audience (in this case the PCs) need to know. Exposition sets up villains and foreshadows events to come. The worst, most common way

to do this is have some NPC show up and yap at the party for a long time. It might be cool if your dramatic NPC portrayal rivets them. It could just as easily leave the PCs unengaged, or worse, bored.

Why not take a storytelling convention from the silver screen? Maybe a flashback scene, in which the players take on the roles of characters long dead, and live out an important piece of your adventure's backstory. This great device shifts exposition into present action. Now the players live the drama in your adventure's set-up. When the time comes to interact with villains, places and situations set up in the flashback, they will have a visceral emotional connection.

If you tell the players "Duke Joldras is an evil evil man, he destroyed an entire village when a young priestess from their local shrine refused to marry him." Who cares? But what if you let the players play the young priestess, her secret ranger lover, stern but caring paladin father and plucky wizard best friend, and they live out the horror of this bombastic evil nobleman of great power showing up? They know firsthand that he tried to force one of them to marry him, and then razed the town and brutally murdered them all when she refuses…well, now when they encounter Duke Joldras later in your adventure as the PCs, they will really hate that son of a bitch.

Flashback Story

DMs love to write backstory and exposition. Players can easily lose interest. (See the essay "Pacing.") Exposition through flashback allows the DM to have their cake and make the party eat it too.

Complications

Make the obstacles on the path to your party's objective interesting. Monsters and traps are great and faithful standbys. What else can get between the party and their goal? Natural terrain? Weather? People who can't just be bought or killed?

How about internal conflicts? Consider introducing a small amount of party strife. The goals of the characters may be related, but different enough, that they have to grind some axes among themselves before they decide their best course of action. Bang, now you've got a great roleplaying scene on your hands. So, Duke Joldras who lives in the nearby keep vexes the PCs' community? Great, we go there and kick his ass, 'nuff said, right? Wrong.

What if the Duke holds one PC's brother hostage? Joldras secretly made it clear to this PC that if an adventuring party shows up at his citadel doorstep, he will turn little Jimarn into a frog and hurl him off the highest parapet. In fact, if this PC doesn't reveal the party's plan of attack in advance, he'll turn little Jimarn into a pint-sized vampire. Did I mention Duke Joldras is a vampire…let's make him a vampire, vampires are awesome. Little Jimarn's brother better not tell his friends what's up of course.

Now we have secrets, divided loyalties, and interesting fodder for roleplaying. This PC needs to think fast and persuade his fellows to engage in misdirection when they encroach on the keep, but he can't tell them why. That should be interesting.

Another PC could care less about the Duke. He's after an artifact of power the Duke possesses called the Shadow Stone, because it can retrieve his long-lost wife from exile on the Plane of Shadows. A third PC is dead set on killing the Duke because he murdered her father, animated Daddy's corpse and forced her to smite it down while he had a good laugh at her tears.

Ah, drama ensues. These complications add variety to the usual mix of monsters, hazards and traps. They supply fodder for intense roleplaying between the players. If you've laid the ground work right (and that is the tricky bit – I'll explain how in a moment), you can just sit back and watch the action as the party roleplays out these conflicts, as if you were watching a great movie in the theater. No, better, because you wrote this one yourself.

Revelations

"I'm your father Luke. Take my hand and together we can rule the galaxy as father and son." Yep, that's powerful stuff. Use it. Make sure there are more than a few secrets up the NPCs' sleeves that will slap the PCs in the face.

Maybe the vampire Duke Joldras is the long lost ancestor of one PC, and the only one who knows how to break a curse that has plagued their family line for centuries. The curse ensures that the bride of every male of their clan dies birthing their first son. The PC just married and his beloved bride is pregnant. In the chamber before the Duke's inner sanctum this PC uncovers an old family tree that reveals his relation to Joldras and mentions that the curse began with the old vampire over three hundred years ago. Bang! Drama! Now the PC's whole take on the situation shifts and they must make a hard choice. Slay the Duke to avenge the destruction of their town and whatever the vampire knows about the family curse is destroyed with him. Is vengeance worth the life of the beloved wife? I don't envy that PC, but what a fun role to play.

Summation

Exposition, complications and revelations should present hard choices. These internal conflicts engage players more than the standard ones in adventures (in this case party vs. vampire.) They completely focus on the player's own character, thus making them the center of the story. They add powerful drama to the standard conflict. If these elements build the drama up during the Rising Action, the conflict with the Duke at the adventure's climax can be a lot more interesting than just the plain, "You must die because you're evil!" There nothing wrong with "He's evil," but the Big Bad deserves a bigger slice of hate from the PCs.

The Climax

Pull out all the stops. You built the adventure's tension up. Now it's time for it to explode. Let all the conflicts hit at once.

Boom, the PCs burst into the tower chamber. The evil Duke Joldras has the young brother in one hand, the Shadow Stone in the other, both held over the parapet's edge: "Kill your friends, or I drop your brother to a messy death below! And you there, if you turn and go, I'll give you this bauble, and your wife shall return to our world!" The vampire turns to a third PC and says: "Your son quickens in your lovely bride's womb, but his birth shall be her bloody demise…unless I tell you how to end the family curse."

Conflict! Hard choices! A daring gambit to save a brother and son. Silver tongued attempts to wrest the secrets of the family curse from the cagey old vampire. Heck, the party might even get to slay him instead of turning on each other in folly.

If you planned ahead, you laid down clues early to defeat the villain and end the curse. Perhaps during your flashback exposition scene at the very start. They come to light when the ghost of the young priestess returns to haunt the evil old vampire during this showdown. All the loose ends tie up tightly in a package fraught with action, drama and intense roleplaying.

Not a bad day's work, Mr. Game Master.

Conclusion

If you take a nod from the playwright inside us all, you've probably got a blockbuster on your hands. No, you won't see royalties, but what is fame and fortune compared to the satisfied player smiles at the end of a truly epic adventure? Those Hollywood writers don't know what they are missing. We work in the best medium there is. Now go out there and make it happen.

Lights, camera, dice!

<p style="text-align:center">10</p>

On the Street Where Heroes Live:
Bringing Towns to Life in a Fantasy Campaign

by Ed Greenwood
October 1, 2007

"Tired of dungeons? Well, then; head into town, where the action is!"

The grizzled caravan merchant grins, displaying decayed brown teeth, and points down the road. Just the other side of yonder ridge, waits . . . yet another town. How is this one any different?

Right now, the new town in the campaign is just a name on a map: a place where the PC adventurers want to resupply, get healing, buy some better weapons, and see if they can somehow sell six basilisk scales and a severed leucrotta paw that doesn't smell too good. The DM wants to hit them with *The Secret of the Fanged Temple*, from a magazine he bought at the last convention.

Obviously the town is a necessary place, but it is still just a name on a map. Let's call it Yonder. Despite the waiting nastiness of that fanged temple, the GM secretly wants the PCs to stay for a bit, so he doesn't have to frantically map and create faceless town after faceless town along this road they insist on riding along, no matter what, heading nowhere in particular.

How can he make Yonder come to life? It should be memorable enough that the PCs will want to tarry, without turning it into a grim-foreboding, over-the-top Hollywood movie set.

The Basics

First, consider the bones of the place: the main-streets map and major industries. Creeks, wells, and horseponds; bridges; mills; market square; major intersections; castles or grand buildings of any sort; and notable landmarks such as gibbets, leaning tavern signs, sites of never-failing magical motes of light that dance or appear to burn, and hauntings. Name an inn or other place to stay, note the bed rates, stabling, what food and drink the PCs can get and

the name and looks of who will serve it, and start playing. It's not subtle, but on rare occasions sufficient, unless the PCs are being chased through it at top speed by something deadly.

The only way to shirk these basics is to enshroud the place in impenetrable fog, install an officious local watch to keep PCs from exploring, and provide the PCs with just exactly what they most need (imagine a handy inn next door to a temple of priests waiting to heal). If that's what Yonder provides and you tempt the party with at least one local treasure tale, the adventurers won't stay long. The tale might be "Folk are being murdered by a flying knife that can get into the most tightly-locked chamber" or "The king's zombie-chasers are here, destroying the undead that keep crawling out of the ruined castle—and looking for whoever keeps causing them to rise and walk." With the local innkeeper or tavern master installed as the tale-teller, complete with colorful looks and accent to match, they'll see the hook and be out of town by sunrise.

Yet if there's no fog nor chase, you will certainly need more. Look and feel, for one thing: what does the place smell like? What's the skyline? Is Yonder a small forest of smoke-belching forge chimneys, or is it a cluster of overgrown shacks clustered around a way-stables, a shrine, and an all-goods shop? Are the streets dirt, cobbles, or something more formal? Do they wind as if they "grew" that way, or are they laid out in a deliberate design? Are they deserted, or bustling, or bristling with uniformed lawkeepers?

Think up a few faces and names of those lawblades or shopkeepers. Unless this is a ghost town or everyone is overgrown with the same mysterious fungus, you will need some descriptions, at least a name and a single defining trait for each.

The Locals

The deeper, too-often-neglected secret that shifts Yonder from a name on a map to a place people call home: the locals. Who dwells in Yonder, and what do they do for a living? Are they happy? Rich? Poor? Why? Where do they get their food? Is the place a simmering cauldron of feuds, or does it stand on the howling edge of open bloodshed (just waiting for PCs to come along and tip things into open warfare)? Does a faith or faiths dominate town life? (And if the clichéd secret cult operates behind all those blandly smiling faces, why is it still secret until the PCs blunder along?) Why are the local crazies considered crazy? Is the place growing, or dying? (Which leads again to why: why are people dying off or leaving, or aching to come here?)

Back to the folk who are here right now, standing with hands on hips watching the PCs ride in. Are they smiling (pleasantly or otherwise)? Scowling in dislike? Or looking wary or fearful? Again (to quote little Cindy Lou Who) "Why, Santy Claus, why?"

Every local inhabitant is either drifting along through life, or working too hard to look up and think—or they have aims and dreams and goals. Things they want to achieve, and opinions about what should happen in future (and what probably will happen, instead). In other words, if PCs are openly serving or on the side of the king or the local lord or temple, they may be hated, feared, or welcomed, depending on recent past events and the resulting attitudes of the locals to authority.

Answering the Questions

Truly, Yonder is a place of many questions; let's have a stab at some answers. Not that there are necessarily any "right" answers, but for every town you are detailing some answers go well with other answers, to make Yonder seem believable. Some answers make Yonder seem appealing as a home or at least a base from which adventurers sally forth to adventures elsewhere (but want to return to); and and others make Yonder come alive and generate ongoing player interest in local events.

Let us step back for a moment from Yonder, sprawled in its green, leafy, vaguely medieval fantasy-campaign valley, and consider it as the setting of a long-running television show.

Yes, a TV program. Done shuddering? Right, onward.

A sitcom, to be precise. Character-based, rather than having Yonder be the blurry, plastic-to-plot-needs backdrop for the antics of just one violent or crazy family or group of bitchily competing neighbors, or the setting for endless murders that have to be solved through intrepid forensics interspersed with car chases.

The Trick of Subplots

Yonder needs subplots. Feuds between neighbors, disputes about who will host the fall harvest festival or be named the next mayor or May Queen, and the little mysteries of who's stealing garters or horses or prize turnips, who's setting outhouses afire in the dead of night, and who is leaving beheaded crows on certain doorsteps.

What makes books memorable is the big scenes of battle or confrontation or heroism—and the characters. What makes television series memorable tends to be, yes, the characters. From soaps to hospital shows to countryside comedies of manners, it's the characters.

A Cornerstone Character

So Yonder needs characters. Not just "that old innkeeper at the Broken Wheel" but Gustable Arondur, owner and master of The Broken Wheel Inn and Fine Table, who limps and aches in damp weather and stares longingly at every red-haired woman he sees, because... Well, yes, the DM needs to know

what in his past aroused this longing; it might feature in play, or might not, but the DM must know. Arondur, who is in awe of elves. Arondur, who despises warriors in the army of the local king but a score-and-more years back was a hero in that same uniform, winning battles hereabouts for the king who was father to the present king.

Why does he never talk of those days, and treats today's soldiery so curtly? Arondur owns all three roominghouses in town and the brothel, too, yet dresses simply and never spends a coin he doesn't have to. Where is all the money going? And who are the masked women who ride into town in the dead of winter and the middle of the night, once a year, to meet privately with Arondur, leaving him gray in the face and shaking when they depart?

Arondur, who can read books peddlers offer him, from lands beyond the sea whose names even they can't pronounce.

Arondur, who is unmarried but keeps an outland girl in his bedchamber who has been blinded and had her tongue cut out. Those who get a glimpse say she is covered in strange tattoos or writing of some sort.

Arondur seems more than a bit over the top, staggering through game sessions with such a load of secrets on his broad, bowed shoulders. Yet Yonder could have a dozen Arondur-types in it; characters who have secrets and pasts and varied interests, both personal and business. Who in town is Yonder's enemy, or at least rival?

For that matter, who in town quietly or openly stands in league with who else? Not every cabal is sinister. From gossips who meet over tea in farm kitchens to the men who drift down to the stables to smoke pipes and grumble about taxes, citizens anywhere will form groups of friends or allies-of-necessity who band together. They may prevent the new mayor from building his own tavern hard by the bridge. Locals will work together until the inevitable disagreements arise. That is when "accidents" sometimes happen that cost a Yonderman or Yonderwoman a barn, a horse, a wagonload of goods, or even their life.

Which brings us to another question: who will investigate such a crime? Not just "the town watch," with certain stats and weapons and numbers, but are we talking bullies? Easygoing, thickheaded buffoons? Eager-for-promotion zealots suspicious of everyone Rulebook-followers? Can they think their way out of a one-seater outhouse, unaided? Are they competent or merely cruel?

The Law and the Lively

The nature of the law changes a place. If Lawcudgel Uldroon is a buffoon or lazy drunkard, is there an Arondur in town who will quietly enact real justice? Is this vigilante feared, and a man of unknown identity ("That demned elusive Pimpernel")?

The law may or may not have the support of the citizenry. Is Arondur operating alone, or can he call on a band of like-minded supporters? If he has a mob or a network of whispering opinionmakers, they may cause "every man's hand to be raised against" a criminal, or even against a notable local who has escaped formal justice.

My PCs Fought the Law

Adventurers by their nature tend to run afoul of (or at least end up closely watched by) the local lawkeepers. As a result, most GMs have a vague idea of what the law looks like in town. Yet faceless professionals in uniform are inherently less interesting than a constable with a name, failings, and hobbies.

"Officer 32" may evoke just as much fear as old Uldroon, but only the locals know that old Uldroon makes his own dandelion wine, loves roast boar and sugared rhubarb-pies. If he also secretly wears silken underthings made for ladies of a certain size and high social standing, Uldroon becomes undeniably more interesting.

Moreover, both players and GMs can find ways to exploit the wine or love of pies—that is, for those traits to feature in adventures. Officer 32 is little more than a stern or shouting force to arrest, slay, or keep order, but Uldroon is alive. From his belches to his socks that need darning to his inability to cook any meat without setting fire to something in his kitchen, Uldroon sticks in memory as a real person.

Just like Arondur, and the handful of other Yonderians the DM has really detailed. The best Yonderians—back to the sitcom—keep showing up, episode after episode, or rather session after play session, to stick their noses into whatever's happening. Their involvement generates humor, a sense of place ("Oh, aye, we're in Yonder, all right!") and eventually player knowledge about who to trust with secrets, advice, or directions.

Player knowledge provides a useful gauge of success. When players around the gaming table start independently suggesting their characters go see Arondur or Uldroon or old Lady Looseskirts at the brothel to ask for rumors, rather than asking the GM out-of-character who in town they should go see, the GM has done it: Yonder has come alive.

Getting It Right

When players look forward to opportunities to roleplay just sitting down in a Yonderian tavern to talk to locals and visiting peddlers over a tankard or two, Yonder has reached the stage of helping to generate new adventures, and the trick is done.

Now, none of this is new. Veteran GMs have been doing it for decades (in my case, 30 years), and every roleplayer knows or senses it. Yet a reminder is always worthwhile: unless PCs ride away from Yonder, never to return,

spending an idle handful of minutes detailing something interesting about the cast of recurring NPCs in Yonder is always worth the time.

Recurring characters provide fertile ground for adventure ideas to spring up, and new plots to come to mind: could old Angrath in the corner be sick and tired of these adventurers? Could he be thinking of ways to get them blamed for something and banished from town? Yonder, deep and rich and colorful, becomes a place that matters to players, a place worth fighting for when dragons or marauding armies or raiding orcs come to town.

One last question: what is more valuable in life than something or someone we care enough about to fight for?

GMs, when you create a Yonder, you are crafting a treasure. Make it valuable.

11
City Adventures

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Love it or hate it, the standard first adventure in D&D is still a traditional crawl, even if it isn't set in a dungeon, caverns, or mines. Adventures in the Demonweb Pits, in a dark lord's castle or palace, or even in a forest are all dungeon crawls: they offer free-fire zones for heroes with massive spells, burst lances, heavy explosive crossbows, and what have you.

I always enjoy the subcategory called "city adventures" because they break the established rules of the D&D combat arena. Unlike dungeons and other secluded locations, city adventures are constantly interrupted by the presence of bystanders and busybodies, by the forces of the law, and by villains hiding among the innocent. They can be wildly unpredictable.

The classic fiction example is Lankhmar and the adventures of Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser, but there are plenty of others in the core D&D setting: the city of Greyhawk, the city of Sigil in **Planescape**, everything in Waterdeep, Ptolus and Freeport. In a certain sense, the biggest cities define the settings, and adventuring there is a logical extension of the dungeon.

City Types and Party Types

To start, you have to decide what kind of adventure you're really dealing with. A city adventure can be all about expectations of behavior. As the designer and DM, you set that standard through what you describe.

Expectations

If the city adventure is set in a standard human city, that's one thing. If it's a dwarven settlement or even a kobold mining camp, the parameters for "expected behavior" are different. It is partly the ability to figure out what is and is not allowed behavior that makes such non-human city adventures (well, all city adventures) fun. Dwarves might have a high tolerance for dueling in the streets or halls, as long as the duel is conducted according to the proper forms. Kobolds might not blink at ambushes, but might also have different ideas of proper behavior during daylight hours.

Weigh the Party

Ideally, a city adventuring party always includes one or more characters who have social skills, Knowledge (Local), enchantment and stealth spells, or psionic powers that allow a party to go around breaking some of the expectations with relative impunity. The party trespasses and commits murder in most city adventures, and it's your job as designer to make sure that this doesn't derail the adventure entirely. If the party is all barbarians, clerics of the war god, warlocks and druids, they may not be the right group for a city adventure. On the other hand, just because there's a bard, rogue, or smooth-talking paladin available in the group doesn't mean that the rest of the party should be ignored.

Contained Violence

The usual default tool for a party trying to solve problems and defeat villains in a city adventure – combat and mayhem – is not part of the code of accepted behavior in most cities. You either need to hide the combat from the citizens, contain it, allow it, or eliminate it entirely. Here are a few strategies:

Cheats

Anyone can place a city adventure in the sewers, in the mayor's jail, or in an isolated wizard's tower. Essentially it's a standard dungeon with a more convenient trip back to town. These aren't the adventures I'm talking about, though sometimes it's good to have some locations where you expect big combats to take place. I call those locations "ghettoes," in the older sense of the word: a place where a minority must live by law, whether they are rich or poor, as in the ghettoes of Venice or Prague.

Ghettoes

Noir crime novels often put their bar brawls, daylight murders, and body-dumpings in "the bad part of town." There's no reason not to use this same dodge in fantasy cities. If your players pretty much expect combat every session and their PCs prefer to beat answers out of prisoners, they may not be the ideal party for city adventures anyway. But make sure that the informers, witnesses, crime lords, monsters, and vile cultists all live in an identifiable part of town. For good examples, I recommend reading the **Thieves' World** books by Lynn Abbey and Robert Aspirin, or any of Fritz Lieber's **Lankhmar** stories.

In the Free City of Zobeck, the kobold ghetto is a place that no respectable human or dwarf visits often, and it is a crowded, dangerous place, full of various kobold mine gangs, silver syndicates, followers of the Red Mask and related cults, and perfectly respectable clockworker kobolds who serve as the protectors and stewards of the city's many gearwork doors, bridges, gates, lifts, and scullions, and devices. All kobolds, though, hold themselves as a breed apart, and are instantly suspicious of anyone who comes to visit them. While

they can pass unnoticed among the rest of town as servants beneath anyone's dignity, no human or dwarf can visit the ghetto without becoming an object of curiosity. This makes it all the more interesting to force PCs to visit, because it means that the kobold rulers instantly take an interest in whatever the party is up to. Any combat in the ghetto is quickly hushed up by the kobolds; people disappear there all the time, and when kobolds die at the hands of outsiders, well, no one wants to talk about that either. It's the perfect place to stage a huge fight that everyone denies after the fact, because it is "out of sight" of respectable society.

Stealth and Limited Combat

Other city adventures are conducted quietly, by night, in disguise or under false pretenses. The party gets to fight incredible monsters because they do it out of sight, and then slip away before anyone asks any really awkward questions such as "Why is there a zombie on my doorstep?" A party actually caught or even just recognized doing stealthy thefts, break-ins, kidnappings, or sewer expeditions at midnight will have a much tougher time explaining themselves to the watch than a group caught in daylight working with a disguise or fast-talking their way in.

Players often overlook the recognition part, but it's the equivalent of robbing a bank and leaving in your own car. Famous heroes who aren't wearing full helmets or hoods *will* be recognized at some point. Then the awkward questions come up again. No high priest of the Sun God wants to hear "Why, exactly, were you in the City Morgue at the witching hour, your Holiness?" first thing the next morning.

Sometimes the fights are unavoidable: the wererats come up out of the sewers, the steam golem starts rampaging through the Arcane Collegium, the angels of death fly down from the Death Goddess temple. Stuff happens. Heroes get an opportunity to save everyone very publicly. These fights are "good" city combat scenes because the party has a free pass to kill monsters, as long as they're saving more of the public than they might harm accidentally. I've always found that paladins, rangers, and certain LG clerics respond really well to these super-hero type scenes. Make it clear that there are bystanders to save.

Pure Investigation

These adventures are not about combat at all: murder mysteries might feature an arrest, but that's about it. Solving a theft or a kidnapping might likewise be done without requiring the party to participate in more than a single combat. These adventures are more properly mysteries than purely city adventures, but the two genres play well with each other.

City Law and Order

The big difference in many city adventures is the ever-present town guard breaking up fights, preventing spellcasting, curing villains, arresting people before the PCs can question them, and so on. City adventures benefit when it's not just the PCs who are trying to solve the city's problems. Ideally, of course, the city watch and the PCs work at cross-purposes a bit, to make the adventure tougher to solve.

Permission for Mayhem

Sometimes, the threat to a city is clear, grave, and immediate, so the prince, mayor, or council gives the PCs free rein to kill the city's enemies. There might be questions about this later if they abuse the privilege, but basically, they have a warrant from the law to do what needs to be done. It's the simplest solution to allow parties to cast *meteor swarm* in the town square.

> "*Maintaining that state of tension between civilization and carnage is what makes a great city adventure.*"

A careless party may start fires, kill innocent citizens, or just drag in the wrong suspect for torture at the hands of a LE ruler. Just because they have permission doesn't mean acting like they're still in a dungeon is smart. Even this fairly relaxed approach to PC limits can feel constrained. It works best for high-level characters. They have a lot more power, so even being slightly constrained feels like a bigger imposition.

Shorten Combat

There's a second category of limited combat: the fight that ends when the Town Watch breaks it up. If a villain cannot be defeated in four or five rounds (or however many you decide), he doesn't need to get away with magic or a chase scene. Instead, the watch comes and arrests him or arrests the party.

Use the Innocent

People in a city will do things that bring them to the party's attention. That you can use to speed up the plot, slow it down, or derail it altogether. Urchins will spy on the party and report back to the villain. Busybodies will tell the party about the illegal dwarven still in the basement. Someone will try to steal the paladin's warhorse.

People in the city have Big Plans, and most of them aren't related to the party's goals at all. I *looooove* derailing city parties this way, with events described at the start of a session. For example:

- Beggars and bards looking for a handout (or do they know something?)
- Heralds carrying invitations to poetry readings by important nobles
- Bells ringing for temples or funerals (who died?)

- Processions by the victorious King's Own Hussars
- Muggings unrelated to the plot (but PCs will often want revenge!)
- Explosive market fairs (the Alchemist's Gathering!)
- Civic and religious holidays (the Anointing of the Mayor, the Blessing of the Fleet)
- Arrival of dignitaries (the elven ambassador and his new wife)

Cities are active places with their own agendas. To avoid derailing a campaign completely you might want to allow the party a Knowledge (Local) check to realize that some of these are "normal" events and unrelated to the adventure at hand.

City Characters

In a dungeon, it's easy to assume that the majority of monsters are evil or at least dangerous. In a city, the majority of characters nearby are totally unrelated to the adventure. How the heck is the party supposed to *find* the villains, much less defeat them in combat? That's often one of the main challenges. Here are a few of the tricks I like to use in city adventures to keep the party guessing.

Paladins and Watch Captains

One of my favorite "bits" for city guards, especially guard captains, is the party nemesis. This honorable sergeant has his eyes on the PCs as no-good, unemployed, vandals and mercenaries. He is always tailing them, questioning people who talk to them, warning others about their shifty ways, and generally making things difficult for the party. Ideally, he's tough, street-smart, and has a high Sense Motive and a strong Will save, to see through Bluff and Diplomacy and to avoid Enchantment spells. A *ring of see invisibility* is a plus.

Nobles, Rogues & Witnesses

You can also make class and status work for you in city adventures, to divide the party. Cities are full of feudal lords and knights who expect a certain amount of special consideration, and who don't expect to answer to lower-class adventurers at all. Likewise, a city's poor or struggling rogues, smugglers, and whores may not feel comfortable talking to lordly paladins, holy clerics, or even to hyper-lawful monks. A bard might be either low-class or high-class, but either way, some ultra-lawful character might object to the "trashy entertainer" and prefer to talk to the honest dwarven sorcerer-scholar. Use NPC prejudices offer a ready excuse for every PC in the party to take point in talking to important NPCs.

Make sure that some of the witnesses or suspects in a city adventure are not the sorts of people who will talk to everyone in the party as equals. Making a smelly, scraggly druid sit in the palace kitchen seems like punishing the player for his character type, but if you spend a couple minutes of the party's palace visit giving the druid a chance to talk to the palace rats, everything usually

works out. Because city life is partly a matter of status and hierarchy, you can make this a chance for high-status characters to strut a little, and lower-status characters to subvert the social order.

PCs invariably ask witnesses to provide information. This seems like a great well of free information, but it's mixed. People forget things, people are greedy, and people are unreliable witnesses at the best of times. Never mind when they are charmed by vampires, extorted by wererats, fading from an illness, or just plain terrified of the local Red Wizards. Roleplaying is built in to many of these encounters. Design your witnesses so that half of them want a side quest or other matter taken care of before they talk. The other half will talk freely, but some of them will lie, cheat, or settle old scores of their own. Sense Motive is helpful in these situations, but it shouldn't be a cure-all. Most practiced deceivers should have high Bluff ranks.

XP for City Adventures

City adventures tend to have lots of roleplaying encounters, skill encounters, witness side quests and the like, and few straight up combats. For this reason, you must design in story awards or encounter-based awards for acquiring information to keep the pace of level advancement reasonable.

I go further than that. Before the game begins, make it clear that you will award XP during city adventures for avoiding unnecessary combats (unless the party is all evil or chaotic PCs). Fighting the town watch should always count as a defeat for the party in an encounter; no XP. This goes a long way to getting the heroes to act heroically in city settings – because the players know that the rewards are there for them, even if they don't fight more than once per game session. It also means that fleeing the Town Watch can become a frequent story element—after any fight or after finding a major clue that offers big XP, the party will be quick to leave the scene, so as not to lose that XP award due to a confrontation with the watch.

Conclusion

A city adventure is different because (unlike other adventure types) it isn't about combat, but about information and precision actions. It demands different skills from both players and designers and a greater emphasis on NPC interaction and legal niceties. You need to manage combat spaces to make the core D&D problem-solving tool part of the fun. Maintaining that state of tension between civilization and carnage is what makes a great city adventure.

12
What Makes a Night *Arabian?*

November 7, 2007

Sinbad, Scheherazade and Saladin. Cinematic action. Deserts, camels, and full-blooded horses. Rocs, cyclops, and a phoenix. Harems, star-crossed lovers, and forbidden romance. Ghuls, genies, bandits, and moustache-twisting viziers.

What really makes an adventure Arabian? How do we define a subgenre? How much is rules, and how much is execution?

It's Not Mechanical

What makes an Arabian adventure work is not rules; it's the story and the flavor that matter. It's the glory of huge treasures and quick death beneath the sands. It's a change of tone and scenery.

That is hard to design well. Anyone can put a sphinx in the desert and run a combat. But why is the sphinx there? What questions can she answer? Is she an oracle? Does she love an androsphinx, perhaps even pine for him? Now we're getting somewhere. Having focused, controlled backstory that drives player action to the center of the story is the trick to a successful Arabian adventure.

Grand, sweeping plots should be distilled down to their essences. Creating new rules or monsters is useful if it supports the scenery and simplifies the action. Creating fun, exotic people and setting them in motion quickly helps a designer capture the storytelling side of the Arabian Nights.

Great, you say, how do we weave this carpet of compelling, exotic story? One strand at a time.

Clear Heroes and Villains

Other campaign worlds stress shades of grey; a fantasy Arabia shouldn't. The appeal of **Sinbad** or the **Thief of Baghdad** is that you know where you stand. Sinbad will sail into terrible danger, and escape it through cleverness and bravery. We know that the lover who recovers great treasures to win the hand of the Sultan's daughter is going to make it. It is the journey that matters.

Villains make straightforward attacks on heroes, without too much dissembling. They aren't skulking — well, the assassins are — but many are quite clearly big bad evil dudes. No misunderstood villains; they really resonate as the power grabber, the manipulative vizier, or the rapacious bandit who really does want your money. All of it.

Player Character Attitudes

Antiheroes are out. Rogues and rascals must have hearts of gold, bandits must have honor, and all true heroes must keep their word. To do otherwise is shameful. No one — least of all the Sultan — will trust a shameful oath breaker. Indeed, the original **Al-Qadim** setting included oathbinding genies as part of the setting, whose task was to magically compel dishonorable characters to keep their word. This sense of personal honor, even for the poorest PC, may drive a party of heroes more than gold.

This is something you need to know about the audience as a designer and know about your players as a DM. Will they go help star-crossed lovers? Will they choose the right thing over greed? Are they idealists or pragmatists? Once you know, you're in great shape. My assumption is that if you want to play in or run an Arabian Nights setting, you have at least a bit of a heroic streak, rather than being purely mercenary.

What About the Rubies?

All this is not to say that player characters can't be greedy. But wealth is a consequence of correct, heroic action. It is not a goal in itself.

This is the hardest thing for players about Arabian adventure: gaining and losing treasures in a hurry. I think a great Arabian campaign hits the heights and the gutter fairly often. Sinbad shipwrecked constantly. Douglass Fairbanks' thief only pretended to be a prince, but he was able to best true princes for love. PC heroes probably aren't fighting for love (it's a tough motive to pin on a party of 4 to 6 characters at once…), but they are able to rise to the Sultan's court and return to the status of peasants in the arc of a campaign.

I think it is entirely in character for a 1st-level Arabian adventure to hand the party an insanely-expensive, pure white warhorse — and then to lose it after just a session or two, to a hungry efreet or a conniving horse thief (who later offers it back to the party, in exchange for a quest). This is what Fate can mean on an individual level: quick changes of fortune are part of the atmosphere.

Strange but Familiar

We understand the desert raider and the caliph as stereotypes, enough that players and DMs are not adrift with the culture. Stereotypes work for us, providing anchors to start from. It is fun to trade warhorses for war camels, when the underlying logic of the setting is similar, with a few tweaks around the sacred status of hospitality, the nature of religion, and the role of the elemental forces in the wilderness.

Arabia is the D&D world's version of Spring Break: you go there for a change of scenery. For this game, you don't want or need to understand the difference between Shiite and Sunni, or the difference between Persian folklore and Arabian folklore. You just need to know whether the fire mages are on your side or not, and maybe a few simple rules of behavior: the bond of salt, the times of prayer, or the correct way to speed a camel through the desert.

Nested Stories

For the advanced designer or DM, the nested nature of some Arabian tales, using flashbacks and stories-within-a-story, could yield excellent results. In game play, this is easy to do: when the party visits the oracle or the storyteller in the market, they hear the start of a story. Play out the primary combat or scene within it, and then return to the main story. The same thing can be done with a mmirror or dream—you fill in the outer shell as a framing device for the core story.

Or you may decide that it's more literal, and characters are whisked away by genies from the present day to the founding of the Sultanate, or the Age of Giants, or a roiling typhoon around a zaratan. They complete an entire adventure before the genie whisks them back to report to the Sultan.

Conclusion

Arabian adventure requires mastery of tone and the simple presentation of the exotic. Clothing, sensory details, monster selection, and all other elements of the setting are important to convey a culture that is familiar enough to be playable, but strange enough to appeal to our sense of the exotic and wondrous. Little bits of extra storytelling will win you big points with players interested in an Arabian theme, and the subgenre makes for an excellent break from traditional fantasy.

13
Hardboiled Adventures:
Make Your Noir Campaigns Work

by Keith Baker
January 1, 2008

When I was a boy, I heard a voice in my dreams calling me to battle the forces of darkness. When I could lift a sword, I made my way to the Temple of the Sun and trained to fight fiends and monsters. But I was touched by a force more powerful than the sun itself… love.

Lilith was married to the bishop, and her tales made me question my faith. I never doubted her stories, not even when I drew my blade across the bishop's throat. It was only then that I found out that Lilith was sleeping with another priest, that I was just a tool to be used and discarded. I escaped to Lankar, but I'm still wanted for murder in my homeland.

Today, I'm a sword for hire on the streets of Lankar. Love cost me my faith and my honor. But I still have my pride, and any job I take, I'm going to see it through. I've sworn never to enter another Church of the Sun, never to return to Alaria, never to listen to a damned dream, and above all else, never to let love lead me astray again…

And Lilith just walked through my door.

In the past, your players have done their share of dungeon crawls. They have slaughtered armies of orcs, defeated dragons and lich kings, and received accolades from king and peasant alike. But you're tired of traditional fantasy. You feel like something harder and darker… less **Lord of the Rings** and more **Thieves' World** or **Sin City**. Perhaps you're in the market for some hardboiled fantasy.

"Hardboiled" is a genre of crime fiction, the realm of Sam Spade, Philip Marlowe, and the Continental Op. In a hardboiled world, little is what it seems, and corruption and violence are the norm. First and foremost, this sort of campaign needs to close collaboration between player and DM. A hardboiled adventure is a shift from the "kick in the door and take the treasure" model, and if your players don't want to explore a different tone and style of play, you're not going to be able to force it on them. So consider the following subjects, and discuss them with each player.

Everyone Has A Past

Hardboiled heroes are flawed individuals. They may be remarkable people with exceptional skills, but they are scarred by loss and failure.

The story that opens this essay is the background for Lucas Caine, a 1st-level fighter. Mechanically, he's not actually a fallen paladin; that is simply part of his backstory. He has lost his faith in divinity and love, and all he trusts now is his sword.

Lucas still has the spirit of a hero, but it is wrapped in bitter cynicism; it's in adventuring that he will potentially find comfort and possibly redemption.

When you are setting up a hardboiled campaign, work with each player to develop their backstory. This helps both of you. It gives you hooks to use in developing adventures.

For example, Lucas has a strong motivation to take part in any adventure that involves corrupt or evil priests, especially clerics of his old religion. Bounty hunters could come after him for the murder of the bishop. And, of course, his old lover could appear, begging him to help her. Does she have an explanation for the past? And even if she does, can he trust her again?

Just as it helps you create stories, it helps a player get into the mood of the game and sets his expectations. This isn't about creating the perfect shining knight; this is crafting a character who lives in an imperfect world. By challenging the player to think about his flaws, to consider why he's on the mean streets, and whether he spends his evenings drinking alone or in the halfling bordello, you help prepare him for the adventures that lie ahead.

Discuss the following things with each player.

What was your greatest mistake? "None" is not an acceptable answer; in this sort of story, no one is perfect. This could be the murder of an innocent man or an early career as muscle for a criminal gang. It could be something as simple as trusting the wrong person, failing to listen when a friend was in need, or giving in to greed with disastrous consequences.

Aside from creating story hooks for the DM, the goal is to learn what the character regrets and why. Does he want vengeance or redemption, and is either one actually possible?

Where do your talents come from? If the PC is a wizard, how did he first come to learn magic? If he studied at an academy, why isn't he still there? If he had a mentor, what became of her?

As before, the goal is to add depth to the character and learn his reasons for adventuring. The classic hardboiled detective is a former cop who became a private eye because of insubordination, betrayal by a partner, or another fall from grace. If he's a fighter, was he once a city guardsman? A soldier in the army? A mugger? How did he go from there to become an adventurer?

What's your motivation? While hardboiled heroes are typically flawed individuals, they stand out in a grimy world because some positive force drives them – something beyond mere greed. Professional pride, a sense of honor, a desire to see justice done in a world where the forces of the law won't provide it… something that keeps him from becoming as soiled as the world around him.

Vices

The classic detective is a hard-drinking man, but the PC might prefer gambling, paid companionship, or brawling to release her tensions. Explore this. If the PC likes to drink, does she prefer hard dwarf whiskey or fine wines? Does she like to carouse with dozens, or drink alone to numb her pain?

Sex and Love

The gaming table isn't always a place for a serious discussion of sex. Not every group can handle mature issues. However, sex, love, and lust are all powerful forces in hardboiled and noir tales. Even something as simple as knowing that Belgan the dwarf has a weakness for redheads is useful – because when that tiefling walks through the door with trouble in her eyes, you know to make her a redhead.

So see where you can go with this. What does the character find attractive? Does he have casual affairs, or is he only interested in serious relationships? Does he have a love of his life, and if so, what became of her? Some hardboiled characters are after more than money; done right, a character arc about saving a damsel from the mean streets can feed neatly into a character's history.

Big Risks, Trivial Rewards

In most D&D campaigns, PCs typically acquire vast amounts of wealth, digging up treasures from ancient ruins or stealing the hoards of defeated wyrms. In hardboiled tales, money is usually tight; rent, gambling debts, and drinking money are actual concerns. The protagonist has it tough, but because of his professional pride he only works for a fair wage. Unlike the police, he won't take a bribe, and while he may consort with criminals he doesn't stoop to their level; he takes honest pay for honest work.

The hardboiled approach to money means throwing out any preconceived notions of fair reward. A platinum piece is just as impressive to a 10th-level character as it is to a 5th-level character; the PC may be tougher, but experience doesn't magically bring wealth. The world around the PCs also reflects this; NPCs will be more susceptible to bribery, and a wealthy aristocrat may be more dangerous than a fighter of the same level, because his money lets him pull political and legal strings.

Perhaps the adventurers will fight a dragon, but he won't be sitting on a pile of gold. Instead, he will be running a thieves' guild, and all his wealth is spread throughout his operations. He has access to a fortune if he needs it, but an adventurer can't just show up and take it from him. This may mean that the PCs have less magic items, or it may mean that they can't afford to buy magic items but still obtain a few over the course of their adventures.

While the adventurers may not receive vast amounts of gold or ancient magic, there are other rewards to be found. Favors are vitally important; if you help the First Blade of the Assassin's Guild, his friendship may be far more valuable than a *+1 shortsword*. Reliable sources of information and trustworthy allies are both rare commodities, treasures gold cannot buy.

The Ugly World

In **The Big Sleep**, Captain Gregory describes himself as "As honest as you can expect a man to be in a world where it's out of style." That is the hard reality of a hardboiled campaign. It is a world where greed and lust are ascendant, while honor and integrity are distant rumors. If the City Watch isn't actively corrupt, it often has its hands tied. Characters will spend a lot of time mingling with disreputable characters, and while there may be honor among thieves, it is never a sure thing.

The backdrop of an adventure is just as important as the individual characters the PCs meet. Whether it is set in Los Angeles or Sanctuary, the flavor of the city is important. What is the dominant industry that supports the town? Who are the major moguls? Every critical NPC should have secrets of her own, hidden agendas that will shape any adventure she takes part in.

While a DM should consider all of the questions presented above for PCs, another excellent guide to city themes is Ed Greenwood's essay *On the Street Where Heroes Live* (see page 46). Before the campaign begins, sketch out the goals of the major players within the city. Are two crime lords competing for control of the brothel industry or distribution of illegal potions? Is the local reeve trying to expose the excesses of the local lords – something that will end in brutal retaliation?

The goals could also include communities or groups in addition to powerful individuals. What are race relations like? Is there an elf underclass, freed from slavery but still considered inferior to humanity? Is the orc street gang as bad as they say, or are the orcs scapegoats imported by a mogul to distract the people from his true agenda? Are there any truly devout clerics in the town, or is religion just an excuse to milk the faithful for tithes?

Moving from the big picture down to the table view, players should see just how grim the world is in the everyday details. Life is cheap, and bad things can happen to good people. The trusted barkeep who provided the PCs with information is killed in a pointless brawl. Adventurers may deal with the rich and powerful, but they should also see the squalid side of things – the parts of the city where people will kill for copper.

In combat itself, things shouldn't be pretty. A hardboiled DM won't just say "You hit him for eight hit points and he falls to the ground." A hardboiled DM will describe how a villain's hands clench around the blade as he tries to pull it from his chest, how the blood spreads across his hands as he spasms. Killing someone with a sword is an ugly business, and people do not usually fall to the ground without a sound.

Make death scenes big. Think up some last pleas and curses ahead of time. Bring out the girlfriend or children of the thug to scream at the PCs. And when players are seriously injured, consider the nature of the injury, and the scars it will leave behind. It's an ugly, dangerous world, and the players should never forget it.

The Role of Alignment

The alignment system does not always work in a hardboiled scenario. Player characters should ideally be better than those around them… but they may still be forced to do terrible things. Likewise, in a scenario where trust is a critical concern, *detect evil* shouldn't result in PCs being unwilling to work with a vital contact.

The simplest answer is to remove alignment from the campaign; however, as it is integrally tied to many magical effects, this isn't always easy to do. A second option is to use alignment as a general guideline of behavior, but to say that "faint" alignment auras have no effect; they cannot be picked up with detect spells and don't make a person a valid target for things like holy weapons.

This means that a *holy word* spell is a powerful tool against undead, outsiders, and evil clerics, but it has little effect on a normal creature with 10 or fewer levels or hit dice. You could also take this a step further and say that normal creatures never produce alignment auras – so a holy sword has no additional power when used on a mugger or a swindler.

Hit the Books

While these ideas should give you something to work with, the best thing you can do is to read the stories yourself. Raymond Chandler, Mickey Spillane, and Dashiel Hammett are all titans in the genre, but there are more recent alternatives. Frank Miller's **Sin City** brings the hardboiled style to the graphic novel, while Stephen Brust and Glenn Cook make the jump from present day into fantasy. The atmosphere is the most important thing to look for; everything else can be adapted. **The Maltese Falcon** is the story of a group of amoral people fighting for possession of a priceless treasure; but change the black bird into the preserved eye of a mighty archlich, and you have a valid adventure with a big fantasy element at its heart.

So pour yourself another shot of mead, strap on your sword, and head for the streets. There is an arrow with your name on it and a woman you wronged waiting at the tavern. If you survive the day, you may be able to put right that terrible mistake you made. But first, you'll have to survive.

14
The Underdark
November 13, 2007

The word "underdark" has existed since about 1978, when Gygax first mentioned it in **D1 - Descent into the Depths of the Earth**. Since then, it has been expanded, most notably by Kim Mohan in the **Dungeoneer's Survival Guide**, by Carl Sargent with the **Night Below** boxed set, and by Gygax himself with the rest of the amazing D series. Bob Salvatore and Thomas Reid and others expanded it in the **Forgotten Realms** novels. (And not to show false modesty, I've done my share in both *Kingdom of the Ghouls* and **Empire of the Ghouls**).

What keeps us coming back to it? The underdark succeeds as a setting for adventure because it pulls on three threads that gamers love: deep-seated myth, the easy grind, and the outsider heroes.

The Mythic Underdark

The classic underworld caves and caverns are the parlor to the afterlife, one step away from hell, the River Styx, or the Cerberus-guarded gates. It's not just Western myths that go this direction: Egyptian and Chinese hells are underground, and the Aztec entrances to Mictlan, the land of the dead, are within the cenotes and caves beneath our feet.

Freud could explain this as some sort of primal urge to return to the womb at death, but really, we're talking adventure gaming. Humans have a deep-seated image of land underground as an abode of the gods and the dead. That's worth playing with as a flavor element, just as mountaintops and deep forests have their own resonances. So work those resonances: river crossings are creepier if the boatman is a bit reminiscent of Charon (and passage back is dicey in any case). Advance that hell hound as far as it will go, and give it the chimerical or two-headed template or whatever strikes your fancy.

Players expect a little bit of eeriness in the underdark: choose your favorite flavor, such as dark fey, decayed undeath, fishy aboleth or kuo-toans, or even the classic drow fane. Push it a little harder: tie the ghouls to Orcus or the Death God, or give the dark fey a black queen who drives them to steal children and leave changelings behind. Give the aboleth secrets of the gods that existed before man, and magic that leads directly to massive power and complete madness.

Then send them on the classic Joseph Campbell hero's journey: leave the civilized world behind, enter darkness, and return triumphant from beyond death and darkness. That's the mythic value of the deep dark. Everyone knows it will be a rough trip, and they half-expect the worst of monsters. Give them ghoul dragons and variant daemons and lich drow and suzerain quickling plague otyughs. The players will complain about the nastiness. But they will brag about the adventure for years afterwards, if their character survives.

> ### *Death at the Gates*
>
> The other part of mythic feel that I like for the underdark is not to everyone's tastes. Characters who die too close to the gates of Hades? They stay dead, though they linger briefly as ghosts until they can pay Charon off. The underdark deaths are permanent. Raising the stakes this way makes a difference, but it's only fair if the players know about it. Make sure some NPC tips them off early in any adventure where you plan on following this direction.

Underdark as Wilderness

Darkness, wet, food, and eternal night — it's possible to run the underdark as a form of survival campaign, slowly losing equipment, food, and health to disease, rust, and decay. Ropes rot. Food spoils, and straps and supplies run out. What mushrooms are safe to eat? Ask the druid, and hope he has the ranks in Knowledge (Nature) or Survival to avoid the poisonous and hallucinogenic varieties.

This campaign depends less on the underworld as a portal to the afterlife, or on big monsters, than on logistics and wilderness fights over long stretches. Each encounter is more or less a standalone affair, with hours or days between them, just like a wilderness campaign. To create worthy challenges, you need to design groups of monsters who work as a sequence of fights near one another. Single monsters always need to have a CR above the party level, because the group will be at or near full strength for each encounter.

There are exceptions, of course, the same ones as on the surface: cities and other settlements. Wherever a group of monsters lives together, encounters can pile on top of each other. While the typical underdark city may have evil drow, demons, and ghouls in it, it still needs some form of dictatorial law and order to make it a livable city. Without rules (no matter how vile), the resources needed to sustain a large population do not flow into the city, and the whole place falls apart. A party is safer in a city of monsters than they are out in the tunnels and empty caverns between those monstrous cities. Even in the cities, murder is only a crime if you kill members of the elite.

This makes the underdark an easier wilderness to grind through than the surface. Tunnels mean you never get lost or miss important sites. The monsters are all evil, and there are no consequences for slaughter, most of the

time. There's no civilization to hold people back from bloodlust. Unlike most wildernesses, you never need to worry about getting caught in bad weather, floods, or forest fires.

At the same time, it can be wilderness unlike any other. Some players expect a sort of mega-dungeon. That's the wrong way to look at it, in my opinion. It's a wilderness without rest, without rules, without margin for a lot of error.

What works best for me is to provide natural hazards to remind people that they are out in the black depths, but keep it hyperreal. To make non-mythic elements resonate with your players depends on what you know of their fears and phobias. Do they hate darkness? Drowning? Tight, enclosed spaces? Force them to swim in the dark through a narrow tunnel. Do they hate heights and fear falling? Put them up on the ceiling in a cloaker city above an Abyss that makes Krubera (the real world's deepest cave) look tame (http://www7. nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0505/feature4/multimedia.html).

> "*That's the wilderness reaction you always want: the sound of pants-wetting fear when the party realizes they're trapped, they're out of resources, and they're many, many miles from home.*"

Acidic waters, noxious gasses, cave-ins, and constant monster encounters can all channel the party in certain directions. You can literally seal a passage behind them, and force a march for miles seeking another exit. Most players think the underdark is a great place to visit for XP and big adventure, but they all get a little nervous when the mountain collapses and they are shut in with all those miles of monsters. "Dropped into the deep end" takes on a new meaning. Suddenly, the trek is a lot less appealing. That's the wilderness reaction you always want: the sound of pants-wetting fear when the party realizes they're trapped, they're out of resources, and they're many, many miles from home.

In the underdark, that is a lot easier to achieve.

Heroes as Permanent Outsiders

The third thing to remember about an underdark campaign is that pasty-skinned, half-blind surface dwellers are not really welcome. They aren't drow, or kuo-toans, or illithids, or ghouls. They're the normal ones, but every race around them is profoundly weird in their own way — and none of them trust surface types. Even if they don't fight the PCs, no one does the party any favors. Getting help, supplies, or just a safe place to rest for a few days is a lucky break. There is no backup anywhere.

The prejudices and hatreds of the underdark races against one another is nothing compared to their hatred of those who see the sun. Unless a party spends some resources on Disguise, *alter self*, and so on, they are always

immediately recognizable as "not from around here." That matters, if they run into a big city or even a small outpost of monsters that they can't fight their way through. Diplomacy and Bluff are useful even in the underdark. When you need to talk your way through the aboleth *force gates*, it is harder if everyone hates you to begin with.

There's a silver lining to the constant scorn and hatred the PCs attract in the underdark: friends are treated like gold. Svirfneblin are welcome because they are merely wary. A group of deep dwarves or even xorn might be friendly, and can become useful allies for a party with no one they can trust. The pressure of always fighting and skulking means that an honestly kind reception or an act of generosity will stand out a lot more from an NPC in the underdark. Make that work for you; remind the party that not everyone and everything is evil inhuman scum.

Just most things.

Conclusion

The underdark appeals exactly because it plays into some deep, dark fears and because it is an innately hostile place. That's what defines heroic action. Any DM who makes things easy on the party is making a fundamental mistake about the nature of the classic underdark adventure. Yes, there is a sense of wonder at the strange world below, but it should be a wonder laced with fear and respect from the PCs.

The underdark is at its most powerful when it is both consistently strange and hostile, and it rises above an easy place to find monsters.

Does Empire *Fit this Mold?*

Empire of the Ghouls violates some of these statements because "Most races you encounter are so terrified by the ghouls, that most will help out the group." I would argue that the treachery of the aboleths, the paranoia of the dark stalkers and dark creepers, and the madness of the derro all make them unreliable allies, at best. Yes, there is a sense of a greater threat uniting enemies to some degree. Perhaps that's what makes it sustainable for a longer campaign, over three or four levels.

15
Fire and Sword:
Inspiration and Discipline in Design

February 7, 2008

"Art is the keeping of the fire, not the worship of the ashes."
—Gustav Mahler

To be a successful game designer, you need all the tools of the trade: wordcraft, imagination, mathematics, and discipline both in mechanics and in daily writing. To get started, you need the spark of inspiration that gets your query approved by an editor (for periodicals) or that gets your pitch accepted by a publisher.

Once you have a project in hand (your own, or an assignment), you need daily infusions of inspiration that keeps you going when things get rough. Know what that spark of inspiration is. Cherish your creative fire. Most of all, know how to keep it alive.

Two Kinds of Fire

Be clear about one thing: Inspiration comes easy, but you need to distinguish between the two types of fire. One burns quickly and disappears. It's the "Hey, it would be neat to put monkey-people in a conspiracy game!" kind of thing that appeals to you for whatever reason. That's transitory. The other kind of fire is the inspiration that makes me daydream and lets my mind wander through what-ifs over a longer period. What if the villain was this kind of creature? What if the plot were really about the poisoning of the wells? What if the big finale was in a huge tower clock – that animated and came alive!

That kind of fire makes me want to keep working long after the initial coolness wears off. I haveshelves full of material on topics that I really like but rarely get to write about. I've gone through long research jaunts for short projects, and short jaunts for long ones. The difference between real inspiration and a momentary whim becomes obvious (for me) around the outline stage, when you start to figure out how many hours of your life you would have to invest to put those monkey-people in the conspiracy game. If the answer is "too many hours," put that clunker down and find a new shiny

idea. Any writer or designer worth his salt has dozens or hundreds of ideas they have no time to develop. Invest your passion only in the best.

Working With Fire

The other thing to keep in mind is that fire burns brightly when it is fed, but dies if you starve it of fuel. Inspiration is a great way to get started. You should capture ideas that excite you on paper or hard drive as quickly as you can. It's odd the way that an inspiring idea can quickly turn into "too much work" or "not that good" if you do not scribble it down and then start working at it.

Inspiration needs to be fed with more inspiration, with outlining, hammering out a few key elements, and maybe soliciting opinions you trust. Figure out what's the strongest part of your project, the sexy bits that are fun to write and that will surely win you a hearing from editors, publishers, and fellow gamers. Then figure out the part that is, frankly, drudgery: the work of defining a campaign arc in detail, or spec'ing out stat blocks, or working up a decision tree for your MMOs tertiary quest structure, in full branching detail. If you never start, your sexy idea is worth nothing. If you write down enough to remember later why you loved the premise, you are much more likely to complete it or pick it up again when time permits.

For me, it is all too easy to write all the sexy bits first, and then grouse about the stat blocks and the advancement tables and the grind. I wind up leaving the best bits as rewards to myself, because I can look to them as a beacon. "If I write this set of random encounters, I will write the big Act II plot twist tomorrow." You may find that works for you. It may even help your project to build up to the finales, the capstone mechanical system, or the big world-building flourish, because you will find yourself foreshadowing for the reader, hinting at what's to come, or cross-referencing the meatiest part of the sourcebook. Know that those are the easy days, and enjoy them. This is the sweet part of design, and it is a thrill like no other. Let your ego run wild.

When the Fire Goes Out

Inspiration is fickle, but deadlines are not. Keep moving ahead whether you feel like it or not, and whether your muse cooperates or not. All that New Age talk about "your inner child" and "lucid fiction" will not help you when you are up against the wall with a deadline to keep. At that point, you have to make a choice: are you a professional writer, willing to power through the bitter work of hammering at the keyboard when you feel nothing for the material—or even actively hate it—or are you an amateur, who dabbles when the going is easy, and gives up when a project is not working out?

There's no shame in amateur work, but be honest with yourself: just how badly do you want to succeed in game design? Because most of it is unglamorous work, done alone, without cheering or compliments or financial

rewards. This is not Hollywood. This is a small industry where success is fleeting. You need to enjoy the process of design, the iterations, and the revisions, or you are setting yourself up for pain and disappointment.

The Sword

So fine, let's say you are a stubborn SOB and you want this thing done no matter what. This is where you really earn your reputation as a game designer. You work on the ruleset. You organize playtests and weigh the results, discarding the dross, balancing the conflicting goals, finding a way to maximize the fun for everyone. Does everyone have something to do in the adventure? Are groups able to forge more than one path through your scenario, or it is a my-way-or-the-highway Railroad Jubilee? Does it suit your tastes, or the audience's tastes? Ideally, some of both, but still. Take a good hard look if you aren't getting positive feedback on any element of the gameplay.

And then cut.

Subsystems that aren't working? Cut it. An NPC encounter that's one of your favorites, but does nothing for the plot? Cut it. Quests that seemed cute, but are really getting a lot of "dumb" comments from playtesters? Cut it. Take

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up the sword of righteous wrath. Destroy anything in the manuscript that does not match the goals you have for it, or that distracts your playtesters, or that simply is too poorly executed to live.

This is the sword side of game design. Often it means cutting out the character or inciting incident that you thought the adventure was originally about. Lots and lots of lore and backstory usually disappear at this stage. Anything the players never see is a big fat target for the Delete key. This material can be great for filling in the sense of history of a place, but in adventure design it is often long-winded and unnecessary. I've always wondered if it is possible to write an adventure that starts in the middle of the first encounter scene, and unrolls the narrative while walking the DM through the locations or trigger events. It would be a great experiment to try.

The Three-Bladed Sword

I digress. The sword of game design really has three edges: your own instincts, playtest results, and editorial direction when a schedule allows for give-and-take with an editor (a rarity, in game circles). Your own instincts make something yours. When you are uneasy about a section, a balance issue, or an encounter , consider how to improve it or whether to remove it. Just being uneasy doesn't mean make changes at random. Careful deliberate change iis a good approach, as is trial-and-error through playtest. Playtesters are the unsung heroes of

many successful games: their one night or several sessions can overturn months of work or can confirm that a direction was a success.

Unfortunately, a bad playtest can derail a project completely. The role of playtest and development is a topic worthy of its own examination. Let me just say that as a young game designer, I took everything playtesters said as worthwhile and honest and actionable. This turns out not to be the case. Over time, you learn to sift playtest data for the results that strengthen your work, and ignore those that only churn the waters.

Playtesters are human, with their own tastes and (often) an itch to re-design everything put in front of them. The playtesters a designer values are the ones who leave most elements of a game in peace, but who have a few well-thought-out and mathematically supported arguments. Those are the ones who always get invited back. Playtesting, even in the RPG world, is more math-intensive than normal play. What are the odds? Was a result a fluke or a statistical certainty? Oh yes, math is the king of playtest trumps. If the playtester breaks a scenario's math, it is almost always time to rethink that element or system.

Editorial direction… Well, my editor will be reading this, so I should perhaps not say too much. Editors usually work to make game designers look smarter than they really are. You argue with editors at your peril; don't react to a well-meant criticism with (entirely natural) defensiveness or protectiveness about your work.

Editorial relationships between designers and writers take time to build up. Some blossom into lifelong friendships, others are working relationships. It's always a close interaction as you share part of your creative output with another person. Especially as a beginning designer, it is natural to worry about how your work might change in another person's hands. You need to trust editors to do right by your work. Starting off in an adversarial mode with an editor is a rookie mistake. Give them the benefit of the doubt. If you really think they have taken an ax to your best work, find someone else to work with, but do it professionally. It's a small industry.

In the case of Open Design projects, a fourth option exists for paring down and honing a design: direct feedback through polls and critique while the manuscript is underway. This is not as weird as it might seem, though it is unusual in game design circles. In computer games, in writing, and in screenwriting, it is common to have first readers or teams of writers hammering on a manuscript. Even novelists use trusted first readers or online communities to gather feedback on early drafts.

In all those cases, the feedback can kill creative momentum. You learn this only through experience, but some patrons have seen it firsthand in Open Design. People may pile on with the best of intentions, brainstorming, riffing on something, tearing down a monster templating or advancement, because

they think there is a better way to do it. They may be right, but spending too much time defending you work means you are not actually designing any new games or adventures.

Though we live in a pluralistic, tolerant society, in game design, all critique is definitely *not* created equal. Matters of taste and opinion are just that, matters of taste. You can safely ignore these, unless a clear majority shares a particular taste. In that case, you have to weigh the value of popularity and broader appeal against the value of staying true to your narrower (but perhaps more cohesive or otherwise superior) view.

> "*You are too close to the work to see its flaws, so you rely on others (reviewers, editors, playtesters, and online communities) to show you where to cut, where to improve, where to strengthen what is already there.*"

Matters of mechanical balance, internal logic, story structure, and play speed or complexity are less matters of opinion than matters of quantifiable design. So long as opinions on those topics are presented clearly and articulated well, they will have significant impact on your work, even if you wind up rejecting them. Clear, insightful critique is hugely valuable even if you reject it, because it makes you weigh and examine what is really important in your design work. Not everyone can give a good critique; it is a learned skill, one that teachers and reviewers hone through practice.

Learn to spot the people who can critique your work in a way that you respond to effectively and without quibbling. Value those critics as the jewels they are. They have insight and perspective that you, by definition, cannot have. You are too close to the work to see its flaws, so you rely on others (reviewers, editors, playtesters, and online communities) to show you where to cut, where to improve, where to strengthen what is already there. They make you a better designer, and for that, you should not be defensive, but grateful.

Conclusion

Inspiration is your starting point, the fire that you light under a project. Critique and feedback are the swords you use to complete a project, learning how to make your game more fun, faster, smoother, more engaging, and more appealing. These two tools will teach you both what it is that you value about games, and why you value certain elements. Over time, you learn both your own strengths, and the needs of the audience.

With inspiration, discipline, and practice, you can improve the adventures you craft for your weekly game, you can win kudos every time you run a convention event, and you can design play experiences that will make gamers come back for more.

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