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Dungeons

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KILLER DUNGEONS: AN OLD-SCHOOL RETROSPECTIVE

by Steve Winter

I've grown tired of "killer dungeons in the old-school style."

For starters, there is no definitive "old school of gaming." I was excited to see that term gaining use a few years ago and embraced it, but that was more because of the sense of community it encompassed than because the term itself had objective meaning. In almost every case, "Old School" means "back when I started playing RPGs." If you started in 1975 with the original three little brown books, then that's old-school. If you started in 2001 with edition 3.5, then that's old-school. If you started in 1985 with *Vampire: The Masquerade*, then that's old-school. Everyone wants to own "old school," so as a defining term, it's pretty useless.

Furthermore, even in the 1970s, people didn't just play D&D. Scattered around every gaming table, you were likely to find copies of D&D, AD&D, countless unofficial D&D/AD&D variants from magazines, fanzines, and independent publishers, plus Empire of the Petal Throne, Tunnels & Trolls, Traveller, Villains & Vigilantes, The Fantasy Trip, RuneQuest, DragonQuest, SpaceQuest, Chivalry & Sorcery, Bushido, and even Bunnies & Burrows all being referenced and used pretty much interchangeably. All those games approach their subjects differently. Some of those games are rules-heavy, others are rules-light. Some emphasize storytelling and roleplaying; others focus on tactical combat on a grid. Even D&D and AD&D differed in their details in ways that made them subtly incompatible with each other—and referencing the details is the reason why people kept the rulebooks at the game table in the first place.

In my "old school" days (the 1970s), wilderness adventures were more common than dungeon crawls among me and my friends. Even the dungeons tended to be more like wildernesses than people sometimes admit. They leaned toward sprawling subterranean worlds complete with societies and ecosystems rather than a compact series of connected rooms in an abandoned or haunted castle.

Probably the best dungeon designer in the 1970s was Jennell Jaquays. Look at some of Jennell's adventures from that time, like *Caverns of Thracia*, *Dark Tower*, and *Hellpits of Nightfang*. Those aren't killer dungeons. They're well-thoughtout environments where adventures take place. Look at the best of the early TSR adventures, like *Vault of the Drow*, *Dwellers of the Forbidden City*, and the Giants series. Again, no killer dungeons.

But wait! What about *Tomb of Horrors*, I hear you asking. Wasn't that the ultimate killer dungeon?

Yes, but S1 is in every way an exception. Acererak's famous trap-filled tomb was created specifically to bypass *character* prowess and be the ultimate *player* challenge. In the late 1970s, players were cropping up at games and at conventions with godlike characters: wielding Thor's *Mjolnir* in one hand and *Blackrazor* in the other, casting multiple *wish* spells per day, commanding demonic and angelic servants, and being impossible for mortal enemies to injure. In creating *Tomb of Horrors*, Gygax was saying, "All you players reveling in your outrageously overpowered characters, this is the ridiculous extent to which you've pushed GMs and adventure designers. Now let ye reap what ye have sown!"

Even so, there's no shortage of players who claim to have fairly beaten *Tomb of Horrors*. To be honest, I'm not sure that's even possible. Every time I ran it, half the characters died before they got inside the tomb. When characters finally face Acererak—the handful who survive to that point—the things they must do to defeat the lich are so obscure and non-intuitive that I have a hard time imagining anyone hitting on the correct solution in the moments they have before the lich absorbs everyone's soul. People say they succeeded, and I'm not here to judge. Given typewriters and infinite time, a roomful of monkeys will eventually hammer out *King Lear*, right?

The point is, from its inception, *Tomb of Horrors* was a parody of itself. It was never meant to be the ultimate dungeon but only the ultimate expression of "pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" in dungeon form.

Dungeon of the Bear (1979) is another highly lethal dungeon, but its lethality was pure "gotcha!" It's a classic Tunnels & Trolls module, and it may be the archetype of the makes-no-sense, kills-you-without-warning dungeon. It has fans, but I've never understood why. DotB is filled with arbitrary death and ambushes that serve only to wreck everyone's joy. That's not an opinion formed by looking back across years of accumulated wisdom; it was obvious the first time we cracked it open way back when.

It does connect us to Tunnels & Trolls, the game that was most notorious for killing PCs indiscriminately. That's partly because T&T's combat rules are so unforgiving to the weaker side in a fight but also because Tunnels & Trolls was well suited to solitaire play, and Flying Buffalo (T&T's publisher) went all-in on the solo adventure market. T&T solos were often brutal excursions with appropriately dire names such as *Deathtrap Equalizer* and *Naked Doom*.

Solo adventures always have the potential for sudden death, even when it isn't the designer's intent. With only one character, just a few unlucky dice rolls in a tough situation can spell doom. Balancing that somewhat is the fact that since you're the only person at the table in a solo adventure, a character's demise doesn't need to be forever. You can simply back up and make a different choice or reroll the dice until you get a lucky break. Assuming that doesn't bother your conscience, no one else is going to complain or even know. Perhaps there were players who never cheated during solo outings, but I didn't know any of them. You can fairly ask what came first: cheating because the adventures were so overwhelmingly lethal or the adventures becoming so lethal because writers knew players had infinite do-overs for those death scenes anyway. I suspect equal parts of both were involved.

Also worth mentioning is that most solo adventures were for low-level characters. That's probably because low-level adventures are always easier to write: rookie characters have predictable abilities while veteran adventurers vary wildly in their powers and magic items. But it's also true that for players, losing a low-level character to bad luck or a bad decision is just a bump in the road whereas losing a high-level character can be traumatic. This was especially true in the 1970s and early 1980s, when generating a new 1st-level character for most RPGs took no more than five minutes; for some games, it took substantially less than that. If Erik the Red died in the second room of the dungeon, it took just moments to whip up Erika the Red and try again (with the bonus that Erika would find and pick up everything left on Erik's corpse in Area 2).

The early practice with the worst reputation is “save or die.” This did exist and was widely used. I maintain, however, problems didn’t come from *using* save or die but from *abusing* save or die.

Experienced GMs always preferred more interesting results over save or die. Killing a character with one unforeseen shot isn’t interesting. Keeping them alive while dropping them into ever-deeper, ever-hotter water is interesting.

That word “unforeseen” is important. Any player, then or now, would be justifiably upset if they lost an experienced character to a gotcha! trap such as a goblin soldier’s footlocker that’s inexplicably protected by a save-or-die poisoned needle. Cheap burns like that are a breach of player/GM trust.

If, however, you play in a world where save-or-die poisoned needles are known to exist, then you need to take that risk into account when dealing with the unknown. Characters shouldn’t need to be concerned about lethal poison on every container they find; a rank-and-file goblin wouldn’t put a death trap on a chest he opens and shuts a half-dozen times every day. But when the stakes are high—when that chest potentially contains a scroll the lich really, really doesn’t want anyone else to have—then characters must weigh the decision whether to try opening the chest against that possibility. How much do you want what might be in there, and how much are you willing to risk getting it? A save-or-die trap that lunges out of nowhere is unfair and uncool. A save-or-die trap that characters had good reason to suspect before choosing to plunge ahead and take the risk anyway is just one of the workaday dangers of the adventuring life.

Finally, the adversarial nature of RPGs is a factor here too. The current philosophy in RPGs is that the GM is a storytelling partner and facilitator working alongside the players, not against them. Some modern games take pains to narrowly define the GM’s role and limit their authority. Under old-school conditions, the GM’s power was nearly unlimited. It wasn’t truly unlimited, no matter what some writers claim. It couldn’t be because the GM was more adversarial in the early years of roleplaying than now. An adversarial relationship was a natural outgrowth of roleplaying’s origins in wargaming.

A tug of war constantly played out between the GM’s role as an all-powerful facilitator of the growing story and the GM as an adversary. You can’t have both at the same time: an all-powerful adversary would make the game pointless. However, the balance point between all-powerful story engineer and ruthless-but-restrained adversary is unstable, to say the least. When the roles are ill-defined to begin with, that instability became a big factor in many RPG campaigns crashing and burning, especially with an inexperienced or immature GM at the helm. It was easy for a GM to get caught up in the rush of power and lose sight of the need for not only impartiality but, to be blunt, mercy.

Any sort of design, game or otherwise, is simplified if there’s no concern for fairness, balance, or the feelings of the end user. Designing a puzzling, challenging, tense roleplaying adventure is hard work. That’s why killer dungeons were and are typically found in the hands of lazy and inexperienced GMs. In the early years of RPGs, *everyone was inexperienced.* Enthusiasm is no substitute for time and hands-on experience when it comes to mastering something new.

As everyone gained experience in the new medium of roleplaying games, the GM’s value as a storytelling partner rather than as a foe became clearer. Fast-forward to today, and no one but die-hard reactionaries committed to reliving the glory days of 1975–76 sees the GM as primarily the opposition. We all simply learned better.

AN ODE TO RANDOMNESS

by Steve Winter

"Introduce a little anarchy. You know the thing about chaos? It's fair!"

—*The Joker*

In the quest for creativity, writers and game designers—and everyone, really—resort to all sorts of techniques to "get the juices flowing." At the very beginning of my career, I bought a book titled *A Whack on the Side of the Head* by Roger von Oech, Ph.D. The subtitle was "How to Unlock Your Mind for Innovation." It covers ten major concepts on how to free your mind from conventional thought limitations, plus a host of minor ones. It's a useful and insightful book, but it's aimed more at business innovators in general and at Silicon Valley in particular than at creative writers. Similar books specifically for writers are also common of course; *Whack* just happens to be the first book on creativity I ever bought or read, so it looms large in my experience.

Creating material for roleplaying games isn't the same as engineering a new smartphone or finding ways to speed up an assembly line. Those tasks are tethered to the real world. The most revolutionary manufacturing idea ever conceived is in fact worthless if it depends on technology that can't be built. RPGs, on the other hand, can be flights of pure fancy. Anything you can imagine can be put to use. The challenge is to imagine things that are exciting, challenging, and above all fresh.

When we sit down in front of a blank sheet of mapping paper or a blank word processor screen with the task of creating something exciting, challenging, and fresh for players, we face many hurdles. I won't even try to enumerate them all. No matter how exhaustive I make my list, I'd leave out something important. Instead, the one problem I'm focused on here is the fact that our thinking falls into patterns. When facing that blank sheet of paper, we fall back on the same favorite, familiar ideas and tropes over and over. Your ideas and tropes probably are different from mine, but we all have them. I, for example, grew up reading pulp stories and juvenile horror, and those tales loom large in my subconscious. I still love them, and their common archetypes and stereotypes—bold heroes, egomaniacal but cowardly villains, improbable situations, melodrama, and narrow escapes—always intrude into my ideas when I'm planning a new fantasy adventure or set of rules. That's true regardless of the theme, tone, or setting. It's just who I am. That doesn't mean I only create pulp material. It just means a "pulp aesthetic" is always in my mind, whether it's front and center or skulking on the sideline.

This is mostly a positive thing. Our influences and predilections help give each of us a unique voice when it comes to creating an RPG adventure, designing a rules supplement, or writing fiction. Readers enjoy getting a glimpse into the writer's mind as long as it's not too frightening a place.

After you've dipped into that same well of favorite ideas three, four, or a dozen times however, players and readers may start losing interest. Even you may start losing interest when you find yourself writing essentially the same ideas over and over.

If you're a GM, here's a good exercise to try: ask your players what themes, motifs, and events they've spotted multiple times in your adventures. Sometime when you're sitting around the (probably virtual) table before the game begins or after it's wrapped up for the session, ask for honest feedback on this. Don't debate, and for god's sake don't argue. Just listen. Asking questions is okay, but the point is to hear the players' opinions, not to give yours. And you're not looking for opinions on what you do right or wrong as a GM; that's an important but separate conversation. You just want to hear their answers to the question, "What are my tropes?" You might even raise the question at the end of one game session and ask players to bring their answers to the next session. People tend to come up with better insights when they have time to think.

If you're the type of GM who thinks about these things much, many of the answers shouldn't surprise you. But I'd be surprised if a few don't cause at least one of your eyebrows to arch upward.

There are two reasons why an answer could surprise you. Reason one is obvious: players mentioned something you're not even aware you do. This could be as trivial as all your bartender NPCs having Scottish accents or as detrimental to suspense as important NPC allies almost always turning out to be secret minions of the villain who betray the heroes just before the climactic scene. Reason two is less obvious: players mentioned something you're aware of, but you didn't think you do it that often. Only you do, and they couldn't help but notice.

Let's get out of that rut.

It's Out of My Hands

A wonderful way to redirect your creativity into new paths is to take some of the decision-making out of your hands. This won't necessarily break old habits. It just short-circuits them or redirects around them; choose your own metaphor.

To accomplish that, all you need to do is make a few key decisions randomly.

For example, instead of making your top villain a dragon, make a list of a half-dozen other creatures that aren't dragons and let a d6 decide. Or if you simply must have a dragon, then instead of putting its lair in a mountainside cave, make a list of a half-dozen other locales—ruined abbey, abandoned quarry, flooded village, big-city sewer, monumental hypostyle, ash-choked forest—and let the die choose.

By letting fate decide, you're no longer in a position to let your preferences and favorite tropes steer the outcome. They're out of the decision loop.

My first serious encounter with this type of random decision-making occurred in the game Skyrealms of Jorune. Jorune is a unique setting for an RPG, created by writer Andrew Leker and illustrator Miles Teves. It combines elements of fantasy and science fiction, and it features a mix of PC and NPC races unlike those in any other game. The closest comparison might be to Empire of the Petal Throne. The two games take completely different approaches, but they're somewhat similar in atmosphere.

Skyrealms included tables to randomly generate encounters. Random tables for generating almost everything were common in the early years of RPGs. They produced more than just a type of creature and whether it was friendly or hostile. They told you the type of creature, its background, what motivated the NPC to approach the characters, one or two quirks the NPC might display, and what's happening nearby that could affect the encounter.

I had a low opinion of such tables at the time (circa 1985), but everything else about Skyrealms impressed me, so I decided to give these a chance. On my first pass through, the tables spat out a bronth NPC (think of the bronth as a bear-man). Its quirk was "hates a race." Okay, my bronth is a racist. The table didn't specify which race it hated, so I rolled again on the race table and got… bronth.

At that point, my reaction was, "That makes no sense." My keen affection for Jorune wasn't diminished, but that result confirmed all the reasons why I disliked these kinds of tables in the first place. I skipped over that section of the book.

A few days later, in a conversation with a co-worker, he said something that completely changed my thinking on the subject. He said, "If it doesn't make sense, you haven't thought about it enough."

That simple statement is more profound than it sounds, so let me repeat it: *if it doesn't make sense, you haven't thought about it enough.*

The reason it's so profound is because that philosophy is one of the fundamentals of creativity. Creativity isn't just coming up with new images, ideas, or objects from whole cloth. It's also taking two or more ideas and exploring all the ways they can work together.

I dismissed the bronth-who-hates-bronth because it didn't instantly make sense to me. It didn't fit easily into any of the preexisting fantasy cubbyholes in my mind. It wasn't one of the familiar tropes I habitually fall back on.

I can't say why that co-worker's simple-seeming comment stuck in my mind so persistently, but I'm grateful it did. Shortly afterward, I was again perusing Skyrealms, and the ridiculous bronth came back to mind. *If it doesn't make sense, you haven't thought about it enough.* It certainly didn't make sense, so I thought about it.

What if the bronth doesn't hate all bronth, it only hates itself? A self-loathing bronth...

That notion hit me like thunder. It was a concept I would never, ever have come up with for an NPC if left solely to my own ideas. And it would be a terrific character to roleplay as the GM. What fun I could have with an NPC like that!

My eyes were opened to vast possibilities in that moment.

I realized no one's creativity needed to be a prisoner to their own habits and patterns. The phrase "think outside the box" was gaining currency at that time. Here was a way you could literally force yourself to think along lines you'd never follow on your own.

The key—the piece of the puzzle that completes the picture—is, *If it doesn't make sense, you haven't thought about it enough.*

Designer Matt Finch wrote a massive collection of random tables called the *Tome of Adventure Design*. They're intended to aid the GM who wants to come up with more engaging adventure scenarios. It's over 300 pages of randomly selected jolts to the brain. In the introduction, Finch states that the point of incorporating randomness into your adventure writing is "to deliver cryptic results designed to shock the reader's creativity into filling in the gaps." So obviously, I'm not the only person to arrive at this realization.

Let me emphasize his use of the word "shock" in that passage. It's perfect. The moment when two, three, or more nonsensical, fragmentary, contradictory notions gel into a coherent and fresh idea is shocking. It's revelatory. It's magical. And it's inspiring.

Random, Not Senseless

Early RPG adventures often felt as if they were thrown together from random elements with no thought to why those creatures coexisted in the dungeon or how all those chests of gold and magical items the monsters guarded got there in the first place. One of my friends related a story of how, as teens, he and his gaming group designed a dungeon that had a magically powered treasure generator hidden on the lowest level. Monsters traveled from their level of the dungeon down to the generator, picked up treasure, and hauled it back to their zone where they got locked into a chamber to guard it. If characters were stealthy enough to infiltrate into deep regions of the dungeon without being detected, they might actually see these treasure caravans on the move. Ambushing a treasure caravan as it marched through the corridors was the ultimate prize; it meant you could seize the valuables while they were relatively lightly guarded and before they were protected by room traps, curses, or entombed undead.

That approach to designing a dungeon was obviously meant to be ridiculous, but it was in reaction to some almost equally laughable and artificial "adventures" that people sold and played in the 1970s. Just to be clear, no one thought these types of things were any good. But novice roleplayers were desperate for anything, and a senseless, paint-by-numbers dungeon was better than no dungeon at all.

That sort of design is an example of random choices used poorly as a fill-in-the-blanks substitute for creativity and imagination. We're after something much more: using random selections to spur creativity and broaden your imagination.

There's no great secret or trick to doing it. The entire method really is summed in that phrase, *If it doesn't make sense, you haven't thought about it enough.*

Using random prompts in your scenario design requires making a commitment to seeing it through. Generating the prompts is fun and exciting. Figuring out how they fit together can be hard work. It can be frustrating. Sometimes it can seem downright impossible, that there's no way to make sense of a particular combination, and if you ever used it, you'd look like an idiot. You'll want to abandon that assortment and start over or cherry-pick a few items that make more sense to you.

There's a film from 2005 called "Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World," starring Albert Brooks. It's a mockumentary with Brooks playing himself as a comedian investigating what Muslims in Pakistan and India find funny. The movie didn't fare well at the box office or in reviews. I liked it better than most reviewers did, but that's neither here nor there.

One of the movie's best scenes involves Brooks trying to do some improv in India. He uses the technique of asking the audience for suggestions: a place, a person, a situation, etc. Once he's built the list of audience suggestions, he's supposed to weave a comedy sketch on the spot from those components.

But when the list is done, Brooks starts making changes. The suggested person's job isn't funny enough, so he changes it to something else. The audience's place doesn't fit with the new job, so he changes that too. Before he's even tried to turn the components into a story, Brooks has changed every element the audience suggested to better fit his notion of what would be funny.

Of course, that's the joke right there. It's all a bit that Brooks is trying out, but the style of humor is so foreign to the audience that no one even begins to get it. They all just think he's not very good at improv.

Most people seem to think that scene is either hilarious or painfully stupid. I find it hilarious, but whichever side you fall on, it's also a perfect illustration of exactly what you don't want to do when building up a plot, an encounter, an NPC, or any other story element from random pieces. Remember the whole point of this approach is to break out of your habitual creative patterns. Rejecting an element because it "doesn't fit" or because you just don't like it undermines the goal and steers you right back into the same old ruts you've traveled a dozen times before. That's how they got to be ruts in the first place.

Although this type of planning takes place outside the game session, it's constructive to think of it as no different from random results that occur during play. Once someone rolls dice to resolve an action, it's very bad form for the GM or the player to declare, "I don't like that outcome. Let's all pretend the roll was a 20 instead." If a die roll was called for, then its outcome should be respected.

No matter what the random elements turn out to be, stick to them! There is an answer, and you'll find it if you think about it enough.

That's Why, but How?

The simplest and most obvious answer to the question of how is with dice and a few tables.

The world of RPGs is filled with tools for exactly this type of exercise. We've already mentioned Matt Finch's *Tome of Adventure Design*. It truly is a tome with over 400 tables created specifically to goad your mind into fresh patterns. Don't expect to find a use for each and every one of them—they get a bit esoteric—but whatever you're looking for, you'll probably a find a table that addresses it in this book.

Going back to the roots of RPGs, you'll find that every edition of the D&D *Dungeon Master's Guide* (except the 2nd Edition version—the one I worked on, ironically) includes an appendix with tables for randomly generating dungeon contents and layouts. The earliest version of the book also includes tools to randomly create wilderness terrain, monster encounters of every conceivable kind, demons and devils (not encounter lists but random generation of what they look like and what they can do), traps and tricks, dungeon dressing (lighting fixtures, furnishings, smells, sounds, etc.), herbs and medicines, magical substances, conjured and summoned creatures, and parties of NPC adventurers covering everything from their class, race, and level to how they're equipped, what languages they speak, how pious, brave, and honest they are, and even their height and weight.

From that same period (the 1970s—the golden age of random tables if you're willing to consider that a thing) come two books from Judges Guild: *Wilderlands of High Fantasy* and *Ready Ref Sheets*.

Wilderlands is a pack of hex maps, displaying the Judges Guild campaign world. The maps portray the setting in broad strokes. Details about towns, villages, farms, ruins, and other adventure opportunities in each hex are left for the GM to fill in. To help with that, the accompanying book is crammed with tables for generating those details.

Ready Ref Sheets is a horse of an entirely different color. It's a grab bag and a celebration of all things random. A look at the table of contents gives a good idea of just how scattershot the entire book is. It starts with tables for determining the social rank of NPCs encountered in cities and proceeds through civic proclamations, trials and punishments, the usefulness of beggars, reasons why NPCs might attack, odd statues, quests PCs might be compelled to undertake if they're hit with a *geas* spell, features found in the wilderness (borrowed from *Wilderlands*), and types of plants by terrain, to name just a few samples. Possibly the oddest and most amusing table is NPC Cutups, which gives 48 social faux pas your NPC allies might commit to drag you into unexpected trouble. These run the gamut from accidentally tripping someone to sneezing on them, pushing them, making an off-color comment, or even barfing on someone. If you can't turn these magic beans into encounters, you're just not trying.

If you're looking at the bigger picture—coming up with the plot for an adventure, for example, rather than just an encounter with NPCs—many games and supplements cover that too. Setting books for the Savage Worlds game often include an "adventure generator" geared toward that book's specific genre. Typically these consist of six to eight categories, each with a short table of possibilities. A die is rolled for each category. When the results are strung together, they provide the keywords to inspire a plot for a short adventure.

For example, the adventure generator in the supplement *Mars* from Adamant Entertainment uses six categories to determine the villain's identity, the villain's goal, a hook that draws PCs into the plot, the locales for important scenes (this table can be used more than once), the type of henchmen the villain employs, and one or several twists the characters and possibly even the villain didn't see coming. In contrast, *Beasts & Barbarians* by Umberto Pignatelli (published by Studio 2 Publishing, Inc.) uses eight categories: the primary setting, villain or chief adversary, nature of the conflict, reward for victory, a hook for the PCs, the overarching mood of the adventure, a plot twist, and the type of action that will define the climactic scene. Between those two examples, some categories are the same, others are similar, and a few are unique to each product.

The beauty of these adventure generators is that, while they're packaged in Savage Worlds games, nothing about them is tied exclusively to Savage Worlds rules or settings. The *Beasts & Barbarians* adventure generator would work just as well for D&D, Pathfinder, Dungeonslayers, 13th Age, Shadow of the Demon Lord, Dungeon World, Swords & Wizardry, Dungeon Crawl Classics, or whatever other fantasy RPG you prefer. It can be used for games set in Midgard, the Forgotten Realms, Golarion, Glorantha, Mystara, your own homebrew setting, or any other world.

They're also infinitely expandable and customizable. Even the simpler *Mars* adventure generator is capable of churning out over 80,000 unique plot threads, but if that isn't enough for you, it's easy to expand each table with a few new entries of your own. Alternatively, you can keep the tables the same size but tailor the entries to reflect more of the character and atmosphere of your specific setting and campaign style. Just remember that building and modifying the tables is the easy part. Making sense of the results they generate is where the challenge lies. As always, *If it doesn't make sense, you haven't thought about it enough.*

Dice and tables aren't your only tools here either. Decks of cards are fantastic randomizers. Some decks exist for this specific purpose, such as the harrow deck from Paizo. It can be used similarly to a tarot deck to generate the bare-bones outline of an adventure by "foretelling its future." The tarokka deck from *Ravenloft* serves a similar but more thematically limited purpose.

For that matter, an actual tarot deck or even a standard deck of playing cards can be used to randomize almost anything. With customized tools for interpreting the results, a deck of cards can create story plots, generate NPCs, or form the layout of a dungeon, a building, or a city; I wrote about that idea in detail in the "Howling Tower" blog series at KoboldPress.com. A set of obscure products from publisher Better Games (1990) uses tarot cards and standard playing cards to generate long and impressively detailed fantasy and science fiction adventure plots with clear beginning, middle, and end phases, detailed NPCs, multiple events and locales, and setbacks and twists along the way. These are hard to find in their original printed versions, but they're still available as PDFs. The Better Games system takes considerably more effort than just rolling a few dice, but it produces inspiring and useful results.

The internet with its vast array of countless roleplaying blogs, vlogs, and podcasts, PDF repositories, retailers, and publisher's websites is a treasure trove of resources. Products that are long out of print, like the scenario generators from Better Games mentioned above or the older Judges Guild titles, can still be had in PDF form at modest prices. Literally hundreds, if not thousands, of amateur game designers share their ideas and their creativity tools via blogs, videos, interactive web generators, and apps. Websites offer tools that can instantly spin up randomly assembled maps of dungeons, countrysides, cities, ruins, and spaceships in a variety of graphic styles.

Some of these tools not only generate entire dungeon layouts but fill them with monsters, traps, and treasure. These randomly diced-up "adventures" aren't much better than the ones from the 1970s discussed at the beginning of this article, but remember our mantra: *if it doesn't make sense, you haven't thought about it enough.* As ready-to-play adventures, entirely random dungeons leave a lot to be desired. As foundations to support your own modifications and stories, they're wonderful time-savers when you need a quick adventure for an evening or for a pickup game at a convention.

Two closely related resources deserve special mention here because they're among my favorites: Risus Monkey's *DungeonWords* and *WilderWords*. These are nothing but lists of words that are, or can be with some imagination, related to dungeon or wilderness settings. When you need a quick concept, you roll a few dice to select two or three words, mash them together, and see what ideas that inspires. You might, for example, get the words *ashes* and *warped*. You can ponder the combination for hours or treat it like an inkblot test and run with the first idea that pops into your head. For the sake of creativity, it's best to respect the dice no matter what and remember, *If it doesn't make sense, you haven't thought about it enough.*

Finally, the vast image resources of the web are a whole other category of inspiration. If you're thinking about a jungle adventure, type "fantastic jungle" into a search bar and filter for image results. Roll a d20 and pop that result into a new browser tab. Repeat with slightly different search terms, such as "swamp ruins." Use two or three images randomly selected from those searches the same way you'd use results from a table. Look for ways they synchronize with and amplify each other and ways they contradict each other and consider how they could become scenes in a story. You can lock them into a particular sequence or arrange them as you like. They can serve as general inspiration to you or they can be so specific that you show them to players during the adventure or the encounter.

These methods are geared toward the same end: breaking out of the habits and patterns that restrict creativity. We all have them, whether or not we're aware of them. Even if we're not aware, the friends, acquaintances, and possibly customers who play the adventures we write and who use the rules supplements we design probably are.

No matter how you arrive at your creativity prompts, the heart of the method is selecting two or more elements randomly and then searching for the means to link them coherently. It sounds simple, but linking two randomly selected ideas can be difficult. At the risk of nagging, we'll state it one last time: *if it doesn't make sense, you haven't thought about it enough.*

DECORATING YOUR DUNGEON: NEW OBSTACLES FOR ADVENTURERS

by Kelly Pawlik

Midgard is a world full of lost tombs, ancient kingdoms, vicious intrigues, and limitless potential for exploration. The tales told by adventurers are full of lost opportunities, sudden reversals of fortune, monstrous threats, and strange phenomena. And where better to set the stage for such odyssey than in the dungeon!

Environmental Hazards

There are numerous possible origins for the environmental hazards that follow: manipulation of the ley lines crisscrossing the world, dark rituals gone awry, interference by creatures outside the scope of humanity's understanding, or a thousand other things.

The phenomena detailed herein are particularly suited to campaigns and adventures set in the many and varied regions of Midgard.

SUPERNATURAL REGIONS

The supernatural regions detailed are suffused with mystery and a sense of the magical or impossible and can be any size from a few square feet to a mile across or more. Characters traversing the region may note its strange effects immediately, or the area may require some action or inaction to trigger its effects. Potential triggers could be:

- Being reduced to 0 hit points
- Entering the area
- Taking injury
- When a group of creatures finishes a short or long rest
- When a spell is cast

ARCANE INSTABILITY

Throughout history, great magic has been worked across the face of Midgard. In many cases, these remain as a monument to the ingenuity and talent of their creators. Some though, have been unworked, dispelled, or destroyed, either intentionally, in a surge of arcane power along a ley line, as a fluke confluence of events, or at the divine imperative of the gods. In areas where this has occurred, an area of arcane instability can form, making magic act in unpredictable and sometimes, dangerous ways.

Consider rolling on the Arcane Instability Effects table below when the following events occur in the region:

- A creature attunes itself to a magic item
- A creature prepares spells after finishing a long rest

ARCANE INSTABILITY IN MIDGARD

Magical disasters have occurred in all the known lands, making arcane instability a relatively common supernatural hazard. The Wasted West is peppered with areas of instability as a result of the reality-warping magic used to summon the Dread Walkers.

In the heart of the Red Wastes, where a flying city of Sikkim detonated, there is a large area of instability. Small regions along the River Nuria are unstable as a result of the magical properties the water once held.

- A creature must make a Constitution saving throw to maintain concentration on a spell
- A sorcerer uses metamagic
- A wand or rod is used to cast a spell

CURSED EARTH

Some entire regions fall under the evil eye of malediction. This often happens due to the thwarted ambitions of some fell presence. Even once the threat to the land and its people is gone, its influence can be felt for generations. Some cursed lands are the result of an oath sworn by a righteous or innocent individual. These tend to be the longest lasting and most devastating. When such an effect occurs, the words or feeling that enacted the curse resound through the minds of the creatures affected by it. Dungeons are particularly common places for cursed earth. The suffering that befalls those who perish in their depths

ARCANE INSTABILITY EFFECTS

d10	Effect
1	When a creature casts a spell of 1st level or higher, a different spell of the same school and level is cast upon the caster's intended target instead. The caster's spell slot is expended.
2	When a creature casts a cantrip, it deals one extra die of damage.
3	When a creature casts a spell that deals damage, they add the modifier of their ability score that governs their spellcasting as extra damage to each creature targeted.
4	A creature that uses a wand must expend an additional 1d4 charges each time it uses the wand.
5	All magical items that are attuned to a creature cease to be attuned. The item cannot be attuned again until 24 hours after the area has been exited.
6	Every time a spell is cast, it deals 1d8 force damage in addition to its normal effect.
7	At the beginning of each of its turns, a spellcaster gains 1d10 temporary hit points. This effect lasts for 1 minute.
8	Each creature in the area that has spell slots recovers 1d4 expended slots. At the beginning of its turn, a spellcaster must roll 1d100. If the result is 1–75, the slots they recover must be of the lowest levels they have expended slots. On a result of 76–100, the slots they recover are of the highest level that they have expended.
9	Each time a spell is cast in the area, it is potentially interrupted as if ***counterspell*** had been cast upon it. Spells of 3rd level and lower fail and have no effect. A caster who casts a spell of 4th level or higher must succeed on a DC 13 ability check using their spellcasting ability; on a failure, their spell fails and has no effect.
10	If a spell that effects one target is cast, it also effects all creatures within 5 feet of the target. Each creature affected must make its own saving throw if applicable.

often causes them to curse their tormentors before their voices are silenced forever.

Consider rolling on the Cursed Earth Effects table below when the following events occur in the region:

- A creature attacks an innocent or beast
- A creature becomes angry or initiates a barbarian’s rage
- A creature becomes frightened
- A creature must make a Wisdom saving throw
- The characters enter the area
- Two or more creatures argue.

CURSED EARTH IN MIDGARD

The most notable area suffering under a curse is arguably at Tannenbirg Castle in Krakovar. The dying vows of the knights and guards slaughtered there on the night the darakhul force poured through from the Underworld and took the castle for King Lucan echo endlessly in its rebuilt depths.

DEVASTATING RUIN

In places where buildings or monuments of importance to the gods are destroyed, the site can forever after remember the events. Similarly, where entire settlements cease to be in a single brutal instant, the supernatural can take hold, reminding those who traverse the ruins of what once was but no longer is. The landscape and objects tend to be transitory in areas of devastating ruin.

Consider rolling on the Devastating Ruin Effects table below when the following events occur in the region:

- A creature attacks an object or construct
- A creature scores a critical hit

CURSED EARTH EFFECTS

d8	Effect
1	A gloomy pall settles over all creatures in the region, giving them disadvantage on saving throws against being frightened.
2	Creatures traveling through the area have difficulty deciding what to do when events get dicey. At the beginning of its turn, a creature must succeed on a DC 15 Wisdom saving throw or be unable to take actions or reactions until the beginning of its next turn.
3	Each creature hears a persistent irritating noise. A creature that casts a spell with a duration of concentration must make a Constitution saving throw (DC 10 + the level of the spell) or expend the spell slot with no effect. A creature that is maintaining concentration on a spell must make a saving throw with a DC as calculated above or lose concentration, which ends the spell’s duration.
4	A faint miasma hangs in the air, catching in the lungs and hanging over creatures caught in it. Creatures that finish a long rest in the area do not gain any benefits from doing so.
5	The longer creatures stay in the cursed area, the more tired they get. A creature that finishes a short or long rest gains one level of exhaustion that can’t be removed while it remains in the area.
6	The air of the region catches at creatures, slowing them. A creature must choose to either move or take an action on their turn; they cannot do both.
7	When a creature casts a spell with verbal components, the curse empowers those words, treating them like an oath. Targets of the spell cast have disadvantage on their saving throws against it.
8	All characters that have a certain something—such as a quality or experience—in common with the creature the original curse was sworn against suffer bleeding wounds while they are in the affected land. For example, at the beginning of each of their turns, all characters from Zobeck in the area take 1 point of slashing damage. Resistance to slashing damage doesn’t reduce the damage to 0.

DEVASTATING RUIN EFFECTS

d6	Effect
1	Physical items and structures seem to soften. Objects in the area have no damage threshold and are easily damaged and destroyed by weapon attacks and spells.
2	Creatures in the region either become very resilient or soft and easily injured. Each creature needs to roll 1d100. Creatures that roll a result of 1–50 have resistance to bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing damage. Creatures that get a result of 51–100 have vulnerability to bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing damage.
3	Weapons wielded become sharper and harder. Every attack that hits its target is a critical hit.
4	Metal armor and shields swiftly turn to rust. Creatures wearing armor made primarily of metal must reduce their AC by 2 while they are in the region.
5	The magic that governs constructs breaks down. At the beginning of a construct's turn, it must roll 1d100. On a result of 1–50, it does nothing at all for the round. On a result of 51–100, it attacks the closest creature to it.
6	The weight of objects, including all items carried by the characters, is doubled in the area.

LIVING BATTLEGROUNDS IN MIDGARD

Each of the Dread Walkers roaming the Wasted West has a living battleground nearby. The constant warfare in the region of the Seven Cities has created hundreds of small living battlegrounds as well as a large one nearly 20 miles in diameter between Valera and the Fist of Mavros.

- A creature takes damage it has resistance to
- A spell from the school of conjuration or transmutation is cast

LIVING BATTLEGROUND

Some places have seen more than their fair share of warfare and conflict. Over time, the lingering psychic residue of the hundreds or thousands of creatures that have hated, fought, and died in an area is absorbed into the land before being reflected out at the creatures that bring new conflicts there.

Consider rolling on the Living Battleground Effects table below when the following events occur in the region:

- A creature is killed
- A creature is reduced below half its hit points
- A creature scores a critical hit
- A spell deals damage to multiple creatures
- Initiative is rolled
- The first attack is made

LIVING BATTLEFIELD EFFECTS

d8	Effect
1	Each creature in the area hears a horn blaring. Roll 1d100. On 1–50, a creature hears the clarion call to charge and acts under the effects of the *bless* spell for 1 minute. On a 51–100, a creature hears the horn sound a mournful retreat and acts under the effects of the *bane* spell for 1 minute.
2	Each creature wielding a martial weapon hears the clash of weapons on armor. The weapons wielded by these creatures are considered magical and deal an extra 1d4 points of damage.
3	Spectral banners bearing the symbol of one or more gods of war appear for a moment before fading. Each creature bearing a matching holy symbol restores additional hit points, equal to their Charisma modifier, to targets when casting a spell or using a feature or magic item to heal themselves or another creature.
4	The ground radiates the cold chill of death. Creatures have disadvantage on death saving throws made in the area.
5	The resonance of past battles affects the living. At the beginning of its turn, each creature in the area must make a DC 14 Charisma saving throw or take 1d10 psychic damage.
6	Blood seems to rain from the sky for 1d4 minutes. While it rains, creatures must make a DC 14 Constitution saving throw at the beginning of their turn or take 1d6 acid damage and be poisoned until the end of their next turn.
7	Each creature in the area receives a brief mental image (the subject of their bond characteristic) and gains advantage on saving throws against being frightened for 1 minute.
8	The ground erupts as though it has been struck by catapult shot. Each creature in the area must make a DC 13 Dexterity saving throw as a space near it bursts in a spray of soil and metal. On a failed save, a creature takes 1d8 points of bludgeoning damage and is knocked prone.

Ciphers

Puzzles are a fantastic way to customize your dungeons and add some interesting challenges to get your characters thinking about their environment and how they might interact with it. Presented herein are some new puzzles you can present, either as a planned part of your adventure or on the fly if you need to add an element of surprise or mystery.

SIMPLE SUBSTITUTION CIPHER

Difficulty: easy

This puzzle can be included anywhere you want and can be presented in many different ways. Perhaps the characters need to gather a few things to gain the grudging assistance of a sage. Instead of giving them a simple list, the sage uses a cipher hoping the characters lose interest or can't figure it out. As the players decipher the list, they gather the items and force the cantankerous old woman to help them. Or perhaps you use a substitution cipher to represent an unfamiliar language that uses the same alphabet as the Common tongue, allowing characters to learn and decipher texts written in the tongue without them needing to have proficiency in the language itself.

For the example, we'll use a locked door that requires a phrase be deciphered to open it.

PUZZLE FEATURES

A locked door is set into the dungeon's stone wall. It is made of stout oak and banded in steel. A small horn etched with a stylized gust of wind is fastened to the door, jutting out at the height of the average human's face. An inscription has been chiseled into the wall:

Solve the riddle and speak the command to enter. A chilly reception will meet the one who does not speak truly.

"YLIVZH ZOOLD NV KZHHZTV."

SOLUTION

Substitution ciphers are one of the oldest types of puzzles. To create one, the maker creates a cipher alphabet wherein each letter of the regular alphabet corresponds to a different letter of the same alphabet. For the example, we will reverse the alphabet to make our cipher, so the letter *A* is written as the letter *Z*, and the letter *Z* is written as *A*. The complete alphabet, numbered for ease of use, is as follows.

REGULAR ALPHABET

(1)A (2)B (3)C (4)D (5)E (6) F (7)G (8)H (9)I (10)J (11)K (12)L (13)M (14)N (15)O (16)P (17)Q (18)R (19)S (20)T (21)U (22)V (23)W (24)X (25)Y (26)Z

CIPHER ALPHABET

(1)Z (2)Y (3)X (4)W (5)V (6)U (7)T (8)S (9)R (10)Q (11)P (12)O (13)N (14)M (15) L (16)K (17)J (18)I (19)H (20)G (21)F (22)E (23)D (24)C (25)B (26)A

In order to unlock the door and move on, the characters need to decipher the script, which using the cipher alphabet above reads, "BOREAS ALLOW ME PASSAGE." Once they know the solution, a character needs to speak it into the horn, which unlocks the door. A freezing bolt shoots from the horn toward the speaker if anything other than the solution to the cipher is said directly into the horn. The cold blast has +4 to attacks and deals 4 (1d8) cold damage.

HINT CHECKS

Any character has the option of making one of these ability checks to receive a hint:

- ***Intelligence (Investigation).*** With a successful DC 10 Intelligence (Investigation) check, the character deduces the lower part of the inscription is a substitution cipher and that something unpleasant will probably occur if the wrong words are spoken into the horn. If their check meets or exceeds a 12, they understand how the alphabet used in the inscription corresponds to the actual alphabet.

- ***Intelligence (Religion).*** With a successful DC 10 Intelligence (Religion) check, the character recognizes the etchings on the horn match the symbol of Boreas. If their check beats a DC 12, they realize the first word of the inscription has the same number of characters as Boreas's name. If their check beats a DC 15, they know the pass phrase is an entreaty for entry to Boreas.

CUSTOMIZING THE PUZZLE

The easiest way to customize a substitution cipher is to change the cipher alphabet, which can be done in a variety of ways. Once you have created a cipher alphabet, you can use it or alter it easily for future use.

Most simply, instead of having each letter correspond to a different letter, have it correspond to a number instead. This can be done by having the number 1 symbolize the letter *A* if you want to keep it easy, but 1 can represent any letter, such as *R* or *J* to make it more complex.

In keeping with the above suggestion, have letters correspond to runes, symbols, or pictograms instead. This is a great option if you wish to use the cipher to represent an unusual or unfamiliar language.

In addition to having letters, numbers, or symbols relate to the actual letters you're using, have some of them symbolize commonly used letter groupings, such as *AI*, *EA*, *ING*, *EE*, *EI*, or *OO*. This is easier if you're using numbers, symbols, or pictograms and can add quite a bit of complexity to the puzzle.

Finally, if you really want to make your cipher difficult, create a cipher alphabet out of letters, numbers, and symbols or pictures. This should stymie even a group who really loves this type of puzzle.

DIRE CREATIONS OF THE DERRO ARCHITECT

by Christopher Lockey

Presenting a deadly assortment of devious mechanisms and arcane accoutrement for dungeons (and other unsavory locations)…

The Mad Architect of Old Hammerheim

Here is introduced a selection of bizarre dungeon features designed by the deranged trapsmith Revok Moldheim Zmythe—a derro torture artist of ill repute whose devilish traps, rare grotesques, and other mechanical oddities are studied the worlds over. A vast array of insidious chambers hosts these diabolical creations, united in their themes of chaos, madness, perversion, and greed.

From the workshops of his extraplanar lair, the Mad Architect cultivates a reputation of cunning malice amongst the patrons who sponsor his creations… spiteful wizards, cruel despots, and rapacious collectors to name a few. Anyone who would see a Moldheim trap installed in their facility would pay a handsome price—and rumor has it that the Mad Architect prefers remittance of a distinctly eldritch variety.

His Dire Creations

Here are but a few of the Mad Architect's most famous creations. The boutique nature of his feats of insidious engineering guarantee that only the most seasoned of adventurers are sure to encounter them during their travels. In fact, some trap-springers seek out these legendary mechanisms merely to conquer them, though many do not live to tell the tale.

INSIDIOUS HOURGLASS

Complex trap (level 11–16, deadly threat)

This complex trap resembles a plain, domed chamber with a door opposite the entrance. In fact, it is an automated ruby ooze incubator situated at a dangerous dead end.

The insidious hourglass is actually a symmetrical, stack of two domed stone chambers, connected by an aperture where they meet (not unlike an hourglass). This aperture remains closed and concealed until the trap is triggered. Each domed chamber is traditionally 15 feet high and 20 feet in diameter. A successful DC 30 Intelligence (Investigation) or Wisdom (Perception) check notices the hidden aperture.

This trap is activated when a character attempts to open the false door opposite the chamber entrance. A successful DC 24 Intelligence (Investigation) or Wisdom (Perception) check reveals the door is trapped. A successful DC 30 Dexterity (thieves' tools) check disables the door harmlessly. On a failed check, the trap triggers. The door is false and leads to a stone wall, revealing the domed chamber to be a dead end.

When the trap is triggered, the entrance door slams and locks in place. The entrance door is an 8-foot-high, 3-foot-wide, 10-inch-thick slab of a strange metallic alloy. A successful DC 30 Dexterity (thieves' tools) check unlocks the door. It cannot be pushed open. The entrance door has AC 18, 100 hit points, and immunity to acid, cold, fire, lightning, poison, and psychic damage. The false door on the opposite wall is an identical facsimile.

Additionally, the concealed aperture in the ceiling opens, and a stream of what appears to be red sand begins steadily pouring into the room from above. The red sand is in fact a group of at least three ruby oozes (see *Creature Codex*), which pour into the room one by one over the course of 3 or more rounds, one creature per round. These oozes have advantage on initiative rolls and become hostile to any creatures in the room as soon as they are discovered or once the final ooze has descended. In addition to the characters, the ruby oozes will attempt to consume any nonmagical metal and wood in the room.

After an hour has passed, a third component to the trap is revealed when the aperture closes once more, and the insidious hourglass begins rotating on a horizontal axis, effectively swapping the original domed chamber for an identical one that was above, concealed beyond the aperture. The original domed chamber, now inverted, becomes the new reservoir for the ruby oozes—which sit and wait for their next hapless victim. The domed chambers of the insidious hourglass must come to a full stop in their normal resting positions in order for the entrance door to align with its neighboring chamber. This means escaping an insidious hourglass during its rotation phase is highly improbable without the intervention of powerful magic or other abilities. The elaborate machinery and stonework that powers this part of the trap is hidden behind the chamber walls and is beyond the scope of simple destruction or disarmament.

Although ruby oozes are one of the most popular agents used in phase two of this complex trap, other oozes, slimes, and other hazards have been used to great effect. Should an ooze or other hazardous material become too large for the hourglass chamber, a dungeon keeper will siphon off the excess for other menacing implementations elsewhere.

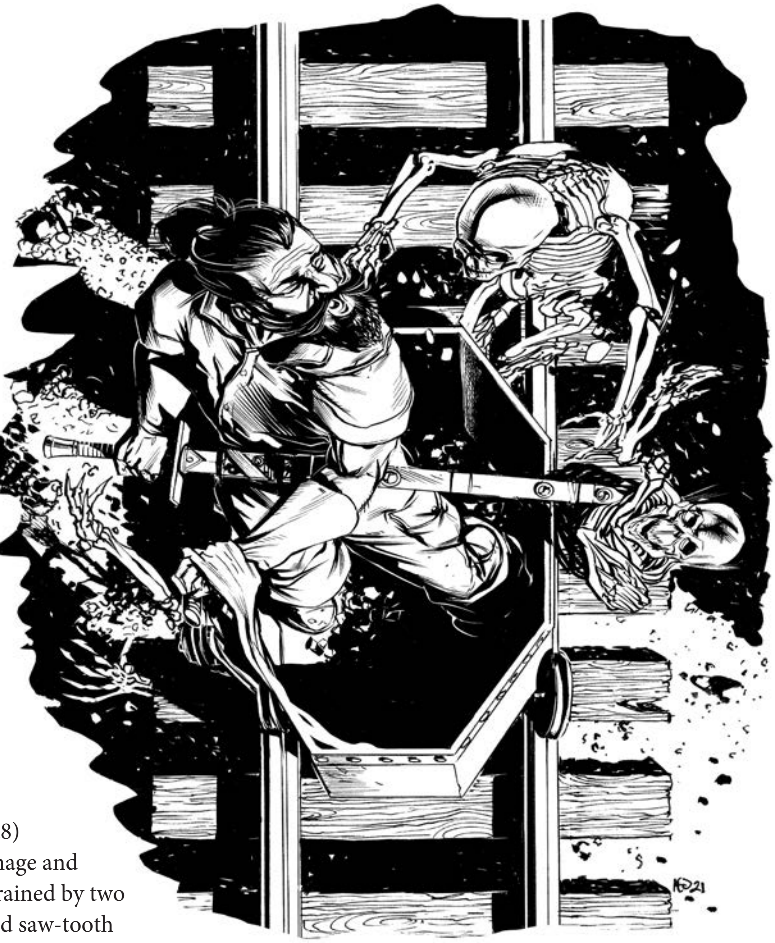
MINE CART OF MUTILATION

Complex trap (level 5–10, deadly threat)

The centerpiece of this inconspicuous trap resembles a simple hand-powered rail cart, often staged in an convenient location.

Once the cart is mounted and the central lever pushed or pulled for locomotion, multiple effects occur: bladed shackles pierce and pinion the hands of the character who triggered the trap, and a secret door opens to release a contingent of deadly creatures from a nearby lair. Regrettably for the would-be rider, the cart itself does not move. A successful DC 18 Intelligence (Investigation) or Wisdom (Perception) check notices either the hidden clamps or the secret doors. A successful DC 18 Dexterity (thieves' tools) check disarms the rail cart's lever harmlessly. On a failed check, the trap triggers.

The first character who attempts to manipulate the rail cart's handle must succeed on a DC 18 Dexterity saving throw



or take 9 (2d8) slashing damage and become restrained by two spring-loaded saw-tooth clamps that pinion the character's hands to the handle. A character can use their action to make a DC 20 Strength (Athletics) check, freeing themself or another character within their reach on a success. A character can also attempt to disable the clamp's spring mechanism with a DC 18 Dexterity (thieves' tools) check, provided that the clamps can be reached and the character can see them. The clamps have AC 16 and 40 hit points each.

Additionally, when the trap is triggered, a secret door nearby opens to reveal a hidden chamber full of deadly creatures (determined by the GM), which immediately advance upon the restrained character and their allies to attack. If the secret door is spotted, a successful DC 15 Intelligence (Investigation) check reveals the mechanism used to open it. The hidden chamber is usually only large enough to house the deadly creatures, and its proximity to the rail cart is determined by the size of the main chamber housing the trap. (These specifications are frequently determined by precisely how much the dungeon owner wants their interlopers to suffer before being fully consumed by the advancing enemies.) The most effective creatures for this second stage of the trap are those to whom physical age is not an issue: these ranks have been known to include undead, such as zombies, ghouls, or skeletons; immortal oozes; weird aberrations; menacing constructs; or strange beasts. The GM can also roll on the following table to randomly determine what kind of deadly creatures have been installed in the hidden chamber:

d6	Encounter
1	5d4 + 5 skeletons and/or zombies
2	5d4 + 8 quasits
3	3d3 ghouls and a ghast
4	2d2 mummies
5	2d2 black puddings
6	3d2 gibbering mouthers

Any time a character fails an attempt to escape or disarm the saw-tooth clamps, the restrained character takes an additional 5 (2d4) points of slashing damage as the clamps tighten.

Although they have proven to be effective deterrents in their own right, the combination of these two simpler traps into one elaborate design has proven itself to be deliciously sinister. Variants of this combination have been known to exist with terrain centerpieces like fountains, thrones, and even doors serving as the first phase mechanism. Additional secret doors and hidden chambers are also common.

This trap is naturally much harder to reset than other, simpler mechanisms and often requires the use of vassals or other servitors to herd the deadly creatures back into their hidden corrals.

WELL OF WOES

Complex trap (level 5–10, deadly threat)

This complex trap resembles a dry wishing well, sitting above a cavern full of treasure, but the slick shaft—lined with pressure plates, tripwires, and spinning blades—actually leads to a junk-filled oubliette.

The standard depth of a well of woes is 90 feet, including a 60-foot shaft of masonry followed by the 30-foot height of the vaulted chamber below. The well is always 10 feet in diameter, and the oubliette beneath is usually a rough-hewn circular chamber with a 20-foot radius or larger.

The trap is activated when an intruder touches one of several hidden pressure plates, lining the stone walls of the well, which releases a fleet of spinning blades from their concealed seams. The trap is also activated when an intruder disrupts one of several invisible tripwires crossing the vertical expanse.

A successful DC 15 Intelligence (Investigation) or Wisdom (Perception) check reveals the pressure plates while a DC 20 check spots the invisible trip wires and concealed seams of the spinning blades. Any character who attempts to climb the slick vertical expanse of the well must succeed on a DC 18 Strength (Athletics) check or fall, taking damage based on the well's depth. Characters have a 50% chance of touching a pressure plate each turn they spend climbing the well. The trap activates when more than 5 pounds of weight is placed on a pressure plate, causing the spinning blades to extend horizontally from their concealed seams. Each creature inside the well's 60 feet of masonry must make a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw, taking 22 (4d10) slashing damage on a failed save or half as much damage on a successful one; a creature who fails this save also falls to the ground below, taking damage based on the well's depth. A character who falls through the spinning blades while they are active takes 5 (1d10) slashing damage for each 10 feet of masonry they travel.

Any character who falls at least 10 feet down the well must succeed on a DC 15 Dexterity (Acrobatics) check to avoid triggering a tripwire during the fall. For each

10 feet of masonry in the well, wedging iron spikes or other objects under the pressure plates *and* cutting the tripwires with successful DC 15 Dexterity (thieves' tools) checks prevents the trap from activating. Once triggered, the spinning blades remain active for 6 hours before retracting to their at-rest positions as the trap begins to reset.

The treasure at the bottom of the well is little more than junk, consisting primarily of iron pyrite coins and the mundane equipment of dead adventurers. Characters who survive their descent to the bottom of the well of woes and spend at least 1 minute searching through the refuse have a 20% chance of discovering an assortment of random treasure on a rotted corpse.

Moldheim's Minions

When he isn't scrying from untold places, Zmythe is known to monitor and maintain his creations with a dutiful legion of vassals and servitors. One variety of these creatures is presented here and has been known to frequent locations where the Mad Architect's artistry can be found.

VILE RECONSTRUCTOR

A small, lithe humanoid with pale skin and a maw of needle-sharp teeth looks up at you through the eerie sheen of a monocular fused to one of his cruel and beady eyes. An assortment of curious tools and strange devices are affixed to a belt wrapped around its waist. Curiouser still are the three rod-tipped mechanical arms that protrude from this stranger's back—each one whirring and gesticulating in odd concordance with the weird creature's erratic motions.

The Architect's Assistants. Cousins to the sinister siabhra (or vile barber, see *Tome of Beasts*), these impish unseelie fey are often tasked with resetting the triggers of complex traps and other contraptions. The ability to traverse shadows—combined with their uncanny mechanical acumen and eldritch implants—allow vile reconstructors to ingress many places considered dangerous and otherwise unreachable. And they do seem to rather enjoy doing it.

Bad Science. Upon enlistment or enslavement, vile reconstructors are subjected to a series of intense physical and mental modifications under the supervision of the Mad Architect himself. These painful arcane medical procedures bestow upon the subject an array of heightened abilities and a macabre complement of skin-grafted tools and weapons (along with a variously fractured mind). And while the specimen classified here has come to be known as a standard variety, stranger and more unique types of vile reconstructors have certainly been encountered in the wild.

Inconvenient Saboteurs. While they are often found in the action of repairing or resetting traps and other mechanisms, vile reconstructors have been known to happen upon adventurers during the most awkward and ill-timed of circumstances. Reconstructors delight in making those moments as deadly (and humorous) as possible in an effort to please themselves and the maniacal whims of their dark creator.

VILE RECONSTRUCTOR

Small fey, lawful evil

Armor Class 15 (leather armor)

Hit Points 28 (8d6)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
12 (+1)	18 (+4)	10 (+0)	10 (+0)	8 (−1)	12 (+1)

Damage Resistances bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing from nonmagical attacks not made with cold iron or silvered weapons

Skills Perception +6, Sleight of Hand +4, Stealth +4

Condition Immunities frightened
Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 15
Languages Common, Undercommon, Sylvan, Umbral
Challenge 1 (200 XP)

Inhumanly Quick. The vile reconstructor can take two bonus actions on its turn, instead of one. Each bonus action must be different; it can't use the same bonus action twice in a single turn.

Mending Rod. The vile reconstructor can use an action to cast the *mending* cantrip at will, using one of its rod-tipped arms.

Monocular Graft. The vile reconstructor has advantage on Intelligence (Investigation) and Wisdom (Perception) checks that require sight.

Nimble Escape. As a bonus action, the vile reconstructor can take the Disengage or Hide action on each of its turns.

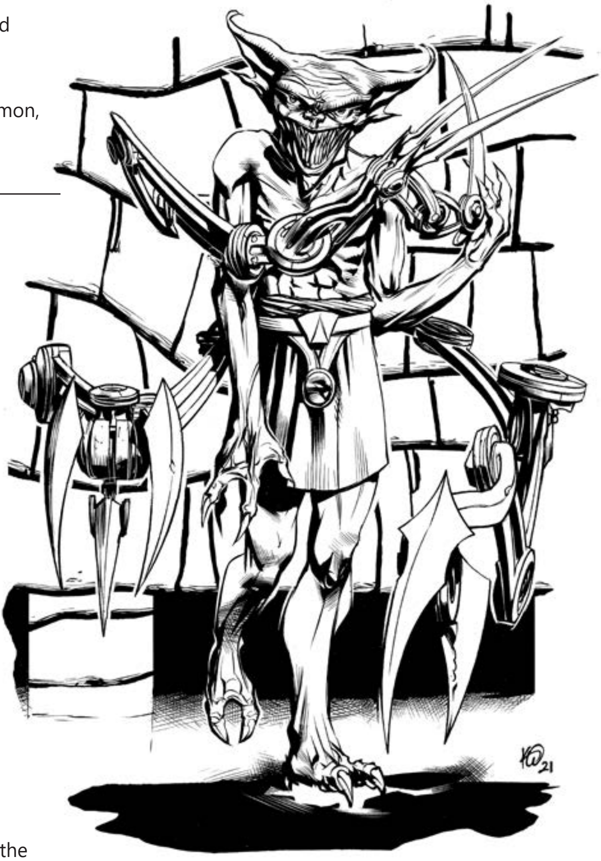
Shadow Step. As a bonus action, the vile reconstructor magically teleports from an area of dim light or darkness it currently occupies, along with any equipment it is wearing or carrying, up to 80 feet to any other area of dim light or darkness it can see. The reconstructor then has advantage on the first melee attack it makes before the end of the turn.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The vile reconstructor makes two attacks with its torch rods.

Torch Rods. *Melee Weapon Attack*: +5 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit*: 7 (1d6 + 4) fire or 7 (1d6 + 4) lightning damage.

Mock Box. As a bonus action, the vile reconstructor targets a creature that can hear it within 60 feet. That target must succeed on a DC 13 Charisma saving throw or attack rolls against it have advantage until the start of its next turn.



Disquieting Technology of the Derro Architect

Whether found amongst his creations or carried by his minions, these magic items represent but a small selection of the disquieting eldritch technology and other objects of wonder to be found in Zmythe's extraplanar reliquary.

CAULDRON OF CURIOUS SMELTING

Wondrous item, very rare

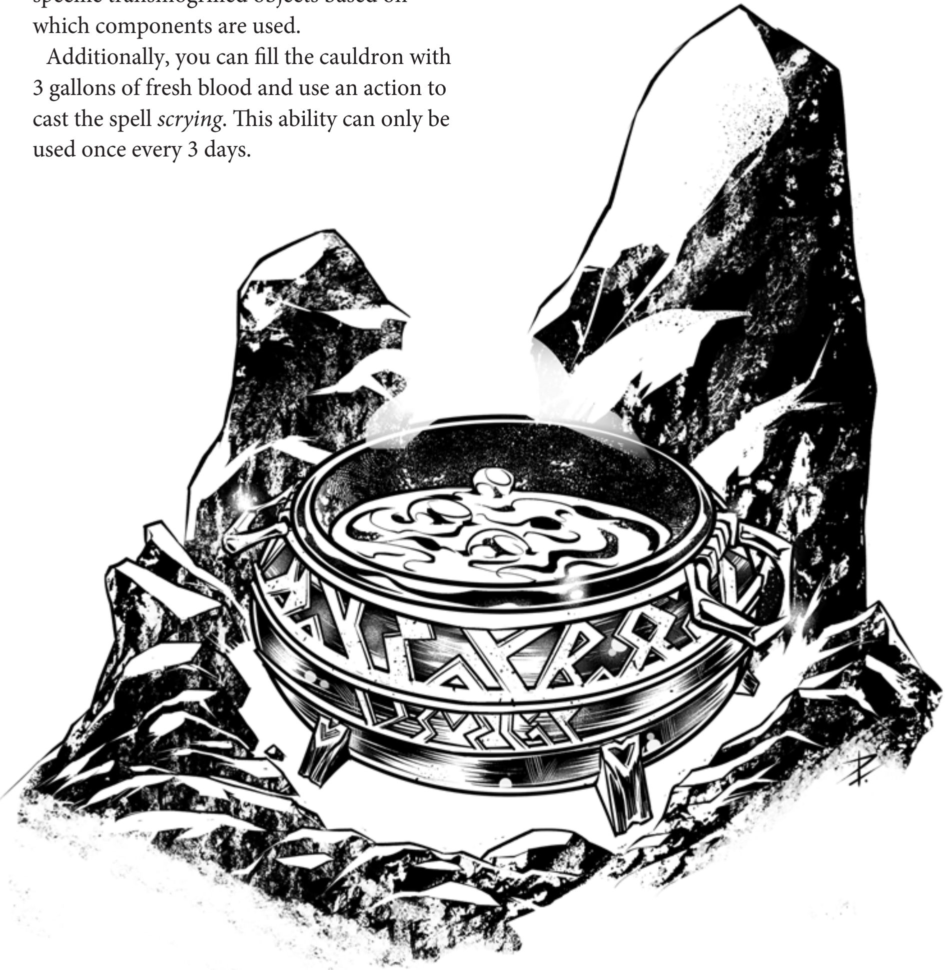
The interior of this black rune-etched cauldron appears able to hold 1-1/2 cubic feet of mass. Its mouth is 13 inches in diameter, and it weighs 13 pounds.

Components	Transmogrified Objects
Any metal items (other than coins)	An equal value of the same metal, powdered
Any stone, gemstone, or glass	An equal value of the same material, powdered
Coins	One solid ingot per 100 coins of the same metal
Three ingots of any metal transmogrified by the cauldron	A dagger made of the same metal (with a +1 bonus to damage that lasts only until then next dawn)
A still-bleeding humanoid heart and 333 gp in powdered precious gemstone	A quasit companion (DC 13 Charisma check to gain its fickle allegiance)

As an action, you can place one or more components from the table below into the cauldron, causing the cauldron to produce specific transmogrified objects based on which components are used.

Additionally, you can fill the cauldron with 3 gallons of fresh blood and use an action to cast the spell *scrying*. This ability can only be used once every 3 days.

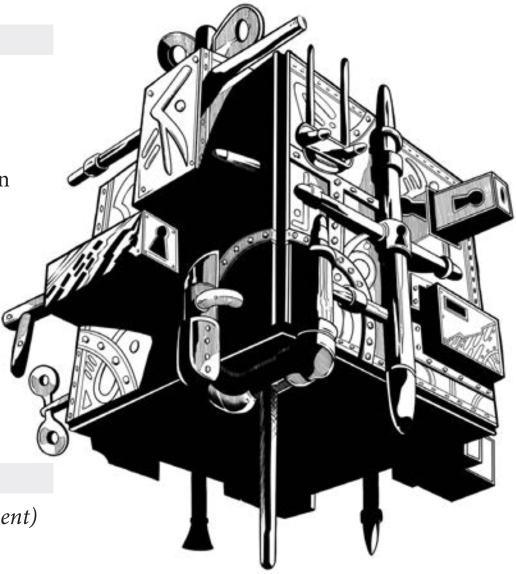
Once any ability of the cauldron has been used, the cauldron can't be used again until the next dawn.



MOCK BOX

Wondrous item, uncommon (requires attunement)

While you hold this small, square contraption, you can use a bonus action to target a creature within 60 feet that can hear you. That target must succeed on a DC 13 Charisma saving throw or any attack rolls against it have advantage until the start of its next turn.



VOID LANTERN

Wondrous item, rare (requires attunement)

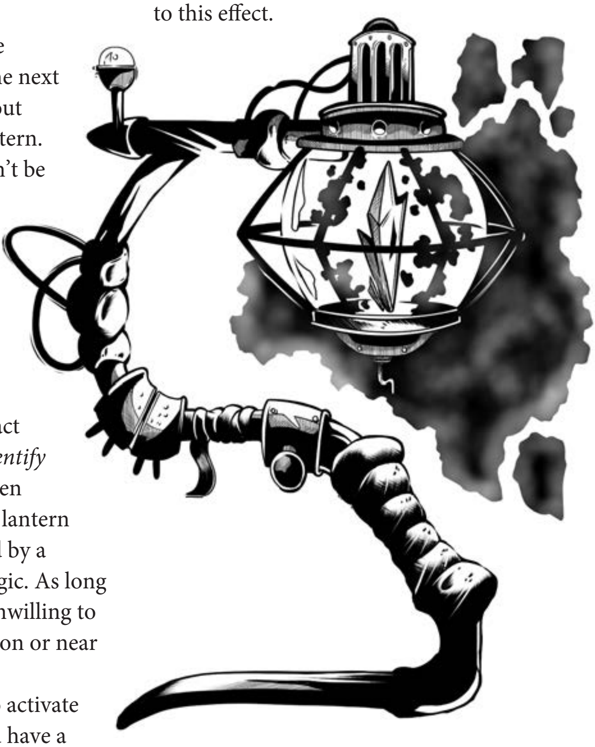
The eerie light of this lantern is fueled by a shard of tenebrous reality from Ginnungagap, the Yawning Void. While holding the lantern, you have darkvision out to a range of 60 feet. The lantern itself sheds dim light in a 20-foot radius.

As an action, you can speak the lantern's command word. For the next 10 minutes, you have truesight out to 120 feet when holding the lantern. Once this property is used, it can't be used again until the next dawn.

Additionally, while holding the lantern, you can use an action to cast the spell *locate object*. Once this property is used, it can't be used again until the next dawn.

Curse. The lantern is cursed, a fact that is revealed only when an *identify* spell is cast on the lantern or when you attune to it. Attuning to the lantern curses you until you are targeted by a *remove curse* spell or similar magic. As long as you remain cursed, you are unwilling to part with the lantern, keeping it on or near your person at all times.

Whenever you use an action to activate one of the lantern's abilities, you have a 20% chance of becoming subjected to the effects of a random short-term madness. Constructs, derro, and undead are immune to this effect.



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