The Anatomy of Adventure

SECOND EDITION

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The Anatomy of Adventure

Second Edition

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Foreword: The Horns of Elfland

O, sweet and far from cliff and scar
The horns of Elfland faintly blowing!

—Alfred Lord Tennyson

Certain episodes from childhood carve themselves indelibly into the mind, and for me the following scene is recorded in deep, vorpal strokes. I was about nine years old and walking with my mother through a narrow, dirty shopping arcade in southern Sydney. We happened to go into a toy store, and, while my mother talked to the shop assistant, I wandered up and down the two cluttered aisles.

Then I saw it. Sitting in a wire display atop a wooden shelf was the *Dungeons & Dragons Basic Set*. I learned many years later that this was the second version of the *Basic Set* and was written by Tom Moldvay. At the time, all I saw was the stunning Erol Otus cover, which depicts a warrior and a sorceress in a dark cavern fighting a draconic beast as it emerges from an underground lake. The colors are sumptuous—the warm, subdued purples of the cavern walls, the poisonous green skin of the dragon, the rich crimson robes of the sorceress, and the kaleidoscopic pile of gems spilling out from an old treasure chest.

The back of the box was just as exciting:

Dungeons & Dragons Fantasy Adventure game is probably unlike any other game you've played before.

In D&D adventures players take the roles of elves, dwarves, halflings, or humans. They will wander through dark dungeons, meet strange wizards, and battle ferocious dragons. Playing D&D is like writing a novel with each player contributing a part…

So enter the Gateway to Adventure—step into the world of DUNGEONS & DRAGONS fantasy role playing game, a world of endless excitement and thrilling fun.

These vivid images awakened a yearning in my young heart that I barely understood. At that moment, I heard the "horns of Elfland," to quote Tennyson, and I desperately wished to step through the promised "Gateway to Adventure." It was another two years before I was actually able to play D&D, but, once I had, it was the beginning of a lifelong love affair.

That is how I started playing the game. But how does one move from player to designer? It's a perennial question in the *Dungeons & Dragons* community, maybe because our game is inherently creative. Whatever side of the DM screen you sit upon, you have experience building something original and wonderful, and probably many things. And, at some point, you may have idly thought about sharing your creation with the world.

As a teenager in Sydney, I filled notebooks with endless maps, monsters, and adventures. Getting published was my dream, but it seemed practically impossible. The local RPG-publishing industry was so tiny as to be non-existent, and breaching the walls of the overseas giants required resources I lacked. America felt as far away as the Moon.

It is utterly cliched and utterly true to say that the Internet changed everything. By the 2000s, publishers, game

designers, and fans were all rubbing shoulders in cyberspace. It mattered less than ever whether you were in Sydney or Seattle, though English was and remains the common tongue of the hobby. Many of us found it astounding to be able to talk online to those who had founded the RPG industry. It was a bit dream-like, as if figures from history were stepping out of treasured old books and into your life.

As the noughties turned into the teens, I found myself on the fringe of the old-school D&D community. At home I was playing my beloved Basic D&D and taking my players on a nostalgia-laced ride through the adventures I'd adored as a kid—*The Keep on the Borderlands*, *The Lost City*, *Slave Pits of the Undercity*, and so on. I was also dabbling in game design and published a few things online, though these early writings had few redeeming features.

Two things then happened to shift my gameplay habits. First, the old-school D&D community, blessed by a small amount of success and prosperity, began to fracture quite unpleasantly, so I started to back away. More importantly, Wizards of the Coast (sometimes abbreviated "WOTC") released the Fifth Edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*, and many old-school players like me found that the new edition scratched our itch in a way that Third and Fourth Edition had not.

I immediately commenced a very satisfying Fifth Edition campaign, and I also revived my dreams of publishing something for *Dungeons & Dragons*. The communications revolution of the previous twenty years made this more feasible than it was back in the 1980s, though it still looked difficult.

The situation improved again in 2016 when Wizards

of the Coast launched the Dungeon Masters Guild. For a share of the cover price, Wizards of the Coast permitted anyone to publish and market D&D-compatible material. They called this "Community Created Content," and the program can legitimately be described as revolutionary.

I straightaway began publishing on the DMs Guild. My first effort, a book of player character feats released a few days after the Guild started, was terrible. My second publication, a small adventure called *Temple of the Nightbringers*, was not terrible. It sold well, received good reviews, and I began to grow an audience. The horns of Elfland rang out once more, though this time I was playing a few notes myself.

It is now over six years since I released that adventure, and I continue publishing, writing, and learning. Adventures have been my forte, and I have released more of those than any other type of product. I have enjoyed more success than I could have imagined, and at the time of writing this I have sold over a hundred thousand books and have more than fifty platinum bestsellers to my name. And that, in summary, is how I became a game designer!

I'm often asked what advice I would give someone who wants to start publishing RPG adventures themselves. I always suggest the following practical steps:

- ***Develop your writing skills.*** I have encountered many people with fantastic ideas who cannot translate those ideas to the page. Roleplaying game designers are writers first and foremost. Just as a carpenter needs to learn how to use a hammer and saw effectively, a writer needs to learn how to use verbs, nouns, and various other grammatical tools

with skill. Fortunately, there is a lot of material around that can help you write better.

- ***Learn the style guide.*** This may seem mundane, but learning and adhering to the style guide of whatever system you are writing for will immediately boost the professionalism of your product. For *Dungeons & Dragons*, the style guide is available on the Dungeon Masters Guild. I also highly recommend *Writing with Style: An Editor's Advice for RPG Writers* (Vallese, 2017), which contains many style principles applicable to most roleplaying games.
- ***Read good adventures.*** Find good adventures and start reading them. They will teach you a lot—things like how to structure encounters, how to describe NPCs, how to tie locations together, and so on. Look for modern adventures that are popular and well-rated. You should also consider reading classic adventures from previous editions—you can find "best of" lists all over the internet. I still read old adventures all the time, and I learn so much from them.
- ***Start short and start soon.*** Many first projects rival a WOTC hardback in size and scope. A small number of newbies actually pull these mammoth projects off, but that is exceedingly rare. I strongly recommend you start small. My first published adventure was about 3,500 words in length and ran to seven pages. People still buy and play it to this day! Start short and start soon. You will learn a lot by simply doing.

That is the foundational advice I give to everyone who asks, but I have much more to say on this subject. A couple of years ago, I started a newsletter called *The Anatomy of Adventure* as a way to keep in touch with those who liked my work. Along with discount codes and product updates, I began including the occasional essay on game design, often dissecting my early adventures with the sharp eye of experience and identifying what I did well along with what I did poorly. These proved popular, and more than a few readers suggested I put them in a book. That is the genesis of what is now before you, though I've substantially re-written and expanded all of the original essays.

This volume presents an eclectic rather than systematic look at the process of adventure design, but that is pretty typical of the few books in this genre. Having said that, I do provide a step-by-step "how to write a dungeon" guide in chapter 10, and I try to boil an RPG adventure down to its essential elements in chapter 20. But you will find the other chapters just as practical, I think.

If you have enjoyed this foreword, you will probably enjoy the rest of this book. I know that many new adventure writers have found these essays valuable, but I have good reason to believe that veteran designers will find a few useful nuggets as well. Failing that, maybe you will simply enjoy a few hours spent with someone else who is passionate about this craft. And perhaps, if we are lucky, you just might hear the horns of Elfland faintly blowing once more.

Chapter 1: Goblins in a Cave

It's none of their business that you have to learn how to write. Let them think you were born that way.

—Ernest Hemingway

How do you learn to write a roleplaying game adventure? Maybe we should start with a broader question—how do you learn any craft? The primary method is via imitation. The master crafter shows the apprentice how to do something, then the apprentice tries to do it for themselves. When it comes to artistic works, there is a fun and helpful word that sheds light on this process: pastiche. Wikipedia tells me a pastiche is "a work of visual art, literature, theater, or music that imitates the style or character of the work of one or more other artists."

It is a bit of a problematic term, though, because the word is often used to deride or dismiss a work. This derision is a shame because pastiche is a great way to learn. The renowned fashion designer Yohji Yamamoto said, "Start copying what you love. Copy copy copy copy. At the end of the copy you will find yourself." I will shamelessly admit that my early adventures were pastiches of the D&D adventures I loved as a kid. Sometimes the influences are obvious, sometimes a bit more subtle, but pastiches they were. And as I wrote them, and kept writing them, I finally found my own voice.

In the Foreword, I mentioned my love-at-first-sight

experience with the Erol Otus cover of the *Basic Set*. I did not dare ask my mother to buy the box, however. It cost $10, which seemed an impossible amount to a nine year old on 50 cents per week pocket money. And so my longing went unfulfilled.

But a couple of years later, in the library at lunch, a kid at school offered to teach me how to play. My first ever adventure was *The Keep on the Borderlands* (Gygax, 1979a), and we had two player characters (PCs) in the party, bolstered by ten hired men-at-arms. My character was a first-level fighter called Zargo; we began by raiding a goblin lair on the bottom level of the Caves of Chaos. It was a life-altering experience; my eleven-year-old self entered an almost platonic realm where imagination and will combined in a unique and spirit-expanding way. But I am likely preaching to the choir.

In some ways, all of my game design efforts since have aimed at recapturing that magical half-hour spent fighting goblins in the school library. My first published attempt to do so was *Temple of the Nightbringers*, which I released on the Dungeon Masters Guild in January 2016.

I wrote the whole adventure over a weekend, in a burst of energy catalyzed by years of pent-up creativity. I did not think in terms of explicit design goals back then, but I recall wanting a low-level goblin adventure that invoked the experience I had playing *The Keep on the Borderlands*. It was a self-conscious pastiche, and the following is a "blow-by-blow" account of how I put it together.

I started by devising a hook: the local lord asks the characters to find and neutralize some goblins who are attacking merchants on a major trade route called the Long

Road. It's a clichéd adventure hook, but it immediately captures the tone of the game. The presence of goblins tells you we're in a fantasy setting. The fact that they are raiding caravans tells you that the world is a dangerous place, and people cannot simply travel about with impunity. Finally, sending the player characters to deal with the problem casts them in a heroic mold. They are not regular people; they are the *saviors* of regular people.

The adventure opens with the party heading toward the hamlet of Melton, where they can learn more about the goblins. This sort of *in media res* opening, with the characters already going somewhere and undertaking some task, is particularly good for one-shots and for the opening adventure of a campaign. You will notice this technique used in both the *Lost Mines of Phandelver* (Perkins, 2014) and *Hoard of the Dragon Queen* (Baur, 2014).

Melton (which I created) is a tiny hamlet midway between the towns of Longsaddle and Triboar in the Forgotten Realms, a "middle of nowhere" sort of place. It serves the same "home base" function as the Keep does in *The Keep on the Borderlands*, though Melton is much smaller and less sophisticated. I followed a pretty classic "town and down" pattern of adventure design here—wander around town and pick up some information, then head down the dungeon. It's a particularly good pattern for your first adventure. Or your thirty-fifth adventure.

Upon arrival, the characters immediately meet the town constable, and I will tell you now that she is the main villain of the adventure. This whole "the good guy was really the bad guy all along" thing is a bit of a rookie move on my part, as it can easily go wrong. Experienced

players will smell a rat immediately and might focus their attention on the constable rather than chasing down the goblins. An experienced DM can make that work without much trouble, but new DMs might struggle. I kept returning to this trope in my early adventures, but I think I have broken the habit after six years!

At the time, I thought I put some good color into the muddy little town of Melton, though it looks a little unimaginative now. I was trying to capture the vibe of the pub scene in *An American Werewolf in London*, with creepy locals who are wary of outsiders. The characters learn some interesting tidbits, including the fact that the leader of the goblins always wears a mask! Yes, it was all very obvious, but it is fun to play.

The characters finally pick up an NPC who knows where the goblin caves are, and away they go. NPC guides are excellent value as they can serve as the DM's mouthpiece, and players always love getting help. This NPC, a half-elf scout named Dawn Mistwalker, stepped straight out of central casting. I would work a bit harder these days to bring her to life by giving her some sort of distinct mannerism or feature. Perhaps she shaves her head or has dark, swirling tattoos on her face.

There follows a short trek to the goblin hideout, interrupted by a rather nice little fight with a bugbear on a fallen tree bridge. Adding a terrain detail like that increases immersion and, in this instance, affects the combat in a meaningful way as the party must cross the bridge single file. If I were writing this trek today, I would include a small collection of short encounters in this wilderness section. I might even include a choice of routes and more

unusual monsters. Perhaps the NPC guide says, "We can take the long way over the bugbear's bridge or take the shortcut past the giant killer beehive." I did not realize at the time how important it was to build meaningful choices like that into your adventures. I talk a lot more about this in chapter 7.

The adventurers arrive at the dungeon. Dungeons don't have a particularly good reputation these days, and some designers view them as uninspiring anachronisms. The problem is not that dungeons are inherently dull, but that many dungeons feature boring and repetitive design. People have forgotten or never learned the tricks that make dungeons a compelling game experience.

Some years back, Monte Cook explained why dungeons remain relevant to the game:

> *Dungeons facilitate game play. Being underground, they set apart the "adventure" from the rest of the world in a clean way. The idea of walking down a corridor, opening a door, and entering an encounter—while a gross oversimplification and generalization of what can happen in a dungeon—facilitates the flow of the game by reducing things down to easily grasped and digestible concepts.*
>
> *You have an easy way to control the adventure in a dungeon without leading the characters by the nose. In a dungeon, the parameters are clearly defined for the PCs—they can't walk through walls (not at first, anyway) or go into rooms that aren't there. Aside from those limits, they can go wherever they like in whatever order they like. The limited environment of the dungeon grants players a feeling of control over their characters' destiny.* (Cook, 2003b)

All D&D adventure designers need to know how to create a dungeon, and dungeon creation is a great place to start learning adventure design.

Given that, let's take a few moments to talk about the architecture of the dungeon and how it shaped the adventure. My original vision was of a little goblin warren that looked somewhat like the goblin lair in *The Keep on the Borderlands*, but I could not draw it myself and didn't know anyone else who could. Fortunately, the DMs Guild includes a few old maps that you can use in your products. The best one available resembled a ruined temple more than anything. Fine—the goblins were living in an abandoned underground temple. But whose temple? I looked over the evil gods in the Forgotten Realms and selected Shar, Mistress of the Night.

I did a little more research and learned that some of Shar's elite followers were called the Nightbringers. I decided this temple was one of their old bases, and suddenly I had a name for my adventure: *Temple of the Nightbringers*. It is a good title! Furthermore, since Shar is an evil goddess, I decided there is probably some malignant magic still floating around the place, allowing me to introduce undead creatures and other strangeness.

There are three important things to note here. First, although I started out with the goblin caves in *The Keep on the Borderlands* as my model, the location quickly evolved into something else altogether. As Yamamoto said, "Copy copy copy copy. At the end of the copy you will find yourself." Folks sometimes tell me they cannot get started because they cannot think of a really good idea. Start by imitating someone else's good idea. If you put the work in,

it will develop into something unique.

The second thing to note is that a constraint (I could not draw a map) turned into an asset. When I was forced to use the temple map, I ended up creating a bunch of new lore to make it all fit together. The result was a more interesting dungeon than the goblin warren I originally envisaged. In my experience, constraints fuel creativity. Forced to come up with smart little ideas to overcome constraints, you move in directions you might never have considered. Constraints for indie creators include cover art, word length, monster availability, and all sorts of other things. Rather than a liability, consider that your constraints will often turn out to be assets.

The final thing to note is that the backstory provided a theme for the location and a small mystery for the players to solve. Matt Finch, author of the magisterial *Tome of Adventure Design*, notes the following:

> *The backstory is the answer to a question: what happened to change this location from a normal place into a dangerous place of adventure, with treasures and monsters? Players love to discover the answer to this question, and an adventure feels incomplete, from the players' perspective, if it ends without this loose end being tied up*. (Finch, 2011)

If I realized this design principle at the time, it was only at the level of intuition.

Having taken care of the architecture and backstory, I needed to figure out who was inhabiting the dungeon now. Goblins, wargs, the goblin chief, and a couple of hobgoblin bodyguards make up the goblin gang. These days, I sometimes put a "monster roster" together before I start

writing the dungeon. Seeing the monsters listed together is helpful, giving me a strong sense of the "flavor" of what I am creating. Then, as I write the dungeon, I simply pick monsters off the roster as needed. I find this keeps me in the "creative flow" more effectively than stopping to think, "what monster would be here?"

I wanted some non-goblinoid creatures as well. It was always on my mind to include zombies, but you cannot just put them in a room next door to the goblins, as if everyone is living at the monster hotel. Or can you? The Shar theme suggested a solution. All the necromantic magic floating around the temple caused some corpses to animate as zombies. Where did the corpses come from? Perhaps they were goblin prisoners. And suddenly it all clicked. The goblins locked these prisoners in the room next door to the barracks and listened gleefully as they died of dehydration and starvation. Hey—these goblin bandits are not cute, they are nasty!

A couple of weeks later, though, they began hearing noises coming from the locked room with the corpses. In terror, they nailed the door shut and put up "danger—keep out" signs. Now they cannot sleep at night, the tormentors having become the tormented. That's how you can have zombies living next door to goblins.

That little cycle is very indicative of the creative process at work.

I used a table in appendix A of the *Dungeon Master's Guide* to figure out the original purpose of each room in the temple, whether it be a barracks, a kitchen, or whatever. I use appendix A frequently when I create adventures these days—I talk about this more in chapter 10. One

suggestion from the purpose table was a *summoning room*, and it so happened I had a place on my map with a pool in it. I decided this was a summoning pool, used by the old high priestess of Shar to conjure fiends. The water is green and glowing, and it turns out she was mid-way through a summoning when the temple met its untimely end (something I never defined). So, the pool is primed—someone just needs to touch the water and the spell will complete, causing an imp to jump out.

These little mysteries (a locked door that says "keep out," a glowing pool of water) are essential to D&D. They are part of the *exploration pillar* of the game—the players see something that piques their curiosity and want to investigate. If you want your dungeon to hold the player's interest, you need to pepper it with little secrets and mysteries like these. One of the reasons dungeons gained a reputation for dullness is that designers filled them with fight after fight after fight. But, as Finch notes:

> *Players enjoy adventures in which the nature of the challenges they face are varied. A good adventure will include combats, traps to detect and avoid, strange tricks to figure out, varied combat terrain, and negotiations.* (Finch, 2011)

Along these lines, I included a little puzzle. A weird black disc found in one room turns out to be the key that turns off a force field protecting a treasure somewhere else. "Lock and key" is the most basic puzzle there is, but players find it very satisfying. It is strange that I do not see more "lock and key" in D&D adventures, and I think designers sometimes wrongly overlook the simple things that work. I had this in mind when I later wrote *Blue*

Alley (co-authored with Alan Patrick and inspired by Ed Greenwood's original). The adventure requires hunting for various keys to progress, and, based on the feedback we have received, it worked a treat.

There is lots of treasure in this dungeon—far too much. I was still stuck in the old-school D&D mindset at the time. In the early versions of the game, you had to pour out the gold because it was the primary means to acquire XP. I have better guidance now around how much treasure to include in a dungeon (based on the Adventurer's League guidelines). But if you run *Temple of the Nightbringers*, you might want to nerf the cash a bit!

Ok, we have ticked off many of the major elements you expect in a dungeon. We have combat, we have a trap, and we have a puzzle. What else do we need? Someone to talk to! Sure, we have already hit the social pillar pretty hard in town, but I really like putting social encounters in the middle of dungeons. Breaks things up nicely and is very handy if the DM suddenly needs to bring the party back on track.

I went for a pretty obvious social encounter, namely, a pair of prisoners. About 90% of non-hostile NPCs you meet in dungeons seem to be prisoners! But there are other options:

- An elemental bound to a room or object
- An explorer seeking information
- A fugitive from the law
- The ghost of a previous inhabitant
- An inanimate object with the power of speech
- A lost monster

- Another party of adventurers
- A nature spirit or fey who is attached to a natural feature
- An ancient guardian who has inhabited the dungeon for eons

I am sure you can think of more.

In this instance, the two prisoners work in the goblin kitchen. They were captured from a caravan, and their families will reward the adventurers for returning them to Triboar. (This would have been a better hook for the adventure, by the way. Families approach you in Triboar and offer you 200 gp to find their missing sons, last seen heading north on the Long Road. No mention of goblins, so you have the delicious mystery of what happened to them, alongside much tighter "win conditions" for the adventure as a whole.)

The player characters finally confront the big bad boss and her pet worg. After she is defeated, the great unmasking happens, and the PCs discover it was the village constable all along! It turns out she stumbled upon the temple ruins some time ago and found the "Mask of Shar," a magic item that gave her a buff but also slowly turned her evil. She gathered a gang of goblins about her and commenced her secret life as a bandit.

Someone wryly described this as a "Scooby-Doo ending," and I think that's accurate. Back in the days of the original Scooby-Doo cartoon, the heroes would always catch the monster, pull off its mask and exclaim something like, "It's Mr. Jones, the real estate agent!" The ending is very cheesy but, in my experience, works okay.

And it is easily omitted if you do not like it.

Temple of the Nightbringers was very well received upon release. It has sold several thousand copies and has a solid 90% approval rating. This customer review sums up the good and bad:

> *This adventure is straight-forward, combat focused, cliched, doesn't rely on player decision-making, and is severely lacking in the social and exploration pillars of the game. This makes it a great resource for new players (or a new DM) who are looking for an exciting first adventure. The simplistic format works well, with a variety of enemies thrown at the party and a helpful NPC who can guide them along. Players will need to adjust their tactics and deal differently with the different combat encounters they face, which will probably help the role-playing aspect as well. Newer players (in my experience) find combat easier to get into than other aspects, so this adventure works well in that regard…*
>
> *Overall, it is a simple dungeon crawl, but well-written and laid out for new players, and hits all the checkmarks for a good intro adventure.*

Lots of people have told me what an effective introductory adventure it is, and for many people, it has been their first experience of *Dungeons & Dragons*. It was a solid debut, and I am still pleased with it. I had some trouble with the sequel, however.

Chapter 2: Second Album Syndrome

The second album is the hardest to write.

—Theophilus London

I was surprised and pleased by the strong response *Temple of the Nightbringers* received, so I immediately sat down and tried to write another adventure. The result was *Terror at Triboar*, written over a weekend and released in February 2016. The initial feedback was a bit underwhelming.

In the music industry, there's a pattern where years of creative energy go into your debut album, and it turns out great, but you stumble when you have to turn around and do it all again for the follow-up, usually in a much shorter time frame. I think I fell victim to this "second album syndrome" with *Terror at Triboar*.

Having said that, I do not regret publishing it as quickly as I did. The inverse problem is getting so anxious about making the follow-up "good enough" that you don't publish at all. I have seen many, many people fall into this trap, especially those who have a huge hit with their first product. I would much rather publish a bit too quickly than become too nervous to publish at all.

It is also worth noting that there are a lot of factors outside your control when it comes to sales. I have often seen follow-up products, of better quality, that do more poorly than their predecessors. Trying to nail down all the elements that affect sales feels like an impossible

quest, especially in the microscopic market of indie TTRPG publishing. It is tempting to play endless games of "maybe it was because…" Maybe it was because of a school vacation. Maybe it was because school just began. Maybe it was because the weather was really good this week. Maybe it was because the weather was bad. And so on and so on. Such discussions are pointless.

I have thought about this a lot and come to the following conclusion. Assuming your product displays a basic level of competence (writing, layout, editing, etc.), your success comes down to either good luck (you happened to hit the zeitgeist that week) or good marketing. There is almost a spectrum when it comes to sales success, with luck at one end and marketing at the other. The more marketing you do, the less you rely on luck. I talk more about marketing in chapter 4.

Back to *Terror at Triboar*. This adventure was very much inspired by *Village of Hommlet* (Gygax, 1979b), though the resemblance is a bit obscure. The great memory I have of *Hommlet* is wandering around the village in a very freeform way and interacting with a variety of interesting people. It may have been my first experience of an urban adventure, and I wanted to capture something of that vibe.

But there were a few other influences and constraints. I selected Triboar as the location primarily because of the alliteration it generated in the title. More significantly, I decided early on that I wanted to create a horror adventure because I did not have much experience in that genre, and I wanted to stretch myself. I had some images from *Creepshow* running through my head that I wanted to work into the plot. I hoped to create something genuinely

disturbing—though it did not really work out that way, as you'll see!

I did not realize at the time that city/town adventures are much harder to write than dungeon adventures. As Cook notes:

> *Make no mistake: Running city adventures is challenging. While a dungeon adventure can be handled with a map and a key that describes the contents of each room, a city adventure is more complex. The PCs have far more options to choose from than whether to go left or right down a corridor.* (Cook, 2003a)

The adventure starts with some infodump via a too-big chunk of boxed text. There is an election coming up in a couple of weeks for the office of Lord Protector. By tradition, this seven-yearly event occurs on St. Oswin's Day, which celebrates the founding of the town. I made most of this lore up, by the way, based on a couple of hints from the canonical Forgotten Realms books.

The player characters are summoned to meet the current Lord Protector, Darathra Shendrel, who tells them of strange happenings in town. People have gone missing, livestock has been killed, and a mysterious figure wanders the fields at night. The townsfolk are nervous and whisper about a legendary creature called the "Terror" that is said to haunt the town. The voters are unhappy, and Darathra wants the player characters to figure out what is really going on—before the election takes place! Yes, I have made her rather more cynical than how she is portrayed in *Storm King's Thunder* (Perkins, 2016b).

Darathra has a single lead to chase up, a crop farmer

whose wife and child went missing a few nights ago. When I write investigative scenarios these days, I usually make sure the quest giver has at least two leads to share, and sometimes three. Whenever you can, you want to give the players meaningful choices to make.

The adventurers wander about town and the surrounding farms, following leads and picking up bits of information about the Terror. I created a dozen encounters for the town, labeling half of them "clue encounters" and the other half "random encounters." The clue encounters eventually lead to an old graveyard outside town, while the random encounters were there to spice things up.

Players can get frustrated by too many meaningless encounters when they are in the middle of a juicy investigation, so I suggested to DMs that they only use a few of the random encounters. Despite this, I have heard about groups getting bogged down in town as they grind through *all* the random encounters. Some Dungeon Masters have a "completionist" attitude—something to be aware of when you create a list of encounters. These days I would provide just two or three random encounters.

A lot of DMs don't like random encounters at all. Former TSR writer Kevin Melka speaks for many when he says:

> *… it's also important for all encounters to be a part of the adventure whenever possible. It's easy to inject random encounters into an adventure that have nothing to do with the plot, but it makes a better story if each happenstance plays some meaningful part in the journey…*
>
> *Filling space in an adventure with unnecessary encounters is the trick used by inexperienced authors to increase page count and can detract from a good story.* (Melka, 2016)

I think there is a middle ground where an encounter might not advance the story but helps promote the atmosphere or theme of the adventure. For example, one of my random encounters involved a half-orc selling apples. Perhaps he could be selling commemorative wood carvings for St. Oswin's day instead. It's still a random encounter that doesn't propel the story forward, but it does reinforce the St. Oswin's Day motif, which turns out to be a crucial element of the finale.

There is one random encounter, "Sharkey's Men," where I did this accidentally. Sharkey is a criminal boss backing a rival candidate in the election, and he warns the party not to help the Lord Protector. If I were writing the adventure today, I might develop that into a subplot of one or two encounters, climaxing in a showdown with Sharkey himself.

I did not know how to plan an investigative adventure back then, and I found it pretty difficult to link the clues together. These days, when I create an investigation, I draw a "clue map" in the form of a flow chart with boxes and lines. The boxes are locations while the lines connecting them are clues, with everything eventually leading to the resolution. The chart ends up looking a bit like a dungeon map. My goal is always to give the adventurers a few different paths to get to the final goal, so they have meaningful choices to make along the way.

In *Terror at Triboar*, the clues lead to an old graveyard outside town where the player characters meet a wraith who can explain what is going on. The Terror is actually Sir Oswin, the founder of Triboar! He is under a curse that causes him to rise from his tomb every fifty years as a

ghast and menace the town.

The adventurers stake out the tomb of Sir Oswin and destroy him when he rises that night. It is a bit like modern Americans staking out Mount Vernon and destroying the risen corpse of George Washington. At this point, I realized my adventure was not very terrifying, and some elements of it were approaching slapstick. I had somehow ended up at the *Army of Darkness* end of the horror spectrum.

Once I recognized this, I decided to drive the irony home. The Lord Protector is grateful for the destruction of the Terror and invites the adventurers to give the Sir Oswin commemorative speech on Election Day. And so the party stands at the tomb, praising the person whose undead remains they recently destroyed! It is all very silly in a D&D sort of way.

One interesting footnote. I released this adventure in February of 2016. In September that year, WOTC released *Storm King's Thunder*, which detailed the entire town of Triboar, and I had to do some hasty revisions to ensure it all reconciled. This is one of the few times I have made extensive changes to an adventure after publication.

Terror at Triboar did not get the same acclaim as *Temple of the Nightbringers* on release, but it received better reviews as time went on. It currently has an 88% rating on the DMs Guild and is a platinum bestseller. Here's one of the more enthusiastic reviews:

> *This past weekend I ran the Terror at Triboar adventure, and I have a lot of good things to say about it so let me just jump right in. While the boxed text is a bit bland at times I find that it has not taken away from the overall feel of the adventure, there is plenty of free roam*

> *for the characters to kind of do whatever they want, random encounters that the character may or may not participate in, a lot of options for whatever directions the characters choose to go, and the whole thing has a non-linear feel to it but it's still coherent enough to be a very well done adventure. I have a party of 5 player characters and the difficulty felt absolutely on point with a challenging final act to close out the adventure.*
>
> *This adventure, for a level 2 one shot, is a hidden gem that presents just the right amount of opportunity and challenge for a new adventuring party. My players and I absolutely loved it and I am eagerly awaiting my next play session…*

I always considered it one of my lesser adventures, but I find a lot of things to praise in retrospect. I especially like that I put together a fun, easy-to-run investigative adventure in about three thousand words. As my writing became more fluent, it became much harder to keep the word count down.

Terror at Triboar may have failed as a horror adventure, but failure is merely an invitation to try again. And as it happened, my next adventure would succeed brilliantly in this genre.

Chapter 3: Horror in the House

If you write one story, it may be bad; if you write a hundred, you have the odds in your favor.

—Edgar Rice Burroughs

I released *Shadows on the Long Road* in March 2016. It was my third published adventure and the first I consider to be *really* good. It was very much inspired by the wonderfully imaginative *Castle Amber* (Moldvay, 1981). Tom Moldvay based large parts of his adventure on the stories of Clark Ashton Smith.

I see *Castle Amber* as a sort of "haunted house," and I chose that genre for *Shadows on the Long Road*. I based the backstory on a Clark Ashton Smith tale called *The Nameless Offspring*. In my adventure, a rich warlock named Gideon Saltmarsh marries against the wishes of his fiendish patron, and his wife later dies giving birth to a horrible creature. There is more than a hint that the patron might somehow be the father. Gideon raises this infernal Offspring as his own, and discovers it has rather grisly appetites…

The party gets involved when they find themselves surrounded by mist and come across a well-lit mansion. Yes, the old "surrounded by mists" adventure hook—it was fresh in the late 70s! They knock on the mansion door and are invited inside by an old man, Gideon Saltmarsh, and his gnome servant, Grundy. Gideon seems friendly

enough, sharing a feast with the characters and playing some games with them. The most memorable of these is a wrestling match with Gideon's servant, a minor flesh golem called Magnus.

The adventurers retire for the evening, but sometime after midnight they are set upon by a group of thugs. After the thugs are dealt with, the adventure becomes a dungeon crawl through the mansion, with the characters encountering all sorts of nasty things. Highlights included a ghoul chained up in a room, a grim chapel with an evil tome, and the ghost of Gideon's wife, whispering sadly to herself in an old bedchamber.

As the characters explore, they slowly piece together the disturbing backstory. They finally make their way to the basement and find a cage filled with terrified people who Gideon plans to butcher and feed to the Offspring. Here is how I described this scene:

> *A row of iron bars cordons off one side of the room, and beyond those bars is the most pitiful sight imaginable. A great mass of people, all stripped naked, are crammed into the pen, wallowing in the mud and their own filth. Some are moaning, some are calling out in terror, and others merely rock back and forth in silent anguish.* (Black, 2016g)

It is a harrowing scene, and several people have written to tell me how much it affected them. It was inspired by the basement scene from *The Road*, which disturbed me terribly when I first saw it. Movies and TV do spectacle well, so do not be afraid to riff off something you see there.

A large ogre, who serves as Gideon's butcher, is next door in a room that is slick with blood and gore. The characters

then come upon the Offspring itself, a vicious yet pathetic creature kept in a cell. Upon killing it and Gideon, the mansion begins collapsing. Should the characters escape, they find themselves (and anyone they rescued) back on the main road, with the mist gone and no sign of the mansion.

It is the backstory that really makes this adventure work. Many of the villains, even the genuinely evil ones, are tragic figures themselves, which gives the whole thing a grim poignancy. I based the map on a real medieval manor and then let the backstory drive the encounters in each room. For example, there was a chapel on the map, so I came up with a suitably macabre encounter with an ancient altar and an evil book. There is a lady's chamber on the map, and I placed the ghost of Gideon's wife there, floating around next to her wedding dress. This is another example of constraint (a real-world map location) driving creativity.

I littered the mansion with clues about the backstory. These took the form of paintings, books, furniture, engravings, NPCs, and so on. Secrets and clues are a great way to transform a good dungeon into a great dungeon. They do not have to reveal the whole backstory in an infodump manner; you just need to share a few key elements, and you will find players are quite ingenious at putting together the whole story. Mike Shea calls secrets and clues the Dungeon Master's "secret weapon," and I think he makes a strong case. He notes:

> *Secrets are powerful magic… they build a rich texture for PCs to discover. When we think about the tools we need for the three pillars of exploration, interaction, and combat; a list of ten secrets is as valuable to*

exploration as monster stat blocks are to combat.
(Shea, 2016c)

Bringing the physical dungeon to life is always a challenge. By this stage, I had discovered the simple trick of using Google Images to help me describe a location. So, for Gideon's bed chamber, I'd google something like "medieval lords' bedroom" and use the image to help describe what the location looked like. I still use this method today when I am struggling to visualize something.

Looking at the descriptions now, some of them are a bit wordy, but many are concise and evocative. Concise descriptions make the location very usable at the table, as the DM can quickly grasp them and keep the game flowing. Evocative descriptions bring the location to life in everyone's mind. Concise and evocative—this is my mantra, especially when it comes to boxed text.

This adventure is by no means perfect, and I can see some glaring mistakes. For example, I literally describe the front hall twice, once at the start when the characters are shown through to the dining hall, and later on when the adventure moves into "dungeon crawl" mode. The first description is completely redundant, and these days I would just say, "Grundy leads the characters to the Dining Room (location 1 on the map)." I make the same mistake with the dining room description, and I would find a way to tighten that up as well.

My mechanical inexperience is also evident. I wanted the party to face a flesh golem, but since the adventure is only level 3, I went to the trouble of creating a "minor flesh golem." What a waste of time! If doing it now I would just use a regular flesh golem with minimum hit points

and change the melee weapon immunity to resistance. Also, the flesh golem, the butcher, and the Offspring are all similar monsters—big brutish things. If I were doing it again, I would combine the flesh golem and the butcher into one character and make the Offspring a bit more distinctive. One easy way to do that would have been to reskin another monster. Brendan LaSalle describes how it works:

> *I recommend creating your own elements wherever possible, and the easiest way to do this is to re-skin certain elements while keeping others the same. Re-skin is a video game concept—you simply change the exterior to your taste, while keeping the basics the same. It's a simple enough concept.* (LaSalle, 2017)

For example, I could have taken the statistics of a black dragon wyrmling, removed the fly speed, and maxxed the hit points. The acid breath could be a demonic black ichor that the Offspring spits at the characters. Voila—a new monster.

There is a very deadly encounter in the adventure that has resulted in numerous TPKs. The adventurers enter Gideon's study while looking for him; Gideon is there, but invisible. He quietly leaves through the door, turns, and throws a fireball at the party! I've seen experienced players pick up on the clues that he's present (burning fire, the lantern is on, there is an open book on the desk, no other exit from the room), but it is a very tough encounter for a level 3 party. In hindsight, I would keep the encounter, but suggest to the DM that if a TPK occurs, the party should miraculously wake up in the pen, naked and on 1 hit point.

There is another design issue that has led to some

grimly amusing finales. The basement has a gateway to the infernal plane of Minauros, which Gideon uses to meet with his patron. As I mentioned above, the mansion and basement begin shaking themselves apart when the Offspring is killed. A few parties have run out the gateway, thinking it was an exit back to our world—and found themselves in a hellish swamp with the tunnel behind them collapsing. Oh dear! If I were revising the adventure, I would keep the gateway to hell, but put bars across it.

But these are all forgivable flaws, I think. The adventure continues to be popular, and I receive great feedback about it even now, several years after publication. I am a little shocked at how dark some of the narrative is, but I remain proud of it. It currently has a 94% approval rating, and here is a typical review:

> *I used this adventure as a side quest during the SKT [*Storm King's Thunder*] campaign and my players really enjoyed it. They suspected something was wrong with the food, but they couldn't determine its true nature and went to sleep without much resistance.*
>
> *The highlight was definitely the wrestling competition. One of my players bet most of his money against his friend. There was an issue with the wrestling mechanics as they kept escaping the grapple. Perhaps steadily increasing or decreasing the strength of Magnus, to make it harder or easier as the rounds pass, would make it resolve sooner…*
>
> *The butcher and prisoner pen were harrowing, it had an emotional impact on my players. My paladin was eaten alive by The Offspring. My players left all the*

prisoners and went to the next town and relayed their story. The villagers were shocked that they left the prisoners behind and refused to help the party until they returned and rescued them. It was a good lesson about finishing what they started. Thanks for the high-quality adventure!

Thankfully, my next adventure was much lighter in tone. But before I published it, I devised a small marketing experiment that altered the course of my creative career.

Chapter 4: The Maker and the Marketer

Almost anyone can be an author; the business is to collect money and fame from this state of being.

—A. A. Milne

I have seen the following sad story play out several times. An enthusiastic newcomer publishes their first creation on the DMs Guild or DriveThruRPG, and they are full of hope and expectation. They then see it slip off the front page with few sales, and they begin desperately asking other creators on social media, "Any tips for promoting my product??"

Unfortunately, three days after launch is usually too late to develop a marketing strategy.

If you are creating and publishing your own books (that is, you are an indie creator), you are wearing two hats. As creator, your responsibility is to make a quality product. As publisher, your responsibility (in this context) is to market that product. You are both the maker and the marketer.

These roles sometimes come into conflict. Marketing is a bit of a dirty word in the indie RPG community. It conjures up visions of greedy multi-nationals foisting soulless products on the unsuspecting masses. For many indie creators, the desired product lifecycle seems to be something like this: you release your product with no

fanfare, it spreads virally, and ultimately becomes a smash hit. You do no promotion at all, just modestly watch from the sidelines.

Let me say that I do not think this attitude comes from laziness—rather, I think there is a vague feeling that marketing is cheating and should not be necessary if your product is of sufficient quality.

This is clearly nonsense. I have seen many *superb* products disappear into the abyss of low sales. There is no inherent justice in the marketplace, no guarantee that hard work and talent will be rewarded (I'll discuss this further in chapter 11). The history of creative endeavor is replete with stories of brilliant artists who were unrecognized and unappreciated during their lifetime. If you want to avoid this grim fate, you need to make an effort to connect your *product* with the people who might *like* your product. This is the essence of marketing.

My first few books sold reasonably well and certainly better than I expected. But they were nowhere near the top 10 of the DMs Guild, nor even the top 50! At the time, I do not think I used the phrase marketing, but I knew I needed to generate more sales if I were to get myself a hit. Just pushing products out into the marketplace and hoping I would eventually get lucky seemed like a recipe for frustration and failure.

About this time, I heard an interview with Monte Cook, who has run some highly successful TTRPG campaigns on Kickstarter. Monte noted that he had struggled to understand how to make Kickstarter work for him until he began to treat it like a game. A game has rules and win conditions, meaning you can create strategies to succeed.

Once Monte engaged his game-playing brain, once he figured out the rules and the win conditions, he devised a successful Kickstarter strategy.

I took the same approach with the Dungeon Masters Guild, asking, "How does this 'game' work and how can I win?" My insights were not especially startling or innovative, but they were the paving stones on my road to success. Let me share some of these early lessons.

The goal of marketing is to expose your product to as many potential buyers as possible. How do we do that in our indie RPG context? Well, the two uppermost strips on the DMs Guild website at that stage were the "Most Popular DMs Guild Titles" and the "Newest DMs Guild Titles." These were the most visible parts of the site. Being high on those strips gave you great exposure to an audience that was interested in buying D&D books. I could not control what appeared on the "Most Popular" strip, but I could exercise a small amount of control over the "Newest" strip—by releasing new products!

I came up with the following strategy. I would release four products per month—one paid product and three tiny free products. The free titles (which were mostly one-page things such as subclasses) would keep my name fresh in people's minds and also (hopefully) drive traffic to my paid titles.

Another pretty obvious marketing concept is brand loyalty. It applies to writers as well as car makers! If someone likes one book you have written, there is a good chance they will like your other books, too. I needed to make it as easy as possible for people who looked at one of my products to see my other products.

These days, the DMs Guild website automatically creates a strip for you called "More from this Title's Contributors," but that didn't exist at first. Drawing on some web programming skills, I created a text file with image hyperlinks to all of my paid products on the Guild. When I created a new product, I added it to this file, then went and edited *every other* product I had on the Guild and pasted the updated link list in. Since I was releasing so many products, I had to frequently update 40 or more titles. But the end result was that every single one of my products linked to every one of my paid products.

Both of these strategies required a lot of work, some of it tedious. Looking back, I am amazed that I persisted as long as I did. But it was effective. I began to see a steady increase in sales across the board.

However, I took my most significant marketing step a few weeks after publishing *Shadows on the Long Road*, when I decided to release my first three adventures as a bundle called the *Triboar Trilogy*. Although product bundling was well established on DriveThruRPG (and in retail generally), to the best of my recollection it had not yet been done on the DMs Guild.

I was selling these three adventures (*Temple of the Nightbringers*, *Terror at Triboar*, and *Shadows on the Long Road*) for $1.50 each at the time (too cheap!). *The Triboar Trilogy* would sell for $3, giving the buyer a 33% discount.

I was nervous. My three little adventures were selling nicely, and I did not want to do anything that might interfere with that. Yet I knew that this sort of product bundling was common across the entire retail space, and I figured it must work. I mustered some courage, shut my

eyes, and hit "Publish." It was a turning point in my D&D writing career. Although the individual sales took a big hit, it was more than made up for by the bundle sales. I tripled my weekly earnings, and *The Triboar Trilogy* became my first top 10 product.

Having proven the idea, I decided to crank it up to eleven. I worked extremely hard to release a whole bunch of adventures over the coming months, with the idea of doing a bundle for Christmas. By the time we reached November, I had published fourteen short adventures. I released the *Complete Adventures of M.T. Black* on November 18th, 2016, for the absurdly cheap price of $7.95 (I increased it to $9.95 a few days later) and went to bed. When I woke up in the morning, I was shocked to see it had hit number one, a position it held *for nearly six months*. This collection remains popular, having sold nearly ten thousand copies at time of writing, and enjoys a remarkable 98% rating over one hundred reviews.

Because of that product, everyone in the DMs Guild creator community suddenly knew my name. And because of that product, doors began to open for me, leading to many of the opportunities I have enjoyed since then.

Writing those fourteen adventures was the *making* side of the business. Choosing to bundle those fourteen adventures was the *marketing* side of the business. The marketing went hand in hand with the making. If I had just focused on the making, and ignored the marketing, I would not have enjoyed the same level of success.

None of the strategies above are revolutionary or original. Whatever credit I deserve lies solely in taking established ideas and applying them to the little marketplace we operate

in. And these strategies are not necessarily going to work for you today, as the scene has shifted. For example, bundles are extremely common now, and only a small number sell well. However, the principle of taking orthodox marketing strategies and applying them to the world of TTRPG is always relevant. There is still a lot of potential for folks to distinguish their products via sound promotion.

These days, a large part of my marketing is done via email campaigns, and I have a mailing list of several thousand people. This sort of marketing is sometimes called EDM (Electronic Direct Mail) and is highly effective. But I am learning more about this area all the time, and you should be, too. There is even an online course now called *Marketing 101 for ttRPG Creators*—I recommend you take it.

Marketing is a massive and complicated topic. I find it painful and most of you probably do, too. But if you can master it, even just a little bit, it will almost certainly lead to more sales and more opportunity to create. And isn't that worth a bit of trouble?

Chapter 5: The Dungeon as Toy

The "joy of discovery" is one of the fundamental joys of play itself.

—Derek Yu

My first three adventures all featured iconic locations—*Temple of the Nightbringers* in a goblin lair, *Terror at Triboar* in a small frontier town, and *Shadows on the Long Road* in a haunted house. I chose another classic setting for my next adventure: a wizard's tower. This became *Tower of the Mad Mage*, which I published in April 2016.

Aside from the location, I created the adventure with two elements in mind. The first was a hook I found online (in a massive list of them) that described a wounded goblin who walks into a tavern and collapses, pleading for help. Second, I wanted to use one of the "climaxes" listed in chapter 3 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*; in this instance I chose #10, "A threat more powerful than the adventurers appears, destroys the main villain, and then turns its attention on the characters."

These three elements (location, hook, climax) gave me a broad outline. I decided to start the adventure in Longsaddle, an isolated hamlet about a hundred miles north of Triboar. As it happened, I eventually wrote six adventures based around Longsaddle and featuring its famous magical family, the Harpells. But more on that another time.

I named the featured goblin Skwelch, and he tells the following story to the player characters. He and his tribe fought and killed a dragon inhabiting an old tower in the woods, taking possession of its hoard. Skwelch then fell out with the leader of the tribe, Glubnose, and was forced to flee. He wants the party to help kill Glubnose, and he offers half the dragon hoard as compensation.

I sketched out Skwelch's personality in just a couple of lines. In his mind, he is the leader of the expedition, so he consistently gives everyone orders and barks out useless advice during combat. My goal was to make him as annoying as possible, since I knew the party could not get rid of him!

To my surprise, Skwelch proved immensely popular. I have had many people write to tell me how much they liked him, and he often ended up becoming a permanent member of the party. It was one of the first times I realized how very satisfying it is to create a memorable NPC. As game designer Wolfgang Baur notes:

> *… all roleplaying games are about imaginary people and places, and the people part is the crucial one. Players rarely dwell on descriptions of scenery, but they parse every clue from a villain's speech, and they will thoroughly question an evil high priest's servants and followers for hints of his plans. Even the good-guy NPCs can really set the mood of a game session: the faithful armorer, the innkeeper who offers ale and a song to the conquering heroes, the arch-wizard who always, always turns someone into a frog.* (Arcadian, 2011)

I included a few little encounters between Longsaddle and the ruined tower. I used to feel obliged to do this to

enforce the idea that the wilderness is dangerous and that it takes effort to move about. But these encounters don't add anything interesting to the adventure, and these days I would more likely say, "If you want some encounters before getting to the tower, please use the Tier 1 Hill Encounter table in *Xanathar's Guide to Everything*."

As an aside, there are other things you can do to convey the feeling of distance traveled without bogging the party down in unnecessary combat. For example, ask one player to describe a problem the party encountered on the journey and another to describe how their characters overcame the problem. Getting the players to roll dice to determine who makes up the problem and who makes up the solution can gamify the experience a little more.

Towers, especially small ones, present a challenge to the adventure writer. They often serve up encounters in a linear manner, whereas you usually want the dungeon architecture to give your players some meaningful choices when moving around. I worked pretty hard to squeeze little corridors and rooms into the tower, so the players had a selection of doors on every floor.

But I immediately noticed another problem: it was self-evident which door took you to the stairs leading to the next level, meaning the player characters could easily bypass about half of the encounters. So, I came up with a new plan that messed around with door placement to prevent people from marching straight to the top floor.

As part of my research, I looked at several wizard's towers in older adventures, and I was a bit disappointed by how mundane they often were. A wizard's tower should feel magical, and they offer a chance to break out some

gonzo design ideas. And so, I included things like an air elemental playing a set of pan pipes, an attack by flying cutlery, and a stained-glass window that came to life. One room featured a diary that sprouted legs and ran away from the characters when touched, which entertained many parties. Those examining the diary learn the identity of the tower's creator—one Hugo Harpell, a now-deceased member of the Harpell wizarding dynasty.

These sorts of encounters play into an idea which I call "the dungeon as toy." What I mean is that our adventure locations should be *interactive*. Yes, there should be monsters to fight—that is the combat pillar of play. Yes, there should be people to talk to—that is the social pillar of play. But the locations themselves should contain things that you want to pick up and touch and play with. "Haptic" is the technical term. This is a big part of the exploration pillar of play, and I think it is often neglected. Pick up the diary and it grows legs. Touch the holy orb and a glass knight steps out of the window. The treasury looks empty but actually has an invisible treasure chest in it. And so on.

Pools, fountains, statues, altars, tapestries, paintings, obelisks, shrines, and thrones are all wonderful for turning your dungeon into a toy, though you can use more mundane objects as well. The trick table in appendix A of the *Dungeon Master's Guide* has some good suggestions for effects. Here are a few examples I just rolled up using those tables:

- Runes engraved on the wall that ask three questions (answer them correctly to get a reward)
- A mushroom field that gives directions
- A door that ages the first person who touches it

These random trick encounters work best when you work in a bit of verisimilitude. For example, you might roll up, "Statue: casts polymorph on the characters (lasts 1 hour)." Perhaps the statue depicts an ancient necromancer, and anyone who touches it is changed into a ghoul. That small amount of consistent theming makes the encounter much more satisfying than if the statue and the polymorph effect had no discernible relationship.

I put a lot of this sort of interactivity into the tower, and it is one of the reasons the adventure has proven so popular. Almost every room has something to play with. Speaking frankly, I often forgot this lesson in subsequent products, and it is only in some recent dungeons that I have put renewed emphasis on the "toy" approach to location design. For example, here is the boxed text from an adventure I published called *The Eye of Klothys:*

> *This dome-shaped chamber has whitewashed walls defaced by charcoal scribbles. In the middle of the room is a brass tripod supporting a hefty candle, while a broad clay jar sits against the wall in a pile of rubble.* (Black, 2020)

This room provides ample opportunity for exploration, as there are all sorts of things for the characters to interact with. You can read the charcoal scribbles, examine the brass tripod, light the hefty candle, or open the clay jar. Players love these sorts of rooms, provided the interactions lead to interesting results.

Let's head back to *Tower of the Mad Mage* and look at the climax. The characters finally get to the top floor and face off against Glubnose and the members of his tribe. But just as the fight starts, something heavy lands on the roof! Yes,

it turns out that Skwelch lied—the goblins did not kill the dragon after all, they merely scared it off. The players need to decide: do they help Glubnose, do they help the dragon, or do they retreat and fight the winner? It is a fun little dilemma.

When I ran this adventure with my home group, the dragon (a red wyrmling) wiped out the goblins with a single breath. The characters all fled back down the stairs—except for the fighter who would not run, even in the face of certain death. And so he stood alone, facing down the evil creature as it slowly crept toward him. It's hard to convey how heroic this moment felt at the time, and it still sends a small chill up my spine thinking about it. His companions thankfully returned, and together they enjoyed a famous victory.

Tower of the Mad Mage is one of my most popular adventures, having sold thousands of copies and enjoying a rating of 96% from over 50 reviews. The feedback has been enthusiastic and generous. People appreciate how easy the adventure is to run, they enjoy the encounter variety, and they love Skwelch.

But one review, received well over a year after publication, will never leave my heart:

> *I ran this game for my brother and his childhood friend along with their now pre-teen sons. When asked to do so I was a little nervous because my own campaign takes up so much of my time so I plunged onto the DM's guild website and, after reading many reviews, settled on "Tower of the Mad Mage."*
>
> *The adventure is a very easy read and doesn't take long to prepare. It's well laid out and a DM can easily skip over some parts if they wish for time or simplicity's*

sake without losing much. The theme is classic D&D—goblins, magic, fighting and decision making. If you're looking to run something dark or heavy on roleplaying and intrigue, then this may not be your best bet. If, however, you want to start a standard campaign or wish for a way to introduce players to the game in a single night, then this is a great choice.

The players I had were a mixed bag of experience: my brother and his friend had played together in the 80's and I even found a couple of their Red Box dice to put out on the table. My brother has been teaching his son 5th Edition, so that was easy. The final two players were new to the game entirely but had a good understanding of it by the end of the night…

I'm afraid I have to end this on a sad note as my brother's friend passed away two nights ago. Though feared, it was not unexpected. I would be lying if I didn't say that this gave our session a somber feeling, or that I didn't have to sit by myself for a while and collect myself after the session ended. It was, though, an excellent experience as, for one night, they got to be teenagers again throwing dice at imaginary monsters. So I wish to give my thanks to the author for creating something well put together and helping me give them one last adventure.

This is why we write. The games we create are not an escape from reality; they provide life experiences that are as profound, intense, and altogether *real* as any other. And the world would be so much poorer without them.

Chapter 6: The Lich that Got Away

If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot.

—Stephen King

Little Shrine of Horrors, which I released in May of 2016, proudly wears its heritage on the cover. It is, of course, inspired by Gygax's renowned module, *Tomb of Horrors*, which was published in 1978 and had already garnered a legendary reputation by the time I started playing D&D in the early 80s. I often met other players, either at school or at conventions, who would say, "Have you played *Tomb of Horrors* yet? You have to check it out!"

When my home group finally got a copy of this coveted module, we had a lot of fun poring over the text and the book of illustrations that came with it. We never played the adventure, though, for a couple of reasons. First, we had all read it! But, more importantly, it had the reputation of being a "killer" dungeon, and no one wanted to risk their precious characters.

Soon after I started publishing adventures, I knew I wanted to write a little deathtrap dungeon in homage to *Tomb of Horrors*. And while I say homage, I think it ended up being something of a parody. The name *Little Shrine of Horrors* simply popped into my head, inspired by the musical *Little Shop of Horrors*.

I had two design goals. The first was to create a *Tomb*

of Horrors-style adventure for lower-level characters. It seemed a great shame that people should have to wait until they reached level 10 before having this sort of experience (sure, there were some older adventures around filling this niche, such as *The Mud Sorcerer's Tomb* (Shel, 1992), but I couldn't find much for Fifth Edition). In the end, I created this adventure for characters of levels 4 or 5, and it is worth noting that this sort of level targeting was a bit of a rookie mistake. Permit me a digression to explain.

The Dungeon Master's Guide defines 4 tiers of play, each representing broad power bands that span the character levels. Tier 1 is levels 1-4, tier 2 is levels 5-10, tier 3 is levels 11-16, and tier 4 is levels 17-20. These are not arbitrary numbers: the cut-off points represent places where Fifth Edition adventurers suddenly become significantly more powerful. For example, at level 5 (where tier 2 starts), martial characters get an extra attack, while spellcasters get access to third-level spells, such as the devastating *fireball*.

Because of these power jumps, creating an adventure that covers a whole tier is usually easier than creating something that crosses a tier threshold. And if you scale over the entire tier you vastly increase the marketability of the product. If I were writing *Little Shrine of Horrors* today, I would scale it over levels 5-10. Both the *Dungeon Master's Guide* and *Xanathar's Guide to Everything* contain manual methods for scaling encounters to different levels, but there are many tools online that do it automatically. End of digression.

My second design goal for *Little Shrine of Horrors* was to create a dungeon that was beatable. Gygax designed *Tomb of Horrors* to be a killer, partly because he was

dealing with very experienced players and very tough adventurers in his home campaign. Indeed, he used to carry a copy of the manuscript around in his briefcase to humble any fans who were boasting a little too loudly about their mighty PCs!

In practice, this means there are several "insta-death" traps in the dungeon, and numerous points where luck seems more important than skill, which diminishes the playability of the adventure. Indeed, the first person to beat the dungeon, Rob Kuntz, did so by taking in a small army of servants to walk ahead of him and trigger the traps! I wanted an adventure that would challenge the characters without undue risk of a TPK.

In my adventure, an evil wizard created the deathtrap dungeon so he could watch in amusement while adventurers died trying to defeat it. An oldie but a goodie, though I included a twist that comes later. One notable feature was the identity of the creator. I had become quite familiar with the Harpell wizard dynasty in Longsaddle, having dealt with them in *Tower of the Mad Mage*. I decided that the dungeon architect was one Lucien Harpell, who was an awfully bad egg. The name Lucien was not random—the person who suggested *Tomb of Horrors* to Gary Gygax in the first place was a fellow named Alan Lucien.

I was starting to develop some sophisticated lore around the Harpell family, a well-known magical dynasty in the Forgotten Realms. The first Harpell wizard I wrote about, Hugo Harpell, was thought insane. This new wizard, Lucien Harpell, was a sociopath. I eventually wrote six adventures about the Harpells, and while some of the wizards in the family were benevolent, most of

them were morally ambiguous. I thought this made them far more intriguing than the kindhearted clan presented in the official material.

Little Shrine of Horrors begins when Gunthar Grimm, a fur trader in Longsaddle, posts a notice seeking brave adventurers. If the player characters respond, he tells them he is a wealthy and successful man who is nevertheless beset by regret, having lost the love of his life when he was young. He recently discovered the dangerous shrine of Lucien Harpell, which contains a powerful magic item called the *Amulet of Lost Dreams*. Gunthar offers the characters generous compensation if they retrieve it for him.

After about a day of exploration, the characters find the entrance to the shrine, which is flanked by a statue engraved with this warning:

> *Yonder lies the Shrine of Lucien Harpell, greatest mage of this or any other age. In the arts of golemancy, artificery and necromancy, his equal has never been known, nor will be again.*
>
> *Cursed are those who enter this tomb. Cursed are those who look upon this statue. Cursed are those who seek his riches. Know that your demise is certain—your lives will be short, and your deaths slow.*
>
> *Read this, fools, and despair!* (Black, 2016e)

I thought that was a suitably dire warning, and the comment about "golemancy, artificery and necromancy" gives the players a hint about what they will face within. Upon entering the shrine, the door closes, and they are imprisoned. They must solve bizarre puzzles and overcome deadly traps to regain their freedom.

I did a lot of research for this adventure, combing through puzzle and trap books looking for inspiration. I also looked at every published deathtrap adventure I could find. I wanted to avoid the standard tropes in this genre and give the adventure a fresh feel, and it turned out to be much harder than I thought. I managed to create the dungeon I wanted, but the writing was a real challenge. I planted a couple of *Tomb of Horrors* easter eggs, though I wish I had included more. If I were cleverer, I would have found some way to work in something from *Little Shop of Horrors*, too.

It is tough to get puzzle difficulty right. If you make them hard enough to challenge experienced puzzlers, most groups will be stumped. Create them to be just tough enough for regular groups, and the people who really like puzzles will blow through them. The smart move, commercially, is to create something that will be fun for the broadest number of people, and that is what I did. From the feedback I have received, most players find the puzzles solvable and enjoyable.

Traps are easier to create than puzzles, though good traps take some work. In a trap-focused dungeon, you want to give the players a clue about the deadlier traps. Maybe there is an electricity trap on the door handle, and this just happens to be the one door handle they have encountered that is made of copper rather than iron. This foreshadowing makes it much more satisfying for the players, because it gives them the feeling that they can beat the trap if they are observant and clever enough—that is, it gives them a sense of agency.

Note that I am talking about especially deadly traps

here, and in an environment packed with traps. I am not suggesting every little pit trap in your dungeon should have some sort of clue or foreshadowing. Having said that, in *Little Shrine of Horrors* I put a pit trip at every four-way intersection. After they trigger a couple of them, the players should figure out where they are and avoid them. Putting minor traps in a solvable pattern is a nice strategy.

We should also speak about the map. I am reasonably pleased with the design, though it is a little too regular for my tastes now. The corridors all run vertically or horizontally, and the rooms are mostly aligned and conventionally shaped. The original *Tomb of Horrors* map had a zany chaos to it, with huge rooms next to tiny rooms and winding tunnels going everywhere. I thought it was very ugly at the time, but I admire it now. Tastes mature!

When the player characters get to the final room, a booming voice tells them the tomb entrance has re-opened, and they are free to leave. Should they persist, a climactic battle against constructs and undead ensues. The adventurers also notice a black curtain across the back of the chamber. Should they approach it, the booming voice becomes frantic, demanding the characters leave the curtain alone.

Yes, this is a *Wizard of Oz* moment. When the characters throw back the curtain, they discover their patron, Gunthar Grimm, there in the control room. It was a setup all along! It turns out that Gunthar discovered the long-abandoned shrine a few years ago and figured out how to operate it. Since then, he has made good coin by luring foolhardy characters to their doom and stripping their bodies of loot afterwards.

It is a bit contrived, but it plays well at the table. My main concern is that it is *another* case of the "goodie turns out to be the baddie" twist, which I inserted into far too many of my early adventures. The *Dungeon Master's Guide* even specifically warns you not to overuse this particular twist! Ah, well, I'm a slow learner. On the upside, it gave me the chance to write an amusing "man behind the curtain" scene. There are purists who might balk at that sort of thing, but most players I encounter take great delight in finding themselves in a scene they recognize from popular media.

I worked harder on this adventure than on any previous one, especially in the research phase, but my labor was well rewarded. The feedback has been consistently excellent ever since I released it, and it is currently rated 92% on the Dungeon Masters Guild. The only tiny bit of criticism has been from experienced puzzlers who find it a bit easy. But the vast majority have found it a satisfying experience. Here's a typical review:

> *THIS is exactly what a tricky trap-dungeon should be like. Some puzzles are easier, some are harder, but it is all designed with the goal of letting the players have FUN solving them. The "so super deadly you have no chance to get through" dungeons are just plain silly and no fun for anyone. This one here strikes a good balance of being challengeable and entertaining. Puzzles are solvable and allow some experimenting and research, they are not of the "come up with some obscure trick or you all die" variety. It also adds some good twists in the story and makes for an overall very pleasant experience for everyone at the table. Highly recommended!*

Re-reading the adventure now, it is obvious that I had begun to understand the importance of giving meaningful choices to the players. Player agency is fundamental to an engaging gameplay experience and is something I spend a lot of time thinking about these days, as I will explain in the next chapter.

Chapter 7: Meaningful Choices

The thing that makes a game a game is the need to make decisions.

—Greg Costikyan

One of the great "aha!" moments in my game design career was realizing how very fundamental the idea of choice is to the gameplay experience. This may seem obvious to you, but it's notable how often designers create adventures that deliberately limit the amount of choice the players have.

What do we mean by "choice," though? Some time ago I shared the following game design tip on Twitter:

> *Giving the players meaningful choices will increase their engagement with your adventure. Three things make a choice meaningful:*
>
> 1. *The player knows they are making a choice.*
> 2. *The choice has consequences.*
> 3. *There is information to inform the choice.*

This tweet provoked general agreement. But I think some of these points are less obvious than they first appear, and there are inevitable subtleties and caveats that get lost in a tweet. So, let's unpack it a little.

Meaningful choices increase player engagement

"Giving the players meaningful choices will increase their engagement with your adventure." This is game design 101,

but let's challenge the obvious. Here's what several game design veterans think about the importance of choices (or decisions) in a game.

Sid Meier, creator of the *Civilization* computer game series, famously defined games as "a series of meaningful choices." The industry loves to quote (and debate) this statement! Meier may have meant it as hyperbole, but at the very least it affirms how central choices are to gameplay. Meier says:

> *… the gift of agency—that is, the ability of players to exert free will over their surroundings rather than obediently following a narrative—is what sets games apart from other media, regardless of whether that agency is expressed through a computer keyboard, plastic tokens, physical movement, or entirely in the mind. Without a player's input, there can be no game; conversely, it takes only a single interaction to transform an observer into a participant, and thus a player.* (Meier, 2020)

Tynan Sylvester, creator of *RimWorld*, says, "Decisions are ultimately what make a game," while Jon Shafer, designer of *Civilization V* and *Stardock*, asserts, "A designer's goal is always to make every decision the player faces interesting."

Ok, it seems that video game designers are very invested in the concept of choice! But what about someone from the TTRPG field? Greg Costikyan, creator of such classic games as *Paranoia* (1984) and *Star Wars* (1987), wrote a seminal essay on game creation many years ago titled "I Have No Words & I Must Design." He states:

> *The thing that makes a game a game is the need to*

> *make decisions… Games are inherently non-linear. They depend on decision-making. Decisions have to pose real, plausible alternatives, or they aren't real decisions. It must be entirely reasonable for a player to make a decision one way in one game, and a different way in the next. To the degree that you make a game more like a story—more linear, fewer real options—you make it less like a game… Trivial decisions aren't any fun… Interesting decisions make for interesting games.* (Costikyan, 1994)

Where Costikyan says, "interesting decisions," I use, "meaningful choices," but we clearly mean the same thing.

I could quote many more people, but I hope these snippets convince you that choices are at the heart of any game you create. Okay, so how do we make these decision points (places where you make a choice) in our *Dungeons & Dragons* adventures meaningful? I argue three things are involved, and we will look at each one in turn.

1. The player knows they are making a choice.

For a choice to be meaningful, the player must know they are making a choice. This might seem like a tautology. Players always know when they are making choices, right? No, not always! Sometimes an adventure hides important decisions behind seemingly trivial actions, with the result that players do not realize the consequences of what they are doing. You might call this a *hidden choice*, and it is generally detrimental to the player's experience of agency.

Let's think of a contrived example. The player characters visit the queen to receive a quest. You privately decide that the queen likes fighters, so if a fighter is the

first to address her, she approvingly provides the party with a mighty magic sword. However, if another character speaks first, the queen offers no additional help. In this instance, the players make an important choice (which character speaks first), but they do not realize they are making an important choice. And this robs the decision of meaning and interest.

An example from real-life D&D that comes to mind is from the classic Gygax module *Dungeonland* (1983), which mimics *Alice in Wonderland*. When the players reach the bottom of the rabbit hole, they see a table and a bunch of other things. If they immediately stare at the table and do not take their eyes off it, the adventure goes in one direction. If the characters do anything else, the adventure proceeds in quite a different manner. There is nothing to suggest that the decision to stare at a particular object is important. The players do not realize they are making a decision that will have a massive impact on their experience of the adventure. This critical choice is hidden.

You can usually fix hidden choices by providing the characters with more information. In the first example, you might decide that anyone asking around town learns that the queen has a predisposition toward fighters. This tidbit gives the players a hint about how to handle the encounter, and it rewards them for making the effort to do some research beforehand. The *Dungeonland* encounter is a little trickier to improve, especially since it happens right at the start. Ideally, you would provide a clue somewhere, but I don't really like this hidden choice and would probably eliminate it from the adventure.

2. The choice has consequences.

For a choice to be meaningful, it must have consequences. Choosing option A should lead to a different experience from choosing option B. Once again, this seems obvious, but in many adventures, option A has precisely the same consequences as option B. We might call this a *hollow choice*.

RPG designers have spilt a lot of digital ink discussing hollow choices and their relationship with player agency. They have even devised a thought experiment called the "Quantum Ogre Problem" (inspired by a quantum phenomenon known as the observer effect). Here's my description of the thought experiment:

The adventurers are searching for an important treasure. They learn it is in one of three woods, and they must choose which one to search first. However, the DM has prepared a detailed ogre encounter and wants the players to experience it. Therefore, regardless of which wood the players choose, they encounter the ogre, and the treasure is somewhere else. Question: has the DM upheld the player's agency in this scenario?

There are many designers who would answer "yes." They point out, with some justification, that the subjective experience of the players is no different whether the DM places the treasure in one of the woods beforehand, or places it on-the-fly during play. Their adventure designs are full of hollow choices, with creatures, objects, and even whole locations moving about in order to ensure the characters experience them in the "right" order.

As you will have gathered, I disagree strongly. I think such hollow choices greatly undermine the game and are rarely justified. In my experience, players are much more

attuned to them than you might realize. Perhaps you will get away with it once or twice, but players soon "sniff out" when there are lots of hollow choices at the heart of the game. They start to feel like they are being "swept along" by events and that their decisions do not matter. And once that happens, they disengage.

Courtney Campbell identifies another problem with the quantum ogre:

> *If you always pre-ordain "your precious encounter" then the players never have the experience of choosing correctly and skipping right to the end (which is fun for them)…*
>
> *What's really terrible about the destruction of player agency in the above examples is the implicit thought that [it's] "your encounter that's sooo cool" is what makes Dungeons and Dragons fun.* ***It's not****. It's getting in that* Dispel Evil *on Strahd that slays him outright. It's getting that critical on that dragon… It's taking down that frost giant at first level…*
>
> *It's when through luck, chance, or skill, something amazing and heroic happens; Removing you from the real world and giving a rare glimpse with a few close friends into a realm where something truly unique and heroic has happened that the rest of the world will never see.* (Campbell, 2011)

This is especially important in D&D. Designer Robin Laws argues persuasively that this chaotic element is built into the game at a fundamental level. He says:

> *… what does a d20 roll do, emotionally? A d20 is very swingy, offering the biggest range of results possible in the*

> *standard polyhedral toolkit. Its raw result introduces a high degree of randomness. You use the rules, in which a +2 bonus is considered mathematically significant, to try to shape its fundamental unpredictability… Through a kitbag of step-by-step accumulation you strive to dampen life's fundamental arbitrariness. Roll well, and rationality prevails. Roll poorly, and you are reminded that disorder can never be conquered, only forestalled.* (Laws, 2012)

Removing this chaotic element, where disaster or triumph hinge upon a single decision or a single role, compromises the play experience.

Hollow choices take different forms, some of them less subtle than others. One too-common example is to simply throw overwhelming force at the characters if they go the "wrong" way. In the classic Dragonlance adventure *Dragons of Flame* (Niles, 1984), the player characters start in the village of Que-Kiri, but the adventure wants them to go to Solace, where they will be arrested by an overwhelming force of draconians. If the adventurers choose to go any other direction, a pair of enormous red dragons swoops down, captures the characters, and deposits them at Solace anyway!

Players quickly tire of such antics. A better design choice would be to allow the characters to wander around the plains, have a few random encounters, and gather some simple clues that point toward Solace.

Another example of a hollow choice is what we call "plot armor." This design device protects certain NPCs from dying because they are "essential" to the future story. It creates hollow choices because the players engage with

a creature under the presumption that they can harm or neutralize it, whereas their decisions and actions are entirely meaningless. *Dragons of Flame* makes egregious and unapologetic use of plot armor:

> *This module introduces several enemy NPCs, members of the Dragonarmies. Since these NPCs appear in later DRAGONLANCE modules, try to make them have "obscure deaths" if they are killed: if at all possible, their bodies should not be found. Then, when the NPCs appear in later modules, you have a chance to explain their presence. Be creative; think up an explanation for their "miraculous" survival.* (Niles, 1984)

Campaigns can tolerate the occasional "miraculous survival," but there are better design options to protect an NPC (usually a big bad) that the players need to interact with. One obvious method is the *project image* spell, which creates an illusory duplicate of a creature that it can hear and speak through. You could also use a magic item, such as a mirror, that works somewhat like a videophone. The characters and the big bad can interact, but with no chance of harming each other.

One underutilized option is a herald, a minion that speaks on behalf of someone else. Instead of the big bad confronting characters directly, they send along an underling to talk smack. If this herald is killed, it does not compromise the campaign. When played well, heralds can build up the anticipation of the eventual confrontation with the big bad.

Much more could be written on this topic, but the overall message is clear: when you present the players with a choice, make sure there is a different consequence for each option.

3. There is information to inform the choice.

For a choice to be truly meaningful, there has to be some information, available to the players, that informs the choice. When such information is lacking, we might call it an *uninformed choice*, with the player essentially making a random decision.

You encounter uninformed choices quite a lot in D&D adventures. A good example comes from our old friend *Tomb of Horrors*. In the original version, the characters enter a metal cubicle with three iron levers. Pushing the levers up enables you to progress, while pushing them down results in a likely fatal fall. There is no information informing you whether up or down is better. And this particular adventure is full of choices like that!

In my view, *Tomb of Horrors* would be improved if these sorts of encounters presented the player with more information. Maybe you can examine the levers and figure out how they work. Or perhaps there is a clue elsewhere in the dungeon indicating whether pushing the levers up or down is good. You do not want to hand out the information on a plate, but you do want to reward good play, such as exploration and investigation.

Having said all that, there are times when uninformed choices are legitimate design elements. In an old Waterdeep scenario called *Blue Alley*, the players are also presented with three levers with no indication of what they do. Pulling the left-hand lever showers you with gold, the middle one causes a fake magic dagger to appear, while the right-hand lever causes all of your gear to teleport to another room! The player knows they are making a choice and that the choice has consequences, but with no information to inform the

choice, the player is effectively tossing a coin. However, *Blue Alley* is a "funhouse" dungeon, a genre of adventure that involves weird and wacky happenings. The lever trick is fun and has limited consequences, so I think it works in this context. It fails my test as a "meaningful choice," but is a good bit of design for this particular dungeon. Even so, I would not overuse the uninformed choice, as it is only fun in small doses.

Must every choice be meaningful?

My original tweet said, "Giving the players meaningful choices will increase their engagement with your adventure." This is not the same as saying that *every* choice you present must be meaningful in the full sense of the word. I have already mentioned some instances where uninformed choices can be useful and fun. And there are lots of trivial choices the players make throughout an adventure, such as what to have for breakfast, that do not need to be laden with significance.

But meaningful choices give players a sense of agency, and this goes a long way toward building up their engagement with your adventure. Choice remains at the heart of the gameplay experience, and all new game designers need to learn how to put meaningful decision points into their games. One great way to do that is to study the work of other designers, a practice we will explore more fully in the next chapter.

Chapter 8: Steal like an Artisan

Every artist gets asked the question, "Where do you get your ideas?" The honest artist answers, "I steal them."

—Austin Kleon

I published my sixth adventure, *Wizard in a Bottle*, in May 2016, just a week after publishing *Little Shrine of Horrors*. It is the adventure that first exposed me to a wider audience, mostly because it was given away for free in an early edition of WOTC's online magazine, *Dragon+*.

In some ways it is a very derivative creation, but I drew a little bit from a lot of separate sources rather than a lot from a single source. By the time it all got squashed together, I ended up with something pretty unique.

I sometimes encounter designers who pooh-pooh the idea of studying older games and using those games as a source of ideas. Some believe (apparently) that their own creations are completely original. I am a little skeptical about such claims. True innovation is rare, and it is extremely easy to either subconsciously imitate something you have seen before or to retread old ground without realizing it.

I'm reminded of something designer John Wick said a few years ago: "The older I get, the more I hear young RPG designers say, 'Never been done before!' And then I just point at something Greg Stafford did a few decades ago" (O'Brien, 2018). And the truth is that even the innovative

founders of our hobby, folks like Stafford and Gygax, were standing on the shoulders of those who came before.

Should we just give up trying to break new ground because "there is nothing new under the sun"? By no means! Rather, I think we need to *own* our influences rather than deny them in a vain attempt to prove our originality. Consciously imitate and learn from the recognized masters. As Yamamoto said, "Copy copy copy copy. At the end of the copy you will find yourself."

If "never been done before" is your only design goal, I suspect your project will fail on all creative levels. Firing up the forge of inspiration needs more than a desire to be "original." Looking at the great work of the past is a good way to gather artistic fuel and may be the only way to ever surpass such work. As T. S. Eliot said: "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different."

Given my views on this subject, I was rather delighted to discover a book called *Steal Like an Artist: 10 Things Nobody Told You About Being Creative*, by Austin Kleon (2012). His opening paragraph is provocative: "Every artist gets asked the question, 'Where do you get your ideas?' The honest artist answers, 'I steal them.'"

He is not talking about plagiarism, as he makes clear further on. Rather, he is talking about actively engaging with the great works in your field, consciously learning from them, and taking what speaks to you into your own work. This is one of the reasons I spend so much time looking at old adventure designs. I enjoy reading them, but I also learn a great deal from them. Brendan LaSalle expresses this nicely:

> *Every idea you have is built on the foundations of a million ideas that have come before it. True originality is impossible. Every new idea is just putting together two or more extant ideas in a (hopefully) unique way. It's all been done before, countless times, in endless variations.*
>
> *Do not despair—just the opposite, embrace this truth and make it work for you by drawing in as many diverse elements to your creation as you can manage.* (LaSalle, 2017)

As I discuss *Wizard in a Bottle*, I am going to pull back the curtain as much as I can and explain the origins of the ideas within it. As I do this, I am very aware that drawing a straight line from influence to idea is a bit simplistic. Ideas usually emerge dripping and half-formed from the swirling chaos of our id rather than neatly hand-delivered from a single sender. Still, we can try to identify primary influences, so I think there is value in this exercise.

The title of the adventure is one of the better ones I have devised. I was reading about veteran designer Rob Kuntz's adventure, *Bottle City* (2007), and thinking about a "bottle" adventure of my own. The phrase "Wizard in a Bottle" popped into my head, and I liked the rhythm of it. I still do! If I look at my first dozen or so adventures, at least a third of them started life with the title only.

The premise, when it came to me, was inspired by one of the plot seeds in *Eureka: 501 Adventure Plots* (Arcadian, 2012), which is a great book that you should buy now. In this seed, the player characters search for a long-lost adventurer who turns out to be in suspended animation. I took a couple of key elements and put my own spin on things, also

inspired by the numerous "suspended animation" episodes I have seen on *Star Trek*. It is a classic trope.

Interestingly, the title and plot outline were not related initially. I have an ideas file on my cloud drive where I jot down random thoughts. "Wizard in a Bottle" was one entry while "Suspended animation adventure" was another. The "aha!" moment came when I joined the two together. The person in suspended animation was a wizard who was trapped, genie-like, in a bottle! Some of my best adventures had their genesis this way, through the amalgamation of two seemingly unrelated ideas. So very often in this business, the magic happens through an inspired combination. Goblins? A bit tired. Goblins riding giant scorpions? Much better!

I needed a location for the adventure. Clearly, some sort of magic-user had trapped our titular Wizard, and that person most likely lived in a tower. But I had recently written a tower adventure (*Tower of the Mad Mage*) and was not ready to do another one. The answer came while reading through some old Chris Perkins material. His second published adventure, *A Wizard's Fate* (1992), was set in the cellar beneath a ruined magic-user's tower. This seemed to resolve my dilemma nicely, so I pinched that location. Tick.

In my adventure, an iron merchant named Ulfgar Longwood asks the party to track down a former comrade who he hasn't seen for twenty years, a wizard named Amilya Greyheart. Through the use of divination magic, Ulfgar has discovered her last known location: a ruined tower a couple of days north of the city. He assumes Amilya is dead and asks the characters to bring back her remains for burial.

The adventurers get to the ruined tower and must first deal with an ogre who has taken up residence inside. There is nothing very distinctive about this encounter and were I writing it today I would buff it up a little. One way I do this is with *Story Cubes*, six-sided dice with prompts on each face that you can buy at your local hobby store. You simply roll up an idea and fit it into the encounter somehow.

Let's work through a real-time example. I just rolled up "tortoise" on my story cubes. Okay, when the characters encounter the ogre, she is feeding her pet tortoise and making gentle cooing sounds. This simple addition makes the encounter much more interesting. Suddenly the ogre is slightly sympathetic, and many parties will be inclined to try and talk to her rather than simply fight her. And the idea of this brutish ogre looking after a tiny tortoise is ridiculously cute.

Giving creatures something to do is one of the best ways to bring them to life. You can transform an otherwise mundane encounter into something special by adding some action. And actions are a much better way to portray a creature's personality than a simple prose assertion—it is the classic advice of *show don't tell* at work. In the example above, I *could* say, "The ogre has a soft spot for weak creatures," but that leaves it up to the DM to figure out how to bring that information to the party. Showing the ogre gently looking after her pet tortoise is a more powerful way to communicate the information and much more useful to the DM who is trying to give the scene life.

The Dungeon Master can take and develop such little seeds in various ways, as well. As the characters eavesdrop, they might hear the ogre saying, "Nice little turtle, you'll

be good in my soup tonight," or, "Don't worry, Brarg, we'll figure out how to turn you back into an ogre," or, "I've never met a talking tortoise before." All of this from a single roll of a story cube!

Following the ogre encounter in *Wizard in a Bottle*, the characters must solve a simple word scramble puzzle to unlock the trap door that descends to the basement. I do enjoy these little pen and paper puzzles, though finding plausible ways to insert them into an adventure is a challenge.

The dungeon beneath the tower has just five or six chambers (depending on how you count them). One of the first locations is a sitting room with a bunch of clay skulls on the wall. Press the correct one and it opens a secret door but press the wrong one and it explodes. This idea is straight out of *The Mud Sorcerer's Tomb*, one of the most highly rated *Dungeon Magazine* adventures ever. If I were doing it these days, I would try to customize the idea a bit more—perhaps instead of skulls, there is an array of terracotta eyeballs that follow you around the room.

The chamber to the west has a stone pool filled with putrid water. If you approach it, a water weird rears up and attacks. The scene was inspired by the cover of *Dungeon of Dread* (Estes, 1982), the first book in the *Endless Quest* series by TSR. I loved that book as a teen and adored the cover. I found the book and re-read it a few months ago, and I am sad to say I was a bit disappointed. Sometimes, you cannot go back—you're better off just holding onto that delicious childhood memory. I still think it's a great cover.

Some of my design inexperience came through in this encounter, though. A water weird is CR 3, and the adventure was written for level 2 characters. This worried

me so much that I went to the trouble of creating a "Lesser Water Weird" monster that was only CR 2. I did not realize at the time that a level 2 party can take down a lone CR 3 monster without much trouble. And even if I wanted to nerf the monster, a better and easier way is to simply reduce its hit points! The water weird cannot even leave the fountain, so it really should not challenge the party.

There is a treasure vault on the other side of the sitting room, protected by a portcullis with a fun little trap that was inspired by Raging Swan's *Dungeon Dressing* book. In their trap, when you touch the portcullis, it begins screaming, and you suffer some sort of sonic damage. In my variation, when you touch the portcullis, a siren goes off, and you must make a saving throw or find yourself compelled to bash your head against the floor. A bit silly but also quite amusing, and I think it is a good example of taking an idea and putting your own twist on it.

The room immediately north of the sitting room contains a little cabinet of curiosities, which was inspired by a random page on Wikipedia I flicked to one evening. Looking at this chamber now, I wish I had used just a few more evocative phrases to bring the place alive. The standard writing advice of "kill your adjectives" does not apply quite as much in adventure writing, where you do not have paragraphs and paragraphs to build a scene. Sure, using lots of adjectives gives your writing a bit of a pulpy vibe, but D&D was born out of the pulps.

There are a couple of dust mephits on the grimy floor of the cluttered cabinet room. Gosh, I love mephits! They are one of my go-to monsters for low-level parties, and I probably need to be a bit more sparing with them. I think

there was a missed opportunity here, as the cabinet of curiosities was full of animal skeletons. A better encounter would be to have the skeletons animate and attack. These sorts of "missed opportunities" are the things I notice most when re-reading my old adventures. The experienced eye sees all sorts of patterns that allow you to pull the dungeon together into a cohesive whole.

An even better idea would have been to have a trick or "toy" encounter here (see chapter 5) rather than a combat encounter. As written, you have a cabinet full of marvelous oddments but no way to interact with them. What if you touch a giant's spear and have the *enlarge* spell cast on you? Perhaps a hand mirror shows a recording of a prior moment in the dungeon. Maybe a dream catcher puts you into a deep slumber where you face a nightmare monster. Those are just a few ideas (which I generated using story cubes, by the way!).

East of the cabinet room is a longish hall before the final chamber. There are nine paintings on the walls, each one depicting a different layer of hell. When the players get to the middle of the hall, two imps emerge from pictures on either side of the party and a nice fight ensues. I was inspired a little by *Return to the Tomb of Horrors*, which has a round room with a bunch of paintings that were gateways to different places. Of course, the "portal picture" is an old fantasy trope. I think I first encountered it in C. S. Lewis's *Voyage of the Dawntreader* as a child, though the idea was most fully developed in Roger Zelazny's *Amber Chronicles*, which I read obsessively in my teens.

So, we get to the final room, an alchemical laboratory. Given the person we are seeking is trapped in a bottle, that

is nice and consistent. However, Amilya is not the only one present. If the characters have a look through the lab equipment, they notice that "an alembic on one of the shelves contains a green mist that is glowing very faintly." These are the remains of the Sorcerer, the person who originally built the tower and basement. In a questionable attempt to achieve immortality, he managed to distill the spirit out of his aged and decrepit body and into a glass container.

The Sorcerer has the power to toss about vials of acid and other nasty stuff, and the fight lasts until the character's find and smash his container. After that, at last, they can free Amilya from her twenty years in suspended animation. I describe her as having "raven hair and a lithe build." A cliched description, but I was (and am) consciously trying to avoid describing women as "beautiful" or "stunning" or whatever. Not only are they very weak adjectives, but the focus on female attractiveness is tired and unhelpful.

With the dungeon complete, the adventure rolls into an extended coda (inspired by Kurt Schneider's plot seed) with Amilya causing trouble as she tries to win back her former fiancé, who has married and had five kids in the intervening twenty years. Truthfully, I am not quite sure this section works—it feels a bit anticlimactic, and a lot of folks who run the adventure skip it altogether. If I were writing the adventure today, I doubt I would include this section.

I released the adventure, and it got good reviews and was selling quite well. Then John Houlihan, an editor at *Dragon+*, got in touch and asked if they could feature the adventure in the magazine. Of course! They paid me a nice little sum and included a code that allowed people to download the product for free. To my delight, the

adventure was downloaded several thousand times, which really helped bring my name to a wider audience.

Wizard in a Bottle continues to sell well and is currently rated 86% by its reviewers. Here's one of the longer reviews:

> *Used this as my first time DMing, in a group with 3 never-played-before players.*
>
> *Was PERFECT for both instances. It was an awesome layout I found incredibly easy to run. Even helping out with rules, making allowances for newbies (including me in a way) and DMing, it was challenging and fun and gave them a perfect mix of problem solving, cause and effect, combat, and RP.*
>
> *Cannot recommend it enough for a simple one shot to ease into 5E, whether DMing or playing with new players.*

This adventure showed me how important it was to read the work of other people, especially the "masters" in the field, when I was seeking inspiration for an adventure. Sometimes, would-be creators tell me they simply cannot think of anything to write. Skim through an old issue of *Dungeon Magazine* and you will have plenty of ideas before reaching the end! Or think about one of your favorite adventures and consider how you can re-imagine that play experience. I have done that more than a few times, as my next adventure shows.

Chapter 9: There's a Robot in my Dungeon

If there's a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it.

—Toni Morrison

In chapter 6, I alluded to the legendary TSR adventures of my youth, those that were mentioned in hallowed whispers in the playground. One of these fabled titles was Gygax's *Expedition to the Barrier Peaks* ("You go into a crashed spaceship, and you get laser guns, and you fight robots!!! Wow!!!"). The concept lit up my imagination, and I desperately wanted to play it. I finally got my chance when a new kid at school produced a copy.

The designated Saturday arrived, and a group of us sat around the table, waiting for the brilliance to unfold. Sadly, it was a disappointing game experience. We were confronted with endless identical rooms to enter and search, interspersed with some repetitive fights. We gave up after about an hour and played *Game of Life* instead. Expectation, please meet Reality.

I do not think our thirteen-year-old DM was well prepared for the game, but I think the adventure itself has some problems as well. There is a lot of "dead space" in the first few levels, and it only really warms up by level 4. Yet, despite my bad experience, I never quite let go of the "dream" of what *Barrier Peaks* could have been, and when I started self-publishing D&D adventures, I decided to create

my own version. I called it *Expedition to the Lost Peaks*.

Here is another example of pure pastiche proudly presenting its provenance in the title. I won't lie—although these homages were well received by the public, I occasionally worried that I should be doing something more original. But I was encouraged by this quote from W. H. Auden, one of the great poets of the twentieth century. He said, "Some writers confuse authenticity, which they ought always to aim at, with originality, which they should never bother about." Finding your authentic voice is much more important than being original. And as you find your voice, originality will inevitably follow.

For those starting out on this creative journey, find a concept you are genuinely passionate about and don't worry if it has already been done. Do you want to write about a cave complex full of monsters? Go for it—and don't be concerned that *The Keep on the Borderlands* did it before you. Do you want to write about a charismatic vampire ruling over a small province? Do it—and don't be bothered about *Ravenloft* (Hickman, 1983). Do you want to write about a dangerous island full of dinosaurs? Go ahead—and don't be troubled that *Isle of Dread* (Cook, 1981) has already been there. In all these things, if you bring your passion and execute well, you will create something worthwhile.

Expedition to the Lost Peaks has proven an enduringly popular adventure. It starts in Longsaddle, with a Harpell matriarch commissioning the characters to investigate a strange metal object in the Lost Peaks. As you have probably guessed, the object turns out to be a crashed spaceship.

I picked the Lost Peaks as the destination because of

the similarity in name to the Barrier Peaks. But it was actually a rather good location for an adventure, since the area is relatively isolated—had the spaceship crashed next to Waterdeep, many people would have gone to investigate already. My spaceship is much smaller than the massive craft presented in *Barrier Peaks*, but that is by design. I wanted an adventure you could run in a session or two. One of the problems with *Barrier Peaks* is that you have endless identical rooms, and you also have large spaces with nothing in them. While kind of realistic, it does make the adventure repetitive and dull.

My spaceship has two levels, the largest one being the Green Deck, which is like a giant terrarium. Here you have a self-contained little wilderness adventure where you fight things such as bulettes, manticores, chuuls, and other strange beasts. You start the level on an observation deck that gives you a view of the whole tangled indoor wilderness, and in the distance, you see a pack of allosauruses dash off. Throughout the level you hear these dinosaurs call out, so you always know they are somewhere ahead. Foreshadowing a dangerous encounter like this is highly effective (I discuss this further in chapter 18).

There are little treasure stashes around the level where you can pick up stuff like blasters and frag grenades. Finding cool loot is a big part of the fun with science fiction crossover adventures! The high-tech items all have limited charges and no obvious way to recharge, so the DM doesn't have to worry about the characters leaving the adventure with too much firepower.

To explain why there was loose gear all over the place, I created a little story about an escaping prisoner with a

jetpack who was killed in midair, which resulted in his loot being scattered across the level. A friendly treant tells you this story and refers to the mysterious makers of the ship.

This tiny story was not only a fun bit of color, but it also suggested a few encounter seeds, including the discovery of the prisoner's body. There was a lesson for me here: adventures usually have an overarching plot, often expressed as a narrative question ("where did this spaceship come from?"), but you can also sprinkle subplots through your adventure that are not really related to the main plot ("Who was the flying man and why was he a prisoner?"). Laying a few of these subplots across a dungeon is a great way to make it more interesting.

One way to do this is to imagine the dungeon in its natural or equilibrium state and then postulate an event that disrupts this equilibrium. It might be a prisoner escaping, a new monster moving into town, someone arriving to hide out from the law, or some kind of natural disaster. This disruption to the equilibrium gives the player characters a mystery to investigate and can heighten the dramatic tension. Imagine you are invading a goblin den and suddenly come across a room containing six dismembered goblins. The players are immediately on edge, wondering what creature killed the goblins, why it did so, and where it is. Subplots can transform an otherwise prosaic dungeon.

Back to the adventure. Having cleared the Green Deck, the characters find themselves on the Medical Deck and have some fun playing around with alien tech and fighting off the security bots. My inspiration here was the old *Paranoia* roleplaying game, which I loved when I was a

kid. I wanted this level to be a bit zany but also dangerous. I called the robots "guardbots" and "medbots," which are both terms from *Paranoia*.

I threw some body horror in here as well. You enter a chamber with some living heads and a brain in a jar. This is an old trope, but I still find it disturbing, and I have used it in a couple of other adventures, most notably *The Clockwork Queen*.

After clearing the Medical Deck, the characters make their way to the Control Room, where the ship's computer reveals the big secret of why the ship is there and who owns it. Spoilers—it was a mind flayer survey ship that crashed eons ago. The strong suggestion is that the mind flayers who escaped the crash are the ancestors of all the mind flayers on Toril. This does not quite square with established lore, especially the Spelljammer stuff. But I thought it was a fun idea.

The computer also has a nasty surprise for the player characters. It has remained functioning for all these years because it was obliged to render whatever assistance it could to its masters. Having determined that the mind flayers are well established on the planet, the computer has fulfilled its function and so initiates a self-destruct sequence. The characters barely escape in time. It's a fun idea, but I should have gamified it with a skill challenge or similar.

This adventure gets a lot of things right—a strong premise, tight writing, a good mix of combat, roleplaying, exploration, and a dramatic conclusion. It is short, but it goes close to fulfilling the vision I had when I was thirteen years old and staring longingly at the cover of *Barrier Peaks*.

The feedback for *Expedition to the Lost Peaks* has been favorable. The adventure is currently rated 90% and has sold thousands of copies. Here is one enthusiastic review that nevertheless upholds my view about the weak climax:

> *Ran this as a one shot. It was really fun! Some incredibly fun and unforgettable moments. It took us about 15 hours (with breaks) as my groups are completionists of sorts.*
>
> *I added an encounter in the final room with the ship's AI as an Illithid construct. I felt that it needed a climactic ending (as well as the detonation).*
>
> *Fantastic!!!*

Expedition to the Lost Peaks is a good example of how you can take something you love (or want to love) and make it your own. The success of this adventure, and the delight it has brought so many people, is one of the reasons I stopped apologizing for riffing on past classics. Having said that, soon after I wrote this adventure, I began earnestly using another idea-generating tool, one that proved immensely powerful.

Chapter 10: Let the Dice Talk

Creativity involves breaking out of established patterns in order to look at things in a different way.

—Edward de Bono

There is an old joke about a novelist and a neurosurgeon who meet at a party. The neurosurgeon says, "When I retire, I plan to write a book." The novelist replies, "What a coincidence! When I retire, I plan to operate on brains." The novelist, of course, is making an ironic comment about the devaluation of their craft. In a culture with high literacy rates, many people fancy they can write a book. Having spent a lifetime reading, such folk do not imagine they might need to serve a writing apprenticeship first—in their view, they are experts already.

We see the same thing in the roleplaying game community. There are many, many people who have invested a remarkable number of hours in this highly addictive hobby. And it is only natural for such folk, once they decide to publish, to consider themselves experts already. But one of the downsides to such "instant expertise" is that you are tempted to skip over the basics. And in doing so, you might miss ideas, techniques, and tools that greatly enhance your work. I know this is true because I did exactly that.

As a Dungeon Master with many years of experience, I felt like I no longer needed the *Dungeon Master's Guide*. That was a book aimed at beginners, and I was beyond the

lessons it contained. Folly! The latest edition of this book is a distillation of forty years of experience, and it simply oozes useful advice and ideas. I realized this myself a few years ago when I had another look at appendix A, which helps you generate a dungeon using random tables.

Now, I know some are skeptical about creating with random rolls, but this technique is well established in the hobby. Indeed, using randomness has a respectable history in the arts since at least the early twentieth century. The pioneer may have been Tristan Tzara, a Dadaist, avant-garde poet who described the following technique:

> *To make a Dadaist poem*
> *Take a newspaper.*
> *Take a pair of scissors.*
> *Choose an article as long as you are planning to make your poem.*
> *Cut out the article.*
> *Then cut out each of the words that make up this article and put them in a bag.*
> *Shake it gently.*
> *Then take out the scraps one after the other in the order in which they left the bag. Copy conscientiously.*
> *The poem will be like you.*
> *And here you are a writer, infinitely original and endowed with a sensibility that is charming though beyond the understanding of the vulgar.* (Tzara, 1920)

Many creators have used similar techniques, including Kurt Cobain and David Bowie. Writer Ray Bradbury used to write down lists of evocative nouns, then pick them out of a bag at random and create stories from them. Using random words as creative prompts is a pretty standard technique in

many writing workshops and has even been turned into a dice-based game called *Story Cubes*. Lateral thinking expert Edward de Bono calls this the "random input technique" and has taught it to business leaders for decades.

When I started creating D&D adventures, I did not give much thought to randomness. I was aware of the technique, but I think I had put it into the "beginner" basket. But, not long after completing *Expedition to the Lost Peaks*, I happened to pick up *The Dungeon Alphabet* (Curtis, 2010). This particular book contained a couple of dozen random lists for creators to use when generating dungeons. I found the lists imaginative and creatively provocative. I went searching for similar works and landed upon the extraordinary *Tome of Adventure Design* (TOAD) by Matthew Finch (2011). This weighty book contains hundreds of tables, most with dozens of detailed entries covering numerous aspects of fantasy RPG design. I've found it an indispensable tool ever since.

But the three hundred-page TOAD can be hard to navigate, and for some time I thought we needed something less complicated but still relatively comprehensive. I then revisited appendix A of the *Dungeon Master's Guide* and realized what a superb job the authors had done. It turns out that these were the tables I had been looking for all along. You can use them to generate engaging and playable dungeons, and I now often use them when creating D&D content.

But aren't such tables only intended for use at home? Can you create publishable material using random input? To test this point, I used the appendix A tables to outline two recent D&D adventures, *The Cannith Schematica* and

The Eye of Klothys. I also used randomly generated maps for them. Since publishing them, both adventures have been highly rated.

Why do random tables work? Edward de Bono described it this way: "The general principle of the random input is the willingness to look for unconnected inputs and to use these to open up new lines of thinking." Our minds are good at finding connections between seemingly unrelated concepts, and these connections are a fertile source of fresh ideas.

In an interview, science fiction writer Ray Bradbury gave a more personal explanation of why randomness helps creativity. He argues that

> *Three things are in your head: First, everything you have experienced from the day of your birth until right now. Every single second, every single hour, every single day. Then, how you reacted to those events in the minute of their happening, whether they were disastrous or joyful. Those are two things you have in your mind to give you material. Then, separate from the living experiences are all the art experiences you've had, the things you've learned from other writers, artists, poets, film directors, and composers. So all of this is in your mind as a fabulous mulch and you have to bring it out. How do you do that?* (Weller, 2010)

For Bradbury, picking nouns out of a bag helped him "dredge" this subconscious mulch and bring the best ideas to the surface. Okay, but what does this look like in practice? For the two adventures I mentioned above, I used the appendix A tables to generate the following information about each chamber:

- Chamber purpose
- General feature or furnishing
- Chamber state
- Chamber contents
- Hazards, obstacles, traps, and tricks (if applicable)
- Monster motivation (if applicable)

Doing this for every room gave me an outline of the dungeon, which I then fleshed out in an iterative manner, adding details, moving things around, and looking for interconnections to develop. I talk about this in much greater detail in chapter 18.

Let us work through a single chamber as an example. Let's imagine an adventure called *Temple of the Jade Priest* (a title I created using tables from TOAD). Following are the results, using the appendix A tables, of rolling up this dungeon. These are all genuine rolls, by the way—I am going to let the dice talk.

Chamber purpose

Pages 292 to 295 of the *DMG* contain lists of chamber purposes, such as bedrooms, kitchens, libraries, and so on. Defining this information helps you add details to your chamber that may interact with other chamber contents in intriguing ways. The chamber purpose tables are divided up by the dungeon type, so there are different tables for strongholds, tombs, mines, etc. I will use the "Temple or Shrine" table on page 294. I rolled 1, meaning our chamber is an "Armory filled with weapons and armor, battle banners, and pennants."

General feature or furnishing

Pages 299–301 contain a bunch of features and furniture to add to your chamber. I usually roll up a single item from one of these tables and later look for a way to turn it into some kind of toy, as I described in chapter 5. In this instance, I decided to use the Religious Articles and Furnishings table on page 300. I rolled 48, meaning there is an "incense burner" in the room.

Chamber state

Page 293 has a table that tells us the current state of our chamber. This information potentially changes the battlefield terrain and may also suggest ways in which to make the chamber interactive. I rolled 2, which is "Rubble, partially collapsed."

Chamber contents

Page 294 has a table that determines the encounter type of a chamber, that is, whether it contains a monster, a treasure, etc. I rolled 78, meaning this chamber contains a "Trick." As you will have gathered from chapter 5, I love tricks! Our dungeons need more tricks.

Hazards, obstacles, traps, and tricks

Pages 296 through 298 contain random tables for hazards, obstacles, traps, and tricks. Since we rolled up a trick for the chamber contents, I use the trick tables on page 298. I rolled 12 and 33, meaning my trick object is a "pool of water," and my trick effect is "Magic mouth speaks a riddle." A talking pool of water—how cool! I love random tables.

Monster

We did not roll up a monster in the chamber contents roll above, but I will describe my process for monster encounters anyway. The *Dungeon Master's Guide* does not have monster tables, so I either choose the monster by hand, use the encounter tables in *Xanathar's Guide to Everything*, or use a random web tool such as *Kobold Fight Club*. I often choose a monster type as the general theme for a dungeon or level, such as fiends or elementals. Even if randomly rolling for monsters, I tend to roll a few times until something *feels* right.

If the monster I select is intelligent, I roll on the monster motivation table on page 296 of the *DMG*. The motivation information adds depth to the monsters, can help you understand the dungeon's history, and sometimes suggests what the monster might be doing when the characters show up.

Pull it all together

So, here are the random elements I rolled up for my temple chamber:

- Armory filled with weapons and armor, battle banners, and pennants
- Incense burner
- Rubble, partially collapsed
- Trick: Pool of water, magic mouth speaks a riddle

The dice have spoken and provided us with some idea seeds. Now we turn the results over to our brain and let it figure out ways to tie these elements together. Why can

the pool talk? We are in a temple, so perhaps a drop of the god's blood got mixed with the pool, which made it magic. Okay, we have tied the pool to the temple theme. And perhaps you have to burn incense to get the pool to talk. Good, we have also linked in the incense burner! Having the pool in the armory is a bit strange, but maybe this temple is dedicated to the god of war, so this is a kind of ceremonial armory. Nice! See how we can link these random ideas together?

Ok, let us tidy up and summarize. Sometime in the past, a drop of blood from the god of war mixed with a natural pool in the wilderness, and the god's followers (led by a cleric known as the Jade Priest) built a temple around it. The chamber that houses the pool is at the center of the temple and has been decorated like an armory in honor of the god. Now, when you burn incense in the incense burner here, the pool gives you a riddle-like hint about an upcoming conflict.

That sounds rather good to me—and all inspired by random rolls! And I'm sure you can create an equally intriguing story from the above elements.

The whole temple

Let us put together an outline for a ten-room dungeon using this technique. For convenience, room 1 is the chamber we rolled above, though we would likely renumber the rooms once we make or find a map. As far as monsters go, I have decided this temple will have a fiendish flavor, with perhaps one other sort of monster for contrast. Since this is a fairly small dungeon, I will re-roll repeat values. For larger dungeons, I have more tolerance for repeats. Here goes:

Temple of the Jade Priest

1. Armory; incense burner; rubble; trick => pool of water speaks a riddle

2. Robing room; altar; ashes; empty room (no encounter)

3. Guardroom; offertory container; wrecked furniture; monster (random) => ettercap

4. Crypt for the high priest; paintings; rubble; monster (dominant inhabitant) => shadow demon hiding from enemies

5. Drinking well; holy symbol; holes in the floor; hazard => green slime

6. Weapon workshop; idol; ashes; treasure => adamantine armor

7. Chapel; font; rubble; trick => tapestry casts *polymorph*

8. Central temple; stand; campsite; monster (ally) => quasits want to conquer the dungeon

9. Monk cells; kneeling bench; a pool of water; monster (pet) guarding treasure => hell hound guarding chest full of gems

10. Dining room; lamp; converted to a divination room; trap with treasure => open door and stone block smashes you

That looks like a fun little dungeon to me! You see some unusual results when you use random rolls, and these really provoke the creative process. For example, in chamber 4 we have the boss monster, a shadow demon, hiding in this (presumably abandoned) temple from its enemies. Perhaps it is being chased by some archdevil enemy who cannot enter the prime material plane. The archdevil sends an emissary to hire the party to go to the temple and destroy or capture the shadow demon. So, there we have a little backstory and hook, prompted by the random roll!

Chamber 8 also has a slightly unusual encounter. Some quasits, allies of the shadow demon, want to conquer the dungeon. What does it mean for such weak creatures to desire conquest? I think I would play them as a bit of comic relief. When the party encounters them, they boldly declare they are masters of the temple and will destroy anyone who dares to pass.

The Next, Hard Step

The next step, and it's a hard one, is to go through each room and convert it into a full encounter, tying together the different threads, fleshing out the descriptions, and making sure it is fun and playable. This step often involves shuffling things around a bit, which is fine—the random elements are there to serve you, not to shackle you. Based on experience, the 120-word outline above would evolve into a three thousand-to-five thousand-word dungeon by the time I finished with it.

Random tables will not do the work for you, but they will help you get out of creative ruts and stimulate new

ideas. It is a creative process that I have found invaluable, especially as I have sought to increase my output. I know some folk fear that any sort of framework is inherently limiting, but the opposite is true. A good creative process (like randomization) helps broaden your thinking, forcing your mind into new and unexpected places. Speaking about his random list technique, Bradbury said:

> *These lists were the provocations, finally, that caused my better stuff to surface. I was feeling my way toward something honest, hidden under the trapdoor on the top of my skull… similar lists, dredged out of the lopside of your brain, might well help you discover you, even as I flopped around and finally found me.* (Bradbury, 1993)

To help you discover you—that is really my hope, not just for the techniques in this chapter, but for all the material presented in this book. Bradbury talks about flopping around in search of his creative voice. I prefer the image of shuffling forward: we might be moving slowly, but to move at all is the thing.

Chapter 11: Why Good Books Don't Sell

Being a bestseller doesn't mean they wrote a great book. Just means they knew a lot of people who would buy it.

—David A. Santos

At the time of writing, there have been approximately twenty-one thousand books released on the DMs Guild. About five hundred of those books have attained Platinum Best Seller status, which indicates one thousand copies sold. Why did these five hundred books sell so well? Why did these books become "hits" while other books languished?

The first argument might be that differences in quality account for differences in sales. Perhaps the DMs Guild is a huge meritocracy, and the best books get the best sales. I can tell you from experience that this is an inadequate explanation. While most of the books that perform well on the DMs Guild are good quality, I have seen many high-quality books fail to chart. And I've occasionally seen mediocre books do pretty well.

If quality is not the critical factor, then what is? A few years ago, an innovative sociologist named Matthew Salganik wondered the same thing. No, he wasn't thinking specifically about tabletop roleplaying games! Rather, he was curious about cultural markets in general. In an article from *Science*, Salganik and his colleagues noted:

> *Hit songs, books, and movies are many times more successful than average, suggesting that "the best"*

> *alternatives are qualitatively different from "the rest"; yet experts routinely fail to predict which products will succeed.* (Salganik, 2006)

They speculated that "social influence" accounted for the differences and set up a brilliant experiment to understand what role it played. They recruited fifteen thousand teenagers and partitioned them into eight virtual "worlds." Participants had to listen to and rate forty-eight previously unreleased songs. After rating a song, they were given the choice to download it or not. The average rating represented the song's *quality*, while the total number of downloads represented its *popularity*.

There was an additional twist. Some participants could see the number of downloads a song already had, with the songs arranged by popularity in a chart. Other participants had no information about the number of downloads, and the songs were randomly presented to them. This latter group was the control group.

The results were fascinating. The song's quality had *some* influence over popularity, but it was limited. Salganik noted, "The best songs rarely did poorly, and the worst rarely did well, but any other result was possible."

Instead, they found that each popularity chart was very different to the others. A song that was a hit in one virtual world might only be a mediocre performer in another. The charts in each world evolved unpredictably, despite identical songs, identical initial conditions, and statistically identical populations.

What about the impact of social influence? Using the control group, they learned that social influence (that is, seeing the number of downloads and the popularity

charts) increased the *inequality* of outcome, meaning that popular songs were more popular and unpopular songs less popular. This is not surprising. Once something becomes popular it attracts further interest and sales, which naturally detracts from competing products. In the RPG market, when a book hits the top ten it gets momentum that keeps it selling. If a book flops on release, it is very hard to revive it.

However, the experiment also showed that social influence increased the *unpredictability* of the results. That is, the popularity charts evolved in an even more random manner, with even less correlation between quality and popularity.

Cultural markets (including Itch.io, DriveThruRPG, and the Dungeon Masters Guild) are not natural meritocracies. If you strip away outside influences, the popularity charts will evolve in a random and unpredictable manner. The cream does not rise to the top on its own. Once you attain a minimum level of quality, unpredictable factors determine whether your book will be a hit or not. Good quality is not a predictor of breakout success. And conversely, lack of success does not mean your book lacks quality.

Does this mean sales performance is entirely random, and there is nothing we can do about it? No! In the experiment, social influence greatly impacted popularity. Once a song started getting popular, more and more people began downloading it, and social influence bolstered this positive cycle. While the experiment looked at a pretty narrow definition of social influence, I think we can safely extrapolate the findings. Building your social influence in

the market or leveraging others' social influence is likely to help your sales. This absolutely accords with my experience.

More importantly, Salganik's experiment was necessarily conducted in a "closed world" virtual environment. But we don't operate on a closed world platform. We have numerous methods of reaching an audience with our book—that is, there are many ways we can *market* our product.

Marketing. As I've progressed in my career, I've encountered very negative attitudes toward this process among indie game publishers, even when they are serious about their craft and making money from it. Many seem to feel that marketing is implicitly dishonest and inherently immoral. And I can understand their point of view.

A few years ago, there was a consumer advocacy show in Australia called *The Checkout*, and it had a segment called "Package vs Product." The hosts showed the packaging of some food product from the supermarket, and the picture inevitably resembled a sumptuous feast. They then opened the package up, and the food itself often resembled dog vomit.

For some indie publishers, this is the essence of marketing: disguising dog vomit as a sumptuous feast. Someone who uses marketing, in their view, both cheats the customer and implicitly admits their game is crap. I've heard it said that marketing elevates poor products at the expense of good products.

But Salganik's experiment showed this is untrue. Cultural markets, with all forms of promotion stripped away, do not behave as meritocracies. People who refuse to market their games are not selling a book on its own merits—they are trusting to the forces of chance.

Marketing can be performed in a dishonest or an honest manner. You can be sleezy or you can be noble. You can deceive or you can enlighten. Like many things, marketing can be performed with bad or good intentions. And helping your book sell a few more copies sounds like a good intention to me.

Chapter 12: Too Many Necromancers

The Well at the World's End—can a man write a story to that title? Can he find a series of events following one another in time which will really catch and fix and bring home to us all that we grasp at on merely hearing the six words?

—C. S. Lewis

Ideas for *Dungeons & Dragons* adventures spring from many different sources. Sometimes you want an experience focused on a particular monster or a specific event. Sometimes you want to re-imagine an older adventure (like *Curse of Strahd* did with *Ravenloft*). And sometimes you are writing to a specification with the significant elements already supplied.

A surprising number of my adventures started with nothing more than a title, including *King of the Cats*, *Magic Village for Sale!* and *Horror in the House of Dagon*. Indeed, I have a whole list of titles sitting in my ideas file waiting to be paired up with a worthy adventure. Such was the case with *The Lurker Beneath Red Larch*. I wanted to write something a bit Lovecraftian, and the phrase "The Lurker beneath X" kept coming to mind. I selected Red Larch (a small town in the Forgotten Realms) as the locale due to the alliteration—though Luskan was also under consideration!

Having found a title, I needed a plot, which proved more difficult than I thought. Seeking inspiration, I scrolled through a massive list of plot seeds I found online. One

of them caught my attention, and it was something like this, "The adventure begins when the characters witness a murder." Okay, a murder suggests an investigation, but what is there to investigate if the characters already saw who did it? Perhaps that person is not actually responsible. Maybe some hideous monster was controlling the murderer from caverns below the village (remember "beneath" from the title). The adventurers must follow the clues and figure out the truth.

I can't recall how long it took to come up with this outline, but I suspect I thought about it for a few days. I don't mean I was thinking about it full-time, of course. I was living my life as usual with the different threads twirling around in the back of my mind. Some ideas, like wine, just need a bit of time to mature. I've learned to trust this process now. When I come across a difficult game design problem these days, I simply move it to the background with the confidence that a solution will emerge eventually. It always does.

I wrote the opening paragraph quite early in the piece. I was proud of it at the time, though it seems a bit long and overwrought to me now:

> *Ribbons of blood dance through the air, tracing wide crimson arcs before fraying into thousands upon thousands of bright red droplets. The cheerful tavern atmosphere evaporates in a moment, rent apart by screams and cries.*
>
> *A woman with gray hair stands near the bar, grasping at the dagger in her throat with fingers made slippery by blood. She sways and collapses. More screams.*
>
> *A man stands before her. He is holding the hilt of the*

dagger, but lets it slip from a gory hand as the woman falls. He freezes for a moment, then spins and sprints away, knocking aside people as he goes.

A young, flaxen-haired woman at the back of the tavern cries out, "Stop him! Stop him!" as he approaches the entrance—the entrance where you and your comrades are standing.

What do you do? (Black, 2016f)

The flaxen-haired woman is the village constable, and she recruits the adventurers to help investigate the murder. When I wrote *Lurker*, I had little experience creating investigative scenarios, and I was experimenting with different formats. In this instance, I put down a list of villagers in one column and a list of clues in the other. The characters could wander anywhere and talk to any villager, and the DM would dole out the clues as they saw fit. There is a ticking clock in this instance—in a day or two, the magistrate is due in town, and the alleged murderer is likely to hang.

I feel ambivalent about this structure now, because it puts a lot of work on the DM's shoulders. On the other hand, most of the information is the sort of general gossip that anyone in the village would know, and the structure reflects this well. Regardless, when I create investigative adventures these days, I prefer to have a trail of clues the characters follow rather than just a grab bag of information.

One thing that stands out is the NPC descriptions. I was trying hard but not quite hitting the mark:

Jalessa Ornra *– the butcher. She has warm blue eyes, slick red hair, and a lined face. She is a nervous woman and becomes angry when put under pressure.*

The physical description is just a laundry list of attributes that doesn't create a memorable picture of what Jalessa looks like. I see lists like this all the time in RPG adventures, including those published by professionals: Bucky has long brown hair and blue eyes; Undrew has round brown eyes and short blonde hair; Lilbet has red hair and a sharp chin.

Such descriptions are better than nothing, but they're not at all memorable. You want your description to create an image that impresses itself on the minds of the DM and players. As the acclaimed writing instructor Gary Provost said:

> *… to make characterization work you don't need to pile detail upon detail. You need to carefully choose some telling characteristics and present them in a lively, interesting manner.* (Provost, 2014)

For a minor character, you may only want to focus on one physical characteristic, as your players are unlikely to recall more than that. Let's think about how to describe Jalessa. "Warm blue eyes" is a cliche that makes very little impact, but what about, "Jalessa has enormous, cornflower-blue eyes." There is just enough interesting detail there to help Jalessa stick in the mind, and that's sufficient for a minor NPC.

But it's not enough to find a striking physical feature—you want to ensure it reinforces the story you are telling about that character. Consider these two descriptions:

> *1. Jalessa has enormous, cornflower-blue eyes and is wearing a tight cotton dress.*
>
> *2. Jalessa has hard, steel-gray eyes and is wearing a battered leather cloak.*

Even though these descriptions only reveal small details, they create very different impressions. Provost notes:

> *… the writer merely begins the drawing; the reader extends the lines… Because the reader is doing most of the work of creating character, you don't have to use many words to characterize minor players in your stories.* (Provost, 2014)

Many adventure creators seem unaware of this principle and produce a column of text describing minor details about an NPC in the hope that this makes the character "realistic." The poor DM does not know what to do with all this detail at the table, especially when there is a large cast to handle. In most instances, a couple of lines of well-written description is much more effective than a wall of well-meaning but largely irrelevant text.

What does this look like in practice? You can judge one of my recent efforts here:

> *Inside the hut is Niall the Finder (**scout**), a tall, raw-boned man on the cusp of old age, dressed in a greasy leather jerkin. He has slick, thinning hair, shaggy gray eyebrows, and a small, fishlike mouth. He is accompanied by Boomer, an enormous black pig.* (Black, 2022)

Even my harshest critics will acknowledge they can visualize Niall the Finder much more readily than Jalessa Ornra! Sure, there is a lot of detail in the description, but Niall is a major character and most of the detail is suggestive of his personality (he is an awkward loner).

Speaking of personality, Jalessa's description noted that she is "nervous." A skilled DM can do something with

that single word, but it does not offer much help. These days, when I write that an NPC is depressed, angry, smug, or whatever, I also suggest some physical traits that match the attitude. Consider this description of Niall:

> *Niall, who is rather shy, mumbles when he talks and rarely makes eye contact.*

This gives the DM much more to work with. The trick is to take the adjective (shy) and find a verb to match it (mumbles). The shy man… mumbles. The nervous woman… bites her lip. The angry innkeeper… yells at his staff. The depressed guard… stares vacantly at his hands. When devising such descriptions, I've found *The Emotion Thesaurus* (Ackerman, 2012) to be invaluable.

You might wonder if these enhanced NPC descriptions are worth the extra effort. I believe they are. As adventure writers, we are trying to give the DMs all the help we can as they create an engaging experience. Brief, evocative descriptions that conjure up vivid characters are priceless at the gaming table. Small details can mark the difference between a competent D&D adventure and a memorable one.

Let's return to Red Larch. The characters eventually find their way to Nightwall Cottage, where the alleged murderer resided. Creepy items in the cottage, alongside some of the information they gathered from the villagers, reveal that a necromancer lived here many years ago. The characters locate a trap door leading down to the caverns beneath the village. I think I did a pretty good job with Nightwall Cottage—there are enough little interactive elements and creepy things to make the location interesting, but it doesn't overstay its welcome.

A standard dungeon crawl follows, using a cavern

map I randomly generated online. I mentioned my use of randomly generated maps in chapter 10, and this is another good example. I stocked the dungeon with a bunch of different monsters, and I did a reasonable job of creating a plausible ecosystem. I always try to give some thought as to how the monsters live day-to-day in their environment. The players might not explicitly notice it, but monster ecology makes the whole thing more authentic and helps maintain the suspension of disbelief. I discuss this issue further in chapter 17.

What strikes me now is that the dungeon is very combat heavy. It is just short enough that this doesn't become a problem, but I think it's a design flaw. The best dungeons from the early years of D&D (something like *The Caverns of Thracia*) were full of strange interactive elements. Sometimes, these elements stretched credibility and even descended into silliness, but they always fired the imagination and forced the players to think.

In the early 80s, there was a push within the industry to make adventures as a whole, especially dungeons, feel a bit more realistic. Many of the fantastical tricks, traps, and puzzles from the early years disappeared, presumably because they were often illogical. The resulting dungeons became more plausible but also more prosaic. Combat followed weary combat, and dungeon crawls gained the reputation of being dull. One thing the "old school" D&D movement has done is bring back the sense of the fantastic to the dungeon.

If I were writing this dungeon today, I would likely have just three combats (rather than eight), and I would add in a social encounter, a trap, an obstacle or hazard, and a couple of tricks. I used variety very effectively in

previous dungeons (especially *Tower of the Mad Mage*), so I'm disappointed I went "backwards" here and just created a monster-bash. On your creative journey, it's not just a case of learning new tricks—you need to constantly relearn your old tricks as well.

The characters get to the final room and encounter a nothic. This miserable creature was once a necromancer named Randall Nightwall, and it now lurks beneath the village and only emerges to steal supplies. Its only egress to the outside world is via Nightwall Cottage. When anyone takes up residence there, the nothic uses its highly developed psychic powers to eliminate them. In hindsight, causing its victims to commit crimes seems a rather roundabout way of dealing with the situation. Perhaps the nothic took some sadistic amusement from it all.

Having defeated the nothic, the characters confront the village magistrate with the facts and secure the release of the alleged murderer. And so ends the adventure.

There is a funny postscript. I wrote this adventure before seeing *Princes of the Apocalypse*, which features the village of Red Larch heavily. Once I got hold of *PotA*, I made a few changes to align names and so on, but I was a bit annoyed to discover that the book had a mini quest also involving a necromancer. And so, I pinched a line from the *Lost Boys* and had the magistrate wrap-up proceedings with, "One thing I never could stomach about Red Larch—all the damned necromancers…"

I released *The Lurker Beneath Red Larch* in June 2016, and it was my seventh published adventure. It has been well received and is currently rated 94% by reviewers, which suggests my retrospective assessment may be a bit harsh!

Here's a nice review I received while writing this essay:

> *This is the third M.T. Black adventure I've run. This time we were introducing my mother to Dungeons and Dragons as she was tired of us all being busy for four hours each weekend without her. I created a character for her and we spent about half an hour getting her ready to play and then everyone came to the table eager to play another great adventure and to help "grandma" be the best little cleric she could be.*
>
> *The hook on this adventure was wonderful and immediately everyone was immersed in the story. My new player, grandma, did an excellent job and was able to get involved pretty quickly as the role-playing was fun for her. When it was time for battle her favorite phrase became "I cast bless and then hide behind the fighter"; she caught on quickly. I think this adventure was a bit dark for her but we all embraced it and several hours flew by. I always appreciate how easy the M.T. Black adventures are for me to run with very little prep but also that I don't feel like they are so prescriptive that I can't cater to my players' styles.*
>
> *We had an awesome session and have now converted our "oldest new player". We're careful now to pick slightly lighter materials when she joins us but it was still an excellent adventure for my party and for her.*
>
> *Thanks M.T. Black for always having a DMs back!*

I've never really thought of it as one of my best adventures, but I see now that it does more things right than wrong. It makes for a fun one-shot or an easy side quest that you can add to any village, and even grandma will have a good time.

Chapter 13: The Elements of Encounter

If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough.

—Albert Einstein (apocryphal)

Encounters are the lifeblood of *Dungeons & Dragons*. In a very real sense, any game session is primarily a series of related encounters. We can define an encounter as *a single scene in which the players interact with a challenge*. But this is better explained with an example. Here is a very short, but still complete, encounter:

> *Six bandits, armed with crossbows, stand in the middle of the road. One of them cries out, "Stand and deliver!"*

The beauty of roleplaying games is that this encounter could play out in several different ways. The characters could fight the bandits, talk their way out of the situation, use magic to trick the bandits, or even comply with the bandit's request. My point is that this is a complete, albeit simple, encounter.

Four Elements

Now, an encounter can be a single line long or it can run over several pages. Regardless of size, all encounters have four essential elements:

- Context
- Cue
- Conflict
- Consequences

Let's look at each of them in a bit more detail.

Context

The context is the circumstances and conditions that surround the encounter. At the most fundamental level, it is the encounter's location. Classic D&D encounter locations include chambers in an abandoned mine, the common room of a cozy inn, or the den of a fearsome dragon. However, the game is also famous for weird and fantastic locations, such as an arena in a drowned city, the outer envelope of a monstrous cocoon, or the interior of a vast paper lantern.

The context adds meaning to an encounter and can radically change how the characters understand what is happening. Consider these two examples, and imagine how your players would react to each:

> *1. Six bandits, armed with crossbows, stand in the middle of the road. One of them cries out, "Stand and deliver!"*
>
> *2. Six bandits, armed with crossbows, stand in the middle of the theater stage. One of them cries out, "Stand and deliver!"*

Those examples are a bit contrived, but they demonstrate the importance of context! For something more subtle, let's consider this encounter:

> *A water barrel stands at the mouth of an alley. The barrel is a mimic and contains 50 sp.*

Now, an ordinary water barrel next to an alley in town is very unlikely to attract attention, and the player characters will probably walk past it. But let's move the barrel from the alley to a goblin den that the player characters have just cleared out. The players are now much more likely to examine the barrel, even if it has no distinguishing features. That is because the *context* has changed—they are in a dungeon, and dungeons are full of treasure to loot. Once more we see that the context, in terms of location, prompts a different response to identical encounters.

The context is not just the location, though. In some instances, an encounter has no fixed location, and the context refers to other relevant circumstances. For example, *The Lost Mines of Phandelver* has the following encounter in the village of Phandalin:

> *Sooner or later, the adventurers run into the thugs who run Phandalin. All you need to do is choose when the ruffians appear. After the characters have had a chance to visit several locations in town and talk to the townsfolk, they might decide to go looking for the Redbrands. When they do, run the "Redbrand Ruffians" encounter.* (Perkins, 2014)

The context to this encounter is provided by the exploration of the town, where the characters learn how the Redbrands are oppressing the townsfolk. This context is important, as it gives the characters a motivation to investigate and oppose the Redbrands.

Cue

The cue is that aspect of the encounter that compels the players to engage with it. It can also be called the hook,

trigger, or provocation. Consider the bandit encounter again:

> *Six bandits, armed with crossbows, stand in the middle of the road. One of them cries out, "Stand and deliver!"*

Here, the cue is the verbal challenge issued by the leader. This grabs the players' attention and forces some kind of response.

A monstrous challenge or attack is one of the most common cues in D&D. Consider the very first encounter in Fifth Edition's seminal adventure, *The Lost Mines of Phandelver*. The characters come across a pair of dead horses on the trail. Four goblins hide in the woods and attack when someone approaches the bodies.

The cue need not be a threat. Imagine a gold statue lying on the far side of a gorge, with a mechanical bridge on this side that the players need to figure out. In this instance, the gold statue is the cue that compels players to engage with the bridge puzzle encounter.

Inexperienced writers sometimes put weak cues in their designs, meaning the players might ignore the encounter altogether. Consider the water barrel encounter again:

> *A water barrel stands at the mouth of an alley. The barrel is a mimic and contains 50 sp.*

There is nothing here that's likely to attract the players' attention. However, we can change the description to make it a little more eye catching:

> *A water barrel stands at the mouth of an alley. The water gives off a silvery glint, caused by light reflecting off the 50 sp at the bottom of it. The barrel is a mimic.*

The silvery glint is much more likely to attract the player's attention and (presumably) lead them into an ambush by the mimic.

Conflict

The conflict is the challenge that the players must overcome in order to complete the encounter. The conflict can come from a person, a thing, or even something abstract. In our water barrel example, the conflict comes from the mimic. But consider this encounter from *Hoard of the Dragon Queen*:

> *The wardrobe containing the cult regalia is trapped. The trap can be detected with a successful DC 20 Wisdom (Perception) check. Once spotted, the trap can be disarmed… with a set of thieves' tools and a successful DC 20 Dexterity check. If the wardrobe is opened without disarming the trap or if the Dexterity check fails, the trap goes off, causing vials of acid to explode. All creatures in the room must make a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw, taking 24 (7d6) acid damage on a failed save, or half as much on a successful one.* (Baur, 2014)

The conflict here comes not from a monster, but from the wardrobe trap. The source of the conflict is not necessarily evil; for example, it could simply be an uncooperative barkeep who has something the characters need. Conflict can also come from nature. If the characters must cross a vast chasm to get to some desirable treasure, the chasm itself is the challenge that must be overcome.

It should be plain that each conflict is accompanied by a set of "win conditions." When you fulfill the win conditions, you successfully complete the encounter. The win condition for the water barrel encounter is defeating the mimic. The win condition for the wardrobe encounter

is surviving the acid trap. The fundamental win condition for most violent encounters is survival!

Survival is not the only win condition, though. Consider this encounter from *Hoard of the Dragon Queen*:

> *These lizardfolk won't negotiate or converse with characters… If they are captured and tied up, a successful DC 10 Charisma (Intimidation) or DC 15 Charisma (Persuasion) check loosens their tongues.* (Baur, 2014)

Here, the win condition is getting the lizardfolk to tell the characters what they know. And this naturally leads to the final element of an encounter: consequences.

Consequences

When an encounter ends, there should be consequences. If the win conditions were fulfilled, the consequences are typically positive, such as gaining treasure, information, or access to a location. Defeating the water barrel mimic wins you 50 sp. Convincing the lizardfolk to talk gives you information about the castle. Crossing the wide chasm lets you explore the other side.

Failing to fulfill the win conditions usually leads to a negative result. You retreat from the mimic and don't get the 50 sp. You can't persuade the lizardfolk to talk and you remain ignorant about the castle. You don't figure out how to cross the chasm, so you can't explore the other side.

Some of the most significant consequences can involve the fate of NPCs. Perhaps you are trying to stop the evil cleric from sacrificing Emalia the Witch. Success means Emalia lives, while failure means she dies.

In narrative-focused games, the consequences of

an encounter are sometimes abstract and focused on character development. For example, you encounter Hago the Sage who asks probing questions about your past, which leads to progress along your character's arc. For these encounters to work well, the players need to be willing and able to contribute at the appropriate moment.

A big aspect of D&D is personal resource management, which includes things like hit points, spell slots, and subclass features. A party can fulfill the win conditions, but if the resource cost is too high it becomes a pyrrhic victory. For example, you defeated the water barrel mimic but Mundy the Ranger died, which is a catastrophic overall outcome.

Most encounters in your game need to have consequences, and player engagement tends to increase as the stakes become higher.

Three Pillars

Although all encounters must contain the elements noted above, they still vary enormously. Fighting a red dragon in an extinct volcano is a very different sort of encounter to negotiating a treaty with the faerie queen! In *Dungeons & Dragons*, we can categorize encounters according to the three official pillars of play:

- Combat.
- Social Interaction.
- Exploration.

I'll briefly explain how each pillar relates to encounters below.

Combat

Combat is central to *Dungeons & Dragons*. Character progression is largely defined by combat prowess, and a majority of the rules are dedicated to combat-related activities. In a combat encounter, the conflict takes the form of a creature that the characters must fight. The typical win condition is to kill or vanquish the enemy, as would be the case if the party were sent to deal with a tribe of goblin raiders. But it is possible to have other win conditions in a combat encounter, such as:

- Rescue a captive
- Prevent a ritual
- Acquire an item
- Destroy an item
- Get to the exit
- Seal off a portal
- Protect an NPC

In such instances, killing the antagonists might only be important insofar as it helps you fulfill the primary win conditions. For example, the goal might be to rescue Haga from a den of vampire spawn. It may not be desirable or necessary to kill all the vampire spawn to accomplish this.

It is easy to have "kill everything" as the default win condition for your combats. Adding different win conditions is a great way to increase player interest.

Social Interaction

A social encounter involves the characters talking to someone or something. They could be asking the local

guildmaster for confidential information, convincing the town guards to let them into the city, or haggling with the blacksmith over the cost of repairing a chain shirt. In these cases, the conflict is created by the other party, who is initially disinclined to grant the request.

Success in a social encounter requires convincing the other party to give you what you want. This usually involves giving them something in return, which could be treasure, a favor, a persuasive argument, or even emotional validation!

The presence of conflict is key, and inexperienced designers sometimes fill their adventures with overly helpful NPCs, who make for boring social encounters. Consider the following:

> *Gunthar (player): I'm looking for the Dalian Tomb, and I was told to ask you.*
>
> *Iva the Sage (DM): It is two miles north of the Dragon Gate.*
>
> *Gunthar: Thanks! Bye.*

This is a dull encounter, and the DM may as well have told the players directly how to find the tomb. There is no real possibility of play in an encounter like that. But if we add a tiny bit of conflict, the situation becomes much more interesting:

> *Gunthar (player): I'm looking for the Dalian Tomb, and I was told to ask you.*
>
> *Iva the Sage (DM): The Dalian Tomb is very dangerous! I'm tired of seeing young adventurers sacrifice themselves there, so I'm not going to reveal the location.*

Gunthar: Oh. Well, um, we are not quite as inexperienced as we look…

Now we have the opportunity for interesting play, as the characters convince Iva that he should tell them how to find the Dalian Tomb. The conflict can be very mild. Sometimes an NPC just needs a bit of emotional validation:

Gunthar (player): I'm looking for the Dalian Tomb and I was told to ask you.

Iva the Sage (DM): Questions, questions, questions! Day and night, you people come to me with your questions! I am sick of it.

Gunthar: I can see how tiring that must be. I'm sorry I upset you.

Iva the Sage: (sighs) Don't worry about me, I'm just feeling grumpy. Now, here's how you find the tomb…

Even a tiny pinch of conflict can bring out the flavor in a social encounter.

Exploration

Exploration is both the broadest and least understood aspect of play in *Dungeons & Dragons*. An exploration encounter involves the characters interacting with an object, situation, or location, and learning something previously unknown. It could involve something as expansive as searching the desert for a lost city, or as narrow as examining a chest for traps. The conflict in such cases comes from the object, situation, or location that is refusing to yield its secret. The win condition in an exploration encounter involves learning something new and is achieved through a combination of successful ability checks, observation, and deduction.

Exploration is a broad category of encounter, and includes the following:

- Searching for traps and secret doors
- Solving a riddle or puzzle
- Determining the purpose and operation of strange objects
- Finding and following clues
- Learning about a new location
- Overcoming hazards and obstacles
- Learning new lore
- Finding hidden treasure
- Mapping out an adventure area

With exploration encounters, it's always important to consider the consequences of failure. One common design error is to gate adventure progress behind an exploration encounter that hinges upon an ability roll. For example, in order to get to level 2 of the dungeon, you have to make a successful Perception check to find the secret door. If the players fail the roll, it is impossible to progress. Ideally, you need to give the player characters another way to find the secret door, or another way to get to level 2.

Nothing adds interest to an adventure like a good exploration encounter. The effective use of this pillar really does distinguish rookie designers from the experts.

The Importance of Theory

Let's get a bit technical. What I've presented above is a theoretical model of an encounter. If you have been designing successful encounters for a while, you might

question the value of such theorizing. If you have already mastered the practice, what use in learning the theory? But there are several benefits.

First, the encounter model can help you be creative. Analyzing an encounter through the model can reveal hidden biases and suggest other approaches. For example, you might analyze the combat encounters in your adventure and realize that each one has the same win condition: to annihilate the enemy. That realization could prompt you to include other, less common, win conditions.

Next, the encounter model can help you communicate with other designers. Admittedly, for this to work really well, the other designers would need to adopt the model as well. Even so, simply using the terminology (such as conflict and consequence) in a consistent manner will improve your clarity.

Finally, the encounter model can help you understand what works and why. Conversely, it can also help you figure out why an encounter is not working. Does it have a weak cue? Does the conflict need additional win conditions? Are the consequences unclear?

These issues are far from academic. Applying a bit of theory to your encounter design will make a significant difference to the table experience of your players.

Chapter 14: Inscrutable Triumph

You write something you think is great, and it flops. You turn in something you think isn't quite up to speed and see the most amazing reviews for it. So, you're always wondering if this will work or if that will work better, or if you have any clue at all about what you're doing.

—R. A. Salvatore

I write these essays for you, gentle reader, but also for myself. I'm trying to dissect my design work and understand what does and doesn't work, with the ultimate goal of becoming a better designer. And it helps—I often uncover principles and ideas that I can refine and use later. I grow as I create, but I also grow as I reflect upon my creations.

But I occasionally come across a design that almost defies examination and explanation. It's like I've caught a little bit of lightning in a bottle, and I don't quite understand how or why it works. *King of the Cats*, which I released in July 2016, is one of my most beloved adventures, and I'm not sure I could ever create another one like it.

The germ of the idea came from an old post on the Grognardia blog, where the author, James Maliszewski (2010), described an encounter with the "King of the Cats" in his home campaign. This title actually comes from an old British folk tale that posits there is a feline kingdom that coexists unacknowledged alongside the regular world. The title took my fancy, and I had wanted

to create an adventure based on it for years.

There are a couple of major influences I can see. T. S. Eliot's *Cats* makes its presence felt, as does Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere*. I was also reading some of Richard Pett's adventures at the time, including his marvelous *The Devil Box* (2004). I loved the idea of a sideshow alley, the kind of thing you find at a carnival, which became a major plot element. There are wonderful ideas floating around the multimediaverse we inhabit. Adventure writers are like chefs in a kitchen bursting with ingredients. Grab some ingredients off the shelf—something old, something new, something spicy, something sweet. Mix them together in the frypan of your fancy and devise an original recipe. This is the way.

The adventure has a fun hook. While the characters lounge in a Neverwinter tavern one evening, a cat jumps up on the table with a note tied to its tail saying, "Follow me." The cat, who can talk and whose name is Asparagus, leads them to an old warehouse where the Congress of Cats is meeting. The King is missing, and if he doesn't show up by the following dawn, cat law dictates he be stripped of his title and exiled forever. The Congress hires the party to locate the King and return him before dawn, with Asparagus as their guide.

The characters spend the evening following clues all over Neverwinter and encounter more people from the animal underworld, including the Rat Boss and the Worg Lord. This aspect of the adventure is not as well designed as it could be, with the investigation being more linear than I intended. I later learned the value of creating a clue map (in the form of a flow chart) when designing

an investigation, but when writing *King of the Cats*, I just tried to keep everything in my head.

The heart of the adventure takes place in the Clockwork Carnival. In established lore, Neverwinter is famous for its clocks. I took that idea and cranked it up to 11, imagining an entire clockpunk-style industry in the city. I'm much more respectful of canon these days when writing for the Forgotten Realms, but it does tie your hands a bit. Even the whole "animal underworld" creates a lot of continuity problems for purist DMs.

At the Clockwork Carnival, the characters encounter Sideshow Alley, which consists of six weird attractions. It was hard work devising these. I wanted to lean into the "freakshow" aspect of the old Victorian sideshows, but that is difficult in the D&D world. How interesting is the world's tallest man in a world where giants exist? And the amazing invisible woman is not very remarkable when *invisibility* is a second-level spell.

I finally came up with an angle that tied everything together. Clever gnomes run the sideshow, and most of the exhibits are fakes using sleight-of-hand and gadgetry rather than magic. So, we have things such as a giant ape, the world's ugliest boy, and a devil summoning. If the characters look closely, they can see through the trickery. The players have a lot of fun interacting with the attractions while they search for the clues.

The climax comes in a small cottage where the King, Morpholomew, is imprisoned. Once there, they learn that Asparagus is a traitor. Yep, it's *another* instance of "the person who was your friend turns out to be your enemy." Argh! Another problem throughout the adventure is lots of

very long boxed text, which essentially creates expository cutscenes. Consider this example from the cottage:

> *The large black cat arches it back and narrows its eyes. "Asparagus—you traitor!" it hisses.*
>
> *"Mind your tongue, Morpholomew, or I'll have it removed," responds Asparagus coldly.*
>
> *The old gnome removes and polishes his glasses nervously. "This is very bad, Asparagus. Why have you brought them here?"*
>
> *"Shut up Balink, you old fool. I had no choice," says Asparagus sharply. "I had to find a party—the Congress were growing suspicious at my delays, especially that nosey young minx, Bombalina."*
>
> *"You were supposed to hire some incompetents," snarls the Rat Boss.*
>
> *"I found the most inexperienced party I could," says Asparagus. "But they have proven more durable and resourceful than I anticipated."*
>
> *"But what do you propose to do with them now?" says Balink.*
>
> *"It's very simple," says Asparagus, turning to you. "You are mercenaries, and I am your employer. I now proposed to double your fee, to 200 gp—all you need to do is turn and leave now. If you refuse to leave, the consequences will be… most unfortunate."*
>
> *"Don't listen to him, his greed has made him evil and corrupt!" cries Morpholomew. "Free me!"*
>
> *"Silence, you sanctimonious old tom!" hisses Asparagus. "Now, mercenaries, make your choice."* (Black, 2016d)

I would never write a scene like this today. It detracts from player agency and can go poorly if the DM is not skilled at this sort of exposition. But when I was writing *King of the Cats*, I thought more like a short story writer than a game designer. If you have a long cut scene that you *must* include, the best method I've seen is to turn it into a script and have the players read it with you.

The worgs unexpectedly arrive, and a battle between them and the rats ensues—five worgs versus eight rat swarms and a wererat. There's some design sloppiness here, as the cottage is not big enough to hold all the participants! Having said that, I did handle the mass combat in the right way. Rather than worrying about dice rolls, the DM assumes that one rat swarm is destroyed every round and one worg every second round. If writing this now, I'd instruct the DM to eliminate two rat swarms and one worg per round, given the pace of Fifth Edition combat. Anyway, with the help of the players, the worgs usually mop up the rats pretty quickly.

That's where the adventure ends. When running it myself, I sometimes add a final Fourth Edition-style skill challenge, which has the party racing across Neverwinter to get back to the Congress of Cats before dawn. It's an entertaining and suspenseful climax!

And that's *King of the Cats*. It has a 98% rating and has received superlative reviews, such as this:

> *Summary: highly endorse this adventure, it's some of the most fun I've had in DND.*
>
> *An incredibly unique and fun adventure that my party loved, I had them go to the city as part of a 'team building exercise' from their company to see the show*

and it was a great way to get them working together. My party is very inquisitive and sniffed out every aspect of this adventure and seemed to love every moment, I know I did. A wonderful, interesting concept with enough fights, mystery and interrogation to keep all party members happy and on their toes, and the added time constraints make things even more tense. I'd recommend this adventure to every DM for either a one shot or as part of a campaign. Though a word of warning, my party decided to adopt Asparagus at the end so be prepared! Parry is now an ever present, and ever snarky member of the party and my players are dealing with the responsibility of a pet.

From a design standpoint, I look at this adventure and see a lot of problems, but if I attempted to "fix" it, would I kill the magic? I can't say, because I still don't quite understand why it works as well as it does! And until I do, I feel reluctant to attempt another adventure in the whimsical urban fantasy genre. But perhaps my hesitation comes from another source—as we'll see in the next chapter.

Chapter 15: The Great Commencement Impediment

First do what is necessary. Then do what is possible. And before you know it you are doing the impossible.

—Francis of Assisi

In the previous chapter, I said I would not write another whimsical urban fantasy until I understood why *King of the Cats* worked so well. I'm sure some of you immediately asked, "why not?" And I'm now asking myself the same question. Why not write such an adventure, even if I don't have a handle on the subgenre? What's stopping me?

Some of you already know the answer. My problem is the fear of failure. I worry that I won't live up to my own standards. Even after dozens of publications, I still struggle with this feeling. It is deadening, like a weight that drags you down and prevents you from moving. I suspect that fear of failure has killed more projects before they've started than any other factor. It is the great commencement impediment.

Some years ago, I was at a convention when a mature fellow approached me and asked for some game design advice. He'd been trying to release a game for years and had loads of good ideas but was struggling to create something worthy of publication. What should he do?

It's hard to answer a question like that in two minutes,

but I suggested his real problem might be the fear of failure. He writes a product but is afraid to publish for fear that it won't do as well as he wants. Or he has a great idea, but when he tries to write the first paragraph it comes out all lumpy and misshapen, and he's afraid it will never live up to the beautiful vision he has in his mind. And so, he quits.

Fear of failure is widespread in creative industries, and game designers are not immune. I have seen countless people who find themselves unable to hit the "Publish" button on their creations because of it. I've encountered other people, some very talented, who don't even start on the journey since they are scared they might fail.

I feel this fear every time I sit down to write. My cloud drive is littered with little scraps of ideas, some of them wonderful, that I just can't seem to get moving. I look at the blank page, and it seems impossible that I might create an actual, real thing worthy of my hopes and dreams. While something is still just an idea, it shimmers with a kind of empyreal perfection, and trying to embed that perfection in a prison of black letters on white paper seems foolish.

How do you overcome this sort of productivity-killing fear? I have a few strategies.

First, articulate the worst-case scenario. If you can't write anything else, write *that* down! Here's an example: "I am afraid that if I write *King of the Cats II: The Wrath of Gus*, people will not like it and will not buy it. And I will have wasted my time on it."

Often, merely articulating the worst-case scenario puts the matter in perspective and removes some of the sting. Is it really that bad if I put out a product that people don't like? Is it really such a problem to burn a few hours

on a project that interests me? I think any mature person would say, "This worst-case scenario is not so bad." And that alone can encourage you to get moving.

Another strategy is to reframe your goals. If you look at my fear above, it's mostly focused on sales. Having spoken to hundreds of creators, I can say that many of their doubts boil down to, "What if it doesn't sell?" And when game design is your primary source of income, that anxiety is partly justified. But remember, an unwritten product sells less copies than an unpopular one!

If your primary goal is to sell a thousand copies of your new adventure, then success is probably out of your hands and in the hands of the market. However, why not reframe your goals around something you *can* control? You might decide your goal is to create a fun tier 1 adventure that lets the players explore Daggerford. That is a goal that is entirely within your power to accomplish. If the market likes your adventure, that's great, but you can consider it a success even if it doesn't sell.

I often have a private "learning goal" with my products. It might be something like "learn how to create spells," or "learn how to write a mystery adventure." If I achieve my learning goal, I tell myself the project is a success, regardless of the commercial outcome.

My final suggestion for overcoming the fear of failure is just do it! Just start writing, even if you don't feel ready. Even if the words aren't coming out well. Just do it! Just start writing.

Now, I'd been giving the "just do it" advice to people for a couple of years when my friend, Ashley Warren, gently chided me. She said, "People can't *do it* if they don't *know what to do*." Ashley went on to create the *RPG*

Writer's Workshop, which has trained thousands of people in RPG adventure design. This course is already changing our little industry, and I heartily recommend it!

But I want to redeem my original advice and rework it into something a bit more practical. Instead of telling prospective writers to "just do it!", I want to encourage you to "just do one room!"

A couple of years back, I had a massive freelance writing assignment for a high-profile project. It required me to create over a hundred encounters and was tens of thousands of words long. It was daunting, and I spent a couple of days feeling paralyzed by the enormity of the task. The way I got going was to ignore the hundred encounters and focus entirely on the first room. One room was manageable. And having completed one room, I found the second was a little easier, and the third easier still. Soon I was writing fluently and not feeling so overawed by the task. Truly, the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

I still use this approach today when I'm struggling to start a project. I'll put the whole scope of the work out of my mind and pretend I only have one room to write. To help things along, I've developed a little checklist, particularly relevant to dungeons, of things to include:

- Terrain & Fixtures
- Atmosphere
- Furniture
- Monsters
- Traps
- Treasure

Write down just a couple of notes under each entry and don't worry about creating beautiful prose. That can come later. The important thing is to get started.

I've got a real-life example! Some time ago, I was struggling to begin the adventure that became *Tomb of the Twilight Queen*. Below are the notes I made for the first encounter, using the above checklist. These are literally the first words I wrote for that project.

1. Portico

An ancient portico is set into the base of an immense purple obelisk amidst a field of rubble and brick.

Terrain & Fixtures

40-by-30-foot portico. The floor is made of limestone blocks. Eight streaky limestone statues, each 12-feet-high and depicting the same regal queen in a different pose, support a flat roof. There is a 10-foot-wide doorway into the monolith, leading to a steep set of stairs.

Atmosphere

Hot and dusty. Whiff of sage from a nearby bush.

Furniture

None.

Monsters

A lizardfolk bandit is here, lurking near a statue. The lizardfolk is invisible, having drunk a *potion of invisibility* as the characters approached. When the characters step onto the portico, the lizardfolk declares herself to be the Gloaming Queen's ghost and warns them to flee or be cursed. If the characters ignore her, she descends the stairs to warn the group in location 2.

Traps

Anyone touching the top step must succeed on a DC 12 Wisdom saving throw or suffer the effects of a *confusion* spell. The lizardfolk knows to leap over this step when she retreats down the stairs.

Treasure

The lizardfolk has another *potion of healing* attached to her belt.

It did not take long to put these notes together. And as soon as I finished this room, I immediately wrote half of the next room and also made some progress on the map. It's always the way. If you can just obtain a tiny bit of momentum, the words start to flow.

So that's my challenge to those who are struggling to begin. Set yourself the target of writing a single room and reward yourself mentally once you do. Maybe that is all you will ever write of that adventure, but I suspect you'll find that you are able to do a little more, and then a little more again. And that's ultimately how to overcome the great commencement impediment. Just do it—just do one room!

Now, about that *King of the Cats* sequel…

Chapter 16: Frustrated Novelist Syndrome

One day I will find the right words, and they will be simple.

—Jack Kerouac

In chapter 14, I suggested that it can be hard to explain why a good adventure works. By strange contrast, when something *doesn't* work, it seems easy in retrospect to understand why. I published *Doorway to Darkness* in August 2016. I've always considered it one of my poorest adventures, and it is certainly one of the lowest rated. I can see real problems with *Doorway*, and I want to discuss those, but it also does some things right, and maybe the good outweighs the bad.

The adventure premise is straightforward. Some miners uncover a strange underground portal. When they open it (always a bad idea!), a hideous creature emerges and turns them into zombies. The remaining miners are left besieged in their camp, with no one able to leave as the zombies roam the land. The characters get involved when a miner's wife asks them to find out why no one has come home. They must rescue the surviving miners then enter the mine to close the portal. I wanted to create a "Walking Dead" vibe, with lots and lots of zombies.

Let's talk about what I did poorly. First, there's far too much boxed text in the opening pages, which I used to

force the narrative along a prescribed path. At this stage of my creative career, I still thought lengthy boxed text was desirable, and I was trying to write material that would not look out of place in a novel. Some of the text actually reads pretty well:

> *The miner's camp is a mess. Several big canvas tents stand in a circle around a central fire pit, though it only barely smolders at the moment and there's little firewood to be seen. A few of the tents are torn, little more than big wet scraps clinging to their pegs.*
>
> *An old brick wall, all that remains of some ancient structure, stands on one side of the site. The miners have piled up some sacks of ore and wooden beams in a semi-circle before it, forming a kind of half-hearted stockade.*
>
> *As you approach, the miners themselves appear from their hidey-holes around the ruined camp. They are haggard and hollow-eyed, barely able to lift the picks and shovels they've clearly been using as weapons. They are unwashed, muddy and stinking—they look little different to the undead that they have been fighting.*
>
> *Shrouded in damp blankets and shivering, they stare at you silently, even disbelievingly. There is only one left among them who appears to have a little iron left in his spine. He tightens his grip on his pick and steps forward.*
>
> *"I'm Gedd Frostlight; are you here to help?"* (Black, 2016a)

Not bad, but far too long. Some call this sort of thing in an adventure "frustrated novelist syndrome." The appellation may be unkind, but it conveys the point that an RPG adventure is not a novel, and it's a mistake to treat it like one. Even if you think the above prose is okay, it's very

hard to read such a long piece aloud and hold the table's attention. Many adventure writers, novice and expert, seem unaware of this fact.

Several years ago, a Wizards of the Coast employee named David Noonan went to GenCon to study this very issue. He wrote:

> *Based on some suspicions I had from my own weekly D&D game, I wanted to look at the boxed read-aloud text in adventures. Specifically, I wanted to see to what degree players were paying attention to the DM when the DM started reading the boxed text. My hypothesis was that boxed text longer than a paragraph probably isn't worth reading, because players tend to have pretty bad listening comprehension when it comes to boxed text. Their eyes glaze over pretty quickly.* (Noonan, 2005)

After observing a lot of games, he came to this conclusion:

> *What I actually saw was much more dramatic than my hypothesis. If you're the DM, you get two sentences. Period. Beyond that, your players are stacking dice, talking to each other, or staring off into space. Time after time, players were missing the actual data in the boxed text—basic stuff, like room dimensions, how many doors exit the room, and number of monsters…*
>
> *Over the course of four days, I saw otherwise smart players get stymied because they missed a salient fact within boxed text. I saw otherwise engaging DMs read through boxed text, then get frustrated because they wound up repeating and paraphrasing all the information in it anyway—often in the middle of the action.* (Noonan, 2005)

Noonan concedes that convention settings are noisier than home games, and that the DMs were often reading the boxed text "cold." Even so, I'm convinced that many designers and DMs have no idea the degree to which players "switch off" once a read-aloud section goes on too long. But why is this? One answer may lie in the conversational aspect of roleplaying games. Vincent and Meguey Baker have argued:

> *You probably know this already: roleplaying is a conversation. You and the other players go back and forth, talking about these fictional characters in their fictional circumstances doing whatever it is that they do.* (Baker, 2016)

This may explain why long boxed text is such a problem. You are halting the conversation to deliver a lecture instead. The interactive energy quickly drains from the table, players shift into a passive mental mode, and attention inevitably wanders.

Should we just abolish boxed text altogether? Many designers, especially those self-designating as "old school," say we should. I tried that for a while, but I received overwhelming feedback that people preferred having boxed text. It serves as a kind of anchor for the encounter and generates play momentum. So I do include boxed text these days, but I keep it short.

But short boxed text does not mean boring boxed text. As I mentioned in chapter 3, my guiding mantra in this area is "concise and evocative." It has to be concise to be usable at table, but it must also create an evocative image that engages the player's imagination. The following boxed text from one of my adventures, *Keepers of the Pale Flame*,

describes an underground grotto:

> *The steps lead down to a small turquoise lake decorated by a wooly fringe of vibrant purple coral. Stalactites seem to drip like candle wax from the folding blue-gray walls of this limestone grotto. Across the lake is an elevated stone platform holding a grimy but colorful altar between two massive, ancient stalagmites.* (Black, 2021)

You can judge for yourself how effective this passage is, but it demonstrates what I'm aiming for.

Let's return to *Doorway*. Another great flaw in the adventure is that the opening pages are excessively railroady. For example, after the characters arrive at the camp, I essentially force them to accompany the camp leader back to the mine to close the portal. If they refuse and try to return home, I swamp them with monsters to force them back in the "right" direction.

This is a classic railroad technique, and I loathe it now, as you might have gathered from chapter 7. And it's totally unnecessary in this particular adventure. There isn't any problem if the characters don't go directly to the mine. They might decide to escort the remaining miners through the zombie cordon and safely back to town before returning to take care of the mine. That is a perfectly reasonable option, and there is no reason to prevent it. And if the characters decide to neglect the mine altogether after rescuing the miners, that's fine as well. Finish up early and break out the Xbox.

The adventure gets better once the party enters the mine, but there are still problems. The map is poorly designed, and I want to take a few moments to explain why. Speaking broadly, there are two schools of thought when

it comes to D&D map design. The first school says that a dungeon should be a group of strangely shaped rooms tied together by a maze-like network of corridors. There should be lots of crossroads, intersections, and loops, as well as secret paths, sub-levels, elevation shifts, and so on. The point is to give the players lots of exploration options and to ensure it requires skill and concentration to navigate the place. We might call this the "Jaquays approach," since Jennell Jaquays mastered the art in her classic 1970s D&D adventures (Alexander, 2010).

The second school of thought says that dungeon architecture should be realistic. If you are in a mansion, the map should look like the map of a real-life mansion. If you are in a temple, it should resemble a real-life temple. The point here is to increase the authenticity of the experience. We might call this the "Hickman approach," championed by Tracy and Laura Hickman in the 1980s. The appellation is a little imprecise, because the Hickmans sometimes created wonderfully convoluted dungeon maps. However, there is no doubt they were seminal advocates of the "realism" school.

Which approach is correct? I use both in my dungeon design these days, but in 2016 I was firmly in the Hickman camp. One of my design goals for *Doorway* was to have a setting that resembled a real mine. Unfortunately, I ended up with a map that was far too simple. There was one obvious path forward, and I'm sure just about everyone took it. There were several fun encounters that no one has probably ever played because they were in tunnels that were obviously off the main path. If doing this map again, I would definitely take a "Jaquays approach," so that the players have some exploring to do.

There was another significant problem with the dungeon structure. I'd read about a design trope where you show the characters another part of the dungeon that they can't immediately access. For example, the entrance to a certain chamber might be barred, or it might be on the other side of a chasm. This generates anticipation and gives the players a navigation problem to solve. I tried to get the same effect here by placing a small hole in the wall where they could look into the final chamber. But with such a tiny dungeon, it was apparent how to get to the final room, which reduced the impact of player choices even further.

Argh! I could see the issues even back then, but I couldn't see the solutions, so I closed my eyes and hit "Publish." Fortunately, the adventure did enough things right to be playable. Let's have a look at them.

The premise is a good one—a group of miners trapped in a camp and surrounded by an army of zombies. I've had a couple of DMs say they were worried about the lack of monster variety, but it was fine in practice. The reason there are so many "horde of zombie" movies is that it's a fun trope!

The main NPC in the story is also well-drawn. His name is Gedd Frostlight, the leader of the mining camp. He has a dusty, grizzled look about him, and his courage alone has kept the miners fighting even as their numbers are whittled away. He leans a bit too hard into the prospector cliché to be a truly exceptional character, and if writing him now I'd look for some way to subvert the trope. For example, he might be clean-shaven and have a refined accent.

Finally, the climax is excellent. The creature from the

dark portal is an original monster called a shadow welt that does not attack directly but can turn corpses into zombies and revive slain zombies. In the final battle, the characters have to choose between fighting the zombies, attacking the shadow welt, or trying to get past them all to shut the dark portal. Giving the party multiple objectives in a battle really heightens the engagement. Johnn Four calls these "combat missions" and notes several benefits, including:

- *Players experience the game in new ways, instead of total annihilation each time.*
- *Missions offer new tactical challenges, making the game less repetitive and more challenging.*
- *Missions challenge more PC skills and abilities. This lets characters shine in new ways.*
- *Several fun aspects of combat are amplified: tactics, whacking, maneuvers, teamwork.* (Four, 2021)

This idea largely overlaps with what Teos Abadia calls the "potential energy" of an encounter, which he describes as:

> *… creating the capacity for something cool to happen. Potential energy is something at rest that could be put into motion. Maybe the monsters will make use of it. Maybe the players will…*
>
> *Potential energy can be added in any number of ways. Here are a few:*
>
> - *Something in the scene can be used (by characters or foes) to gain an advantage…*
> - *There is impending doom for some or all creatures, which happens unless stopped.*
> - *An area might become inaccessible, treasure*

lost, or foes escape unless quick action is taken…

- *The scene can drastically change if certain elements are activated.* (Abadia, 2020)

Let's wrap up. The balance of feedback says that *Doorway to Darkness* is a good adventure, and it currently has an 88% rating. This review sums things up fairly:

> *This was a fun little adventure for our new party. Short and sweet—it knows what it is and what it's trying to do. You should be able to easily finish it in an evening, especially if you shorten the intro (which can be done with little issue).*

You have to be happy with a review like that, although I can't help but see the missed opportunities for this to be something excellent. I rarely go back and revise an adventure after publication as it makes little commercial sense, but I'm sometimes tempted to make an exception for *Doorway to Darkness.*

Chapter 17: Plausible Monstrosities

Realism should not be your goal. Verisimilitude should be. Your world doesn't have to be realistic, just believable.

—Monte Cook

When I was thirteen years old, I met up with some friends at school every lunchtime to play *Dungeons & Dragons*. The DM would pre-fill a large sheet of graph paper with an intricate maze and populate it with random monsters. There was neither rhyme nor reason to the monsters—you would enter a room and fight some gargoyles, go to the next one and battle a blue dragon, then open a door and meet a storm giant. It was the classic "monster zoo."

We had a lot of fun with these dungeons at the time, but they couldn't hold our attention once we got a little older. For we discovered that RPGs could deliver truly immersive experiences, where the real world fell away and you felt like you *were* your character. Once we had tasted that style of play, we desired it over the purely mechanical act of rolling dice and marking off hit points.

The *Star Wars Roleplaying Game*, by Greg Costikyan, transformed my understanding of this subject. The rulebook states that "the gamemaster's job is divided into three parts: refereeing, roleplaying NPCs, and sustaining suspension of disbelief" (Costikyan, 1987). This phrase,

"suspension of disbelief," was new to me at the time, but soon became central to my gaming. The phrase was coined by the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who wrote fantastical tales but realized he needed to infuse them with a "semblance of truth" so that the reader could put aside their critical judgment and enjoy the story on its own terms (Coleridge, 1834).

Later theorists would come to call this concept "verisimilitude." Since RPGs are a type of literary experience, it is not surprising that the same principles apply. As Monte Cook says, "Realism should not be your goal. Verisimilitude should be. Your world doesn't have to be realistic, just believable" (Cook, 2019). If there is no verisimilitude, people are no longer able to sustain their disbelief, and the immersive experience evaporates.

I've seen this "evaporation" happen many times, even with very young players. Years ago, I played through the classic D&D adventure *The Lost City*, and in the caverns below the pyramid was the sort of "monster zoo" I mentioned above. Even my ten-year-old son was unimpressed by this. He said, "Hey, how did that big blue dragon get into this underground room through those small doors? And where does it get its food? And what does it do all day?" They were excellent questions, and I had no good answers! Verisimilitude crumbled, and my son could no longer suspend disbelief.

But isn't it nonsense to talk about verisimilitude in a world with fireballs, blue dragons, and vampires? Adrian Pommier notes that verisimilitude is always contextual and even unstable:

Say, for instance, a movie hero jumps off the roof of

> *a skyscraper and hits the pavement only to get up and walk away. If this is a Die Hard movie, we call "bull—" because John McClane is an everyman hero and is immune to neither gravity nor sidewalks. If, on the other hand, the hero is a leather-clad, werewolf-hunting female vampire [Underworld], we're OK with it. The difference is context.* (Pommier, 2016)

Die Hard, as a contemporary action movie, has a different set of genre expectations, expectations regarding how the world works, than *Underworld*, a supernatural horror action movie. Their distinct genres provide different contexts for what's believable.

This explains why my ten-year-old son could not maintain his suspension of disbelief when he met the blue dragon. Even within the magical world of D&D, there are certain logical expectations about how creatures will behave, and this encounter violated them. A blue dragon has to eat a lot of food, and there was no obvious way to get food. A blue dragon is large, and there was no obvious way to get into the room through the small door. And a blue dragon is intelligent; even if we solve the other problems, it defies belief that it would sit in this cramped room for months or years with nothing to do.

It's interesting to compare the blue dragon with the monster in the next room, a bone golem. Within the genre context of D&D, we know that golems don't eat, drink, or get bored, and they are often created to guard things. (They are also small enough to use human-sized corridors and doors.) To find a bone golem in a cramped room deep below the ground makes perfect sense in the D&D world. To find a blue dragon there does not.

With a bit of work, we can redeem our blue dragon encounter, though. Perhaps the priests from the upper levels found the dragon while young and brought it here to be a fearsome guard. Now fully grown, it is chained to the floor and eats a full cow every day, and a nearby room has a stall with some cattle. The priests raised it to fear the sound of a whip crack, and a great whip hangs in a guard room next to the entrance. The priests pick up the whip and crack it when they have to pass through the room, and the characters can potentially do so too. That's a much more coherent encounter, and it includes a few nice clues for the players to gnaw on as well.

Or here's another option. The dragon is an intelligent spellcaster and able to change into human shape. Long ago, it formed an alliance with the priests and uses this room as a top-secret hideout. The room is luxuriously furnished, and the dragon is in human form when the party first meets her, but, when she tires of the conversation, she transforms and attacks.

Both of these suggestions are consistent with the D&D game world and feel much more authentic than simply putting a dragon in a room deep beneath the ground.

Here are some helpful questions to ask when creating a monster encounter:

- How did the monster get here?
- Why does the monster stay here?
- What does the monster do while here?
- Where, and how, does the monster get food?
- When, and how, does the monster come and go?

Answering these questions in a context-consistent manner

will help you maintain that verisimilitude, that semblance of truth, that is your goal. But, as always, there are exceptions. Michael Curtis notes that "The fantastic, when cranked up to eleven, somehow equals the realistic." He explains:

> *Somehow, if things get weird enough, they become acceptable. The player who steadfastly believes that the Tyrannosaurus Rex you've placed on Level Three is completely ridiculous will suddenly switch gears when informed that the thunder lizard is actually composed completely out of magical chocolate or was grown in a giant test-tube by the Alchemist Gremlins.* (Curtis, 2008)

This makes sense to me. Plausibility operates within a context—changing that context changes what is considered plausible. Let's apply one of Michael's ideas to our blue dragon problem. Imagine the characters stumble upon a magical lab that contains fetal blue dragons in various stages of development in sapphire vats. The presence of a full-grown blue dragon in one of the rooms is no longer problematic—it almost becomes mandatory!

This leaves us with two methods for creating and placing plausible monsters. One method involves the creation of a naturalistic ecosystem for your creatures to inhabit—that is, you make the monstrous a little more mundane. The other method involves shifting your context in such an extraordinary way that your creature becomes plausible, that is, you make the environment more fantastic.

Which is better? You really want elements of both. Adventures that are relentlessly naturalistic sometimes become a little dull—I think *Keep on the Borderlands* suffers from this. Adventures that lean hard into the fantastic, such as *White Plume Mountain*, can certainly be

fun, but are best used sparingly. My own approach is to focus on the naturalistic and add dashes of the fantastic for flavor.

Whatever mix of these methods you use, do so deliberately and with an eye on verisimilitude, which will go a long way toward creating those immersive roleplaying experiences so many of us crave.

Chapter 18: Resonance and Random Dungeons

I find that my favorite books have lovely little subplots and main plots and side plots and internal plots that all wrap around and intertwine until you're left with this giant symphony of story.

—Susan Dennard

I have published many RPG products, and I spent decades creating content before I started publishing, but I am still learning. Every time I write an adventure, I try out new techniques and learn new things. I hope and expect this will always be the case.

A book like this can only capture a snapshot of my thinking. I can never share "all my tricks," because I'm discovering new tricks all the time. Some of these are fully formed in my mind, while others are in an embryonic state, all pink and squishy. The techniques I'll describe in this chapter are in the latter category.

A little while ago, Whitney Beltrán wrote an astonishing tweet-thread on something she calls *narrative resonance*. Beltrán described this as the "secret sauce" of game design. She said:

> *Resonance is when a body of work rhymes with itself. When things feel like they are aligned, vibrating with*

> *meaning. If you ask me what makes my better games truly award winners, it's resonance…*
>
> *Boiled down, resonance is when a work connects to itself; thematically, archetypically, structurally. It has its own internal call and response, patterns, echoes, and other structural and rhythmic forms that cohere into meaning…*
>
> *That means we need to get themes, motifs, characters and MECHANICS to resonate with each other. Ah, there's the magic!* (Beltrán, 2021)

These ideas lit up my brain. When applied to our particular field of RPG adventure design, I suspect that resonance is a key difference between a good product and one that is truly memorable.

One immediate (and paradoxical) thought is that resonance explains how and why randomly generated adventures can work. I explored creative randomness in chapter 10. One point I made is that randomness gives you the *outline* of a dungeon, but you then have to do the hard work of developing that outline into a full-blown adventure.

I see now that a crucial element of this development process is *creating resonance* between the randomly generated parts. The dice can tell you that room 1 has a trap and room 2 has a monster. The dice *can't* create a compelling theme that ties the two locations together. This is why a randomly generated dungeon outline can lead to a great dungeon—because the secret sauce is *not* in the randomly generated elements! It is you, and the collection of thematic devices that you lay over the top that makes the adventure shine.

There are several tools we can use to create resonance

in our dungeon:

- Foreshadowing
- Themes
- Motifs

Following is a practical guide to applying these tools to adventure scenarios, especially dungeons. And although I'm treating these terms separately, you will soon see how they are interlinked.

Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing is a literary device where you place indications in the narrative about what is to come later. It is a simple technique to implement in an RPG adventure. The below definition and examples come from *Curse of Strahd:*

> *Foreshadowing is about finding clues to a horrible truth yet to be revealed. Consider the following examples:*
>
> - *Before characters encounter a monster, hint at the monster's presence with clues such as claw marks, gnawed bones, and bloodstains.*
> - *Whenever characters take a long rest, give one character a prophetic dream in which he or she glimpses something yet to be found or encountered.* (Perkins, 2016a)

Here are a few more examples:

- A holy symbol painted on a wall foreshadows a shrine deeper in the dungeon.
- Fresh leaves in one chamber foreshadow a dryad in the next room.

- Deep furrows in the soil foreshadow some awakened trees elsewhere in a forest.
- A corpse covered in sucker marks foreshadows some tentacled aberration further into the caverns.

Foreshadowing is a very effective way to create suspense and anticipation. Let me give an extended example, this time from my home game.

The party was exploring caverns deep below the city of Calimshan. They came to an intersection, and the gnoll ranger smelt blood from one of the corridors. He quietly padded ahead on his own, and after about a hundred feet he came upon the remains of a prior adventurer. The poor creature had been smashed to pieces, its armor flattened and its body plastered onto the wall.

The ranger suddenly heard the sound of great, booming footsteps from up ahead. Although normally courageous, his nerve broke, and he fled. The rest of the party were waiting, very anxiously, at the intersection when the ranger emerged, followed closely by a…

Well, I'm not going to tell you! Are you feeling the anticipation, though? Are you curious about the monster? Is your mind running through the possibilities? If so, the foreshadowing has worked. Notice that the hints came in multiple stages and used various senses. First, there was the *smell* of blood. Then there was the *sight* of human remains. Finally, there was the *sound* of pounding footsteps. Each element left the players on the edge of their seats when a clay golem emerged from the tunnel. It was a difficult fight, but they prevailed.

Themes

The word "theme" is overused and oft abused. One authority describes it this way:

> *A salient abstract idea that emerges from a literary work's treatment of its subject-matter; or a topic recurring in a number of literary works. While the subject of a work is described concretely in terms of its action (e.g. 'the adventures of a newcomer in the big city'), its theme or themes will be described in more abstract terms (e.g. love, war, revenge, betrayal, fate, etc.).* (Baldick, 2015b)

That makes sense to me, but it's a little hard to apply to a D&D adventure! *Perilous Wilds*, a book on procedural dungeon generation, has a much more practical definition:

> *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.* (Lutes and Strandberg, 2015)

The authors helpfully list several dozen possible dungeon themes, such as decay, tricks, disease, forbidden knowledge, and blasphemy.

When a dungeon lacks a theme, you end up with a "monster zoo," a bunch of unrelated encounters placed

uncomfortably side-by-side with no apparent thematic development. By contrast, when the dungeon has one or more strong themes, players are much more likely to suspend their disbelief and be engaged by the experience.

Let's consider an example. In chapter 10, I mentioned *The Eye of Klothys*, an adventure I created using a randomly generated map and rooms populated by dice rolls from the *Dungeon Master's Guide*. The adventure received excellent reviews, which I saw as a vindication of creative randomness. But I'm now convinced that the adventure hums because of the internal resonance, which I achieved through strong theming.

The adventure's goal is to find a missing oracle and, in keeping with this, one of the themes is *hidden knowledge*. Several elements in the adventure communicate that theme. For example, a chamber with a bunch of scrolls contains cryptic messages with clues. Another chamber contains a magic well that allows you to survey the dungeon. And yet another chamber contains a hidden entrance to a pocket dimension.

Most of these elements I rolled up randomly (using the tables in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*) and then tied them back into the theme. Let's look at how this worked in practice.

In one chamber, I rolled up a candle, a piece of charcoal, and a jar. I decided that the candle was magical, and that the oracle stared into the flame to receive prophetic inspiration, which she then wrote on the wall with the charcoal. I didn't tie the jar into the hidden knowledge theme, though it contained a baby hydra, which was consistent with the Hellenistic theme of the overall setting.

Here's the final boxed text:

> *This dome-shaped chamber has whitewashed walls defaced by charcoal scribbles. In the middle of the room is a brass tripod supporting a hefty candle, while a broad clay jar sits against the wall in a pile of rubble.* (Black, 2020)

If the players light the candle, they start to get visions themselves. And some of the prophetic scribbles contain clues to the mystery at the heart of the dungeon, making them very explicit examples of foreshadowing. The idea of hidden knowledge provides a strong thematic unity to the dungeon, creating the resonant experience we've been talking about.

Motifs

In literature, a motif is a "situation, incident, idea, image, or character-type that is… elaborated into a more general theme" (Baldick, 2015a). In the example given above, the prophetic writings and the magic candle are motifs that support the theme of hidden knowledge. It is common (some would argue essential) to repeat a particular motif to reinforce a theme.

Author David Farland notes that "resonance occurs when a writer sets up a motif to a story, and deepens the readers' emotions by playing upon that motif." He gives an example from the Moria journey in *Lord of the Rings:*

> *Do you recall the opening to that scene? The group must walk along the edge of a still pool, where the only sound is the occasional sound of dripping water. The very solitude of the place sets them all on edge…*

Inside the mine, Frodo cannot sleep that night for the dripping sound of water… A few nights later, that dripping sound is replaced by the distant sound of a hammer going, tink, tink, clank, tink…

Finally, as they near the exit, the "plink" of water, the "tink" of a hammer, is suddenly replaced by the sound of drums in the deep—huge thunderous sounds that roll through the cavern, roaring "Doom! Doom! Doom!"

Here, the internal resonance is simply a repeated sound, one that grows louder, more unsettling, and more menacing with each repetition. (Farland, 2012)

Let's look at a D&D-specific example. *The Wild Beyond the Witchlight* uses numerical motifs to build a theme:

As you run The Wild Beyond the Witchlight*, look for ways to bring the numbers eight and three to the fore. For example, characters who take a long rest in the fey domain of Prismeer might, without fail, be awakened by three songbirds at the end of the eighth hour.*

The number eight is symbolically important, as this adventure plays with the themes of time and nostalgia. The numeral 8 resembles an hourglass, which measures the passage of time, and looks like the symbol for infinity (∞) turned on its side. Hidden within the numeral 8 itself is the numeral 3. In the D&D multiverse, there exists the Rule of Three, which states that events of cosmic consequence often manifest in threes. Time, for instance, has a past, present, and future. The Hourglass Coven has three members. The fey domain of Prismeer is divided into three splinter-realms, which adventurers explore with the help of three guides.

Hidden within the adventure are numerous other mentions of the numbers eight and three. Can you find them all? (Perkins, 2021)

Finally, let's look at an example from my own work. One of the themes for *Tomb of the Twilight Queen* is *sinister danger*. In retrospect, I realize that I used snakes as a motif to establish this theme. Here are some places where the characters encounter snakes:

- They are attacked by constrictor snakes on the way to the tomb.
- The walls of the tomb are frequently decorated with snake engravings.
- A painting on the entry depicts the Queen holding a snake.
- Bronze snakes flank the doorway of a false crypt.
- An inscription refers to the queen as "serpent master."
- A sculpture shows a criminal being sewn into a bag full of snakes.
- A huge bronze snake looms over one of the chambers.

Notice that the snake motif takes a different form in each encounter. It is sometimes expressed as a creature, sometimes as a painting, sometimes as a sculpture, and once via an inscription. You could express the motif just by putting some living snakes in every room, but that would be dull. When repeating a motif, you need to vary the expression to maintain interest.

The snake motif serves as a nice bit of foreshadowing

when, in the final battle, a huge skeletal snake clatters out of a dark pit. The repetition of the motif makes that moment much more effective than if it had been, say, a giant scorpion. And notice how motif, theme, and foreshadowing all interlink. If you start to play with one, you will soon be playing with the others.

In my experience, creating these elements is not a top-down affair. I don't always start with a theme in mind and then carefully populate the adventure with appropriate motifs. Indeed, it's not uncommon for the motifs to emerge from the writing process and ultimately suggest a theme to me.

Let me try and illustrate this. Consider the following chamber, which I just rolled up using the appendix A tables in the *Dungeon Master's Guide:*

> ***Pantry.*** *This room smells of urine and contains some old barrels, a few leaves, and a holy symbol.*

I've seen adventure writers randomly stock a dungeon and end up with a bunch of rooms like this. Taken in isolation, these elements are trivial and frankly dull. But you can build them into thematic motifs that will engage and entertain the players.

The holy symbol seems a bit out of place, and something out of place always provides fertile soil for the imagination. Perhaps one of our dungeon themes is blasphemy, and hence the holy symbol is broken in two. It's easy to think of some other motifs that support the blasphemy theme: elsewhere in the dungeon you could find a smashed altar, a defaced religious tome, and a holy symbol drawn in blood. Pulling it all together is an undead priest who was corrupted long ago by an evil relic. This could be a subplot

in your dungeon or could be the central objective.

These are not especially sophisticated ideas, but they show you how a random item can be turned into a motif that builds an interesting theme. Once players start asking, "I wonder what this means?" you have them hooked. The different elements of your dungeon now resonate with one another.

But be aware that resonance is hard to create. If your motifs and themes are too subtle, they will not be noticed. Too brazen, and players will roll their eyes. Like so many artistic skills, it takes patience and practice. Beltrán says:

> *This is feeling based, intuition based, you cannot derive it from a formula. Perfect your tuning-in skills. Learn how to listen and feel for resonance. Learn how to course correct when resonance is fading from your work. That's easy to say and hard to do. It takes a lifetime to build these skills.* (Beltrán, 2021)

When resonance is present, it is like magic—the players are drawn into a "symphony of adventure" and can't even explain why it is so engaging. Resonance is elusive, but if you can find it, you just might create something truly great.

Chapter 19: When the Well Runs Dry

Every writer I know has trouble writing.

—Joseph Heller

The success of *The Triboar Trilogy* (see chapter 4) suggested that a big adventure anthology would do well on the DMs Guild, so I worked hard to publish as many adventures as I could in 2016. My goal was to have fifteen released before Christmas, at which point I would bundle them up.

But, after publishing nine or ten in quick succession, I was running out of creative energy. And I was interested in publishing more sophisticated adventures; I'd tackled some of the "low-hanging fruit" with my first few titles, and I wanted to try something better. But this would take more effort at a moment when I had less to give.

In the years since, I've developed a few strategies to help me write when the creative well runs dry. First and most importantly, I've learned how to use external tools to help me write. I've mentioned several in this book already, such as the *Tome of Adventure Design*, and the bibliography contains many others. You are not writing your scenario in a creative void. You are surrounded by a cloud of helpers—if you are willing to be helped. Not everyone is.

Some time ago, I came across *describingwords.io*, a website that lists thousands of interesting and helpful adjectives for various common nouns. I found it useful and showed it to a creative colleague, who smirked and

said, "Well, I like to do that sort of thing *with my own brain*." But what a small world we inhabit when we stay inside our own brain! How limited we are if we only draw upon the power of a single mind! And how self-deceived to imagine our thoughts are original, and not a tangle of influences we've imbibed, digested, and absorbed into our creative gestalt.

Along the same lines, another useful strategy when you are stuck is to *steal ethically*. I wrote about this extensively in chapter 8. Nolan Bushnell, the legendary founder of Atari, once said, "Creativity is the art of concealing your sources" (Lautsch, 1985). Concealing not in a deceptive way, but because you've developed your influences into something fresh.

Here's a good exercise for a novice adventure writer. Pick out your five favorite RPG adventures and take the best encounter from each of them. Rewrite those five encounters in your own style and find ways to link them together. Now, take an appropriate theme (e.g. decay), lay it over the top of the encounters (as described in chapter 18), and then iron out any inconsistencies. I'll wager the result is a good adventure that feels as original as most other products in the field. This approach certainly worked for me when I wrote *Wizard in a Bottle*!

Another one of my burn-out strategies is to scour my ideas file. Intriguing ideas are like mayflies—they spring into existence from nowhere and are gone almost as soon as you notice them. You need to catch and preserve them quickly. For many years I have maintained an electronic ideas file, and I record entries in it throughout the day. It could be an adventure plot, a cool name, or even an

evocative description (I recently added the phrase "pearl-gray winter sky," which I encountered in a book). After a few years, your ideas file will be bursting with content, and you can flip it open and browse whenever you get stuck.

Another strategy is to work on simultaneous projects. Ideally, these relate to different aspects of the game. For example, I might be working on an adventure, a book of lore, and a book of magic items. One of these is the primary project, but when I'm struggling I switch to one of the others, and by the time I tire of that, I feel ready to return to the first project. In this way, I can often "write my way out" of a creative slump.

There is a trap here, of course. If you start up too many projects and find yourself constantly flitting between them, you will never finish anything. For me, I really want no more than about three open projects. If another project comes along that demands attention, I'll archive one of the existing projects to make room for it. Other people will have a different limit, but I think you do need to have a limit.

My final strategy to restart the creative wellspring is to collaborate, which can be complicated but also creatively invigorating. There are several approaches you can take here. The simplest method is to reach out to a creative peer and ask for some feedback on your project. A variation on this is to join one of the many creative-oriented social media groups and post material there for comment. The quality of the commentary varies enormously, but I've still found this worthwhile.

Beyond these avenues, you are looking at more formal arrangements. There are experienced RPG creators who

offer to consult on projects, usually charging an hourly fee. But perhaps the ultimate method of overcoming writer's block is to hire a freelancer to do the writing for you—or at least some of it.

That was my solution for the rather grueling schedule I set myself in late 2016. The general pattern of work was this—I gave the freelancer a brief of a few hundred words and asked them to create a three thousand-word draft, which I then developed into a final product that was up to six thousand words long. I followed this process for the next ten adventures I published.

One of the first writers I approached was Remley Farr, who had created several gorgeous adventures on the DMs Guild, such as *The Sun Goes Down with a Ruby Smile* and *The Fasting Worm at the Spider Feast*. Remley is a terrific writer with a great sense of humor, and he was open to freelance work.

My proposal was called *Into Ivy Mansion*. My last few adventures had revolved around the Harpell family, a magical dynasty that lives near Longsaddle in the Forgotten Realms. I wanted to create a domestic adventure that took place inside their home, Ivy Mansion. Here is the four hundred-word brief I gave to Remley:

> *PCs are in Longsaddle at the Gambling Golem when one of their ale mugs grows a mouth. Tells them that they've been summoned to Ivy Mansion, the sprawling ancestral home of the powerful but eccentric Harpell wizard family. The summons came from Tristan Harpell, a mage in his early 20s. He is pleasant, lazy, vague and a bit self-involved. He tells the party that the family have decided to give him the ground floor of the "old north-*

east wing" of the mansion for his quarters. The entire wing has been abandoned for years, and the problem is that it has become "infested". He was told to clear it out himself but he is "really too busy" to do that. He gives them two old keys. One of them opens the entrance to the north-east wing. The other one locks the stairway down into the underground levels. There is some "nasty stuff" down there, so that door needs to be locked. For compensation, he is offering 300 gp and some sort of valuable magic item. If they ask who used to live there, Tristan will tell them that it was his great-uncle Siegfried Harpell, who mysteriously disappeared many years ago.

The ground floor of the north-east wing I'm thinking will kinda resemble the living quarters of the white house (diagram included below). There are no upper stories. Probably not quite so many rooms. (with regards to a map, just do something rough and I will turn it into something a bit more polished). As they explore, they discover portraits and references to Siegfried. Much powerful magic was practiced here, and so very weird things can happen, which are often related to the purpose of the room…

Final room has a wooden staircase spiraling down and down and down into the darkness. A hideous voice from below says, "I will be up in just a moment". As they look down, they see a dark and indistinct figure climbing the stair case, getting closer. Make a saving throw or be scared! They try to lock the door but the key doesn't fit! The lock says, "That's the wrong key, Siegfried! You left the spare key in the kitchen." PCs race to find spare key before the horrible creature gets

to top of stairs. If it gets there first, they will have to flee the wing as it is very powerful and fearsome (whatever it is). If they lock the door, all is safe and well.

I took the names and personalities of the main NPCs, Tristan Harpell and his Uncle Siegfried, from the marvelous British television series *All Creatures Great and Small*. "Clear the dungeon for reoccupation" is, of course, one of the classic D&D quest tropes.

The map caused me some consternation. In chapter 16, I mentioned flipping back and forth between realistic and nonrealistic maps. *Into Ivy Mansion* started with a weird and random map for Siegfried's suite of rooms, but it just didn't feel right and didn't look good. So I finally went for a standard mansion layout, roughly based on the Executive Residence of the White House.

This new map *felt* right for the adventure, but it presented a potential problem. Because the layout was essentially a big hall with several doors coming off it, a character could enter, open the right door by chance, and face the boss monster almost immediately. I was tempted to put some gates in to force PCs to play through the adventure in the "right" way. And this comes down to a design difference between old-school and new-school D&D.

To summarize, one aspect of old-school play suggests you put an interesting location in front of the players and let them explore it. You don't prescribe how things should happen. Instead, fun narratives *emerge* from the gameplay as characters make their decisions and pursue their priorities. Chapter 7 goes into great detail about the importance of decisions.

New-school D&D, by contrast, is often more concerned

about delivering a particular story. Thus, adventures have a beginning, follow a broadly prescribed path, and then have a definite conclusion. It's worth mentioning that this school of play emerged in the early 1980s, so the word "new" is relative! All definitions have their limitations, and there are many examples of overlap and hybridization between these models. Moreover, many other threads make up the old-school model of play. Still, this emergent narrative idea is one of the most important.

I mentioned in chapter 16 that *Doorway to Darkness* suffered from excessive linearity—it was new-school and not executed as well as it could have been. With *Into Ivy Mansion*, I embraced old-school openness. Yes, some groups would enter the hall, open a door, and face the boss monster immediately, but so be it.

A few weeks after I sent Remley the brief, he returned a marvelous three thousand-word draft that included many original ideas and had me chuckling as I read it. For example, Remley came up with the oddball, ingenious idea that Siegfried had accidentally trapped himself on the moon! I did a small amount of development on the manuscript, and it was about four thousand words long by the time I'd finished.

I released *Into Ivy Mansion* in August 2016, and it quickly received great feedback. People enjoy the characters, the funny-yet-creepy vibe, and the exploration of an intriguing environment. At the time of writing, it has a 96% approval rating. Here's a typical review:

> *Fantastic one-shot adventure. Great humour with a dash of tense combat and a bit of dark mystery. A particularly good bit with the telescope had the whole*

group laughing to tears. There is still plenty of challenge to it as well. One fight was down to the wire due to some hot DM dice. As a DM the adventure was simple enough that at one read, I could run it smoothly which is perfect for a quick prep 'I need an adventure for tonight' game. My group was down a player for our normal game, so I ran it for three level four characters and play time was just over three and a half hours. All my players said they really enjoyed it and told me to make sure I gave it 5 out of 5 stars. For the price, I would strongly recommend picking up Into Ivy Mansion if you need a quick prep game for right now, or to keep in your DM pocket.

It's always good to get feedback like this! But, more importantly, this adventure showed me how effective partnering with another writer could be. I would do so on many future adventures.

Chapter 20: On the Anatomy of Adventure

There are three rules for writing the novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are.

—W. Somerset Maugham

The first edition of this book received encouraging feedback, but one reviewer had a very specific complaint:

> *While it was an entertaining (and short) read, I wouldn't be able to answer the question "what is the anatomy of adventure" after reading it. The title is a misnomer…*

This criticism surprised me. Hadn't I "dissected" my adventures and shown you their guts? How much more anatomy do you want? However, the more I reflected upon the comment, the more sense it made. If you want to understand the anatomy of a frog, one method is to dissect a frog and have a look inside. This is a valuable exercise but is surprisingly hit-or-miss. You might get a good look at the heart, for example, but perhaps the stomach is undeveloped in this specimen or was punctured when you cut it open. Sometimes all you see is a big, icky mess.

A different way to learn the anatomy of a frog is to read a textbook that neatly lays out and explains the different organs. This textbook explanation will feel a bit lifeless, but it ensures you get a "big picture" understanding of the

frog's anatomy and gives you a vocabulary to discuss it with other frog-enthusiasts.

In the preceding chapters, I explained RPG adventures by dissecting many of my own products. This chapter, by contrast, attempts a "textbook explanation" of an adventure. As always, my focus is on D&D, but I believe the model can be extended into other games.

The following six components should be present in every competent RPG adventure:

- Title
- Backstory
- Hook
- Location
- Encounters
- Climax

Let's look at each in turn.

Title

I'm sure this one raised a few eyebrows. Sure, most adventures have a title, but is it really essential? For those looking to sell their adventures, it obviously is. But I'd argue it's a very good idea to give all adventures a title, even when they are not going to be used outside your own group. After all, names have a special power. As one scholar noted:

> *Choosing the right name is important. Names may tend to become mere labels after constant use, but first impressions last. Authors can agonise for ages over the right names for their creations, and for good reason: names help shape characters in the mind of a reader.*

> *Consider the names Myrtle and Krystal—which would you pick as an ancient schoolmarm? a trendy airhead? Our reactions to a name are based on many things: general knowledge, word association, the general sound and 'feel' of the name… Place-names also conjure up specific atmospheres and expectations.*
>
> *At its best, though, as with imaginative fiction, [roleplaying] creates a consensual illusory world for its participants, and everything that supports that illusion for the game session helps—including the good use of names.* (Bowers, 2004)

Consider an adventure called *Temple of Doom* as opposed to one called *Temple of Doodles*. The first is clichéd but weighty, while the other is frivolous (perhaps appropriately so if you are writing satire). The title affects how you feel about the contents and, in my view, invariably impacts your writing. It's invigorating to devise a good title for your work.

The first D&D writers were heavily immersed in the supernatural literature of the early twentieth century as well as the fantasy pulp fiction that emerged soon after. You can see this influence in their title choices. For example, the first adventure TSR published was *Temple of the Frog*, which appeared in *Supplement II: Blackmoor*. This title resembles *The Tower of the Elephant*, one of Robert E. Howard's earliest Conan stories. The title *In Search of the Unknown* was taken directly from Robert W. Chambers' book of the same name, while *The Keep on the Borderlands* was inspired by William Hope Hodgson's *The House on the Borderland*.

A common title formula in both pulp fiction and D&D

history is "[noun] [preposition] [article] [noun]." Take *Vault of the Drow*, *Tomb of the Lizard King*, and *Isle of the Ape*, to name just a few adventures. In pulp fiction, we have *Vault of the Beast*, *Tomb of the Seven Taajos*, and *Isle of the Undead*. I did an analysis of over three hundred TSR adventure titles, and roughly half of them follow this formula.

This title formula is still used today, with recent adventures like *Dungeon of the Mad Mage*, *Tomb of Annihilation*, and *Hoard of the Dragon Queen*. The formula is by no means compulsory, but it is tried and true and connects you to the game's pulp roots. So common is the formula that many people have created random tables to generate such titles. *Tome of Adventure Design* (Finch, 2011) has a sophisticated generator that creates names like *Aerial Pyramid of the Ice Resurrectionist* and *Fortified Canyon of the Decayed Abbot*. These may be a bit gonzo for some of you, but at least they put a new twist on common genre tropes!

Backstory

All good adventures need a backstory. Matt Finch explains why:

> *The backstory is the answer to a question: what happened to change this location from a normal place into a dangerous place of adventure, with treasures and monsters? Players love to discover the answer to this question, and an adventure feels incomplete, from the players' perspective, if it ends without this loose end being tied up.* (Finch, 2011)

A backstory can be conceptually simple, even for a complex adventure. For example, here is my summary of

the backstory for *Tyranny of Dragons*: Severin Silrajin, the new leader of the Cult of the Dragon, is trying to find five magical dragon masks that will enable him to summon Tiamat from the Nine Hells.

That's it! Notice what this backstory *doesn't* mention. It doesn't mention the player characters or what quest they will go on. The backstory exists separately from these elements, providing the context that explains the quest to follow. It is certainly possible for an adventure backstory to mention one or more of the player characters, but it is by no means necessary.

One tip for creating good backstories is to identify the factions in your world and consider how they interact. Kevin Crawford describes factions like this:

> *A faction is an organization, government, cabal, gang, tribe, business, religion or other group that you mean to make a significant player in your campaign. Not every organization in your campaign setting is a faction; only those groups that are most interesting to you and important to the campaign…* (Crawford, 2021)

A well-defined faction provides you with NPCs, themes, and motifs to use in your adventure, and also generates a great deal of campaign cohesion. If you are using an existing setting like the *Forgotten Realms*, you have an army of factions at hand, everything from the Agents of the Eye through to the Zhentarim. If you are creating your own world, it is a good idea to define the key factions.

A typical D&D backstory revolves around a villain and their scheme. This usually represents an undesirable disruption to the status quo. It could be something as provincial as "bandits have started robbing caravans on

the Long Road," or as epic as, "The undead ruler of the astral plane is planning to conquer the multiverse."

The *Dungeon Master's Guide* has a good table of villainous plans—in fact, let's roll one up right now. We got: "The villain wants to prove themselves worthy of another person's love." Combining this plan with a faction leads to rich and varied results. Let's take the Zhentarim, a mafia-like organization from the *Forgotten Realms*. Perhaps the leader of the Zhentarim, the Pereghost, has a protégé named Riviar whom he dotes upon, and this has aroused whispers of favoritism. To prove herself worthy of the Pereghost's affections, Riviar decamps to the city of Berdusk and plans to assassinate Quillathe, leader of a rival faction known as the Harpers. That sounds like a terrific adventure backstory!

Let's take the same plot but apply a different faction, the Fraternity of Ash, a group of devil worshippers from my Iskandar campaign world. A member of the Fraternity, Oonagh Candlemass, wants to prove herself worthy of the affections of her patron, the archfiend Chemash. To do so, she kidnaps a local villager and plans to sacrifice her in the ruins of an old temple.

You can see how the different factions suggest different interpretations of the same basic plot. They also imply different themes. With the Zhentarim, we have the theme of organized crime, suggesting motifs such as back alleys, spies, hideouts, fences, gangs, and so on. With the Fraternity of Ash, we have the theme of the occult, suggesting motifs such as devils, candles, pentagrams, and fire.

Hook

Hooks provide a reason for the player characters to go on an adventure. The hook draws the players into the situation described by the backstory, and it usually contains two parts: a *mission* and an *incentive*. Typical missions start with a strong, active verb, such as:

- Slay a troublesome monster
- Recover a valuable treasure
- Rescue an important person
- Protect a building from attack
- Escape from confinement
- Clear a ruin so it can be reoccupied

Typical incentives include:

- Money
- Magic items
- Repaying a debt
- Property (such as a farm or tavern)
- Honor
- Noble titles
- Information
- Spellcasting services

Oftentimes, the mission is simply to thwart the villain's plan as described in the backstory. If the backstory is "bandits are robbing caravans on the Long Road," then the hook could be as simple as "the Lord Protector offers you 200 gp to deal with the bandits." Here we have the

mission (deal with the bandits) and the incentive (a 200 gp reward).

This sort of hook is serviceable, but it squanders an opportunity by revealing too much information. One of the things that makes an adventure compelling is a sense of mystery and discovery. There is a disorienting and delicious moment at the start of good adventures when player characters (and their players) are faced by an intriguing unknown. Adventures that give away the whole plot early on bury this experience. An overly earnest NPC handing out paragraphs of exposition in the opening scene is a definite warning sign.

One way to redeem the above hook is to make the bandits original and surprising in some way. For example, perhaps they are a previously unknown race of bird-people, and their hideout is a floating aviary. Another way to spice up an obvious hook is to change the mission midway through. For example, the characters go to the hideout and deal with the bandits, but they uncover a magic mirror that transports them to an ancient shrine. The mission has now shifted from "kill the bandits" to "find a way out."

It's common for published adventures to provide multiple hooks. For example, in *Hoard of the Dragon Queen*, the opening adventure involves defending Greenest from the Dragon Cult. The book provides several hooks to motivate the characters, such as:

- *Leosin Erlanthar, a wandering monk, once saved your life. He's sent urgent word for you to meet him in a small town called Greenest. Looks like it's time to pay off that debt.*

- *When an orc raid drove your family from your home, the people of Greenest took you in. Anyone who threatens Greenest is your sworn enemy.*
- *Every five nights, you have a strange sequence of apocalyptic dreams. The world is destroyed by cold, choking fumes, lightning storms, waves of acid, and horrible fire. Each time, the dream ends with ten evil eyes glaring at you from the darkness. You feel a strange compulsion to travel to Greenest. Perhaps the answer to the riddle of your dreams awaits you there.*
- *Ontharr Frume, a crusading warrior and champion of good, is your friend and mentor. He has asked you to travel to Greenest in search of rumors of increasing dragon activity.* (Baur, 2014)

Many more ideas can be found in the *Dungeon Master's Guide* and the *Tome of Adventure Design*. Good hooks are a sign of professionalism, and it is worth taking the time to craft them.

Location

The adventure location is the physical venue that the encounters take place in. It is common for adventures to have one primary location, although the size of that location can vary enormously. Long campaign books (such as the WOTC Fifth Edition adventures) contain multiple interlinked adventures, with each one usually associated with a unique location. For example, *Hoard of the Dragon Queen*'s first chapter takes place in the town of Greenest, chapter 2 in the raiders' camp, chapter 3 in the dragon hatchery, and so on.

Broadly speaking, locations can be classified as either dungeon, wilderness, or settlement. Throughout the game's history, dungeons have been by far the most common adventure location and include places such as tombs, shrines, temples, mines, lairs, strongholds, and treasure vaults. A dungeon could appear anywhere from a farmyard to a swamp to a volcano to an asteroid.

Wherever the adventure is located, it is worth making the effort to add some colorful details, "dressing" the location. Sadly, descriptions such as the following abound in adventures, both amateur and professional: "This room is 30 feet by 30 feet and has a door in the north wall." At best, such a description is a missed opportunity to engage the players. Too many rooms like this, and you risk sending everyone to sleep.

A few well-placed details can bring a location to life in the player's mind and draw them into the unfolding story. Creighton Broadhurst (2014a) identifies four reasons to dress your location with details:

- **World Building:** Key details can reinforce your campaign setting. If characters are exploring a dwarven mine, you can buttress this with things such as low-ceilinged tunnels and dwarven runes carved on the equipment.
- **Verisimilitude:** An adventure location is not an unchanging environment, so it should show signs of the inhabitants. Graffiti carved on the wall, a pile of ashes in the corner from a campfire, some dried blood on the altar; these details add "a sense of realism to the place which helps players maintain their suspension of disbelief."

- **Story Telling:** An adventure location is a mystery that the players want to unravel. If this abandoned stronghold was once inhabited by orcs, what happened to them? Whether they were slaughtered by some monstrous beast or wiped out by a plague, the location should give the players some clues.
- **Foreshadowing:** Is there a water trap in this room? If so, the carpet should be wet. Does a behir hunt for prey in this chamber? If so, there will be scorch marks on the wall. Location dressing helps foreshadow what is to come.

Broadhurst adds a helpful caution:

> *When dressing a room (or entire dungeon), don't go mad with detail. Adding too much detail creates confusion and eventual apathy in players; in effect, they don't see the wood for the trees. Instead, concentrate on a couple of interesting features in each area.* (Broadhurst, 2014a)

This reinforces David Noonan's comments about extended boxed text, which we looked at in chapter 16. As I have mentioned several times, we want our descriptions to be evocative *and* brief.

Encounters

In chapter 13, I defined an encounter as "a single scene in which the players interact with a challenge." I also noted that encounters are the lifeblood of an RPG, being the element of the game that consumes most of the play.

I've already discussed encounter design extensively

in this book, and most chapters touch on this topic to a greater or lesser degree. However, much of the analysis has considered encounters in isolation. Here, I want to consider how encounters work together.

Wolfgang Baur describes game design like this:

> *… game design is a function of human attention: getting it, directing it, and keeping it. A well-designed game commands the player's attention at frequent intervals, directs that attention to turns or events, and keeps that attention through various means…* (Baur, 2012)

This is why assembling the encounters correctly is crucial. A well-designed combat encounter can easily keep the table entertained. String together eight combat encounters in a row, and even the most stalwart player will grow bored. How do we assemble our encounters in a way that "commands the player's attention"? There are a few things to be aware of.

Encounter Networking

Encounters exist in a network, with each encounter connected to at least one other encounter. The hook must provide the players with a "jumping on" point into the encounter network. The players navigate through the encounter network and eventually come upon a special encounter called the climax, which we will discuss in the next section.

The shape of the encounter network is important. You can link the encounters together one after the other, like beads on a string. We call this a *linear adventure*. This pattern needs to be used cautiously since it can easily lead to *railroading*, which we mentioned in chapter 16. Alexander (2015) offers a good definition:

> *… linear scenarios which are designed around the assumption that the PCs will make specific choices at specific points in order to reach the next part of the scenario. If the PCs don't make those choices, then the GM has to railroad them in order to continue using the scenario as it was designed.*

Why is railroading bad? Because it eliminates meaningful choices from your game and, as we saw in chapter 7, meaningful choices are at the heart of gameplay. Once you rob players of this agency, their engagement and enjoyment will plummet.

Is every linear adventure also a railroad adventure? No! If you create a rich encounter with multiple ways of progressing to the next encounter, you can have a linear adventure while preserving player agency. Here's an example. The characters seek a missing relic and find themselves at a masquerade. Out of the dozens of attendees, several know that a key clue can be found in the Great Library. The adventurers interact with many NPCs using a variety of strategies, and eventually figure out they need to go to the library. Although progression from the masquerade to the library is linear, the open nature of the masquerade encounter gave the players many choices to make.

Having said that, my own preference is to link encounters together in a non-linear manner, which requires that most encounters lead to multiple other encounters. Old-school dungeon maps tend to support this approach, with dungeon rooms linked by corridors that branch, intersect, merge, and loop. This gives you an enormous number of ways to navigate the encounter network.

The same pattern can be applied to wilderness and

settlement adventures. If the players are following a path through the forest, you can have it branch, merge, and loop, just like a dungeon corridor. If they follow a trail of clues in the city, that can branch as well, with some clues perhaps leading to dead ends.

The goal is to network your encounters together in a way that gives the players interesting decisions to make. You can certainly do this with a linear encounter network, but a non-linear network makes the job easier, baking choice into the structure of the adventure itself.

Encounter Variety

In chapter 9, I noted my dissatisfaction with the "classic" D&D adventure, *Expedition to the Barrier Peaks*. The main problem is repetition. There are at least two hundred rooms on the first level, the majority of which are completely empty. Of the rooms that contain encounters, several dozen are filled with identical creatures. Anyone attempting to run it as a traditional dungeon crawl will grow bored very quickly. Finch notes:

> *Players enjoy adventures in which the nature of the challenges they face are varied. A good adventure will include combats, traps to detect and avoid, strange tricks to figure out, varied combat terrain, and negotiations.* (Finch, 2011)

As a very general rule, I try to ensure every dungeon has at least one each of these elements:

- Combat
- Trap
- Trick

- Social interaction
- Hazard
- Obstacle
- Unguarded treasure
- Empty room

Another good way to vary your encounters is through complications, which occur when you introduce an element that deviates from the expected mission while increasing the difficulty. Here are a few of the common ones:

- The monster has an unusual trait for its kind. E.g., a flying bugbear, an invisible chimera, or a dragon that is immune to weapon damage.
- There is an environmental hazard, such as poison gas or flooding waters.
- The terrain changes, such as a mudslide or a collapsing ceiling.
- A new monster shows up and joins the fight.
- An innocent creature enters the battlefield, getting in everyone's way.

A good complication is just like a good twist in a story—it grabs everyone's attention by subverting your expectations. Complications are an enjoyable part of the gaming experience that players crave. Baur notes:

> *… perhaps I belabor the obvious when I tell you to give gamers what they don't yet know they want. Underlying that, I believe that what gamers really want beyond a faithfulness to a game's premise is a sense of surprise and originality.* (Baur, 2012)

But be warned. Complications are like pinches of salt—too many are overwhelming. Don't layer multiple complications into every encounter. Just a few are needed to make your adventure shine.

Encounter Beats

In the world of screenplays, a "beat" is a small chunk of story that moves the narrative forward. Robin Laws states that most story beats propel us emotionally toward fear or hope, so that "Stories engage our attention by constantly modulating our emotional responses" (Laws, 2010).

If we treat beats as encounters, we can use this principle to improve our adventure design. Now, a roleplaying game is very different from a screenplay since we have much less control over the order in which the beats occur and what sort of emotional reaction they will elicit. Yet it is still useful to take account of the likely emotional trajectory of each encounter. When an enormous dragon dives toward the characters, the players are likely to feel a stab of fear. When they later stumble upon an unguarded treasure hoard, they may feel jubilant. The modulation of emotions makes the game compelling.

One mistake D&D adventure designers often make, especially when creating dungeons, is to place one challenging encounter after another with no respite. This is quite natural, since dungeons are supposed to be filled with "terrible monsters, vicious traps, and deadly hazards." However, if there are no "hopeful" beats, the dungeon "can drain not just the characters of their resources but the fun out of the players" (Shea, 2019b).

The solution is to mix in a few positive encounters amidst the danger of the dungeon. Some examples include

unguarded treasure, friendly monsters, a magic fountain, or a secure room to rest in. Weak monsters that are easily intimidated or overcome can also count as a positive beat.

But if the encounters are linked in a non-linear manner (as discussed above), how do we ensure that we can alternate between upward and downward beats? The answer is, of course, that you cannot. All you can do is sprinkle the positive encounters through your adventure and then leave it to chance and the players. They might make a series of unlucky choices and keep missing the upward beats. But that's fine, as the positive encounter when it happens will be all the sweeter. This "swinginess" is a feature of many roleplaying games, especially D&D.

Climax

All adventures should have a climax of some sort. Now, I know some old-school gamers might dispute that statement. In their view, the Dungeon Master provides an interesting location, and the story emerges naturally as the players explore. How can there be a pre-ordained climax?

I think this is a misunderstanding, and I want to argue in favor of adventure climaxes from narrative, design, and historical perspectives. From the narrative perspective, it makes perfect sense for a location to have a dominant creature. This reflects reality (consider apex predators and corporate CEOs) and is also seen in much literature. From a design perspective, D&D threats will necessarily have different degrees of difficulty. And this variation is desirable, as we touched on when talking about encounter beats. If the threats vary, one of them will have to be the hardest, and the players will likely experience it as the climactic encounter.

From a historical perspective, there is no doubt that the early D&D adventure writers embraced the idea of an adventure climax. We have famous climactic encounters such as The High Priest in *Temple of the Frog*, Chief Nosnra in *Steading of the Hill Giant Chief*, and the Minotaur King in *Caverns of Thracia*. Yes, sometimes those climaxes do not occur at the "end" of the game, but there is no rule that a climax must occur right at the end of the experience you are weaving. Indeed, the classic narrative arc always has a denouement after the finale, which ties up loose ends and enables an emotional comedown.

Having justified the existence of the climax, what should it contain? In the vast majority of D&D adventures, it involves combat with some powerful creature—what we call a boss monster. For example, in *Tyranny of Dragons* you fight Tiamat, in *Curse of Strahd* you face off against Strahd, and in *Tomb of Annihilation* you encounter Acererak.

You want these to be memorable battles, but how can you achieve that? We've discussed some strategies already in the Encounters section above, but here are some more ideas that are especially applicable to boss battles.

Terrain

The climactic fight should make use of the terrain, and this is a great opportunity to evoke a sense of wonder with a fantastical location. Perhaps the characters find themselves next to a mile-high crystal waterfall or inside an enormous chamber of steel. The climax for *Tyranny of Dragons* takes place within a Lovecraftian tower amidst a vast dragon graveyard inside an extinct volcano!

Shea notes that "Dungeons and Dragons games give us an unlimited special effects budget" and offers the

following example of fantastic terrain for a boss fight:

> *You stand on the links of a great chain, suspended hundreds of feet over the sea of molten iron below. Each link of the chain must weigh as much as a castle. Each of the links in the chain is decorated in large dwarven glyphs of power. Far off, a great creak echoes and the chain shifts, sending the link ahead of you over from one side to the other.* (Shea, 2016b)

Such epic details add "color," but terrain can affect the battle in practical ways. An unusually shaped room can force characters to discard their regular battle strategies and devise new ideas. In *Tomb of Annihilation*, the Soulmonger is suspended above a pit of lava by three adamantine struts. Characters wishing to make melee attacks against it must approach in single file and risk falling into the lava.

Speaking of lava, it's common for climactic battles to feature terrain that can actively damage or inhibit the characters. The ground could be covered in acidic slime that wraps around the characters' legs, or cloudspore mushrooms that explode on contact and fill the air with blinding spores. A boss monster often has lair actions that allow it to turn the terrain against the adventurers. In *Storm King's Thunder*, the ancient dragon Iymrith can cause the ceiling to collapse and arcs of lightning to spontaneously form.

Some more good ideas for terrain and lair effects can be found in *Fantastic Locations* (Shea, 2016), *Fantastic Terrain* (Handlin, 2019), and *Home-Field Advantage* (Trekiros, 2022).

Win Conditions

Another way to create a compelling climax is to introduce multiple win conditions; that is, you give the players options aside from "keep beating the boss until it dies." An ambitious example of this can be found at the end of *Baldur's Gate: Descent into Avernus*. The characters are attempting to save the city of Elturel from the archfiend Zariel. They can destroy Zariel, make a deal with her, or attempt to redeem her soul.

Even after battle is joined, you can give the players different ways to win. In another of my adventures, *Horror in the House of Dagon*, the players come across thirteen victims being sacrificed to a newly spawning god. When the party arrives, the cultists begin a ritual that transforms the victims into small fiends, one by one. The players have several options. They can attack the cultists, attack the spawning god, free the victims, or disrupt the ritual. Games are made up of interesting decisions and adding different win conditions to an encounter is an effective way to engage your players.

Escalation

Boss fights often escalate over the course of the encounter, with new dangers revealed each round. It's a superb way to maintain attention. Players are continually thrown off-guard and forced to re-engage with the action to overcome the changing situation. One tried-and-true method to escalate an encounter is to introduce a new monster or a new wave of monsters. Take for instance *Descent into Avernus*, during the battle of Idyllglen. The characters start out fighting a barlgura and some dretches; on the second

round a gnoll pack joins the fray, and on the third round a vrock swoops down and attacks.

Lair actions can be used to escalate a fight, as we noted above with Iymrith the dragon. However, many of the lair actions in the *Monster Manual* are lackluster and have only a modest impact on combat, such as the mummy lord giving its minions advantage on a saving throw. For a lair action to properly escalate the action, it should be spectacular and potent. A better example is the lich, which can call forth the spirits of everyone that ever died in its lair and compel them to attack.

Changing the terrain in the middle of combat will also escalate a fight. For example, the characters are fighting a fire giant, and a pool of lava simmers on one side of the room. The giant pulls a lever that opens a hatch, causing more lava to cascade in. The pool now creeps up by ten feet every round, forcing the players to move and change tactics. It will certainly ramp up the tension!

Matt Colville created an escalation pattern called "action-oriented monsters," which does not rely on terrain or lair actions. Each round, the boss gets a special bonus action that is consistent with their theme. Colville gives the example of a goblin boss with the following bonus actions over three rounds:

1. *The boss yells "What are you waiting for?!", and every goblin gets a free movement or attack that does not provoke opportunity attacks.*

2. *The boss yells "Focus fire!", and all goblins can both move toward one enemy without provoking opportunity attacks and make an attack.*

3. *The boss yells "Kill!", and all remaining goblins immediately get two scimitar attacks.* (Colville, 2019)

Shea (2021) calls this pattern "Position - Escape - Explode." In the first round, the special action enables the enemies to move into a good *position*. In the second round, they can *escape* from any advantage the party might be gaining, perhaps by taking down an important character. In the third round, with the combat nearing the end, the enemy *explodes* (figuratively or literally), dealing large amounts of damage.

One tidy way to escalate a fight is to trigger extra abilities off the boss's death or bloodied condition. When a bulette is bloodied, for example, perhaps it can use its deadly leap attack as a reaction to knock its assailants sprawling. When a banshee dies, perhaps a cold wind rushes out and engulfs everyone, causing a level of exhaustion. Many more good ideas can be found in the *Bloodied & Bruised* series (Gregerson, 2021).

A final way to escalate the fight is to introduce an entirely new monster when the boss is killed. One dramatic example of this occurs in *Tomb of Annihilation*. After the characters destroy the Soulmonger, the great necromancer Acererak teleports in to take revenge. *Mythic Odysseys of Theros* codified a variation of this idea with the introduction of mythic monsters, which it describes this way:

> *Mythic traits transform battles into truly legendary confrontations, well suited to the climactic battles at the ends of adventures or whole campaigns. Mythic traits are optional; they don't need to be used during combat with these monsters… If you wish to increase a battle's*

> *stakes, though, using a monster's mythic trait results in some mid-battle twist that changes the way the monster behaves, restores its resources, or provides it with new actions to use. As a result, the battle becomes deadlier and rages on for longer than most combat encounters. (Schneider and Wyatt., 2020)*

In these instances, when the boss is reduced to 0 hit points, it revives with deadly new abilities. This works best when the creature changes form in some way, rather than simply getting a hit point top-up. For example, when the kraken Tromokratis is reduced to 0 hit points, its carapace cracks open, revealing four beating hearts that must be destroyed to finally kill it. The kraken also embarks on a rampage, making a flurry of attacks against its foes.

It's true that WOTC has shown mixed commitment to mythic monsters in official material, but the concept remains sound and is well worth exploring if you want to deliver an epic battle to your players.

Coda

Just before I published the first edition of this book, I released my thirty-fifth adventure on the Dungeon Masters Guild. It was an Adventurer's League scenario called *Thimblerigging*, and one chapter required the characters to explore Candlekeep, interacting with the librarians while searching for a secret clue. It was an unusual scene, and I tried some new design techniques to achieve the experience I wanted. I was pleased with the final result.

A couple of weeks later, I received the following review:

> *Chapter 2 as written gives 100 minutes to just roleplay doing research in Candlekeep and NPCs who aren't*

relevant to the story, aside from one… This had to be some of the most boring stuff I have ever played through.

Ouch! They say pride comes before a fall, and I certainly fell hard. After publishing dozens of scenarios, how did I miss the mark so badly? Well, there are two truths on display here. First, whenever you try something new you take a risk, and you might fail. Second, it is hard to write a really good RPG adventure scenario.

I hope the preceding chapters have made it a little less hard for you. My goal in this book has been to let you "look over my shoulder" and get a glimpse of how I craft my adventures. I've generally resisted giving you a step-by-step recipe because, in my experience, that's not how anyone doing this seriously actually works. There is a necessary chaos in the creative process, and an approach that helped me create one adventure might be unhelpful when writing the next. There aren't really any formulas, just hints, principles, nudges, shortcuts, suggestions, and examples.

There is much else I could say, but it is time to bring this little book to a close. I've shared lots of my techniques, but now it's time for you to develop a few of your own. It may be easier than you think—you just need a keyboard, a computer screen, the germ of an idea, a little sweat, and the all-important courage to hit "Publish."

Here's a truth to remember: if writing is your vocation, you can never be fired, you can only ever quit. Each day you choose not to quit is another, stumbling step on the road toward mastery. And this suggests another great truth, something that drives me back to the keyboard time and time again: so long as we persevere, our best work always lies ahead of us rather than behind.

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