

Game Design Through A Dungeons & Dragons Lens

I've been running a D&D 5e campaign for 2.5 years. It is in an existing setting, Exandria, but the actual contents: overarching story, individual quests, combat encounters, NPCs, etc. of the campaign are completely created and designed by myself. The following slides will show some excerpts from my notes on what I've designed and my thought process behind it.

Design and Creation of a Custom Magic Item within 5e

Goals:

- Mechanically interesting and powerful while not being overly so
- Narratively cohesive with both the intended character and overarching story
- Shore up pre-existing mechanical deficits with the character's this item was designed for class and subclass

Brainstorming:

Whenever I had a thought or idea about this I would write it down on a page in my notes. Once I had a good amount, I looked over everything I had and began to compile it into more cohesive thoughts. The general idea I had for the mechanics behind the item came down to a couple things: I wanted the item to have modes that it could switch between giving different benefits that the character could match to the situation, I wanted to fix the character's lack of offensive abilities, and I wanted the item to mechanically be tied to the theme of alchemy and leylines.

Research:

Now having a solid direction to work in, I sat down and looked through existing magic items to get a good sense of scope. I wanted to know roughly how much mechanical power I could give an item while remaining balanced in comparison to other magic items; essentially estimating a 'budget' of mechanical power I had to work with. I also wanted to see what ideas mechanically have already been done and how the authors accomplished them within the rules so that I could stick to the standards set in the system, both rules and language-wise.

Iteration:

I then began to come up with specifically what I wanted mechanically for the item. I knew I wanted different modes for the item so that's where I started. I came up with multiple ideas at first, but eventually settled on 4 modes with each one centered on a different idea tactically: a 'chain' mode, where damage dealt can be 'chained' to subsequent targets; an 'overload' mode, where the character can 'overload' their spells allowing for maximum damage; a 'feedback' mode, a more defensive mode that reduces incoming damage to the character; and a 'build-up' mode, where the item charges up overtime to eventually release a large burst of damage.

Breakdown of the Item

Flavor text

I found that existing magic items often had 'ribbon abilities' or abilities that are small bonuses but aren't the main focus or theme of the item.

Main mode switching mechanic along with access to the 'chain' mode and the 'build-up' mode

New stage means increasing and upgrading previous ribbon abilities

Gaining access to the new 'feedback' or defensive mode

Final stage and final upgrades and increases

Gaining access to the final 'overload' mode

Divergent Catalyst Core
<i>Wondrous Item, Legendary (requires attunement by an alchemist artificer)</i>
A complex mechanism from a bygone era housing a crystalline vial with an unknown substance within. It seems to resonate with the energies of the leylines.
The Divergent Catalyst Core has a maximum number of Resonance Charges equal to your proficiency bonus.
Dormant While the Divergent Catalyst Core is in a Dormant state, you gain the following features: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- You always have <i>Chromatic Orb</i> and <i>Aganazzar's Scorching</i> prepared and they count as Artificer spells for you.- You learn the formulas for enhanced <i>Acid Vials</i> and <i>Alchemist's Fire</i>, allowing you to craft these for half their usual price in reagents. The enhancement allows the items to use your spell attack bonus and your spell DC in place of the standard. Resonant Frequency. As a bonus action, you can mentally command the core to switch its resonating frequency to utilize different ley energies, switching its resonance to <i>Harmonic</i> or <i>Accelerant</i> . Harmonic Resonance: When you deal damage to a target with an alchemical attack (alchemical item or artificer spell), you can expend any number of Resonance Charges to mark an equal amount of targets damaged with harmonic resonance for 1 minute. When a marked creature dies, it resonates violently, dealing damage equal to your artificer level of your most recently used alchemical attack's damage type (acid, fire, necrotic, or poison) to all creatures within 10 feet. Additionally, whenever you hit a creature with an alchemical attack, their DC to maintain concentration is equal to 13 or half the damage taken, whichever is higher. Accelerating Resonance: As long as you have at least 1 Resonance Charge, as an action you can initiate a <i>Resonant Surge</i> , targeting a point within 60 feet you can see and expending all Resonance Charges. All creatures in a 20 foot radius of the point must make a Dexterity saving throw (DC 13) or take 7d6 plus an additional 1d6 per charge spent in the most recent alchemical attack's damage type. Additionally, when you hit an alchemical attack, you gain 1 Resonance Charge, up to your maximum. Any charges gained at your maximum grant you a 5 foot boost to your speed until the end of your next turn.
Awakened When the Divergent Catalyst Core reaches an awakened state, you gain the following benefits: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- The DC for any <i>Resonance Frequencies</i> increase to 15.- You gain additional options for creating <i>Experimental Elixirs</i>: enhanced <i>Acid Vials</i> and enhanced <i>Alchemist's Fire</i>.- You always have <i>Fireball</i> prepared and it counts as an Artificer spell for you.- You gain an additional <i>Resonant Frequency</i>: Reverberant Resonance: While attuned to the <i>Reverberant Resonance</i> , you have resistance to damage of the same type as your most recently used alchemical attack. Additionally, when hit by a melee attack, you can use your reaction to expend a Resonance Charge. Doing so reduces the damage you take from the attack by an amount equal to your artificer level and deals damage to the attacker equal to your artificer level in your most recently used alchemical attack's damage type.
Exalted When the Divergent Catalyst Core reaches an exalted state, you gain the following benefits: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- The DC's for any <i>Resonant Frequencies</i> increases to 17.- You always have <i>Ultric Sphere</i> and <i>Immolation</i> prepared and they count as Artificer spells for you.- You gain an additional <i>Resonant Frequency</i>: Climactic Resonance: Whenever you would deal damage to a target with an alchemical attack, you can expend a number of Resonance Charges equal to the spell's level (or 1 for an alchemical item or cantrip) to maximize the damage roll against 1 target. Additionally, you can increase a dimension of an area of effect you create: add up to 10 feet to the radius, to the length of a cone or line, or to one dimension of a cube.

During my research, I realized that the entire ruleset of D&D 5e uses a very specific, concise, and efficient kind of language to convey many nuanced pieces of information relating to a multitude of rules without the need to explicitly state everything. I emulated this language in my design.

The **Dormant**, **Awakened**, and **Exalted** keywords mean that this item grows alongside its wielder, a mechanic I identified in other existing magic items during my research. Each new 'stage' grants access to new abilities in addition to the previous ones from the previous stages.

By analyzing other items with this evolving mechanic, I found that they all had the same rising number at each stage (DC 13->15->17), which is a very mechanically important number for balance, so I used that in order to stay consistent with this existing standard.

Narrative Design in a Custom 5e Campaign

Goals:

- Present the overarching plot in a way that the players could piece puzzle pieces together to predict what might be coming
- Keep as much agency for the players as possible
- Weave the player characters' backstories as well as the actions they take during play into the plot

Mindset:

Running a game of Dungeons and Dragons can be akin to trying to herd cats, as the players are always unpredictable in what they might do. However, this sort of randomness of the players brings a very interesting level of cooperative storytelling, where even if I have a general story or plot in mind, the actual path things take to get there is nothing I could've ever predicted. Because of this, I always kept this cooperative nature in mind when designing my overarching narrative and left plenty of room for this 'randomness' to influence and alter what I've prepared.

Twine Board of a Custom 5e Campaign

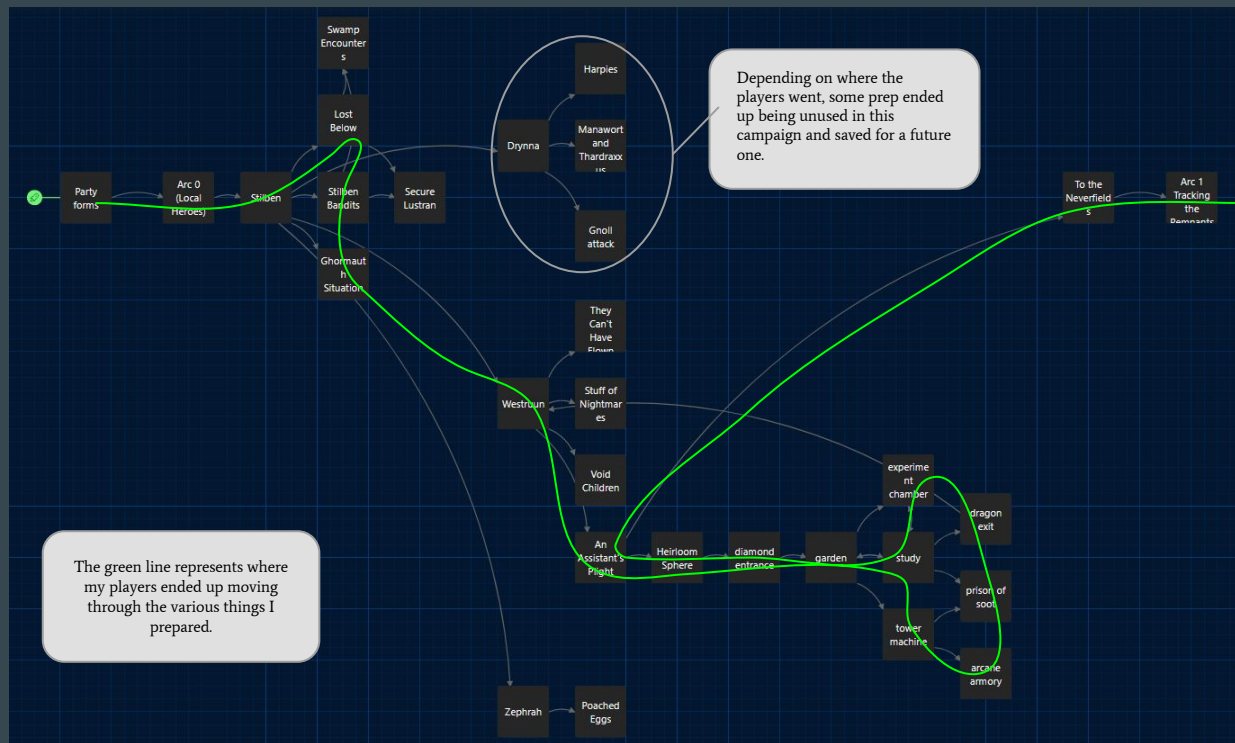
This is a board I made in Twine for the first arc of my campaign. When I was initially coming up with ideas for the campaign I had a rough plan for large overarching things that I wanted to happen as large events in the campaign, as well as who I wanted the final villain to be.

Knowing these things, I worked backwards to generate a very rough overview of large plot points I wanted to hit. Then as I would prepare for a session I would focus down into the specifics that would be relevant based on what happened in the last session and roughly where I would predict the players would go. This is where I would lay threads and leave hints that connect to the larger plot points for the players to find so that as they get further along, everything is connected and they can put the puzzle pieces together to get the bigger picture.

Had the players made different choices, this board would look a bit different. For example, had the players chose to go to Drynna, there might be more quests I would've prepared and there would be a connection from Drynna to the Neverfields, as that is one of the larger plot points.

You can download this and view it at twinery.org to get a more interactive view!

[Storyboard View](#)



Combat and Level Design of a Boss Fight

Goals:

- Keep combat dynamic and interesting as things tend to become static in 5e combat
- Have alternate goals other than just 'defeat the bad guys' to allow for all aspects of a player's kit to remain useful
- Drain the party of some resources to force more interesting decision making

Prior Experiences:

Having ran 5e combats for a little over 2 years now, I have a decent grasp of how to keep things balanced and where things might go wrong. The biggest one is the amount of attrition and resource expenditure between rests. Most classes in 5e have a limited pool of resources for their various abilities that only come back on rests. A party at full resources can really throw things off balance-wise and I've found also dilutes the decision making when piloting a character in a combat, as it is usually optimal to blast through things with your highest level resources quickly and doesn't encourage outside the box thinking, risk-reward considerations, or other interesting decision points. I've also found that unless I actively try to combat it, fights usually devolve to the melees running into range and staying in the same spot while attacking every round and the ranged not really moving and slinging spells or shooting ranged weapons. Finally, fights where the only goal is to 'defeat the enemies' tend to get dull and boring pretty quick as at a higher level view, it is simply the health pools of the party and the enemies subtracting from each other.

Solutions:

The first two points can usually be solved with similar things, that being adding things around the environment to interact with for various reasons. Examples include putting levers to open or close doors, or environmental hazards that can be manipulated to gain a benefit. In one boss encounter, I had the main goal be to try to flee the encounter and let some NPCs distract the boss so the party could continue with their quest, but I had the only exit blocked by a wall that would only lower once 5 runes were destroyed around the area. Doing this solves the alternate goals problem as the goal is no longer to deplete the boss's health as quickly as possible but instead to maneuver around the room and destroy multiple objects while avoiding the boss. This also solves the static tendencies as the players are now running around the entire battle arena looking for the runes and trying to destroy them. The last point I solved by having two encounters before the main encounter in order to deplete some resources. Having fewer resources creates interesting decision points of "do I conserve some higher level resources in case there's more after this, or do I need to spend them to succeed now?" and other questions similar.