Plumb the Depths — Creating dungeons on the fly

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Intro

This section is addressed to the GM. Eventually, and maybe always, the party leaves the outdoors behind for darker places, stumbled across in the depths of a jungle or found where the "X" marks the spot on maps of dubious origin. This section details a method for generating dungeons before or during play. Terms and organizational information are presented first, followed by the actual procedure. Tables for rolling up various aspects of a dungeon come at the end.

Dungeon organization

For purposes of this approach to improvised dungeon creation, dungeons are defined by a number of different terms, explained here.

Dungeon name

A dungeon may start out with a name, known through rumor or legend, or the party may give it a name it themselves.

Dungeon foundation

Each dungeon has a **foundation**, which describes who built it and for what purpose. A dungeon's foundation is the basis for the GM's descriptions of the physical environment, and what sorts of things the characters might expect to find there. "Dwarven Prison," "Natural Lair," and "Cult Library" are examples of foundations taken from combined results on the Builder and Function tables on page CROSSREF.

Dungeon size

A dungeon's size determines how many themes and areas it can have (see below), as well as the size of each theme's countdown. The Themes column on this table refers to both the number of themes and the size of each countdown. The number listed under Area Limit is both the number of common areas and the number of unique areas to be found in a dungeon of that size.

Table 1: Dungeon size

1d12	Size	Themes	Area limit
1-3	small	2 or 1d4	6 or 1d6+2
4-9	medium	3 or 1d6	12 or 2d6+4
10-11	large	4 or 1d6+1	16 or 3d6+6
12	huge	5 or 1d6+2	24 or 4d6+10

Dungeon themes

Every dungeon has one or more **themes**, each of which is a simple phrase that describes an organizing principle of the dungeon's contents. A dungeon's theme is a reference point for you to describe the environment and create Discoveries and Dangers as the party explores. A given theme might obviously relate to the dungeon's foundation, or it might not; you get to make sense of the juxtaposition through play. Generally speaking, the more themes a dungeon has, the greater its variety of contents. You can make up whatever themes sound interesting to you, or roll some up on the Dungeon Theme table on page CROSSREF. For example, choosing to expand on the idea of a Dwarven Prison, I roll up the themes "rot/decay" and "holy war."

Dungeon areas

Just like regions, dungeons contain different areas. Each area can be thought of as a one or more locations or rooms categorized by function or proximity within the dungeon. Each area is identified by a name, and is classified as either **common**—meaning it may recur multiple times in the same dungeon—or **unique**—occurring only once. The number of common and unique areas in a given dungeon is determined by its Size and Area Limit (see above). For my Dwarven Prison, I decide that its common areas are "Guardroom," "Gated passage," "3-way intersection," and "Cellblock;" and its unique areas are "Storeroom," "Oubliette," "Torture Chamber," and "Warden's Quarters."

Countdowns

Each theme in a dungeon has a **countdown**, used to track the degree to which that theme has been explored. A countdown is made by drawing a number of circles next to a theme, the number of which is dictated by the dungeon's Size (see above). As the theme is revealed in play, the circles are marked off, and when its countdown is completely marked off, that theme is exhausted. When all of a dungeon's theme countdowns are marked off, the dungeon has been fully explored.

Dungeon record

When you make a new dungeon, you'll want to write down all of the preceding elements, either before the party sets foot inside, or as they explore. *The Perilous Wilds Survival Kit* includes blank dungeon record sheets for this purpose, but you can just as easily take notes on whatever you have lying around.

Optionally, you may want to assign die roll results to your themes and common areas, allowing you to randomize their occurrence within the dungeon.

My notes for my Dwarven Prison, with die results assigned, might look like this:

Korvenhald

Dwarven Prison

Size: Small

Themes (1d12)

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1-8   Rot/Decay  O O
9-12  Holy War   O O
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Common Areas (1d12)

```
1-2    Guardroom
3-6    Gated passage
7-9    3-way intersection
10-12  Cellblock
```

Unique Areas

```
o Storeroom
o Oubliette
o Torture Chamber
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Rumors and legends

When the characters first hear about or come across a dungeon (ruin, tower, sewer system, monster lair, etc.), and it makes sense that at least one of them would have heard about the place, ask some or all of the following questions. If they have no clue about the place at all, answer the questions yourself ("I don't know yet" is a fine answer), or roll on the tables suggested in parentheses, which are all on page CROSSREF. In any case, write down the answers.

- Who or what is believed to have built this place? (Dungeon Builder)
- For what purpose was it built? (Dungeon Function)
- How did it come to ruin? (Dungeon Ruination)
- What Dangers is it said to conceal? (monsters, forces, traps, etc.)
- What Discoveries may lie within? (clues, puzzles, treasure, etc.)

Note that, regardless of what you write down, the answers may or may not be true, and only those who brave the depths may discover the truth.

Plumbing procedure

When the party begins to explore a new dungeon, and you have nothing prepared, follow these guidelines. You can also use the method described here to generate ideas for a dungeon ahead of time.

1) Write foundation & size

Before the dungeon is explored, figure out who made it, why, and how big it is. This may be dictated by rumors and legends the party has heard, chosen by you, or rolled on the Builder and Function tables (page CROSSREF). Remember that a dungeon's foundation helps you describe what the place looks like, and what sorts of things the characters may find inside. Once you settle on a foundation and size, write them down.

2) Write themes

Determine how many themes the dungeon has, based on its size (see page CROSSREF). Choose themes based on rumor, make them up, or roll them on the Dungeon Theme table (page CROSSREF). Write them down and give each one a countdown based on the size of the dungeon.

3) Write areas

You can write down the names of some areas that suit the dungeon's foundation and themes right now, or do it as the party explores. Either way, the number of

common and the number of unique areas should each not exceed the number listed in the Area Limit column of the Dungeon Size table (page CROSSREF).

4) Describe the exterior/entrance

The first time the characters come across a dungeon, think about its foundation and themes, and describe what it looks like from the outside. Is it a halfburied ruin in the desert sands? A black tower silhouetted against the sunset?

Consider how they might gain access to the interior and decribe it if it's obvious, or let them find it by searching. Perhaps the dungeon is entirely concealed by the landscape, and the only external clue is the way in: a crevasse in the ice, a hole amongst the roots of a giant tree, a doorway set into a cliff face thirty feet off the ground. Perhaps the entrance is guarded, or poses some other hazard. Keep in mind also that there may be more than one way in.

Describe the environment according to the results of that move, taking the dungeon's foundation—and any theme that applies—into account. You can just describe things in general terms ("A cold stone passage runs east to west, lined with corroded iron doors"), or draw a map showing how things are laid out as they explore. The advantage to speaking generally is that play moves faster; you can drill down and describe things in more detail as demanded by their actions and the circumstances.

A Danger or Discovery introduced via the See What They Find move should be integrated sensibly into the fiction. A beast-man ambush can happen suddenly and out of nowhere, but if the beastmen are unaware of the party, perhaps their grunts and growls will be heard in advance of the confrontation.

5) See what they find

When the party ventures into a new area of the dungeon, make the See What They Find move (page CROSSREF).

6) Leave openings

As long as there are unmarked boxes on any theme's countdown, the dungeon has not yet been fully explored. Knowing this, as you describe and/ or map out an area, keep the need for more rooms within that area and connections to other areas in mind. If they find themselves at an apparent deadend because you forgot to leave enough ways forward, and you have unfinished countdowns, don't fret. They'll either decide they've explored the place fully and head back out (let them go), or stay and search for something they may have missed. Perhaps there's a trapdoor in the floor under that heap of bones, or they passed under

an airshaft without looking up. That old chestnut, the secret door, is always a
good fallback.

Dungeon moves

These moves are GM-facing.

Marching Order

When they **enter or move through a confined space**, ask how the party is
organized: who goes first, second, etc., and who brings up the rear. Ask them
to track this important information in whatever way is most convenient.

See What They Find

When they **press on into the unknown**, ask them to roll 1d12, consult the
table below, and describe what they find. Interpret the results based on the
dungeon's foundation and themes (if appropriate). The actions of the party—
potentially triggering the Stay Sharp move (page 25)—should dictate whether
or not they are surprised by what they encounter.

1d12	Area type & contents
Unthemed area	. . .
1	Common, empty
2	Common, Danger
3-4	Common, Discovery + Danger
5-6	Common, Discovery
Themed area	. . .
7	Common, Danger
8	Common, Discovery + Danger
9	Common, Discovery
10	Unique, Danger
11	Unique, Discovery + Danger
12	Unique, Discovery

When they find a new area, choose or roll it from your area list. If it's a unique
area, cross it off your list. If the new area is themed, choose or roll a theme from
your theme list, and take that theme into account as you conceive and describe
the place and its contents.

When you assign a theme to an area, choose one with a countdown that is not

completely marked off, and mark 1 box off that countdown. If every theme's countdown has been completely marked off, the dungeon is fully explored.

This table allows for just one Discovery and one Danger per area, but you may want more (especially Discoveries). If so, add them as they explore, or roll 1d4 to determine how many are present. If you need an idea for a Discovery or Danger, roll one up on page CROSSREF.

Intensify your themes and encounters as they press on into the unknown!

Example — Improvised Dungeon Creation

The characters are traveling through a part of the Wildwood they've never seen before. They are Undertaking a Perilous Journey, and Maeve the Ranger rolls a 10+ to Scout Ahead. She chooses to make a Discovery, and although I have some Discoveries listed in my almanac of the Wildwood, I choose to ask the Fates and roll on the Discovery tables. She finds a dungeon.

Referring to the Dungeon Foundation and Size tables, I ask for some d12 rolls, and the results are "demigod/demon," "lair/den/hideout," and "huge." Yikes! I decide the dungeon is a demon's lair and write that down. A huge dungeon has 1d6+2 themes, and the roll is 1, +2 equals 3 themes. More d12 rolls give me the themes, which I write down: "scheming evil," "impending disaster," and "tricks and traps." I put a countdown of 5 boxes next to each.

A huge dungeon has an area limit of 24, which means 24 common and 24 unique areas, way too many to write down in the middle of play, so I skip that step and get back to describing what Maeve finds: "You enter an area of the forest where the trees are blackened and twisted, the ground cracked and sloping down toward what looks like a sinkhole."

She returns to her companions and leads them to the spot. Sir Lachlann the Paladin makes a Discern Realities roll and asks "What here is not what it appears to be?" I tell him he has a profound sense that this is not just a sinkhole—it's a pit of evil. Against objections of the others, who just want out of the woods, he insists on investigating.

Sir Lachlann lights a torch and drops it into the hole, prompting the See What They Find move. A roll of 6 gives me a common area with a Discovery, and a roll on the Dungeon Discovery table gives me "signs of battle."As they peer into the darkness I tell them the torch appears to have landed on something that glitters like silver, about forty feet down. Calum the Thief takes the bait and descends on a rope with his own torch in hand, secured by the others.

On his way down I tell him it looks like the ceiling of this underground space gave way, creating the sinkhole, and that he is being lowered into what looks like a natural cavern. About twenty feet from the bottom, I tell him the silvery stuff is a scattering of metal, broken weapons and scraps of armor, rusted by

still shiny in places. There are bones as well. He calls for his friends to stop lowering him and scans the area for anything dangerous, triggering Trap Expert. A roll of 10+ tells him there are no traps (which fits—while "tricks and traps" is one of the dungeon's themes, this area has no theme), but I tell him he can see tunnels leading off in three directions.

I draw a quick map of the place, write down "cavern" as the first of my common areas for this dungeon, and wonder what they're going to do next.

Dungeons

Roll to determine different details as needed.

Dungeon Size

1d12	Size	Themes	Area limit
1-3	small	2 or 1d4	6 or 1d6+2
4-9	medium	3 or 1d6	12 or 2d6+4
10-11	large	4 or 1d6+1	16 or 3d6+6
12	huge	5 or 1d6+2	24 or 4d6+10

Dungeon Foundation

Who built it, to what end?

Builder

1	aliens/precursors
2	demigod/demon
3-4	natural (caves, etc.)
5	religious order/cult
6-7	Humanoid
8-9	dwarves/gnomes
10	elves
11	wizard/madman
12	monarch/warlord

Function

1	source/portal

2	mine
3-4	tomb/crypt
5	prison
6-7	lair/den/hideout
8-9	stronghold/sanctuary
10	shrine/temple/oracle
11	archive/library
12	unknown/mystery

Dungeon Ruination

1	arcane disaster
2	damnation/curse
3-4	earthquake/fire/flood
5-6	plague/famine/drought
7-8	overrun by monsters
9-10	war/invasion
11	depleted resources
12	better prospects elsewhere

Dungeon Theme

What's it all about? Choose or roll according to Dungeon Size.

1-5 Mundane

1	rot/decay
2	torture/agony
3	madness
4	all is lost
5	noble sacrifice
6	savage fury
7	survival
8	criminal activity
9	secrets/treachery
10	tricks and traps
11	invasion/infestation
12	factions at war

6-9 Unusual

1	creation/invention
2	Element (CROSSREF)

3	knowledge/learning
4	growth/expansion
5	deepening mystery
6	transformation/change
7	chaos and destruction
8	shadowy forces
9	forbidden knowledge
10	poison/disease
11	corruption/blight
12	impending disaster

10-12 Extraordinary

1	scheming evil
2	divination/scrying
3	blasphemy
4	arcane research
5	occult forces
6	an ancient curse
7	mutation
8	the unquiet dead
9	bottomless hunger
10	incredible power
11	unspeakable horrors
12	holy war

Dungeon Discovery

A starting point: extrapolate, embellish, integrate.

1-3 Dressing

1	junk/debris
2	tracks/marks
3	signs of battle
4	writing/carving
5	warning
6	dead creature
7	bones/remains
8	book/scroll/map
9	broken door/wall
10	breeze/wind/smell
11	lichen/moss/fungus
12	Oddity (CROSSREF)

4-9 Feature

1	cave-in/collapse
2	pit/shaft/chasm
3	pillars/columns
4	locked door/gate
5	alcoves/niches
6	bridge/stairs/ramp
7	fountain/well/pool
8	puzzle
9	altar/dais/platform
10	statue/idol
11	magic pool/statue/idol
12	connection to another dungeon

10-12 Find

1	trinkets
2	tools
3	weapons/armor
4	supplies/trade goods
5	coins/gems/jewelry
6	poisons/potions
7	adventurer/captive
8	magic item
9	scroll/book
10	magic weapon/armor
11	artifact
12	roll twice

Dungeon Danger

If they would notice, show signs of an approaching threat.

1-4 Trap

1	alarm
2	ensnaring/paralyzing
3	pit
4	crushing
5	piercing/puncturing
6	chopping/slashing
7	confusing (maze, etc.)
8	gas (poison, etc.)

9	Element (CROSSREF)
10	ambush
11	magical
12	roll twice

5-11 Creature (CROSSREF)

1	waiting in ambush
2	fighting/squabbling
3	prowling/on patrol
4	looking for food
5	eating/resting
6	guarding
7	on the move
8	searching/scavenging
9	returning to den
10	making plans
11	sleeping
12	dying

12 Entity

1	alien interloper
2	vermin lord
3	criminal mastermind
4	warlord
5	high priest
6	oracle
7	wizard/witch/alchemist
8	Monster lord (CROSSREF)
9	evil spirit/ghost
10	undead lord (lich, etc.)
11	demon
12	dark god