



KOBOLD™ GUIDE TO DUNGEONS

WITH ESSAYS BY

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FRANK MENTZER, BRUCE NESMITH, ERIN ROBERTS, LAWRENCE SCHICK, AND MORE!**

EDITED BY JOHN JOSEPH ADAMS

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KOBOLD Guide to Dungeons

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KOBOLD GUIDE TO DUNGEONS

INTRODUCTION

John Joseph Adams

After nearly fifty years of *Dungeons & Dragons*, we're all well familiar with the concept of what a dungeon is.

At its most basic, a dungeon is any kind of underground/indoor locale that player characters or protagonists must traverse in order to complete their quest. They're frequently subterranean, in old castles or ruins, or formed from a series of natural (or unnatural) caverns.

But could a haunted mansion be a "dungeon"? Sure! Could a difficult-to-traverse forest full of nasty thorns and brambles? Why not! Often, of course, dungeons are very dangerous places filled with monsters and traps and other hazards. But maybe they don't always need to be to still be compelling.

In this anthology, you'll find seventeen essays exploring various facets of dungeon design, from using all three dimensions to where and how to drop loot to how to pack your dungeons not only with a gamut of monsters, but a gamut of emotions as well.

I asked these writers to not let the default idea of what a dungeon is stand in their way—that I wanted to see essays that honor the history and craft of the dungeon designs that molded us, but also ones that look to the future and explore the limits of what a dungeon can be.

So grab your torches, your ten-foot-poles, your fifty feet of rope, and your pitons, and let's get delving!

THE BOOK OF FIVE 10-FOOT POLES

Observations on Dungeon Design

Lawrence Schick

I was an early adopter of *OD&D*¹ and have been designing dungeons for both tabletop and video games for nearly as long as such dungeons have been designed. I'm still at it, working at the time of this writing as a lead narrative designer for Larian Studios' *Baldur's Gate 3*, a *Dungeons & Dragons* video game.

Fantasy roleplaying games come in flavors for every taste, each with its own approach, but I've found that where "dungeons" are concerned, there are some useful design principles with almost universal application, for both tabletop and video games. We're going to take a brief look at five of them in this essay, under a title that's a tip of the helm to Miyamoto Musashi's *The Book of Five Rings*.

Pole 1: Boundaries

Dungeons & Dragons, the first commercially-available roleplaying game, added new concepts to the storyteller's toolbox, some of which have become so pervasive and familiar in modern media that it almost seems as if they have been around forever. These ideas include a character's health or hit points, defensive armor values, character skillsets grouped together as classes, and the revolutionary idea of character progression—or "leveling up." Among these influential and now-classic concepts must be included the idea of the *dungeon*, an enclosed, usually underground location consisting of a series of dangerous puzzle or combat areas, spaces that are encountered in a sequence defined by the dungeon's layout.

¹AKA the original *Dungeons & Dragons* ruleset (1974). Sometimes referred to as "0e." —ed.

Let's consider why dungeons are so important to role-playing games that they constitute half of the very title of the game that started it all. The stunning—and thrilling—promise of roleplaying games is that their flexible rules enable the players to make, by collaboration and consensus, choices that simulate *any situation the players can imagine*, thus bursting the bonds and limitations of classical board and card games. Players use these rules to tell stories about their imagined selves, but stories require structure, and when you have the option to do literally anything, no choice has more meaning than any other choice. From a dramatic standpoint, everything is the same as nothing.

Thus the dungeon, which imposes a simple but rigorous structure on the players' actions, instantly transforming nothing into something. Exploring a dungeon gives players purpose, its easily understood physical limitations give their actions clarity and focus, and the almost unlimited variety of spaces that can be encountered give the players broad scope to exercise their characters' rule-defined capabilities and the players' own limitless imaginations. In this way, the very concept of an RPG, which had at least in theory abandoned all limitations, immediately offered a return to limits by setting play within a bounded environment that imposed an easy-to-grasp structure. When you make character decisions within a sequential structure, the result is story.

Dungeons in RPGs are as useful today as they were in 1974, and though our options for encounter areas have moved beyond medieval underground structures to include almost any environment you can think of, these areas are still successful almost exactly to the extent to which they provide limitation and structure, focusing play and emphasizing some choices over others.

We've gotten pretty abstract here, so let's get to the fundamental, concrete lesson that informs all dungeon design: a dungeon map is a *flowchart*, providing structure in both space and time—and keeping play choices within clearly defined limitations. This is not a new observation—it's obvious to anyone who has thought even casually about dungeon design—but the dungeon or level designer who forgets it or believes they can ignore or throw away the flowchart is mistaken, and their storytelling environment will suffer as a result.

In a successful roleplaying game, anything can happen—*within clearly defined boundaries*. Whether these boundaries are physical, as in a classic dungeon, or conceptual, as in social RPGs, players are happiest when they know where they are and what rules apply there. (Because then, of course, they can look for ways to break them.)

Pole 2: Theme

Dungeon structure keeps player choices within boundaries, but what keeps players moving forward are *goals*. This may seem obvious, but there are nuances here that make this idea deceptively complex.

Though you can go into a dungeon to just slaughter and loot, as in Dave Megarry's classic boardgame *Dungeon!*, that gets old pretty fast. A proper dungeon is built around an overriding goal that's made clear to the players up front: destroy the wicked archmage, rescue the missing heir, replace the stolen sacred idol. This focuses player decision-making by giving them a compass for their choices, pointing toward those options that appear to lead toward their goal.

But a goal provides more than just a compass for making choices: it also provides a theme for designing the environment in which those choices are made. The goal needs a dramatic context, a situation and backstory that gives it meaning and significance: in short, your dungeon needs a *theme*, and every encounter and circumstance within the dungeon should reinforce that theme. This helps greatly with your design, because once you have your theme, environment and encounter ideas that support it come easily and tend to link together, giving your dungeon theatrical cohesiveness. And it helps the players, because once they see that the theme of the place matches their overarching goal, they instinctively know which choices will move them toward that goal—and every one of those choices will feel satisfying and dramatically correct.

(Do note, however, that the order of Poles 1 and 2 could be reversed: you can decide your dungeon's theme first and then derive the goal from that context.)

So, pick your dungeon's theme, and if possible, write it out in a single sentence for clarity. Then, as you design each part of your dungeon, ask yourself how it matches that theme and advances it. Do that consistently and it will draw your players through the space, creating a plausible and convincing story as they go.

Pole 3: Pacing

It's time to talk about pacing, which means we're getting down to the real nuts and bolts of building a dungeon: setups, payoffs, and players' limited attention spans. Crunchy!

The long-term goal that defines your dungeon's theme is set up at the beginning and isn't paid off until the end. However, along the way you're going to want to set up a series of short-term goals with sooner payoffs to keep players focused on the task at hand . . . and providing them with gratifying rewards for doing so.

The pacing of these setups and payoffs requires careful attention to maximize player enjoyment. Every setup poses a problem or puzzle that in most cases has a solution players can discover in the dungeon environment, but *not necessarily right away*. A dungeon that poses a series of problems that set up and then pay off quickly will have a rhythm of play that's repetitive and predictable. If some of the problems you pose to the players don't have obvious solutions until later in the flowchart, it keeps the challenges fresh, and the players will learn that they have to stay alert and pay attention. When a player is presented with a setup with no immediate, clear resolution, and then—three encounters later—they see and recognize a way to resolve that earlier setup, it makes the player feel smart and capable, resulting in some serious and memorable fun.

Be careful not to overdo it. Players have a lot to think about, and they can keep only so many details in mind at any given time. Achieving a short-term goal within a reasonable number of encounters feels good, but too many outstanding, unresolved setups nag at a player. They feel like they must have missed something, they doubt their capabilities as a player, and their fun is replaced by anxiety. A problem that's set up early in the dungeon but isn't paid off until much later rarely feels good; vary the amount of time and space between your setups and payoffs, but don't take it too far or it might violate your players' expectations . . . of the dungeon and of themselves.

Pole 4: Mechanics

Players love figuring out how to solve problems in unexpected ways. Nothing is more gratifying, but how do you encourage that?

Show your work! An RPG incorporates dozens or even hundreds of simple rule systems that synergize to create a pleasing complexity that enables story to happen. Many of these rules define the player characters' capabilities, but players won't use their abilities if they can't see how to apply them. But you can help them: when you create a situation for the players to interact with or solve, set it up so they can clearly see how it works. Expose the situation in a way that reveals the physical setup, its functionality, dangers, and potential vulnerabilities. Don't hide anything unless you want part of the situation to be a surprise.

This applies to more than just the mechanics of physical situations; if part of the problem involves relationships between NPCs, build in a way to convey those relationships to the players. If they can see all the working parts, physical, magical, and social, they can decide which skills or assets in their character's toolbox are most likely to give them a successful (or at least interesting) result.

As a side matter, one of the advantages that tabletop games have over most video games is that all their mechanics are exposed—the rules and everything that pertains to them are literally an open book. Video game RPGs that provide the broadest array of systemic solutions are those that most clearly show how their rules work and then give the player the ability to access them, usually as a matter of advanced character progression.

Pole 5: Vistas

This pole ties in closely with the previous one. Classic dungeons are tight, narrow, claustrophobic places, with stone walls and low ceilings, but there's no reason to stick to that paradigm. Your adventure setting will maintain interest and spark surprise by mixing in medium-sized, large, and even vast spaces, with vaulted ceilings or even open to the sky above. For maximum impact—and to give players a chance to really take in a space and plan how to deal with it—it's useful to have the obvious route into such a large space lead quickly to a vista, a literal overview of the space that enables it to tell its story. (In cinema, this is called an *establishing shot*.)

In most cases, you'll want the vista to also be a place of concealment, a safe spot from which players can consider their strategy and tactics. You might also want it to look like entering the encounter space from the vista is a one-way trip, with no obvious way to get back out once you go in: this raises the dramatic stakes of continuing forward, invites players to pause to consider their options, and makes it feel like an act of courage to advance onward. Players may hesitate, but ultimately, they enjoy proving themselves fearless. Help them be bold.

MORE THAN JUST A HOLE IN THE GROUND

David “Zeb” Cook

Dungeons, dungeons everywhere! Since the early days of RPGs, dungeons—ranging from simple complexes to vast, multi-layered labyrinths—have been a staple of fantasy campaigns. Landscapes were littered with them, and every barony worth its salt had at least one of these tourist traps for doughty adventurers. The dungeon filled with monsters and abandoned treasures became a trope supported by a string of B movies, fantasy novels, and published adventures. Dungeons *everywhere*.

Except in the real world. Despite several thousand years of history, the real world is *not* littered with dungeons. In fact, they are quite rare. In this, the real world and the worlds of imagination are seriously out of alignment. Is this a problem? Of course not. In fact, reality is full of useful material for use in a fantasy campaign. It is just a matter of knowing where and how to look for it.

What is gained by looking at the real world when it does not want dungeons? The first is grounding. Things in the real world exist for reasons. While those reasons may be antiquated or forgotten in the modern world, they provide meaning and lore. “A castle on the Thames” does not have the same weight of substance as “the Tower of London.” The first is just a vague place; the other has murders, executions, intrigue, ghosts, superstitions, pomp, and splendor.

The second is theft—steal from history to save work and time. Need to work up a new location for next week’s adventure, but your boss

has saddled you with a killer deadline? A little time on the internet investigating real places can provide maps, photographs, descriptions, even useful legends and ghost stories for ideas. The biggest trick is knowing what to look for.

Prisoners . . . or Cheese?

Dungeons like those found in movies and fantasy novels—massive underground complexes with spaces for torture and imprisonment—are rarer than hen's teeth in the real world. Building castles meant digging a big pit for the foundations for walls and towers. Rather than fill a perfectly good pit with a bunch of cells, the space inside the tower foundations would be used for things like storerooms, cisterns, cesspits, wells, even tunnels that led outside the walls. Cells and torture chambers were generally not part of plan. Storage space was more important than cells especially since influential prisoners could be locked in towers while the less important were put in storerooms, locked in cages, chained to stakes outside, or put wherever was convenient until their punishment could be administered.

For a fantasy campaign, the good news is that every baron worth his salt should have at least a fortified tower if not a proper full castle, leaving the countryside dotted with structures old and new. Under each of these is likely a small collection of chambers which, while not spectacular, are worthwhile places to explore. Occupied castles might have an armory, treasury, arcane workshop, a valuable hostage, a lone mad prisoner, or even a problematic pet dragon. Abandoned and ruined castles could become a monster den, a pious monk's hermitage, shelter for runaway peons, a bandit stronghold, the home of a shunned hedge wizard, a sinister cult's altar, the cache of a smuggling gang, a necromancer's ossuary, or even a portal to a dangerous place. For lore, such ruins beg the question of who lived there and what happened to them? Were they loved by the peasants or were they cruel landlords? Did orcs overrun their manor and wipe them out in the last invasion? What is the tragic tale of their downfall?

A Cell with a View . . .

Dungeons in the real world were more often found aboveground than under it. Throughout medieval times, noblemen and women were more often imprisoned in castles where they sometimes wined and dined visitors or even their jailers. Prisoners in the Tower of London were kept, obviously, in the Tower. When Ranulf Flambard escaped the Tower of London in 1101, he used rope to scale down the walls, as did several other later escapees. A few others made their getaways by casually walking out the front gate. In 1916 an imprisoned subaltern walked out, had dinner, and then came back, apparently concerned that his absence had caused a ruckus.

The original Newgate Prison, built in the early 1200s, was a wooden building with an adjacent gate tower. The conditions were certainly vile, but the building became so run-down that there were several mass escapes before it was eventually declared unfit and rebuilt in 1436. The rebuilding provided cells with chimneys and privies, comfortable rooms in the gatetower, a chapel, recreation rooms, and a dining hall, but also included dank basement cells and lightless “strongholds” for the truly unfortunate. This is not quite the image of the Hollywood dungeon. Still, it had its share of pain and suffering. Throughout its time, officials were accused of pocketing payments for prison repairs, while some sheriffs routinely tortured prisoners to extort money or accepted bribes to save condemned men from the gallows . . . and then seeing them hanged anyway. Certainly it was not a place of comfort, but it wasn’t a proper dungeon either.

As prisons became more common toward the end of the Middle Ages, they were often elaborate buildings in the middle of cities. In Venice, the Doge’s Palace had cells on the top floor just under the roof, the Piombi, and another set, the Pozzi, on the ground floor. The latter rooms were dank and dark given how close they were to the water, while upper cells of the Piombi were dry and even had a well-lit hallway where prisoners could exercise. When a new prison was built across the canal, it was connected to the Palace by the famous Bridge of Sighs. But regardless of comforts, prisoners still wanted to escape, as Cassanova did in 1756.

. . . Or Not

The Catholic Inquisition was responsible for a number of notorious prisons and torture chambers. Many were official palaces of the Church or the government built in the center of cities to impress. Since torture was a means to extract confessions of heresy, these palaces had a fearsome reputation where the accused were held until they recanted their heresies, regardless of actual facts. Still, they had more than just cells and torture chambers for the accused; the palaces included trial chambers, rooms for officials, even scriptoriums where the records of the Inquisition were kept. It took thick walls to keep the screams from disturbing clerks. Examples, now museums, are still found in Malta, Portugal, Mexico City, and Cartagena.

Secrets Beneath the Streets

While there are dungeons out in the wilderness, the best place to find dungeons is where people live. Building a good-sized dungeon takes money, manpower, and time. This means large towns and cities are often home to surprising dungeon-like spaces. These include the aforementioned prisons and palaces of the Inquisition, but there were also a fair number of tunnels and passages running underneath many medieval cities.

Neighborhood Connections

Initially, a castle on its own might have a secret passage to slip past potential besiegers, allowing the defenders to smuggle in supplies and send messages to those outside. They were also convenient for escaping when things went badly. Twice, popes managed to avoid capture when the Vatican was attacked by using the Passetto, an 800-meter passage built into a wall that ran to the Castel Sant'Angelo. In Slovenia, a secret tunnel connected Predjama Castle to a cave system that led to the village of Vipava, 13 kilometers away. Supposedly, the robber-knight who owned Predjama used the passage to withstand sieges and send out his men on raids. Of course, things sometimes worked the other way and such tunnels, if found, could be used against their owners, as happened in 1330 when Sir William Montagu and his companions used a secret passage to enter Nottingham Castle and capture Roger Mortimer, the Earl of March. This made Edward III happy, but not so much the unfortunate Earl of March, who was hung.

As towns and cities grew around castles and manor houses, secret passages were used for more than just escape routes. Tokat Castle in Turkey has a series of secret tunnels, some only recently uncovered. One runs from the castle to the baths in the city center, approximately 300 meters. Other tunnels lead to storerooms and the cell where Vlad Dracula was rumored to have been imprisoned as a youth. In Pevensey, England, a tunnel was said to run from the castle to the town's market square. Norwich was apparently riddled with tunnels running from the castle; one to the nearby market guildhall, another to Norwich Cathedral, and a third to Carrow Priory.

Quiet as the Grave

Cities and towns had more than just tunnels from castles, though. Catacombs and sewers created a rich network. The most famous of the catacombs are those of Rome and Paris. Originally built outside the city, the Roman catacombs were not a single network but a collection of tunnel complexes used to bury the dead. The passageways are lined with niches for laying out bodies and sometimes entire chambers or galleries that serve as family crypts. As Rome grew, the city literally built itself over many of these catacombs. Entrances were sealed and most of the catacombs were forgotten. Several were rediscovered as recently as the 1950s and there is always the possibility that more may exist under the city.

The largest of these, the Catacomb of San Castillo, has twenty kilometers of passages on different levels and a labyrinthine layout. However, none of the catacombs were used to hold prisoners or for torture chambers. They were for solemn observances of rites for the departed. Of course, in a fantasy world, who can say what the burial rites of a strange cult might be?

Beneath Paris lies another catacomb with the remains of six million people. As impressive as this is, these catacombs were not created initially as catacombs. When the city's graveyards became overcrowded in the 1700s, the bodies were moved into convenient mineshafts beneath the city and thus became the Paris Catacombs. These mine tunnels are the true mysterious underworld of the city. From ancient times up to the 18th century, miners dug tunnels outside the city quarrying limestone and gypsum. Extensive networks lay under the hills with branching tunnels on different levels, pits, and sometimes large chambers with pillars of unquarried stone to support the weight overhead. As the veins tapped out, the mineshafts were abandoned. Some were sealed or their entrances collapsed and eventually almost all were forgotten. Over the centuries, the tunnels were used by bandits, supposed necromancers, smugglers, the French Resistance, and urban explorers. Hideouts, a WWII German HQ, art exhibitions, and even a fully functioning (but illegal) cinema have all had a home under Paris, in addition to the catacombs popular with tourists. Today, the catacombs are only a small part of what may be 300 kilometers of tunnels undermining Paris.

Plumbing, Fresh and Foul

Water, fresh and foul, is also a part of every city. Ancient and medieval engineers built aqueducts to bring in fresh water to fill underground reservoirs known as cisterns. Istanbul, in Turkey, is noted for these underground chambers, many dating back to the Byzantine age. The largest is the Basilica Cistern which held 80,000 cubic meters (2,800,000 cu. feet) of water and was about one-and-a-half times the length and width of a football field (or a soccer pitch). Over three hundred stone columns support the nine-meter-high ceiling. Water entered through underground aqueducts and flowed out through pipes and tunnels to fountains in the city. With about two hundred cisterns, most of them drained and nearly forgotten, subterranean Istanbul is dotted with a network of hidden chambers and passages. Now, some are tourist sites, others serve as workshops and storerooms, and still more are empty.

Where water comes in, sewage must go out. Ancient Romans built sewer tunnels in Rome, Paris, and other cities that flowed with water to carry waste to nearby rivers. By the Middle Ages, most of these were forgotten. However, in the 1200s, Dubrovnik built an underground sewer system, some of which is still being used today. Most cities even as large as London were not so advanced and sewage wound up in small rivers that flowed through cities. As the population grew, these rivers were diverted into brickwork tunnels and paved over to reduce flooding and, more importantly, stench. London, Paris, Moscow, and many other cities still

have underground rivers flowing beneath the streets. These usually connect to sewers, storm drains, and catchments until they reach a river, treatment plant, or the sea. Of course, having hidden waterways was useful for thieves and smugglers. Sometimes secret staircases from nearby buildings connected to these rivers, especially in places where it was convenient for small rowboats to ferry contraband goods in and out of the city. Whether proper sewers or hidden rivers, such dungeon-like spaces will be damp, choked with foul muck, and possibly heavy with toxic or explosive gases. And of course, dangerous creatures may lurk in the dark!

Lost Cities?

Is there a historical analogue for underground cities popular in some fantasies? Yes, there are multiple examples, of which Derinkuyu in Turkey is the most famous. Carved out of soft rock in ancient times, it was a series of chambers and tunnels up to eighty meters deep in some places, that could house upwards of 20,000 people. It had stables, storerooms, wine presses, and chapels in addition to simple housing. Fresh air and some sunlight entered through central shafts. It is connected to Kaymakli, another cave city, by a nine kilometer tunnel. All told there are two hundred or more underground villages and settlements in the region.

Similar cave complexes were built in China. One of the best known is the Guyaju Caves. Carved into the side of a cliff, it has 350 rooms spread across multiple levels. Another is the shrine complex of the Maijishan Grottoes in Gansu province. It consists of 194 cave shrines carved into the side of a rock tor where monks lived and received pilgrims who came to visit the shrines.

Elsewhere in the world are other settlements carved into stone. The most famous is Petra in Jordan with its elaborate architecture. Iran boasts the ancient Persian underground city of Nushabad with three different levels twenty to sixty meters underground. In Georgia, the remote monastery city of Vardzia is claimed to once have had 6,000 rooms built in thirteen layers up the mountainside. The Bandigara Escarpment in Mali includes cliff tombs and villages built under the overhangs of the giant rock wall.

In almost all cases, the inspiration to dig underground cities wasn't architectural. It was fear. Underground cities made good fortresses and shelters against invading armies. Even into the modern age tunnels were dug for barracks and storerooms. Fearful of Napoleon in the 1800s, the English dug military tunnels under Dover Castle. Before WWII, the French created the massive but ultimately futile underground fortresses of the Maginot Line and, somewhere in the Rockies, the Cheyenne Mountain NORAD base still exists. In a fantasy campaign, who knows what underground strongholds fearful people or paranoid kings might create?

More Than Just Holes in the Ground

As these few examples have shown, the real world is filled with ideas and inspiration to make dungeons much, much more than a simple hole in the ground. The locations mentioned here—and many others—can easily be converted into game settings as-is or picked apart and reassembled in ways that best suit the campaign. Furthermore, through the magic rabbit-hole of the internet, it is simple and entertaining to find stunning visuals, wonderful architectures, strange facts of history, weird legends and folklore, and even useful maps to bring these settings to life. History is a strong ally in bringing any campaign to life.

A DUNGEON IS A STORY

Dominique Dickey

A story is a change of state. I came to game design by way of fiction, so I approach dungeons as self-contained stories. Player characters (PCs) enter a dungeon for a reason—to find something, to save someone, to slay a foe. Whether they accomplish that goal or not, they enter the dungeon in one state and leave it in another. How they come by that change of state, how they resist it before they give in to it, how its consequences permeate into the rest of gameplay—that’s the story.

Let’s define a dungeon as a contained series of locations, where the action is dictated by PCs exploring the space, as guided by a game master (GM). The locations, which may be rooms or other discrete structures, are topographically connected to one another. Each location offers new potential for encounters, which may emphasize combat, investigation, problem-solving, or some combination thereof. Within these parameters, a dungeon could be a cave system housing a dragon, an abandoned space station with malfunctioning life support, or a haunted house in a remote village—or really, practically anything. Its open-endedness makes dungeon design challenging for GMs and game designers of all skill levels. The level of difficulty is perhaps summed up best by the first rule of game design: no plan survives contact with the players.

What’s kept me going as a GM and game designer is the same thing that’s kept me going as a fiction writer: I shake up my perspective from time to time by looking at different kinds of story structures and then applying them to my own work. For fiction, this means projecting plot ideas onto a model like Freytag’s Pyramid, stretching my work-in-progress into a new shape and exposing possibilities in the process. For a dungeon, this means

asking how story structure relates to the shape of the space: What is the purpose of its rooms? How do they flow into each other? What possibilities do they contain? What encounters might ensue, and how ought they be timed for maximum effect?

Freytag's Pyramid

At its simplest, Freytag's Pyramid consists of an inciting incident to get the story started, rising tension toward a dramatic climax, and then a clear resolution where we see whether our hero(es) achieved their goal. Here's how you can apply its tenets to dungeon design:

EXPOSITION

Why do the PCs need to enter this dungeon? What obstacles and rewards do they expect to find inside? How do their expectations differ from what you really have in store for them?

INCITING INCIDENT

What's the impetus that gets the adventure started? Establish the stakes—is there some immediate sense of danger, as soon as they've crossed the threshold? What prevents the party from turning back when things get tough? Why do they *have* to see this through?

RISING ACTION

This section makes up the majority of the dungeon. As the PCs explore, things get increasingly tense. Maybe they face traps, puzzles, or combat (or all three). All of this builds to the . . .

CLIMAX

This is where your players get what they came for—if you promised them a dragon, give them the dragon. If you promised them a haunting, give them vengeful wraiths. This should be the culmination of everything you've built in the Rising Action phase; perhaps a relic they found in an earlier cavern is the key to defeating the ogre at the heart of the mountain, or maybe blood from a foe they bested in the basement appeases the hungry ghost in the haunted manor's attic.

RESOLUTION

Hand out loot, XP, and other goodies—and congratulate everyone at the table (including yourself!) for a job well done.

Characters enter a dungeon in pursuit of a goal, achieve that goal, and then find themselves changed in the process. This is a story, told by way of a location, using a classic dramatic structure.

Though a tried-and-true structure, Freytag's Pyramid leaves the Rising Action—the heart of the story—completely up to the designer. So, next, let's look at a story structure that's more prescriptive and granular about those finer details.

Seven-Point Story Structure

The Seven-Point Story Structure has its origins in RPG adventure design. The bones of the system are drawn from Decipher's *Star Trek Roleplaying Game* (2002), in which the GM is encouraged to think of each adventure—referred to as an “episode”—in seven segments. My own first exposure to this narrative structure was via science fiction author Dan Wells, so it's his version that I'll refer to here.

HOOK

The Hook is similar to Freytag's Exposition. This is where the characters begin their story. Why are they headed into this dungeon? What do they expect it to contain?

PLOT TURN 1

This is a big event that gets the story moving, similar to Freytag's Inciting Incident. The characters enter the dungeon and something happens that propels them toward the story's midpoint—something that ups the stakes and forces them to keep exploring, even when they want to turn back. Give us a hint of this story's overarching conflict: this is where the PCs start to piece together what this dungeon will demand of them and what dangers await. If the final boss is a supervillain, this is where the PCs take on some henchmen who can offer additional insight into their overlord's evil plan.

PINCH POINT 1

Apply pressure. I think of this moment as something that happens *to* the characters—catch them on the back foot, so that they're reacting rather than acting. Maybe they get a clearer glimpse of the main antagonist but are forced to retreat until they can rest and gather information. If the dungeon is a mad scientist's lab complex, this is where the scientist unleashes an android made of machetes. The characters should feel out of their depth during this encounter, but all is not lost! This is also where they figure out what weapons, tools, or information they need in order to survive the dungeon—and how to find those things within the dungeon itself.

MIDPOINT

After having their mettle tested, the characters move from *reaction* to *action*. They know who or what they're up against, and now they're able to regroup and figure out their next steps. As the PCs prepare to achieve

whatever objective brought them to the dungeon in the first place, keep some information back—you'll need to surprise them one more time.

PINCH POINT 2

The PCs failed to account for something critical. Their killer plan to best the antagonist? It's not going to work. Apply more pressure—but you have a fine line to walk here. This isn't a "gotcha!" moment from the GM to the players, but from the antagonist to the PCs. Don't insult your players' intelligence; rather, lean on the fact that the *players* may have realized something that their *characters* remain oblivious to.

PLOT TURN 2

This is where the characters get the last thing they need in order to battle the final boss, whether that's a weapon or a spell or a piece of intel. They thought they were in the clear before, but this time around they're thoroughly prepared for whatever the dungeon will demand of them.

RESOLUTION

This is what Freytag would call the Climax, where the tension you've so masterfully built thus far is resolved. Give your players what they came for, whether that's a logical puzzle or a massive, cinematic fight scene. Whether the PCs achieve what they set out to do or not, this is where you harvest all those narrative seeds you planted in your plot turns and pinch points.

This structure is much more granular: what Freytag would consider Rising Action is broken down into four separate steps, which create a cycle of obstacles and triumphs. The characters earn their eventual victory by trying and failing repeatedly, so that we're constantly reminded of what they stand to gain—and what they stand to lose.

Plot Structure to Location Structure

Whether you use Freytag's Pyramid, the Seven-Point Story Structure, or a model I haven't explored here (such as Kishōtenketsu), you might still wonder how to translate these plot points to topography. Sure, a dungeon is a story, but how do you take that story and turn it into a map that players can wander around in?

To that I say that physical structures should match the logical way a place would be built. The dungeon should reflect the ideology and needs of whoever built or inhabits it, whether it's a cave system full of ogres or a space station run by a rogue AI. If the player characters are looking for an item in a dungeon, ask yourself who put the item there in the first place—and take your inspiration from how that NPC would relate to the space.

Go with the Flow(chart)

Once you know how the dungeon is intended to function, you might wish to draw a map, but it's possible you won't need one. A simple flowchart is often more than enough.

To run with the space station example: let's say the PCs are looking for a hard drive aboard an abandoned space station while trying to evade the corrupted AI who controls the station's life support systems. Once I know how the station was intended to run when it was active and who stashed the hard drive in the first place, I can start charting how different areas connect to each other, without needing to lay down graph paper and hash out fine details. I know the main entry point is an airlock, and it makes sense for the airlock to connect to a central hallway. The AI is likely monitoring that corridor, so the characters walk right into a plot turn and are being hunted from the start. The person who hid the hard drive worked in the space station's command center—which is at the opposite end from the airlock. Entering the command center requires a biometric lock, and the necessary material to spoof the biometrics is in the living quarters . . . and so on and so forth.

Climax / Resolution

I'll leave you with this: it is impossible that your dungeon crawl will entirely go according to plan. The PCs will approach challenges in ways you hadn't accounted for, throw themselves into fights you expected them to run from, and traverse the dungeon in a different order than what your notes suggested. But thinking of the dungeon as a cohesive story allows you to maintain a rough idea of what needs to happen when and why . . . which will help you keep your cool when it all inevitably goes to shit.

NO EMPTY ROOMS

James L. Sutter

You never forget your first dungeon map.

I was ten years old, wedged up against the pebbled vinyl of a school bus seat, flipping through a first-edition *Dungeons & Dragons* rulebook I'd borrowed from a teacher. There, in the back, was what I still think of as a "crossword map": the classic gridded white polygonal rooms against a black background.

I was instantly captivated, poring over each new chamber and imagining what strange wonders it might contain. What stood in those alcoves? Where did that staircase lead? What might be carved on those circular pillars?

While roleplaying maps have evolved greatly since then, in both artistry and the technology facilitating their creation, it still only takes a few lines on graph paper to bring me back to that sense of awe and curiosity. Whether full-color in a sourcebook or scrawled on the back of your math homework, dungeon maps are simultaneously mysterious and accessible, daring you to fill in the missing details. That's the timeless potential of a dungeon map.

At the same time, however, a map alone is not an adventure, and it's easy for a dungeon crawl to go wrong. So many times, I've gotten excited about a fascinating map, full of creative room shapes and intriguing details, only to find the actual adventure leaves those rooms tragically bland. A complex of mysterious caverns and corridors is left half-empty, or filled with wave after wave of identical enemies, leaving bored players to grind their way through.

So how do you make sure a dungeon crawl lives up to its potential?

No Empty Rooms

It all comes down to three words: no empty rooms.

That doesn't mean you need a *fight* in every room; in fact, it's important that you *don't* have one. When players know there's always a fight behind the next door, it ruins the suspense. It can also lead to small dungeons and boring maps: if your game system has players leveling up after a set number of encounters, you might only be able to afford a few rooms in your encounter budget or have to deal with players leveling up at inconvenient times. And if you're writing adventures for potential publication, a stream of encounters and stat blocks can quickly eat up your available word count.

So what do I mean by "no empty rooms"? I mean that rooms should never be left *blank*. A one-line description that says merely "this is a bedroom" or "this cell is empty" is a missed opportunity and leaves players feeling unrewarded for having mustered up the bravery to open that door. In my experience as a Game Master, there's nothing worse than seeing players' faces fall at a flavorless room description, which inevitably leads to me trying to jazz things up on the fly. But why force GMs to improvise?

Instead, make sure that there's always *something* that sets an otherwise empty room apart from those around it. Give your players a reason to be interested, even if it's just a sentence or two. Some ideas include:

DECORATION

Aesthetic details can make a room stand out in player memories, even if they don't have any significant effect on the adventure. Perhaps the bedroom contains several pneumatic tubes for sending messages elsewhere in the dungeon or a bathtub fed by a magical spigot in the shape of a dragon. Or the nature of the room itself might be interesting, such as an area where your subterranean dungeon links up with a forgotten temple complex, or a room that's been carved out of a giant tree root.

These decorations can also offer easy roleplaying opportunities. Perhaps that pneumatic tube network lets your players communicate with monsters in other parts of the dungeon, or maybe that bathtub dragon can animate to relate juicy gossip. Why settle for an empty corridor when you could have a row of sphinx heads whispering embarrassing memories from characters' childhoods?

CLUES

Setting details can also reward perceptive characters by warning them of what they might face ahead, such as bugbear hair on a bed or the telltale marks of a body being dragged. What's more, something like a half-completed mural might give you a chance to introduce additional world lore and backstory in a way that feels earned rather than expository.

Clues can hint at substories or side quests, such as tensions between the dungeon's residents. These can be fun even if they aren't load-bearing for the current adventure—a page torn from a journal or a cameo locket with the face scratched off might mean nothing now, but can act as an adventure hook or foreshadowing for future adventures. Whether it's a partial map, a tattered banner, cryptic graffiti, or a smashed magical device, these elements suggest a larger world to your players, and give you as a GM both inspiration for future adventures and the chance to look like an all-knowing mastermind when you find an opportunity to tie something back in years later.

TREASURE

Like clues, small treasures can reward players who take the time to search. A dagger hidden inside a bedpost won't do much to affect the party's wealth, but it'll make the player who finds it feel smart and special.

HAZARDS

Not every detail should be a boon to players. Minor traps and hazards can keep party members on their toes—challenges that aren't dangerous enough to count as true encounters, but still require caution (and skill checks). For instance, slipping between precarious towers of dishes in the castle scullery might not be a trap in the traditional sense, yet could still require a check to avoid a noisy collapse that alerts the guards in the next room.

VARY YOUR OPPONENTS

When it comes to crafting a dungeon—or any adventure—it's crucial to present a variety of challenges to prevent player boredom and give characters of all skillsets a chance to shine. That means not just battles, but traps to be disarmed, social encounters with NPCs, puzzles or investigation opportunities, and more. At the same time, most traditional dungeon crawls revolve around combat, and the best way to keep your fights interesting is to have a wide range of opponents. But how do you decide which creatures are right for your dungeon? Let's look at two different approaches.

Menagerie Dungeons

“Menagerie dungeon” is my term for the classic first-edition-style romp where inhabitants seem plucked at random from a bestiary. For as long as there have been roleplaying games, there have been people making fun of menagerie dungeons. How, these folks ask, could there *possibly* be minotaurs in one room, devils in the next, and an owlbear in the hall between? And why hasn't the dragon next door eaten them all? Yet these questions aren't a reason to jettison the menagerie—you just need to answer them.

The easiest answer is that the creatures are there because someone put them there: whoever created the dungeon bound them as guardians or gathered them for a ritual. Maybe they're intended as war beasts for gladiatorial games, attractions in a private zoo, or research specimens for a college of spellcasters. Yet they could also have arrived on their own, drawn by the power of an artifact, fallen through portals from other planes, or even driven together by habitat destruction. By coming up with an explanation—no matter how basic—you give yourself (and your players) the freedom to play with all of your favorite beasts.

Logical Dungeons

“Logical dungeons” are those in which it's immediately clear why all the monsters are present. These dungeons are in some ways easier to populate: the kobold den has kobolds, the monastery is home to monks, the roving tower of the clockwork mage is full of . . . well, you get the idea. Yet while that's a great place to start, combat can get old quickly if your dungeon is a monoculture.

One way around this is to look for excuses to add in other creatures—as prisoners, pets, predators, and so forth. Maybe the kobolds lured an owlbear into one of their caverns but now have no idea how to control it, or have tunneled into an old wizard's workshop and now live in an uneasy truce with the golems that guard it. Yet even if you don't want to add in other creature types, it's still vital to give each battle or encounter a unique flavor. If your first encounter is against kobolds who rush in with spears, the next should be with kobold archers who hide and snipe with poisoned arrows, while the third includes a cleric who tries to con the PCs or sets them on fire.

Use the Terrain

In all types of dungeons, a variety of room shapes and terrain types can keep things fresh while also making your map more visually appealing. If one fight takes place in a small room, put the next one in a big cavern, or on a bridge over a pit, or across a series of ledges connected by ladders. Set dressing like giant statues, a forest of mushrooms, or a series of reflecting pools can stoke players' fear of traps while giving them props with which to improvise creative battle plans. I'll often design a dungeon map and its inhabitants at the same time, tailoring them to each other to achieve the most interesting game experience. Perhaps I'll place my flying monster in a room full of levitating pillars for PCs to jump between, or stick a subterranean stream where it can be diverted into the magma moat in the next room.

The Illusion of Choice

Now that you've put so much effort into making sure each room of your dungeon is a unique gem, how do you make sure your players visit them all? While it's tempting to guarantee it by creating a single route through, you want to be careful not to make every dungeon an amusement park ride where players have no real choices. Fortunately, there are a number of ways to give players a sense of control while still making sure they don't circumvent half your dungeon.

One way is to think of your dungeon map as a chain, with routes branching and then coming back together. Let players choose different paths, with meaningfully different experiences along each, but make sure those routes meet up again at your most important locations. Sure, players may still bypass a few rooms, but you're now guaranteeing they'll hit your key encounters.

Another way to encourage full exploration of the dungeon is to allow many routes but require players to collect items or information from different areas. If your players manage to go straight to the door on the east end of the dungeon, have them discover they still need to fetch the key hidden on the west side before they can leave, or vice versa.

Finally, don't forget that the dungeon itself can keep players from missing out. Monsters may move between several areas, making it harder for players to avoid their encounters, and traps like hidden chutes or teleportation runes can shunt players into areas they would otherwise have missed.

Make it Memorable

However you choose to go about crafting your dungeon, remember that roleplaying—and fantasy in general—is all about experiencing things you've never encountered before. So don't fall into the trap of serving players the same predictable dungeon rooms over and over. Next time you're facing down a bunch of empty encounter areas, take the time to imagine at least one unique detail for each of them. Your players will thank you.

EMOTIONAL STORYTELLING IN DUNGEON DESIGN

Sadie Lowry

1. *Atop the tower, you close the journal lying at the feet of the once-powerful mage as your eyes trace her blackened corpse. With a flicker of pity, you pry the relic she had fought so hard to obtain from her charred fingers and leave her there, on the hundredth floor of this grotesque monument to her hubris, smoldering in her bitter, underwhelming end.*
2. *The mansion exudes malice and violence—and blood. The lord has left the bottom floor a massacre of bodies, their limp forms adorning the golden staircase flanked by statues of his own glorious form. Disgusted, you ascend the staircase toward the hymnal room where cultists swear their fealty to their master as the lord himself stands before the altar, ritually washing the remains of a fresh sacrifice from his hands. The repulsive crimson stains on his fingers never fully fade.*
3. *An unwilling shiver crawls down your spine as a wailing rises around you. You crest the hill of the graveyard and look out at the undead clawing from their graves, your heart thundering in your ears as you grip your holy blade. These are the faces of your childhood village, now ghoulish and screaming, a swarm between you and the lich who commands them. You must not falter now.*

You just read six stories, not three.

Once player characters enter a dungeon, the dungeon tells two simultaneous stories: the emotional journey of the *dungeon*, created by its history, and the emotional journey of the *characters* as they interact with it.

The emotional journeys of the dungeons above remain the same, no matter who enters them. First, we saw a story of hubris—about how mortals try to grasp the impossible, no matter how dangerous. Second, a story

of zealous violence, about how little bodies matter to one who considers himself a god. Third, the tragedy of a village slaughtered and raised for a lich's fell purposes—its victims not allowed to rest even in death.

But the second kind of story—the emotional journey of the characters—is different. In the first story, our point-of-view character felt pity. In the second story, they were disgusted, and in the third, they were fearful but determined. But characters with different experiences, goals, and values might react differently . . . and thus tell a completely different story.

And so the question is: How can we, as GMs, best utilize dungeons to interact with the emotions of our player characters—and thereby create experiences that are as memorable, nuanced, and evocative as possible?

Creating a Tension Point

Every dungeon—even the most basic and straightforward one—contains a central conflict. In the simplest terms, the characters want something or need to accomplish something, but challenges stand in the way. The conflict lies where the stories of the dungeon and the characters intersect.

A dungeon's story includes elements like its **location**, **atmosphere**, **inhabitants**, **items**, **history**, **function**, and **mechanics**.

The characters' story includes elements like their **personalities**, **goals**/**desires**, **values**, **history**, and **abilities**.

You can take any of the concepts above and consider the conflict points between them. The simplest dungeon is one where a dungeon's **items** or **inhabitants** and a character's **goals** intersect: e.g., the characters desire to gain an item the dungeon possesses or to defeat a dungeon's powerful inhabitants. Perhaps the easiest way to create conflict is to engage the characters' **goals**, as they—by definition—are already invested in those.

When we explore different pairings, though, we create a whole new realm of possibilities for evoking the characters' emotions. For example, pair the dungeon's **location** and the characters' **histories**; the dungeon's **history** and the characters' **personalities**; the dungeon's **function** and the characters' **values**. Not all the pairings will be applicable to every character, but inspiration can strike when you consider the unique places where the two lists collide.

When the dungeon's half of the pairing is in *conflict* with the characters' half of the pairing, you create an opening for emotional engagement. What conflicts can we create from the examples above? A manor that exudes wealth (**location**) and adventurers from humble, even poor conditions (**history**)—how can this create frustration? Disdain? Disregard? A palace where a benevolent queen was slain, her legacy passed to a bloodthirsty

warlord (**history**), and gentle, kind adventurers (**personality**)—how can this create sorrow? Or grief? Or vengeance? A weapons factory (**function**) and a group of pacifists or rebels (**values**)—how can this create anger? Righteous fury? Fear?

The inherent conflict in these pairings will do a lot of work for you, but there are other factors to consider that can help to maximize or guide those emotions.

Next, let's talk about the dungeon on an encounter level.

Building Encounters and Arcs

Before we talk about encounters, let's talk about story structure. For our purposes, a “story beat” or “plot beat” is a moment in or element of a story that *changes* something or moves the story forward—a realization, a twist, a betrayal.

Let's pretend that a dungeon is divided into a simple three-act structure—it won't be, because no dramatic structure survives contact with PCs—the beginning, the middle, and the end. In the first act, the characters are introduced to the setting and the problem. In the second (and longest) act, the characters face challenges and pursue a goal. The third (and shortest) act deals with the outcome and the resolution of the problem from the first act.

In addition, stories tend to have symmetry, and the symmetry is created by a central midpoint. The midpoint is typically the story's strongest plot beat: something is found (they recover the ark in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*), a hidden truth is revealed (Mr. Darcy confesses his love in *Pride and Prejudice*), or a catastrophe changes everything (the ship hits the iceberg in *Titanic*). The midpoint marks a point of no return—after this, nothing can be the same.

How does this information help create a dungeon that evokes and interacts with the characters' emotions? A dungeon filled with encounters that are on the same “narrative” level the entire time is likely not going to encourage emotional arcs: e.g., characters fighting several groups of bandits to defeat a bandit captain or stealthing carefully through a manor to steal a prized necklace. These are fine and fun dungeons! But they probably won't make a character *feel* a whole lot.

On the other hand, impactful encounters without context *also* can fall flat. A death means more if you know who the person was. A sacrifice means more if it's for something that matters—or if it *doesn't* (see below). A reveal means more if the characters had knowledge of and believed the lie. Thus, we need to intertwine rising story tension and impact in our encounters to help create feeling.

Dungeon-Building Workshop

Like a story, think of a dungeon as a small, self-contained story in which the encounters follow a three-act structure, have a midpoint, and meaningfully challenge the characters. Let's go through an example dungeon.

The **goal** of the characters is to delve into an ancient, abandoned temple to retrieve an item that is also being sought by the dungeon's **inhabitant**, an evil archangel. The **history** of this temple is that it was dedicated to an ancient, evil god known as Vrelkenryth the Betrayer, but little information is available about the deity or what he seeks to accomplish, so finding information is equally important (**desire**).

As the GM, I want to create a lot of anger and vengeance with this dungeon. I want to give them a reason to hate Vrelkenryth. Our dungeon should make him feel prideful and perfect, and make the PCs feel small and flawed. Thus, the architecture is larger than life—golden and pristine. The atmosphere oozes condescension. From the art and reliefs, the PCs discover that the Betrayer was one of the first primordial deities, and that he once waged war against the other gods. When we get to the first challenge, I want to chafe against the characters' **values** and **desires**—so, to move forward, they must offer something beloved as a “tribute” to be “worthy” to pass into Vrelkenryth's interior chambers.

This sacrifice has narrative power because of its context. The PCs don't want to be worthy in an evil god's eyes—it's blasphemous, wrong, and insulting—and they don't want to give up something valuable to them. But they need to press on. With this challenge, we've created a lot of feelings—disgust, anger, reluctance, frustration. The PCs sacrifice something important to them, but only because the fate of the world depends on it.

Next, we need our midpoint—something that changes everything. So, through writings, visions, art, a social encounter, or otherwise, the PCs learn that the Betrayer's goal is and always has been to rebuild a newer, more “perfect” world in his own image, first by purging the world of its imperfections. If he is successful, it would be a true apocalypse—the end of everything as we know it. Obviously, this is no small challenge, and it conflicts with the PCs' **desire** to, well, continue existing. It conflicts with their **values**, as they love this world, even for all its imperfections.

To create emotion in the second half of the dungeon, we need to challenge these **desires** and **values**. We need the dungeon to strongly conflict with the **values** especially, to force the PCs to take a stand.

So, we create a final combat where the PCs fight “perfect” versions of themselves.

It is a deep insult and a challenging combat both. These versions of the PCs have higher AC, more hit points, and all the PCs' abilities. They also lack each of the characters' flaws. By presenting an encounter that directly challenges the PCs' **values** (that even imperfect, their lives are important, and that these "perfect" versions aren't better than they are), we are creating a situation where they must truly fight for what they believe in, no matter how they do it—angrily, fearfully, vengefully, passionately, hopefully, or faithfully.

Thus, we have our first act (learning about the temple, entering it, and getting their bearings in it), our first story beat (the sacrifice), our midpoint (discovering the Betrayer's goal, which recontextualizes everything), our next story beat (the PCs facing their perfect selves), and our third act (standing up for their values, defeating the enemies, getting the item, leaving the temple with more information than they had before). And the characters leave it having *felt* something, an emotion they will carry into encounters with Vrelkenryth and his minions going forward.

Conclusion

Breaking down your dungeon into acts, beats, and a story arc can help you pinpoint how and when to push on the PCs' emotions. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What about the dungeon conflicts with something about the PCs? How can you represent that in the first story beat?
- What midpoint changes or recontextualizes everything?
- What additional story beat (that ideally was created by the midpoint) conflicts with something about the PCs?
- When closing off the dungeon, how do you allow the PCs to change, grow, or reaffirm themselves and their emotions?

A true primer on emotional storytelling in dungeons (and/or stories) could fill a whole book, but the tools presented here are a great place to start. Not every dungeon *needs* to have such heavy emotional weight. But when you want your players to feel, when you want what they're doing to *matter*, these tools will help you weave the dungeon and the PCs together, creating a nuanced and impactful dungeon that they'll remember for years to come.

SOUND THE ALARM!

Character Noise and Dungeon Consequences

Christopher M. Cevasco

“It may have nothing to do with Peregrin’s foolish stone; but probably something has been disturbed that would have been better left quiet.”

—The Fellowship of the Ring, J.R.R. Tolkien

In the above quote, Gandalf admonishes that “fool of a Took” for dropping a stone into a well shortly after the fellowship enters the Mines of Moria. And indeed it is almost immediately after Pippin’s stone drops that they first hear the tap of drums in the deep, setting off a sequence of events that culminates in the arrival of a balrog. Between the dropping of the stone and that final confrontation on the Bridge of Khazad-dûm, the fellowship’s underground journey is all the more harrowing and tense because they know (and the reader knows) they’ve alerted unknown dungeon denizens to their presence.

Likewise, any dungeon-based story or roleplaying campaign is more compelling when there is a sense that the characters must mitigate the amount of noise they make lest they attract additional dangers. Consider, for example, how much of the tension in the horror film *The Descent* arises from the fact that the spelunkers not only have to find a means of escape but must do so in near silence to avoid the cavern’s grimlock-like menace. The corollary to this is that a dungeon environment can begin to feel unrealistic and contrived if each room, cave, or section of the dungeon seems to exist in its own sound-proof bubble wherein noisy actions have no effect on what might be waiting in an adjoining room or just around the bend.

On the other hand, neither GMs nor players want a campaign where a simple skirmish with door guards always results in an alarm that draws every last dungeon denizen to converge simultaneously on the party. Balancing these competing concerns might seem daunting, but the solution can really be quite simple. Each of the following approaches not only addresses the issue of realistically handling noise in dungeons but can enhance the overall adventure, making it a more dynamic, unified whole and less a series of unrelated set pieces or initiative rolls.

Hear Ye, Hear Ye!

To establish an adventure's parameters, players should be tipped off in some way so that they understand sounds their characters make might have consequences. If a sorcerer casts the *thunderwave* spell during combat, for example, a GM might describe how the sound of thunder can be heard for several seconds thereafter, echoing down the tunnels or hallways ahead and behind. Even the clang of swords against shields or the creaky hinges of a rusted door might set off such echoes. Alternately, in a quieter moment, the players might be informed that their characters hear the sound of laughter, or a shouted conversation, or the clink of chains, drifting from what seems like a considerable distance, telling them sound travels in this environment and someone or something is there to make (and perhaps hear) noise.

Stop that Bugbear!

One of the best ways to balance the consequences of party noise against the desire to avoid an unsatisfying total-party-kill is to give the players the opportunity to avoid an impending alarm. The party might spot a lookout who has heard and then seen them and is preparing to dash away to bring reinforcements; one or more enemy combatants during a skirmish resulting from party noise might shout to their allies that they intend to get help before likewise moving deeper into the dungeon or might move on their turn toward a large gong, perhaps with mallet raised. In any of these scenarios, the PCs become immediately aware that they risk a general alarm being sounded, and they can take steps to prevent those enemies from acting.

In another dungeon or chamber, sufficiently perceptive characters might have an opportunity to spot a tripwire alarm before triggering it. Again, this avoids an immediate disaster but lets the PCs know they had better watch their step (and their noise level, as any alarm is meant to alert someone who can hear it) going forward.

Red Alert!

If party noise occurs, and it seems implausible that there would be no resulting consequences, one simple but effective way to let the consequences play out is to keep track of the dungeon's overall alert level. This measurement might be a simple three-tiered system (Red Alert, Yellow Alert, All Clear), but it can be as complex and multi-tiered as the GM wishes. Every time the party makes noise or fails to mitigate an escalating factor (like the above mentioned guard running to bring help), the overall alert level can increase.

With each such increase, the dungeon should become a more dangerous environment. That increased danger might result in more frequent random encounter rolls or the need to make such a roll every time the party enters a new room or dungeon area; it might cause doors that are otherwise usually open or unlocked to be shut, locked, or barricaded as the dungeon denizens take defensive steps; magical countermeasures or (where applicable) a legendary monster's lair actions or regional effects might begin to manifest with greater frequency.

Crucially, however, the party should likewise have opportunities to decrease the alert level through their actions: preventing a foe from running off for reinforcements, successfully hiding for a period of time, cleaning up evidence of their earlier skirmishes, successfully bluffing a guard, crafting an illusion or otherwise misleading investigating creatures to provide an alternate benign explanation for some ruckus they made, etc. Where appropriate, the GM could require skill checks relevant to the actions taken; successfully cleaning up after a skirmish, for example, might require a Survival or Sleight of Hand check, with higher DCs for particularly bloody skirmishes or ones in which a great deal of ammunition or destructive magic was released in the area. Once the alert level returns to its baseline, the dungeon can then return to its normal environmental conditions.

Why Fight When You Can Lie?

In some situations, it may be impossible to avoid enemies coming to investigate once the party has made a great deal of noise. But such an encounter needn't always result in combat or an escalation of the dungeon's alert level. Under appropriate circumstances, as suggested above, players might wish to have their characters bluff their way out of trouble, coming up with a satisfactory explanation for the recent noise and justifying their presence in a place where they don't truly belong. A successful Deception check might entirely defuse the situation or at least stave off an immediate increase in the dungeon's alert level.

It's a Trap!

Not every noise, however, needs to be investigated. Even if the party does make an excessive racket or sets off an actual alarm bell, the mere fact that nobody comes to investigate doesn't mean they won't face additional consequences as they move forward through the dungeon. One such consequence might be that the monsters who had otherwise been loafing in the next room are now on high alert and decide to set an ambush. If this happens, the GM should make it clear that the ambush was a direct result of their noisiness. One of the ambushers might, for example, shout to another during the first round of combat, "See, I told you I heard something!" or the like. This will demonstrate to (or remind) the players that their characters need to be quieter and more cautious moving forward.

Size Matters

There might be more practical reasons why certain dungeon denizens do not converge immediately on a noisy party. Very large creatures might not be able to pass through narrow passages to reach the source of the disturbance. In that case, however, the GM should consider how such a large creature got into that part of the dungeon in the first place. A flying creature, for example, might have an overhead shaft to the sky, through which it can exit and enter that particular section of the dungeon; or the creature might have been teleported into the space by a mage who keeps it fed as a pet. Similarly, a guardian monster might have been chained in a particular area to prevent it from roaming free and causing indiscriminate havoc.

What's important here, however, is that it is made clear to the players why this particular monster did not come find them when they were smashing dinnerware in a nearby room, thus maintaining the sense of verisimilitude and of an environment that is both dynamic and logical.

Routes and Bottlenecks

Once an alarm has been sounded, the actual layout of a particular dungeon can also greatly impact how its denizens react and how the party deals with that reaction. A dungeon might have only a single pathway through, such that there's no avoiding a creature drawn to noise, or it might have multiple routes that allow the PCs to backtrack or sneak around to avoid such a creature if they are perceptive enough to hear it approaching.

A party that realizes it has attracted unwanted attention might also find bottleneck points in the dungeon—bridges, ladders, narrow passages—where they can more effectively make a heroic stand or even set their own ambush rather than simply allow themselves to be surrounded and overwhelmed by large numbers of converging enemies.

The Only Thing to Fear is Fear Itself

One of the easiest ways to deal with noisy parties is to let the players' own imaginations do the heavy lifting. Sometimes, merely giving the impression that the denizens of a dungeon have been alerted to the characters' presence is enough, even when the risk to the PCs has not objectively increased. Returning once again to Tolkien's trilogy, consider Samwise Gamgee's infiltration of the Tower of Cirith Ungol in *The Return of the King*. Sam sets off a loud alarm when he passes between the tower's Watchers, and, as far as he knows, all the many orcs he recently saw enter the tower are about to converge upon and overwhelm him. He's ready to go down fighting, and, in a wonderful instance of character development, we get to see what tough stuff Sam is really made of. Unbeknownst to him, however, the orcs have recently been fighting among themselves, leaving only one or two survivors who are more afraid of an unknown intruder than the intruder is of them. . . .

Similarly, PCs might trip an alarm or realize an enemy has escaped deeper into the dungeon to summon reinforcements, leading them to conclude a total-party-kill is headed their way. Deciding how they'll press forward in the face of this fear can provide memorable roleplaying moments or the development of clever tactics even though the source of that fear might never materialize. Maybe in this particular dungeon, its denizens have been instructed that when an alarm sounds, only some of them should go investigate, while others are meant to stay at their posts and still others should rush to protect their master in the inner sanctum. The party might have lost the element of surprise, but they won't be forced to fight a horde of monsters in the front hallway.

Or, like Sam Gamgee, the party that has tripped an alarm might eventually discover their imagined enemies have all been killed (or turned to stone, or had their minds magically addled, etc.) and they've been worrying about nothing . . . or have they? Something else obviously wrought this blow upon the dungeon's occupants, and the party might be next on the hit list. Apart from anything else, this can be a very effective way of upping the stakes while dynamically introducing new story elements or twists.

These are, of course, only a handful of methods by which the consequences of noise in dungeons can be embraced rather than avoided. Whether you choose to use these methods or simply let them serve as inspiration for your own unique approaches, the main thing to remember is that sound can be an important dungeon feature. Rather than balk at dealing with its reverberations, let sound enhance the story for your players.

RIPPLES

Frank Mentzer

Since this is a book about dungeons, first things first. What are “dungeons” and why do they exist? (Fear not, this part is real short.)

In this context, a dungeon is a setting within a fantasy role² game. Though historically dungeons were rare and small (a few rooms under a building), they have of course become ubiquitous—a solid gaming trope. Dungeons now come in all forms . . . an old mine, the decks of a spaceship, a military complex, and more. These dungeons all serve one primary function: to confine the action in the game.

A role game with a dungeon is played by a group of several people, and the game is complicated because of the ways in which they interact.

Us as Players:

- a1. Sharing non-game personal things, about our lives and opinions;
- a2. Talking about other things and people in the world;
- a3. Game-specific details—procedures, dice, etc.

Us as Our Characters:

- c1. Reflecting a life and opinions about their world;
- c2. Actions in pursuit of individual success and a career;
- c3. Participating as a team member, with specific talents.

While playing in a role game, we switch between these six viewpoints instantly, prompted by both casual dialogue and game events.

For example: while a character is in combat with a troll (c3), the player makes a quip based on a recent film (a2), and another makes a personal

²I use “role game” in preference to “roleplaying” game, because we don’t play “boardplaying” games.

reply (a1) before checking a die roll (a3). That interaction involves four of the six levels and takes less than 10 seconds. (Role games are best for the mentally agile.)

Points c2 and c3 imply a world in which the character exists—one as broad, rich, and detailed as the one we live in. Your game will probably omit the minor details, but they are firmly implied. Also implied are most of the details of basic biological function—notably ingestion, excretion, and reproduction.

When detailed context is extended to the characters' surroundings, these "ripples" are even more apparent.

Upon entering a dungeon room, a character may find an object. On close inspection it may be a relic of a forgotten civilization or unknown world. Where was it made, and what is its condition and value? Why was it left there—was it lost or discarded, or placed with purpose?

What about writing: Is there any? A little or a lot? Was it painted or inscribed or written with magic? At what height is it? Is the placement in plain sight or hidden? In what language is it?

From a realism standpoint, most fantasy dungeon designs are unlikely at best, impossible at worst. Even the best of the "famous" published ones share an underlying flaw: they are unsustainable because they did not address ripples such as: Is there sufficient airflow for creatures to survive there? Food and water? Was its very construction even possible? Or is much of its existence unspecified "magic" or just unknown³?

Most game systems spend considerable space describing rules for encounters, especially hostile ones—combat, of course, having a fundamental appeal in most such games. Thus, when a creature is encountered, that's a well-defined moment in every detail. But the existence of that creature can be a complex web of connectivity, as much as the lives of the characters and even the players themselves.

But.

When a hungry troll finds you, you don't chat about its lifestyle. It attacks, and dialogue is irrelevant. You hope to slay it, and perhaps recover some treasure that it stole from someone else. The only relevant context is where it came from.

³ On a personal note I admit to a strong bias against illogic, even in fantasy games. I want my magic to work like a science, repeatable and with defined rules. Given the far reaches of imagination a "unified field theory of magic" is hard to achieve, but we can get pretty close. This approach is not for everyone of course, but I'm a game designer, so that's my method.

We can imagine the complex regional variables that produced the dungeon, the troll, the treasure, and the characters. Some (few) may be relevant to the moment, in this case leading to the troll's loot and lair and possibly its family. Thousands of other factors may apply to even this simple encounter. When did the trolls move into their lair? Who else have they met and slain, and what treasure may be there to find?

Verisimilitude is an ideal, wonderfully appealing, but our actual results are both limited and flawed. Thus, let's take a step back and consider *why*. Why are we playing role games that have dungeons?

Fun, of course, is our prime directive. These games are pastimes, forms of entertainment⁴.

This global but oft unspoken “code” of striving for Fun-For-All should be given primary weight in the game. Rules deal with procedures, and all involved with your particular game have agreed to use (or tolerate) them. The fictional environment in which these rules are applied is more discretionary than rules, provided by either a publisher or a creative talent. And within that environment is the Dungeon.

Remember that you can always selectively dampen the Ripples to increase everyone's Fun.

If you're the GM, use the level of detail in your descriptions to indicate whether context is important. If an item found is *not* a clue about the adventure, and does not *lead* to clues, avoid an overly detailed description. Too much information may produce briefly amusing results as players search in vain for the ripples—but that wastes precious game time, and if repeated can wear on patience as well. A GM who faithfully eschews such red herrings should gain the trust of the gaming group, using these signals of detail or lack thereof to help guide the party to success.

Adversarial GMs were common in the past era of role games. In representing the myriad opponents of the characters, the GM might confuse the roles (those six levels of interaction), and become the players' opponent. Our experience after nearly 50 years playing role games has shown that the GM is on the same team as the players, working toward the same success, but with tasks different from theirs.

Players have a similar implied duty to stop the spread of ripples. Foremost, remember that it's just a game, and that the quest for realism has its limits. Trust the GM to give clues when appropriate, and also to deliberately omit tedious detail when it does not further the game or the plot.

⁴ Yet unlike all other “games” in human history, in a role game *everybody* wins; the losers are (generally speaking) just imaginary monsters. This unique feature is directly responsible for the passion that drives the hobby of role games.

Another fundamental flaw has appeared over the years: a player prioritizes his or her character over the group's Fun. That character's opinions and goals become more important than the group's success. Once again, the fault lies in zealous pursuit of a fictional reality to the exclusion of greater goals. Sometimes you must skip the details and just move on.

I make one final point, though this is for the truly Advanced GM. You presumably have an adventure all planned, complete with maps and details, ready for the characters to tackle it. You have a general idea of how everything should proceed, and possibly a timeline of expected events based on reasonably good play.

In such an approach, the GM leads and the players follow. But are you brave enough to follow *them* instead?

As you run the game, stay alert for player interest. When someone catches a clue and follows up appropriately, reward it quickly. As you do so, listen for ideas and clues from the player.

You're looking for chance comments that you can use to further the game. For example, if a player guesses a detail wrongly, consider (quickly and briefly)—would that upset your plans if it were true instead? Because, if you can use that idea and quickly make it part of the story, that player has contributed to the game. Do it repeatedly and the players realize what's happening—and become invested in the activity. It's more Fun because it's more personal.

The repeated use of player ideas by a skillful GM makes the game player-driven, which is generally agreed to be the ideal format for almost everyone. It rarely occurs, however, and is never in published (pre-planned) adventures. The "trick" is obviously to create an adventure flexible enough for such customization, and then to have the mental facility to recognize and use fleeting player ideas with a high frequency.

THE PLAYGROUND DUNGEON

The Tenets of Interactive Dungeon Design

Kelsey Dionne

When you were a kid, would you rather have gone to a museum or a playground?

Some of us would have preferred the museum (and with good reason), but many of us would have charged straight toward that playground for an afternoon of ripping the knees out of our new pants.

The thing is, playgrounds are highly engaging for kids. Young humans are at the stage in life where they want to mess with their environment and use their physicality.

Playgrounds are great places for kids with boundless energy, a penchant for make-believe, and the desire to socialize. They can race to the top of the jungle gym, climb on ropes, go down slides, throw a ball around, crawl into tunnels, dig in the sand, and try to knock each other off the monkey bars. A place of unlimited fun!

On the other hand, kids don't tend to love museums as much (museums for adults, anyhow).

And it makes sense. Your typical museum is a place where people are encouraged to look, but not touch. Museums are quiet, reverent, clean, static, and full of valuable things that absolutely cannot be broken. If you try to slide down the glass-and-steel spiral stairs in a museum, you're going to have an encounter with 1d6 security guards in short order.

Which sounds like more fun for a group of adventurers (and real people playing games)?

Adventurers Want to Mess With Stuff

Adventurers aren't just striking out into the dark fathoms of a dungeon to gaze at spiked pits from afar and muse about how the blood splatter invokes feelings of chaos and mortality. No, they're here to stick their hands into the mouths of demonic, green statues and guzzle recklessly from mysterious fountains spouting purple water.

Adventurers are a lot like kids, and dungeons are a lot like either playgrounds or museums. A dungeon should be an environment that supports the kind of behavior that kids—er, adventurers—find the most engaging. Thus, we should be giving them playgrounds, not museums. (There's a reason the Indiana Jones films take place outside the proverbial museums Indy reveres, after all.)

Interactivity Yields Engagement

So how do we make a dungeon that is a fun place for adventurers?

The key secret here is one element: interactivity.

Playground Dungeons are high in interactivity, whereas Museum Dungeons are low in it.

In a high-interactivity environment, there are a lot of elements that the characters are *encouraged to engage with*.

In a low-interactivity environment, the opposite is true: it's defined by a lack of elements that the characters will want to mess with.

Interactivity ≠ Enticing

It's important to note that while high interactivity requires things to engage with, that is not all it requires; you must ensure those things are enticing.

Imagine, if you will, a room full of buttons. Buttons on the walls, the floor, the ceiling! They're red, blue, yellow, flashing, strobing, buzzing. There are so many buttons that you could spend an hour just trying to press them all. What do they all do? Why are they different colors? Are the flashing buttons special in some way?

So far, we have a lot of interactivity going on, and a lot of enticement.

But wait! What if every time you pushed a button, you got a painful zap?

Suddenly, we go from sky-high interactivity to very low interactivity. After a few zaps, you would bail on that beautiful room that had once filled you with curiosity.

Ultimately, you were *discouraged* from pushing the buttons. Effectively, you were being punished, repeatedly, for messing with them.

Interactivity in dungeons doesn't just mean shiny buttons; it means buttons that are *worth pushing*.

The best kind of interactivity beckons characters to try their luck, with characters being rewarded for their efforts. There can be punishments for interacting too, of course. (That is, after all, the basic definition of a trap.) But that should be the exception, not the rule.

Interactivity that only results in punishment is the same thing as no interactivity at all, since it quickly trains the players to not touch anything.

Museums vs. Playgrounds: A Case Study

Let's now look at examples of what a low-interactivity dungeon (a Museum Dungeon) vs. what a high-interactivity dungeon (a Playground Dungeon) looks like:

MUSEUM DUNGEON

Everything you touch is booby-trapped. There is only one door in each room. Most rooms are empty. There is a puzzle that nobody can solve because they get soul-drained for 1d6 damage each time they pull the levers. The monsters charge immediately, attacking until the bitter end. Crossing a rope bridge requires five successful checks, all with a penalty; everyone falls in. Teleportation magic is blocked. Divination magic is blocked. You can't jam the pit trap's hinge with a cleverly placed rock; you have to roll to disable it. All the NPCs attack or betray you. All the treasure chests are mimics. All the random encounters are rust monsters.

PLAYGROUND DUNGEON

Traps are infrequent and their placement makes logical sense. Rooms have multiple entrances and exits, each with a hint about what lies beyond. The majority of rooms have something interesting to poke and prod. Puzzles let you figure out how they work with a mix of good and bad results. The monsters can be tricked or persuaded into letting you pass. Crossing a rope bridge is simple unless you're running or fighting on it. No magic is blocked. You can break traps with smart tampering that doesn't require a roll or check. Some NPCs betray you, but some help you and become allies. Some treasure chests have tricks, but not all of them. Some random encounters lead to difficult fights, but in others, you can sneak past enemies or forge new alliances with NPCs.

Do you see the difference?

In a Museum Dungeon, it's much better if you just don't touch anything, flee from all the monsters, and never talk to NPCs. It's better to observe from a distance. Look at the *Mona Lisa*, but do not throw cake at it, or you will get escorted out in handcuffs.

In a Playground Dungeon, you are rewarded for engaging with the encounters. Sure, it can be dangerous sometimes, but it's often worth the risk. Who knows, eating the fuzzy, orange moss might actually heal you!

Designing Yourself Into a Corner

But wait, you might say. Most dungeons don't take their designs to such an extreme as the above examples. That's true, of course. Most GMs have a natural sense for when things have gone too far. Only your weird cousin Jimmy puts an undetectable pit trap in every other 5-foot square, and nobody likes playing in his games.

When we're neck-deep in our own design process, we can get lost in the rush of creativity and challenge-tuning and forget to check whether what we're making is interactive and enticing.

Here's an example of how even a thoughtful designer can go wrong:

THE CASE OF THE MAGMA VAMPIRE

We've decided we want to make the coolest set-piece dungeon battle ever, so we are going to have a flying vampire over a boiling field of magma dotted with little rocky platforms the characters can use as stepping stones. Epic!

Oh, yes, this is the fight of our dreams. We've been waiting to make a magma vampire lair for ages, and we can already envision the harrowing battle that will take place inside it.

But what if the characters used magic to ignore the perilous stepping stones and fly right over to the vampire? We'd better make it so this vampire can negate flying magic.

And, actually . . . it wouldn't be a titanic boss fight if the characters negotiate with and then enter the service of the vampire, becoming her evil lieutenants. Power is tempting, after all. We'd better make it so the vampire attacks on sight, no questions asked.

And it wouldn't be a mega-battle of legend if the holy character just sizzled the vampire to ash with a magical blast of sunlight. Better make the vampire immune to holy magic.

Obviously, there can't be any way in the dungeon to drain the magma out of the room. Otherwise, the environment would lose a great deal of its danger. No magma? No fun!

And—

Record scratch. Hang on a second—what have we done?

We've accidentally removed all the interactivity and enticement from this vampire fight. We wanted to force the perfect battle to happen, but, instead, we choked off the ability to engage with anything. This vampire's

lair is a *don't touch* museum, not a playground. There's nothing for the characters to do except one thing: charge straight over to the vampire and start swinging.

If we're not careful, we can design our way into these corners when designing our dungeons. In the quest for interactivity, we have to remember what's fun for the characters, and not lose sight of the consequences of what we add in or take away.

Fun First and Foremost

When striving to create fun, we should always lean toward giving and allowing, rather than taking away. That often means setting up a situation and then relinquishing control over how the characters will solve it.

Fun is finding a hostile group of goblins and then slinging insults back and forth like a grade school comeback fight—the losers let the winners pass. No combat necessary!

Fun is coming up with a totally ludicrous plan to climb the sheer walls of a dragon's cave and drop a magically expanding iron tower on his head while he slumbers.

Fun is an interactive playground where you can mess with countless things and be rewarded for taking those risks.

So don't make your dungeon a sensible, sterile place with clean floors and signs that threaten, "Look, Don't Touch!" Make it a mythical place of excitement, surprise, heroics, and drama—a playground, not a museum.

ZEN AND THE ART OF LOOT DISTRIBUTION

Bruce Nesmith

If you're GMing a campaign, you might be dreading the thought of handing out loot to your players. If you're too stingy, the players will likely grumble. If you give out too much, it breaks the game.

Fear not, there is hope. There are ways your players can definitely amass a suitable hoard of wealth and goodies without ever breaking your game. All it takes is some planning and up-front work on your part. What, you thought this would be easy?

Let's start by looking at your campaign. What's it all about? Is it a story-centric campaign where whole sessions can be spent without rolling a single die? Is it a casual gaming environment with loose rules and a friendly give-and-take with the GM? Is it a campaign full of players who optimize their characters—who know the mechanics backwards and forwards and are extremely familiar with the magic items available in the core sourcebooks?

No judgment here—none of these are “better” or “worse” than the others, and obviously there are cases where there's overlap. Fun is fun, and you get to choose how to have it. But understanding your campaign's identity will guide you in how best to hand out loot.

Story-Centric Campaigns

Let's start with story-centric campaigns, since they are the easiest to manage. These campaigns aren't about the numbers. So you can't just hand

out a vanilla longsword +2 here. Your loot should be as story-centric as . . . well, your *story*. Items that talk, with full personalities. Things with fun curses or strange restrictions. Objects with histories. These are going to be your bread-and-butter. Money? *Pfft*. Your players probably don't even care much about it. As the GM, you can, of course, control how rich they become by limiting how much you give out. But finding very little money may seem strange to experienced players (even if they don't care about it). In such cases, you can have tax collectors make regular visits if need be, with their own motives and storylines—or find other means of siphoning off money to keep their finances from becoming astronomical.

Casual Campaigns

Loot dispersal in casual campaigns is a bit more challenging. Give out items that do quirky and funny things. Boots that let you jump greater distances . . . but only if you jump backwards. Weapons that function as +1 only if you shout a personalized insult to your opponent as you attack. The zanier the better. The goal is to get everyone laughing at what results.

In this kind of campaign, give the PCs just enough coin to get themselves into trouble. They likely don't want to have to worry about their cash reserves, so give them enough to buy a small boat or house (. . . that's haunted). Or to hire a servant (. . . that has a bad attitude). Or maybe to have a bard following them around singing of their deeds (. . . who secretly resents them). They'll enjoy getting and spending the money . . . and then dealing with the consequences of their purchases.

Optimizer Campaigns

Figuring out how much (and what kind of) loot to dole out to a group of optimizer players is the most difficult scenario to manage. Players who love this kind of game are typically the sort that tend to know the rules and lore very well and are familiar with all of the magic items available in the core sourcebooks.

The advice below for laying out loot rewards also works well for casual and story campaigns. However, in those cases, make the loot appropriate as described above. Those player still appreciate a good loot progression, even if it's not the most important part of the game for them.

The first step to take here is to determine how long you anticipate your campaign lasting. Not in years, but in player levels. This can be a difficult question, because campaigns frequently fizzle out sooner than anticipated or sometimes go on well beyond initial expectations. Err on the side of longer, since it's better to be prepared.

Next, map out all the major magic items you want to give your players

at every level, from level 1 to level 20 (or to wherever you think your campaign will stop). Yes, every level. Throw out those loot generation tables. They're fine for shorter campaigns, casual play, or minor items, but not for *our* players.

Doing this is not as daunting as it sounds. It also doesn't have to be perfect. It's a starting point that you'll revise as your campaign matures. Let's start with the classic +1, +2, and +3 weapons and armor—items which form the backbone of magic item rewards. In a campaign that goes from level 1 to level 20, give out weak or common single-use items below level 5, such as potions, give out +1 or uncommon items at level 5, +2 or rare items at level 10, +3 or very rare items at level 15, and legendary items and/or artifacts at level 17. This controls player power and gives them several levels to enjoy each item before getting better ones.

For a more typical campaign that might end at, say, level 14, you could give out +1 or uncommon items at level 4, +2 or rare items at level 8, and +3 or very rare items at level 12, etc. For shorter campaigns, you might wish to cap item power at +2/rare in order to keep control of player power.

Now you have to figure out how spread them out amongst the PCs since it doesn't exactly make sense for every player to suddenly get a full gear upgrade all at the same time. So, choose the player that most needs an item upgrade to get one first. ("Needs" can mean that player is underpowered, or it can mean that player is one that just psychologically needs to get a reward sooner in order to have fun.) I don't recommend giving out an armor upgrade at the same level as the weapon upgrade. From there (or from the start!), you can let the story dictate which players get items and when.

Once you've done all this, you'll have a list of items to give out for every single level from about level 4 all the way to level 20. At every level, somebody is getting something. Given that you have multiple players, that's probably multiple item upgrades each level. Try to give those out in different sessions. With this list of items in hand, you can now plan your adventures accordingly, and your group is constantly getting tangible rewards on a regular basis, which makes them happy.

As your campaign proceeds, you can adjust this list as necessary. Miscellaneous items and minor items can be rewarded in sessions that don't give a major upgrade. Not all +2 items are created equal. You can give away weaker ones at first and upgrade to better ones to help stretch out the reward conga line. However, remember that players almost always pass old items to others in the group when they get an upgrade. So, if you replace a

player's longsword +2 with a Flame Tongue, someone else in the party just got a longsword +2, too.

As for gold and riches, lay it out on the same track as the items or on a parallel track. Consider what money can actually buy in your campaign. Horses? Potions? Scrolls? Underlings? Boats? Assume they spend nothing on anything else, because they probably won't. They need to be able to spend their money on useful, fun things, but you can control that by limiting how much cash they earn and limiting availability of those items. Single-use items like potions and scrolls are great rewards that have limited impact on game balance, so long as they aren't available in quantity.

Last Words of Advice

The whole idea here is to maximize fun. A good GM wants to keep his players wanting more, whether it's more story, more laughs, more loot, or all three. Loot is an important part of that, but it isn't the only part. Talk to your players. Ask them what they are looking for in a campaign. Then lay out the loot accordingly, and hopefully my advice helps with that.

D&D&D&D&D

The 5 Ds of Dungeon Design

Rajan Khanna

For many, the word “dungeon” conjures up a very specific image—subterranean stone rooms filled with a variety of monsters, treasure, and traps. Such locations are classics for a reason—they work. The fun of exploring conventional dungeons is a large part of why fantasy roleplaying is so popular. But even the old reliable dungeon crawl can get stale. Deconstructing what makes a dungeon work can allow a GM to create fresh and unconventional dungeons.

The dungeon, in the context of RPGs, has surpassed its literal meaning to become something larger and greater than a mere subterranean prison. A dungeon isn’t just a location; it’s an experience with a very specific feel, one that can be applied to a variety of settings and circumstances.

So what are the design elements that are essential to giving us that dungeon feel?

1. A Dungeon Must Be: Discrete

A dungeon is a singular, contained entity. It’s not a wilderness, a sprawling forest, an ocean, or a solar system. It’s a bounded location, whether that location is an ancient tomb, a derelict ship, or an asteroid. Size matters not, as a wise person said—a dungeon can be as large as a city or as small as a mausoleum—but it should have borders, an inside, and an outside.

2. A Dungeon Must Be: Distinct

A good dungeon isn't generic; it has a unique identity. Instead of a random, unnamed tomb, it's the Tomb of Anatep the Mummy Lord. Not a nondescript derelict ship, but the Wreck of the Crimson Sparrow. A dungeon's identity helps inform not just what lurks inside, but also its appearance and feel. What's more exciting for players—exploring the abandoned mine down by the lake or plundering the depths of King Glammering's Mine where, legends say, the hammers stopped falling long ago? Giving a dungeon a distinct identity can elevate everything in it (and looks better on a t-shirt when your party manages to survive). To help make your dungeon distinct, figure out its story. Ask how it was created or where it came from and what happened from then until now.

3. A Dungeon Must Contain: Danger

An empty tomb, or one containing only inert objects and corpses, isn't a dungeon: it's a set piece. Hazards are integral to a dungeon, whether they come in the form of enemies, puzzles, or traps. There should be threats galore, and braving a dungeon should carry the risk of death. That's where the thrill comes from, and the triumph, should the party survive. That doesn't mean danger has to lurk around every corner (as the next D will help illustrate), but there should be some element of danger that isn't easily ignored.

4. A Dungeon Must Be: Diverse

While a dungeon should have a unifying story or theme, drawing on its Distinct identity, it should also contain a variety of experiences within it. Dungeon rooms with similar contents or encounters quickly grow stale. The most beloved classic dungeons contain a bewildering mix of strange and bizarre elements, which is a big part of their appeal. By focusing on our third D, Danger, you can vary the threats between creatures, puzzles, and traps. But just as important are rooms *without* Danger, to keep your players guessing, and to allow for a break in the tension, making the next threat all the more effective.

Your creatures, puzzles, and traps should vary as well. Even if your dungeon's identity dictates that it only contains the undead, those undead should be a variety of different types in order to keep each encounter fresh. The amount of diversity will depend on your dungeon's Distinct identity and how logical and thematic you want it to be, but the best dungeons contain surprises and should give the players a variety of different challenges to face.

5. A Dungeon Must Contain: Dividends

Dungeons usually provide rewards to those brave enough to explore them, treasures which often come in the form of money or objects—though, depending on the dungeon, this could also include information, power, allies, or even revenge. The Dividends might be discovered *in* the dungeon, or they might be awarded after the dungeon (or both!). After all, our heroes have to have a reason to brave the dangers of the dungeon in the first place, and not every adventure should be about saving the world.

Now that we've identified our five elements of dungeon design, we can apply them to a variety of locations and settings. The following are examples of unconventional dungeons built with the five Ds in mind.

Living Dungeons

A dungeon can be organic, made out of a living (or recently living) thing. Let's consider a couple of examples.

THE MOTHER TREE

Let's imagine a giant tree in a forest with chambers carved out of (or maybe even grown inside) its trunk. The tree is large enough to house a small community. Perhaps elves lived there, or a society of druids, or an alien race. It's Discrete, certainly, a singular tree, self-contained. To make it Distinct, let's call it The Mother Tree, a magical, ancient oak that welcomed, fed, and took care of the creatures living inside of it.

So where's the Danger? We can develop that along with the tree's history. For centuries, The Mother Tree lived in a kind of symbiosis with the creatures within it, each supporting the other, but then its roots became tainted. Perhaps a denizen of the tree was experimenting with dark magics and (accidentally or purposely) summoned a great evil. Perhaps an asteroid contaminated with an alien infection contaminated the water supply that the tree's roots drank from. Whatever the reason, the taint spread through the great oak and to the denizens within. Some of the inhabitants killed one another. Others went mad. The most ardent of the tree's servants were corrupted and became perverted, dark druids. Outsiders shunned the tree. It became known as a dark place, once green and pure, now evil.

The Diverse elements can come from the various remaining inhabitants. Perhaps some of the dead live on as undead. Perhaps some of the rooms contain intricate traps created by paranoid denizens, now long dead.

When it comes to Dividends, the tree would contain the accumulated wealth and possessions of its denizens over the years, and perhaps there are artifacts once stored there by the druids, or special, unique devices created by forest aliens. All of these elements combine to give us a dungeon, one that isn't underground, or made of stone, but which contains all of the elements we expect.

TIRANNIUS THE DESTROYER

Now let's imagine a colossal, kaiju-sized being, one that is either dead or in stasis. A creature such as this is certainly Discrete, and if we give the creature a name (Tirannius the Destroyer), and a history, it is also Distinct. Danger and Diversity (which often influence one another) can come from any creatures that live inside the beast symbiotically (or parasitically), the Destroyer's own natural defenses (its immune system, perhaps), and the body itself (digestive acids, constricting organs, etc.).

As for Dividends, this kind of dungeon likely contains less lore and treasure than some others might, but the PCs might venture inside the body to find a valuable substance only obtainable from the creature's organs—and who's to say that the creature like this one can't have swallowed items and objects that remain in its craw or gullet?

Mental Dungeons

A dungeon has to be a place, but it doesn't necessarily have to be a *location*. Consider, for example, a dungeon existing in a creature's mind.

THE MIND OF MISSEMA THE MAD

Missema the Mad is a powerful wizard who has been afflicted with a strange madness that has resulted in amnesia, but holds, somewhere in her mind, knowledge necessary to further the party's goals. The only way to unlock the information, and/or restore Missema's mind, is to enter her mind and find it. The PCs might enter her mind through magical or technological means, finding within a mental construct of a wizard's tower or insane asylum. Missema's mind is Discrete and certainly Distinct, tied as it is to a singular person. Danger and Diversity could arise from creatures and other interactions drawn from Missema's past. Perhaps instead of rooms, the party has to make their way through different memories, resolving each one before proceeding to the next, forced to fight bogeymen and enemies from Missema's history, or forced to solve puzzles that help resolve her inner conflicts. Perhaps there's even treasure, appearing as objects in Missema's mind, but are really sources of information, or even spells, that exist in the real world.

Unconventional Landscapes

Sometimes creating an interesting or fresh dungeon can be as simple as setting it in a different environment, like the ocean.

UNDERWATER OUBLIETTES

Imagine a dungeon in a massive coral formation (Discrete) formed by a lost underwater civilization known as the Namorians (Distinct) and now populated by a variety of sea creatures (Danger and Diversity). Or the underwater location could be a sunken ship, the lost *Star of Nostros*, which had set sail with its cargo hold filled with the treasure and holy relics of the Caspian Empire, now home to a variety of sea creatures, and waterlogged undead, who use it as a home.

Or perhaps it's a derelict submarine filled with stolen Nazi gold. In addition to the environmental hazards of getting to the sub, the dead Nazis still haunt it as zombies and ghosts. It could instead be a crashed spacecraft of the Nutari, filled with powerful advanced technology . . . and dangerous alien specimens that were released from their holding cells when the ship crashed. Perhaps the ship is the lost *Fortune's Favor*, a ghost ship cursed to travel the sea, and the party must board it and make their way through various parts of the ship to reach the source of its unlife in the deepest holds of the ship and put its inhabitants to rest.

Otherworldly Dungeons

Dungeons can also be otherworldly, dealing with dimensions, planes, or even other planets.

THE PLANAR HUB

Imagine a dungeon that has, instead of doors leading to different rooms, a series of portals leading to different planar regions. Enter the portal to your left, and you're transported to an ancient forest glade defended by sylvan creatures. Take the portal to your right and you end up on a rock bridge crossing a magma pool menaced by flying fire creatures. To add more Danger, perhaps the portals are one-way, forcing the PCs to find a way back to their home plane.

In a science fiction game, you might have different locations linked by alien teleportation devices, each keyed to a specific location. The PCs might be trying to find out what happened to the scientist studying the devices, encountering the various alien creatures and malfunctioning technological devices that fill the path across worlds.

DELVING INTO THE DOMAIN OF THE DREAM KING

Or consider a dungeon of lost and forgotten dreams, kept alive in some distant dream realm. Each “room” is an individual’s dream, containing their hopes, memories, and fears, each of those individuals making it a Distinct location, Diverse within the larger dungeon. The Danger comes from nightmare creatures and situations (essentially traps) that menace those traveling through them. And the Dividends might come in the form of treasure that could be a mix of dream items that make traversing the dreamscape easier and information that can be used back in the real world.

These are just some examples of what you can create with the five Ds. There are countless others, limited only by your imagination. Play, experiment, and give it some thought. You might end up with something new and exciting for your players to explore.

ONCE UPON A DUNGEON

Erin Roberts

Every place has a story to tell—a history that leaves its imprint on the walls, is altered by the needs and choices of those who have occupied the space, and exerts force, however small, on the adventurers that pass through it. Whether you tell that story in meticulous detail or simply let it fill the atmosphere of your dungeon, leaning into the legacy left behind by a dungeon’s glorious (or sordid) past helps to add depth, cohesion, and tension to any adventure.

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

While dungeons can come in many different forms and flavors, most are either **natural** or **constructed**. Natural dungeons are part of the environment around them. Some, like caves and tunnels, are inherent to the land, while others, like burrows and lairs, were created by the activities of animals or other creatures. In a fantasy world, the creation of these natural formations can be larger than life—a dragon hollowing out caves to hide its treasures, the crystallized remains of an otherworldly being—but they’re all caused by something that’s a natural process within that world.

This gives them one big thing in common—they weren’t created to be traipsed through. Natural dungeons are great settings for environmental hazards—hindrances like dim lighting or slippery ground that make movement and combat more treacherous, persistent threats like intolerable heat or toxins in the air that cause harm to characters over

time, and obstacles like rockslides or underwater lakes that block easy forward movement. These may also be present in the natural sections of a constructed dungeon, like the seemingly inert volcano a mine occupies, or the natural caverns a palace uses for storage. A few additional things to consider as you develop a natural dungeon include:

SIZE & SHAPE

How large are the passageways left behind by this creature or natural phenomena? Cavernous passages can create echoes that make it hard to track where danger is coming from, while tiny burrows could force a party to separate if not all characters can make it through.

SURROUNDINGS

What are the walls made of and how were they formed? Is there evidence of this creation in the form of wall materials, marks, or the contents of the space? A column of magma pouring through a natural crevice will leave behind a much different tunnel than one created by the burrowing of a giant worm.

LIGHT

Where does illumination, if any, come from? Is there anything that affects or changes the amount of light in different sections of the dungeon?

PRESENT IMPACT

Is whatever created this dungeon still active? A dungeon formed from seismic activity could still be at risk from earthquakes, while one carved from a creature's hibernation burrow could see it returning home just as the PCs are in its deepest section.

THE ELEMENTS

Which elements other than earth exist in this space? Air could manifest in a breeze from outside or toxic air from an underground vent; water could be present in anything from dripping stalactites in a natural cave to an underground lake; and fire (or the lack of it) could pose a threat in a natural setting in or around a volcano or glacier.

We Built This City

Constructed dungeons can range even more widely than natural ones, including everything from abandoned mines to heavily fortified strongholds to decadent palaces, but they were generally all created by an individual or group. Determining that creator's purpose and motivation can help in building out the dungeon's basic blueprint, determining the types of rooms to include, and figuring out what makes it stand out from others that serve a similar function.

Purpose is the easier of these to determine—essentially, it asks what type of building the dungeon was intended to be. Was it a housing complex? A warehouse? A stronghold? A community hospital? Once you've determined this, it can be helpful to find a real-world analogue that serves a similar purpose, both to get ideas for interesting rooms to include in your design and to identify major commonalities—the iconic rooms that players will use to identify and try to understand the structure they're exploring. In a castle, these might include a ballroom and a throne room, while in a mine, they might be the caverns being mined and some way to move materials to and from the surface.

Once the purpose is set, the motives of the structure's creator come into play. A palace built for a self-obsessed ruler might be filled with statues in their image, elaborate tapestries of their great deeds, and endless mirrors, while a hospital designed by someone who cared more about cruelty than care might have more space dedicated to a secret crypt or experimental lab than to medicine or beds. Motivation can also be used in developing natural dungeons created by creatures, but is likely to be more instinctive, driven by the needs of hunting, mating, or self-protection.

Both purpose and motivation can be used directly in a dungeon plan at its earliest stages: selecting the rooms to include. In a shorter adventure, iconic rooms might be the only ones included. In a larger adventure, they're good to spread out among rooms that are less typical but still make sense for the building's purpose or highlight its creator's motives. I often like putting one room that's emblematic of the building's purpose toward the entrance to help set expectations about the kind of setting characters will find in the dungeon and then use another as the location for the final encounter.

Once you have an idea of the rooms that you're including in your dungeon, think about the deeper motivations of whoever decided to create it. One way to do this is to ask yourself: *What kind of [set pieces/details] would a [room] meant to [serve this motivation] have in it?* Set pieces—the defining items that are often described when first entering a room—are a great way to capture what the creator believed was the most important element of the space or the values they most wanted to publicly proclaim. A giant chandelier might speak to wanting to impress others, an altar to the importance of faith, and a shifting magical wall to protecting the truth behind illusion.

Details of a space, though often more practical, can serve a dual purpose. Large structural or decorative elements like pillars or hanging rugs can be ducked behind, barrels and containers can be hidden in, slippery floors and debris can restrict movement. They can also help to reinforce both the purpose and the motivation of the creator of the dungeon. Making

these key details specific or using interesting names can do a lot of the storytelling for you. If a room filled with barrels or divided by pillars is interesting, one with alchemical vats and pillars carved to resemble the gods is that much more so.

The Years Start Coming and They Don't Stop

Whether your dungeon is natural or constructed, it has also been shaped by its occupants and the ravages of time. Before focusing on who currently lurks in the dungeon, it's always good to think about who, if anyone, might have left their mark on the place along the way. Maybe a band of thieves moved in and added traps throughout, some of which have yet to be disarmed, or an artist's collective painted bold murals on any empty walls. Consider the visitors who may have altered, added, or taken from the space over the years, as well as what drew them there and why they ultimately left. This is also a great way to add interesting treasures to the space that were left behind by previous occupants.

Next, decide whether anyone is currently occupying the space. If it is fully abandoned, consider who the last occupants were, why they left, and how you can capture that in the objects and items found within the dungeon. Perhaps the former occupants fell to a curse and their bodies litter the halls, or the place was abandoned during a siege, leaving fully set tables in the wake of their departure. An abandoned dungeon also creates another opportunity for environmental threats. In addition to the ones mentioned for natural dungeons, constructed dungeons can easily fall apart as structures corrode over time or lose the magical protection that kept them together. Those that remain intact may have been infested with bugs, mold, and other environmental hazards.

If your dungeon is currently occupied, the current occupants may be a danger to the characters, but they've also likely had an impact on the space around them, either adapting to the physical space or shifting it to fit their own needs and desires. As with the originator of the dungeon, these changes are likely to be driven by the purpose and motivation of the current occupants. What brought them here? Do they intend to stay? What is it about this place that appeals to them? What do they wish was different?

Changes from the original purpose of a dungeon can also be a good way to hint to players about what they may expect further into the dungeon, building suspense that culminates in the revelation of an enemy, secret, or hidden feature. A guard rotation might have supplies stored along its route that are found before the first patrol is ever spotted, while a group who has retreated to a warehouse out of fear of a terrible curse may have set up protective enchantments throughout its walls that still can't keep it at bay.

Weaving the Threads

While the backstory of a dungeon can end up becoming quite in-depth, what's important in an adventure is how it affects players. In some cases, the weight of a dungeon's history is there mostly to add depth and build tension—an atmospheric approach. To make the dungeon's history part of the atmosphere, select two to three key ideas that you want to weave into the space. Are there puzzles, traps, or monsters that are suggested by the dungeon's history? Can they be used to raise the stakes? If, for example, characters are in an abandoned mine that has been overgrown with toxic slime, they might see only a hint of the substance at first, only to have it fully cover a room further in. Anything that recurs in a dungeon in this way, growing larger, more dangerous, or physically closer to characters as they progress, helps to make things seem more urgent and give the dungeon a sense of life and dynamism. This works especially well if you can use something thematically related to the element you're highlighting in the climax of the adventure, whether it is part of the mechanics of a final monster or simply exists as a set piece within the room.

If you have a more defined narrative that you'd like to tell throughout the dungeon, like the tragic story of one of its occupants, or a more detailed history of how it came to be the way it is, instead focus on two to three key parts of the story and reinforce each with décor, treasures, or dangers that align with those facts. If doomed lovers haunt the basement of the inn they died in, for example, their love letters could be scattered throughout the inn's rooms and their engagement or wedding rings could be among the treasures. Remember, though, that it often takes players 3–4 times encountering the same information to pick it up as a clue, so it's always good to have a way to directly deliver the information if players take it in without putting all the pieces together.

And with that, you are fully equipped and ready to build a dungeon whose history continues to resonate through its walls and into the journeys of your players. Enjoy the adventure!

FANCY DESCRIPTIVE WORDS I LEARNED FROM GARY GYGAX

Barbara J. Webb

I come by my geekiness honestly. My earliest memories are of watching my parents and their friends sitting around the green card tables in the living room, with paper maps and sheets of numbers, rolling all those pretty dice. I grew up in a *Dungeons & Dragons* household, and it's no wonder it's such a big part of my life today.

When I was twelve, I started my first serious forays into the basement shelves where all the best books were kept. Tolkien and Cherryh and McCaffrey, with their swords and dragons on the covers, but also the shelf with these brightly colored, thin books with titles like *The Temple of Elemental Evil*. I started reading those, too, meeting the giants, the drow, and those people in Saltmarsh with all their sinister secrets.

This was my real introduction to *D&D*. Before I ever rolled my first d20 or calculated my first THAC0, I was reading the modules and putting together the stories in my head. Without a DM to guide me, I was entering these worlds and putting together the stories they presented. (Not to mention, learning all kinds of new and fascinating words!)

Looking back, one of the things that amazes me now was how much of that story was being told, not through direct narration or dialogue—those oft-employed fiction-writer tools—but through the environmental design and description.

A *D&D* module is a static presentation. Unlike a book, where the story is moving forward from beginning to end, the module is presenting you with a snapshot of a situation and setting that will only start moving once the PCs show up to engage with it. The events—all the kinetic energy—will be brought by the players, and as any DM will be quick to tell you, there is no predicting what actions they will take.

So, how do we create a rich adventure that tells a living story without railroading the players?

You Open the Door and See . . .

Environmental storytelling can create a depth of history, a sense of character, a *world*, without necessitating the PCs do anything but move through the dungeon.

It can also give the players an active role in discovering the story. Instead of information being handed to them by an NPC or DM-driven exposition, clues are seeded in the environment, giving the players an opportunity to extrapolate from their own observations, ask questions, formulate theories. They get to be full participants in the narrative process, which keeps everyone engaged in the game.

One of the earliest and best examples of this approach was the T1–4 series of modules for *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, packaged together as *The Temple of Elemental Evil*. Written by Gary Gygax and Frank Mentzer, this is a dungeon I have come back to over and over—both to run as a DM and to read for inspiration. It was full of history, conflict, and drama—much of which was communicated entirely through the environments and descriptions. (Also, some really snappy poetry.)

The Temple of Elemental Evil (ToEE) was a massive dungeon beneath a ruined church, its multiple elemental factions being directed by the demoness Zugtgmoym and demigod Iuz. There was an extensive history of the ToEE's waxing and waning power against the forces of good, but also inter-factional politics and, on occasion, full-out warfare. Many of the NPCs, from the leaders of the elemental factions, to the former adventurers now undercover keeping watch on the temple, to the rising stars of evil looking to find a place for themselves, were present, but in the static snapshot, that is the best any module can do. So the history, the story, a lot of the heavy lifting was done in the descriptions themselves. As we see here:

The south wall of this chamber bears a bas-relief⁵ of a hideous head [...] remains of a sandstone altar lie in fragments before this sculpture. (Area 115)

⁵The module does not hyphenate “bas-relief,” but my editor informs me the word needs one. I’ll let him argue it out with Mr. Gygax.

For at least 100 feet of its length, this [...] corridor is covered with bones. Skeletons of humans and humanoids are mixed in a terrible jumble. Many skulls and loose bones seem gnawed. The complete skeletons, though, still wear sundered armor, dented caps, or sprawl by broken shields. Bent and broken weapons likewise testify to [...] a hundred, two, perhaps more all met death here. (Area 125)

These are just two examples from the first level of the temple, which has suffered the brunt of the years of conflict. Many of the rooms are like 115, in that they had a previous purpose (either clearly discernible or lost to time) but are now ruins or the lair of interlopers. We can infer that the temple was once much larger, more powerful, but is now struggling to hold on to its own ground. As we move into the lower levels of the dungeon, we see less of this decay and more of the current temple's presence and strength with more rooms in active use or with a clear, sinister purpose. But even in the lower levels, we have rooms like Area 224, described as "[once] one of the many guest rooms of the temple. It now holds a cot [...]" Or Area 317, once a pleasure chamber, now home to the ogres who have claimed the space.

The walls of this colorful [...] room are covered with mosaics, depicting all sorts of weird and depraved scenes. The floor is a mosaic of like scenes. A few pieces of broken furniture are stacked near the fireplace in the west wall. Two heaps of rugs, skins, etc. are by the east wall [...] two small pots stand near the fireplace [...]"

There are so many layers here! This room had a *purpose*. In those few words, the adventure tells us that the dungeon had a life before the current monsters moved in—all the while pointing toward a former glory and power the temple has now lost (and is trying to regain). This is history made clear.

The Demon Lord is in the Details

Little details in the descriptions can also be used to hint at personality or to give the PCs clues. For example, on the lowest level of the temple is room 404, the home of Senshock, Lord Wizard of the Greater Temple. He's described as a strategist with great attention to detail. If the PCs find his room, in addition to the expected fancy furniture and wizard accessories, they discover that Senshock has a collection of wooden eggs that are "nicely crafted puzzles in which the pieces are cleverly interlocked." So even these *wooden eggs* are doing double duty! In addition to telling us about Senshock's hobbies, they're a cue that the ornate wardrobe in his room might have similar hidden compartments.

By contrast, Senshock's rival Hedrack is a hedonist and sensualist, less intellectual, but with an aspiring artistic bent. How do we know? His rooms contain ermine furs, bejeweled silk robes, and many other expensive signs of decadence. Among those are two "ceramic plates, hand painted but poorly done"—painted by Hedrack himself—and a bookshelf crammed with "reference works on various subjects, with an emphasis on battle strategy and tactics, personal improvement, leadership, and management. Most appear little used." So Hedrack is not a big reader and paints pottery (poorly) in his spare time, while surrounding himself in luxury. Those are fun details and give the DM some great hooks to playing Hedrack.

Lights, Camera, Action!

Let's not overlook the value of a fantastically-described, glorious set piece. For example, area 213, the Hall of Verdigris (the most dramatic use of seaweed I have ever seen in the history of *D&D*.)

This huge hall [...] has an arched ceiling some 30 feet overhead. The many buttresses and arches form a tracery of shadowy dimness; the ceiling's exact height is not discernible. The floor and walls are covered in slabs of polished stone, apparently azurite-malachite from the swirls of blue intermingled with the deep green. Some magic has evidently been placed here, for a soft cloudy greenish luminosity seeps from the walls and floor, seemingly floating in the air, making the whole chamber appear as if deep underwater. This impression is enhanced by the bronze doors, fountain, and other work; all are covered with verdigris. Even the damp air seems to smell of the sea.

In the middle of the west wall is a great sheet of bronze, a bas-relief of an underwater vista—seaweed, shells, and various forms of marine life. The head of a fish-like thing projects from this, a most hideous visage. Its ghastly maw emits a stream of water, which falls into a tiered series of four basins. The fourth and largest never overflows, so it must have a drain system somewhere.

It goes on to describe other equally ornate details of the room, including an altar, more statues, and a drapery fashioned from seaweed and water.

This is amazing detail, full of things for PCs to poke at. The room itself is a puzzle, with traps and rewards and monsters, with clues to everything contained in the description. For example, to properly approach the altar, an offering is placed first in the stream of water, then must be submerged in each descending basin. If the fountain were the only part of the room described in such detail, its importance would be too obvious, but with it being only one part of a larger, intricate description, that leaves room for the PCs to have to examine, discuss, and consider. It keeps them active participants in the session.

Thoroughly Modern Mapping

The rise of virtual tabletops like Roll20, Foundry, and Fantasy Grounds—combined with easy-to-use map-making tools like Dungeondraft, Inkarnate, and Dungeon Alchemist—gives us a whole new array of tools for environmental storytelling. We’ve moved past the days of the “Shitty Combat Map™” hastily sketched on graph paper (or, if you were super fancy, a wet-or-dry-erase mat). Now, with a minimal investment of time, you can create beautiful, interesting maps for your players to move through. You can build a layered history with objects and decorative choices, point to personality aspects of the NPC inhabitants, and build intricate puzzles and interactions all through the environmental details you choose (or choose not) to include.

Conclusion

Not all of us can make a dungeon like Gary Gygax, but next time you’re talking about or designing a “classic dungeon crawl,” keep these lessons in mind. And remember: every bas-relief can have a story to tell, and every curtain of verdigris can be a part of something bigger.

ON QUESTIONABLE NAPS

Basheer Ghouse

The last zombie fell to the floor. Abdulhamid scrubbed gore from his sword as he looked over his comrades. Light injuries, but nothing serious, thanks in part to Khalid's timely spellcasting.

"Well," said Khalid suddenly, "That was a solid workday. Let's make camp, yeah? Pick up tomorrow."

"We woke up two hours ago!" protested Abdulhamid.

"Right, but that was my last fireball. So. . . . Beddy-bye time."

If you've DMed for a while, you've been there. The players get through a moderately difficult fight where they burned some resources unwisely, assess their surroundings, and make an immediate tactical decision: they're going to take an extremely long nap. Now. In the middle of a dungeon.

Commonly known as the "Fifteen Minute Adventuring Day," I was introduced to this concept in high school as the "Guild-Mandated Nap." While generally viewed as a playstyle problem, the short adventuring day can also be seen as a dungeon design problem.

When players try to take a rest mid-adventure, they're not purposefully spiting you and probably aren't trying to break the game's balance. They're reacting to a perceived threat according to their own assumptions, which they may not even realize that they're making. This isn't a wrong or malicious decision on their part; it's the intersection of awkward incentives.

At the core of this conundrum is a game-mechanics equation. The consequence for failure in an adventure is death or, worse, narrative

consequences! Players want to avoid this or are at least gamely trying to mitigate the possibility. However, they have extremely limited information and a defined set of mechanical tools with which to do so. As such, they spend resources to avoid consequences during encounters (or take damage and lose those resources anyway). For most characters, the most reliable way to recover resources is to sleep for one to eight hours, regardless of how appropriate a decision that is given their circumstances.

At each step here, there's a failure state that pushes your game toward Questionable Naps.

The first is an information imbalance. The players don't know how difficult that last encounter was compared to what still lies before them and don't know how many resources they're going to need for the next stretch. They only know what resources they currently have and how to get them back.

This means that if they burn some powerful spells on a random encounter—or lose more health than expected in a given room—they can't tell if they've just burned through the floor's most dangerous encounter or if they've got five more encounters just like it remaining. Resting regularly—and thus going into more encounters with more resources—becomes a seemingly sure-fire way to counteract that. Meanwhile, the standard counteraction provided by many dungeons, interrupting the rest with random encounters, only takes more resources and makes further exploration less predictable, incentivizing completing the rest further.

The problem with solving this issue is that the unpredictability of a dungeon is part of the appeal. You want encounters that players unexpectedly find a clever solution to . . . or ones that prove vastly more brutal than you'd dared to imagine. This is part of the fun.

Managing the Nap

So what do we do about this conundrum?

One way is to signpost encounters you know are meant to be climactic, or to signpost rooms the PCs are meant to rest in and use as a staging area into the rest of a particularly large dungeon.

Admittedly, signposting runs the risk of breaking verisimilitude. Marking every boss fight with a giant skull over the door is a bit obvious, after all. But in most dungeons, there are naturalistic ways to do this. High-ranking humanoids might have guards outside of their door due to their importance, powerful monsters might leave piles of bones outside of their lair, ritual rooms and grand throne rooms indicate the importance of a fight within them by their simple immensity and layout. More importantly, these all tell players that once they clear this room, they've earned themselves a rest.

Similarly, having warded or clearly long-abandoned chambers where no one will find the party when they rest indicates that, yes, here is where you *should* take a rest and sleeping anywhere else is probably a bad idea. However, on its own, this also results in players who kill everything outside of the Obviously Important Room, go take their Questionable Nap, and come back for the boss fight. This can be mitigated by having multiple signposted rooms and the occasional unmarked dangerous encounter but pushes the pendulum back toward the unpredictability that leads your players toward taking their questionable naps.

The second issue is that naps are mechanically free—or at least very cheap. Casting spells, taking hits, using abilities all tick down resource pools until your players run out of something important. But most games don't track ammunition, food, camping supplies, and the like nearly as closely. In this environment, resting often only makes sense! You're burning an extremely abundant resource (Time and Supplies) to get back limited ones (Not Dying). Having a random encounter that interrupts a rest primarily drains resources that you get back by resting, only *further incentivizing* taking the rest, and so any attempt by the GM to forestall abundant rests in this way still fails to actually give rests a cost.

The solution is simple and well-trod; it was even standard during the earliest editions of *D&D*: look for something that doesn't regenerate over the course of a rest and tie it to *the ability to rest*. For example, imagine a dungeon where:

- Hungry shadows devour dreams while the PCs sleep unless they burn wood or oil through the night to keep them away;
- Conjured food spoils instantly and there is nothing to forage, forcing the PCs to dip into their food supplies;
- Traps and conjured monsters replenish themselves overnight, so the PCs would have to deal with them all over again.

These even make random encounters more worrying: the threat of a random encounter is now that you've burned these precious strategic resources and may have not gotten that rest at all! It introduces a real and brutal incentive to hustle.

However, these solutions that were once a standard part of the GM toolkit have since been deprecated for a reason. They require a lot of inventory management, a part of the game that most players (and most GMs!) don't find particularly interesting. They risk annoying players, bogging down the game, or only really working as a one-dungeon gimmick rather than a regular part of your games. It's a good solution for some groups, but it's definitely not a cure-all.

The third issue is that naps are *narratively free*. As players play more TTRPGs, they will suspect, and then become convinced, that narrative time pressures are an illusion. Just as characters can have full, dramatic conversations in a three-round-encounter, so too can a desperate rescue of a princess from a monstrous castle take two weeks without a problem.

It doesn't matter how often the characters rest, how much time they waste, they'll reach the dramatic encounter just in time for things to go as they should. Conversely, it doesn't matter how badly the characters press themselves, how quickly they burn through their foes—they're never going to encounter the villain before the plot is ready for them to, they're never going to rescue the princess before her assassins have put a coherent plan together.

This issue is endemic to video games, but plagues tabletop RPGs as well. It exists for good reason: truly reacting to the pace of your adventurers can be a logistical nightmare, making the already-difficult endeavor of planning a campaign seemingly impossible.

Fortunately, you can cheat. Big, dramatic story timers can provide a long-term incentive to move quickly, while smaller, dungeon specific timers will harshly limit how often players are willing to sleep. When the world ends in 90 days, every additional day you spend on this sidequest is a significant cost. When a new demonic boss fight is summoned every six days, or a friend's execution is scheduled the next morning, or a PC's love interest will be getting married to a snooty noble in six hours, there is a narrative weight to each and every rest. It's an irreversible change, one that sells the idea that things are happening whether the players are sleeping or awake.

But at its core, this is a player behavior issue. It's a player reaction to a pre-existing problem, one which these timers, and every other suggestion so far, serves to paper over. There's a good reason why this essay is titled 'Questionable Naps' instead of 'Short Adventuring Days.' Your players aren't the only ones taking Questionable Naps.

Their opponents are as well.

The Monstrous Nap

Olguthar the Grim reclines on a chaise lounge of human skulls, quietly sipping at a flagon of blood. In the distance, explosions, screaming, and the distant cackle of some arcane in-joke echo through the dungeon's halls. Beside him, a goblin leaps up from a dirty bedroll, staring down the hallway.

"Olg, there are intruders! We've gotta get out there," squeaks the goblin.

"Eh," replies Olguthar, shifting his muscular frame on the lounge, "Sounds like a B-17 problem. I ain't moving."

“That’s only three rooms down! They’ll be here soon!”

“Contract says I’m responsible for B-14, 15, and 16. And only if I hear a racket comin’ from ‘em. Til that happens, I ain’t moving.”

We don’t think about it much—and it can take years for players to shape their behavior around it—but standard dungeon design relies on an ironclad assumption of *monstrous* naps.

In traditional dungeon design, monsters don’t rally to drive out intruders. They don’t go from their dormitory to their guard posts to their mess halls and the lavatory. They don’t evacuate their treasures when they know the treasury might be under threat. They don’t have actual shift rotations that players can exploit or that can ruin a solid infiltration plan. Their default state, when not spurred into action by the presence of PCs, is Nap.

This is because dungeons are traditionally designed as a series of set pieces: static encounters that only change in the ways noted on the page, chained together as players move through a location. Random encounter tables and clever descriptions can provide the illusion of a more organic design, but traditional dungeon design language has largely left this to the initiative of individual DMs.

However, by leaving the life and initiative of monsters to table discretion, you get a culture of play where it doesn’t exist. New DMs don’t necessarily know to branch out from what the book has presented to them, experienced ones may not make the time or may forget it in planning. The set-piece approach becomes ingrained, and the Nap becomes ubiquitous among the inhabitants of various dungeons. Eventually, the players pick up on this and feel that this is a rule of how the world works and they can follow suit.

This is the true cause of the short adventuring day. Players have internalized the rules of the world they play in and try to implement them to their advantage, but because the rule is now in the open, where everyone sees it explicitly, it looks like a ridiculous break in verisimilitude. Fixing only the symptom of that break might work, but it can result in a PCs vs. DM arms race: the players look for routes to play by the rules they’ve internalized, and the DM patches up those perceived exploits as they come up.

Curing the Nap

Now, there’s good reason this hasn’t been fixed. Just handling simulationist resting rules is tedious, and expanding it to full life cycles for everything in a dungeon is a clear non-starter. It would exponentially increase the work involved in every dungeon, forever. Even video games, with ever-increasing access to processing power and memory, default to having enemies forget about stealthy players who’ve killed a bunch of their friends or having

enemies in a dungeon stay at their posts until the player trips an invisible flag. Players can't hope for full simulation and, to be frank, shouldn't want one. Instead, we must simplify, find a solution that feels close enough to real that results in the players and the DM internalizing the same rules and expectations.

Additionally, dungeons are unconsciously designed with a map in mind. Having every encounter in earshot respond to a fireball would quickly overwhelm most parties. Realistic counter-patrols or overnight sweeps after an attack take resting from too common to near-impossible. Adjusting for a new, more reactive approach to dungeon design, where monsters aren't waiting for the heroes to kick in a door, necessitates completely overhauling how you think about encounters, and that's a lot of work!

The good news: I have answers.

The bad news: they're inconvenient.

The easiest solution is to fake a radical change in dungeon design. You want to create the appearance of a dynamic dungeon filled with enemies reacting to and counteracting player actions without actually having to put in the work.

To start, treat an encounter's location as a suggestion rather than a hard-and-fast rule. If an encounter isn't intricately tied to its assigned room, reliant on a trap or specifically guarding some feature of the dungeon, then untie it from that room entirely. If the PCs make a lot of noise clearing a room, double back through the dungeon, or just try to time their attack around an enemy's schedule, re-arrange your encounters to match. Those guards in the dining hall sleep in the dormitory. The chimera in the kennels smelled blood from a fight over the course of that short rest, and now the main hall the characters fought through is occupied once again. This is mostly just a rearrangement of pre-existing content, but it makes the universe feel more alive and makes it clear that enemies aren't just waiting in their pre-assigned zones for characters to hit an ordained trigger. The more improvised the rearrangement, the more real it's likely to feel.

If you're writing a dungeon for others to use, bake these assumptions in explicitly. Mention alternate locations for encounters, and, instead of noting only a few specific areas that might alert reinforcements, identify large swathes of the dungeon that might warrant additional forces.

The more difficult solution is to actually implement that radical change in dungeon design.

The basic idea here is to turn a dungeon into a challenge that ramps up as the PCs move through it, reacting and becoming more dangerous the longer they spend inside. As they learn about the dungeon, the dungeon

and its inhabitants learn about them, until it eventually becomes a race to complete objectives and get out before they are overwhelmed and killed.

To begin, make most of your encounters significantly easier, and have most traps start disabled. When the PCs arrive at most dungeons, they have a crucial and vanishing advantage: the enemy doesn't know that they've arrived and aren't ready for them. Most traps are just a hazard to the occupants unless there are known enemies in the area, so all but the most obscure or important will be disabled. Enemies will be broken up and scattered throughout the dungeon in relatively small, manageable numbers, on watch, performing other duties, or just being monsters.

However, as PCs delve into the dungeon, start consolidating those encounters. After the first guards fail to report in from their watch, the first fireball sounds in the halls, the first screams echo from distant towers, everyone else in the dungeon starts to react. Enemies start to group up, fortify, and look for their mysterious foes.

Remember that fights in *Dungeons & Dragons* are short: six to thirty seconds for all but the most dramatic confrontations. As long as the PCs move quickly and expeditiously defeat their enemies, they can outrun even a highly organized resistance. But whenever they rest, or delay, or get stuck on a puzzle for a while, that's when you can draw together more foes. Add an ally to the boss and miniboss encounters. Activate some traps, build up some barricades, and have the bad guys grab magic items from their hoard to use against their new foe.

You'll want to pre-plan these since it's easy to accidentally make encounters that are *too* overwhelming when you start consolidating. But remember that this dynamic approach to dungeon encounters doesn't punish players for moving slowly: it rewards them for moving quickly. The longer they go without rests, the more enemies they can take out piecemeal, and the more treasure they can grab without it being used against them.

It may take a few dungeons for your players to figure out what's going on and adjust to the new rules of engagement. But once you deny your monsters their questionable naps, the players should give up their own too.

THE RULE OF THREE

Crafting Dungeons That Focus on Mood, Narrative, or Agency

Bryan Camp

There's an old maxim used to describe both services and products: they can be Fast, Cheap, or Good. The idea behind it is pretty simple. Let's say you want to put a new roof on your house. You can get someone to do it right away for bargain prices, but you can't be surprised when the quick job cheaply done springs a bunch of leaks. Or, you can pay someone who knows what they're doing. You might get a discount if you offer to wait, but if you need it done this week by a trained professional, it's probably going to cost you. Fast, Cheap, or Good: pick which two you want, because getting all three is next to impossible.

There's a similar decision you have to make when designing dungeons for your players. You're not choosing between Fast, Cheap, or Good, of course. (Though it is fun to imagine a wizard having to decide whether he wants his lair built by the quick and cheap kobold contractors or the duergar architects who will demand a dragon's hoard when they're done.) Instead, the three qualities a GM must choose between are Mood, Narrative, and Agency.

Mood

How do you want the dungeon to feel to your players? What emotion are you trying to evoke? Fear seems like an obvious answer, as the majority of dungeons are meant to be environments of deadly challenge, but that's a little too simplistic. What *kind* of fear? Fear that their character will die? Fear that they'll fail to stop some looming threat? Fear of their soul being corrupted? Your dungeons can evoke much more nuanced reactions than merely "this place is trying to kill you." Nor are you restricted to

negative emotions. Dungeons can inspire awe or instill a sense of heroic accomplishment in your players as well.

So how do we create a mood within a dungeon?

Let's look at a dungeon I designed to be focused on creating anxiety. My players were there to find another group of adventurers who had gone missing. The first thing they encountered was an open door with a set of tracks going inside. That set the hook, the confirmation that the people that they were there to rescue were somewhere within. As they moved deeper in, they found all the usual things you might expect to find in a dungeon—traps and puzzles and monsters—but with a key twist: they had already been solved, discovered, or defeated. I didn't entirely defang the difficulty of the dungeon. Some of the traps were still armed, just marked and bypassed by the previous party, and others, by being triggered, had left behind a challenging space for the PCs to navigate. My players didn't have to fight the same monsters that the previous party had fought; they had to fight the things that had come to feed on the remains. The intent of leaving those challenges in place was to ensure that reaching the far side of that space would still feel rewarding.

But my true goal was creating a sense of anxiety, and this I achieved through hints and clues and descriptions that showed the ways this dungeon was threatening the people they had come to rescue. A smear of fresh blood left behind on the edge of a pit trap to show that someone had been injured by it. Half-eaten rations left behind at a hastily abandoned camp to show that the previous party hadn't been able to complete a rest. Arrows left behind in a monster that had been salvaged, repaired, and had broken again, to show that the previous party was running low on resources, getting desperate. Then, right after the PCs discovered still-wet blood (suggesting how close they were to reaching the people they had come to rescue), they encountered a collapsed tunnel and had to backtrack to find another way around. Ultimately, the entire dungeon design was based on figuring out ways to convey the specific mood that I wanted to evoke in my players—fearing not for their own safety, but that of those they had come to rescue.

Narrative

In my experience, most dungeons function as lockboxes. The thing your players are supposed to want is hidden deep within it, whether it's a treasure to find or an adversary to slay, and the point of the dungeon is to break into the vault of its design. A heist, in other words.

For the dungeon in *this* example, though, I wanted to tell a different kind of story, so I flipped everything in the dungeon around to face the opposite

direction . . . and suddenly instead of a vault, I had a prison. There was something dark and malevolent kept deep inside, and the point of the dungeon wasn't to keep people out, but to keep the dark thing *in*.

As the PCs explored the dungeon, it soon became clear that it functioned differently, that the challenge would be escaping this place, not finding its center. Some of the ways that I led them to this conclusion: the solution to a puzzle being left scrawled on the wall beside a door's lock by guards tired of forgetting it; doors that permitted entry but locked behind them; graffiti that told of the crimes and atrocities of the entity held captive within.

Ultimately, the PCs encountered literal warning signs posted to tell them that they were entering a point of no return. Every detail of this dungeon was devoted to building the narrative that the creature that they were heading toward was dangerous, powerful, and ancient, not by the GM telling them that it was, but by the environment showing them.

Agency

Now let's look at a dungeon that doesn't look anything like a dungeon at all. When I wanted my players to have an opportunity to focus on their choices, I gave them a map of a swamp. Their only real objective (aside from survival) was to find the person who had gotten lost inside. There were places of interest marked on the map, a strange lake here, an ancient tower there, and guides who were willing to help the PCs find their way from landmark to landmark. But all the choices were theirs to make. All the reliable hallmarks of a traditional dungeon were there, traps and puzzles and monsters and treasure—but they were bound by none of the traditional structures that impose linear movement. There were no doors to block them, no walls to hem them in. The PCs could go to any landmark they chose, in any order they chose. They could leave the swamp entirely and circle around it, entering it from the other direction. Since it was a living, mutable environment, they could interact with it any number of ways that would be impossible in rigid catacombs beneath the earth.

Design Breakdown

Once I'd decided on the element I wanted to focus on in each of the examples above, I also had a second choice to make: I had to choose which of the three elements I would abandon. In the Mood example, the narrative of the place was given priority over giving the players an abundance of options. Focusing on the mood and narrative meant that, by necessity, a certain amount of choice had to be sacrificed. A dungeon which under other circumstances might have had multiple ways of reaching its conclusion only had a single linear path, so that the PCs would encounter the points of increasing tension at precisely the right moments. In the same

way that you can't fully experience the emotional heft of a climactic scene of a movie that you've watched in random chunks, my players wouldn't have gotten the full punch of anxiety if they'd been able to skip past the moments I'd designed.

In each of the other examples, I could have picked either option. Take the prison dungeon. I could have layered enough story into the design of the dungeon that my players would get a fragmented sense of the narrative no matter what order they proceeded through the maze, but in doing so, I would have opened myself up to all sorts of unintended emotional connections. One post-it note of frustrated guards followed by a mural of a dark god devouring innocents followed by a series of increasingly solid doors is building the dramatic tension of everyday citizens confronted with a horrible monstrosity. But if your players choose to go to the room with the post-it note which leads to break room with games and meta-narrative joke novels, the mood of the dungeon is going to skew in a "what an inept bunch of chuckleheads these folks were" direction that wouldn't have happened if you introduced those narrative elements in a more controlled, linear manner. If I'd chosen to limit their options, I would have been choosing to lead them through both the narrative and emotional beats in the "correct" order.

In the swamp dungeon, I could give every encounter exactly the same emotional resonance, ensuring that they would experience the mood I intended them to have, but also ensuring that they would start to move through my encounters faster and faster to reach the conclusion. One whimsical NPC, a deathly dangerous trap, and a tearfully poignant fight with a nemesis from a character's backstory is emotionally refreshing and keeps your players focused, while grimdark trap after grueling fight after macabre puzzle is going to become tiresome no matter how compelling your narrative is.

Conclusion

No one kind of dungeon is better than the other. A choice and mood dungeon is just as enjoyable as a mood and story one. You just have to be aware of the choices you're making. No dungeon can tell a coherent, deliberate narrative, maintain a consistent and pre-planned tone, *and* offer its players an abundance of options and open-sandbox freedom. If you can manage two of those three, though, you've built something your players are likely to enjoy.

WHERE YA GONNA RUN TO?

Keith Ammann

No one *wants* to die.

A fanatic, fervently committed to a cause or anticipating some kind of reward in the afterlife, might do so willingly. Or a highly trained member of a society whose reputation hangs on absolute devotion to duty. Or someone devoid of hope, with nothing left to lose. But most creatures, when Plan A (“*Get ‘em!*”) produces results that seem to be proceeding rapidly toward fatality, will decide quickly that Plan B (“*Run!*”) holds more appeal.

That decision may or may not achieve the desired result. Creatures fall along a continuum of prudence. Those of lower intelligence and wisdom may set up operations in a place where they have no way out if things go horribly wrong. Those that are more calculating, however, will absolutely make sure to have contingency plans—and those plans will include back doors.

Not Every Retreat Is a Defeat

Before we discuss those plans, it’s worth noting that “retreat” isn’t necessarily synonymous with “fleeing.” There are plenty of good reasons to retreat from a position even when you’re not losing a battle at all, some strategic, some tactical. An example of a strategic retreat is withdrawing to entice your enemies forward into a battle area where you have more advantages—greater numbers, more cover, clearer lines of sight, an easier time maneuvering your forces—or luring them into a trap, which is essentially the same thing, but more embarrassing and harder to get out of.

A tactical retreat may help you conserve strength, in terms of numbers, resources, or stamina. It may allow you to aim attacks at your foes from another angle or send reserves around to hit them from behind. It may buy you time to reorganize and recover after a setback. Something that looks like a retreat may not even be a retreat at all, but simply sentries doing their job by heading rearward to spread the word about what they've just seen. When intruders are detected, it's important to let one's allies and superiors know as much as possible about the intrusion as fast as possible, so that they can respond appropriately.

Exit Strategy

With that point out of the way, let's talk about how to plan for the possibility of defeat at the hands of invaders. Any such plan has to ensure that a loss is survivable and that it doesn't result in the destruction or capture of critical information or priceless loot. Unless things are significantly worse "out there" than "in here," a plan for survival must include a means of escape. An escape plan requires three things: a place to go, a way to get there, and a way to stall or thwart pursuit. A better escape plan does one more thing: it allows you to bring your most important asset(s) with you.

Any place you're planning to escape to has to meet certain standards. It has to offer minimally acceptable living conditions: a hospitable climate, adequate food and water, basic defensibility, and so forth. It has to be uncontested, not controlled by other enemies, which can be a big problem in a dungeon: if every location is occupied by one faction or another and there isn't a friendly one that can absorb your fleeing forces, you have no choice but to leave the dungeon altogether. It's probably not going to be as good as the place you're fleeing from; if it were better, you'd have set up shop there instead in the first place. However, a satellite settlement can offer you not only safe harbor but also reinforcements with which to return and reconquer the territory you've just given up.

Your route to this escape destination must be unhindered by enemies as well. If you're unusually large, like a dragon, it has to be big enough for you to move through without squeezing. If you're on the small side, on the other hand, narrower passages are ideal, since they allow you free passage while slowing or stopping larger pursuers. Either way, make sure the route can accommodate not just you and your followers but also any valuable assets you're bringing with you. If such assets are too heavy to carry, include a means of moving them, such as a minecart on rails or a barge on a subterranean river.

It's good for this escape route to include at least one defensible place to rest along the way, in case you and/or your forces need to recover from injuries or are too fatigued to make the whole trip at once. If possible, such a waystation should be concealed: hidden behind a visual obstruction, camouflaged to blend in with its surroundings, or disguised as something innocuous. It must be large enough to accommodate all your fleeing forces, and it should include a cache of food, water, and—if applicable—ammunition.

As a gamemaster, when you're designing an escape route, seize on opportunities to give it as much flavor as you'd give a primary location. It might cross a ramshackle bridge over a bottomless fissure, overlook an ancient ruin of inscrutable provenance and purpose, pass through an area where air currents create eerie acoustic effects, or be embellished with paintings or mosaics—or defaced by graffiti. These details keep pursuit from getting boring; they may even create an incentive to come back later and explore further.

Do Not Follow

Stall pursuers by every means you have at hand. If the escape route doesn't lead directly out of the heart of your lair, where your assailants will clearly see where you're going when you avail yourself of it, find a way to hide it, camouflage it, or disguise it. Can you climb or fly? Then make the route three-dimensional. Can you swim? Place some or all of the route underwater. Can you burrow? Maybe you don't need an already existing exit; maybe you can dig yourself a tunnel! Be sure, though, that you can dig faster than your pursuers can run—or that you can collapse your tunnel behind you without also trapping yourself.

If you command followers, you may order them to execute one or more retreat operations: withdrawing, delaying, or retiring. Withdrawing is when a creature or group of creatures that's already engaged in combat with an enemy tries to leave the scene. It's difficult, because the enemy can press forward and force them to continue the fight. It's therefore wise to order some of your followers to delay the enemy, occupying their attention and blocking further progress in order to buy time for the rest to get away. Finally, retiring is when a creature or group of creatures that *aren't* already engaged in combat try to make their escape. Delay actions are also used to buy time for this operation, especially when the retiring group has valuable assets in its possession.

Creatures assigned to delay the enemy are often struck down in the process, so be sure to command only your most loyal followers to carry out this operation, or they may decide you're not worth dying for. If you're a powerful creature and also benevolently inclined toward your dependents, it may be you who delays the enemy in order to allow *them* to escape.

Typical heartless villains, however, make their own getaways, leaving their minions to run interference.

My own opinion is that it's ill-advised to set deadly traps within your own territory because of the risk that you or one of your followers will set them off while carrying out everyday activities. However, escape routes are excellent places for booby traps that you and your followers can set behind you as you flee. You can also thwart pursuit by setting up barricades, dropping gates, rolling heavy stone doors into place to block tunnels and corridors, and so forth. You can also trigger rockslides and demolish bridges, but don't permanently render impassable any path you plan to return by.

Whether or not you conceal the entrance to your escape route, the exit must always be well hidden, if not one-way—for instance, barred on the side you'll approach it from, or inaccessible from the other without a ladder or rope. You can't allow a hostile party to turn your exit into an entrance. In fact, just to be safe, you should always make sure you protect your emergency exit not only with methods of deterring intruders but also with methods of detecting them: at least two sentries at all times if you have the personnel to spare, physical or magical alarms if you don't.

Let's Get Out of Here!

That covers all the most important escape-plan considerations from the point of view of the owner of a dungeon, or a portion of a dungeon. But what about the player characters? When their best-laid plans go horribly wrong, *they* need ways to run away, too. And whenever possible—granting that it may not be possible in a given dungeon—the PCs' escape routes should be *different* from the escape routes used by the home team, because those escape routes are geared to the needs of their creators.

In fact, the PCs' escape routes should be things that the defenders of the territory have *overlooked*, not considering them to be viable escape routes at all. They're straws for desperate PCs to clutch at. These escape routes can (and should!) be bonkers, less like a conventional dungeon map and more like a level of *Assassin's Creed*. They can go down wells and drainage channels and up through ventilation shafts (never underestimate the importance of ventilation and drainage in subterranean compounds—there's no photosynthesis to oxygenate the air, and the hydrology that creates cave networks in the first place never shuts off). They can squeeze through shoulder-width crevices that larger creatures can't fit through; solution cave systems are full of those, and who knows where they might lead? (*You* do. You drew the map. They lead someplace interesting.) They can stumble into hidden, camouflaged, or disguised apertures that were built before the current inhabitants moved in, which those inhabitants never took the trouble to find.

When PCs are availing themselves of these providential escape routes, it's not the time for die rolls that might stop them in their tracks. It is the time for die rolls that add complications and tension to the escape. A failed roll shouldn't cause a fleeing PC to fall off a ledge, miss the rafter they're leaping to grab, or plunge into the chasm. But it might cause the ledge to crumble beneath their feet, creating a gap that the *next* PC has to leap across. It might cause the rafter to creak, bend, and begin to split. It might cause them to grab onto the bridge, the ropes holding the bridge to break, the bridge to swing down and slam against the chasm wall, bringing the PC one step closer to their doom ... but *not* all the way there.

Do the PCs make their getaway from the frying pan only to find themselves in the fire—for instance, stumbling into the territory of a different hostile faction? Oh, yes, most certainly. But perhaps this faction is more interested in capturing and questioning them than in killing them right away. Perhaps this eventuality sets up a three-way conflict, as the PCs' prior enemy pursues them into territory where that enemy isn't welcome. Better to have your foes fighting each other *over* you than fighting *you*!

The greater the stakes, the cannier the combatants, the more you should work to ensure, as you draw your dungeon maps, that no battle of any importance takes place in a dead-end room. Instead, give both your villains and your heroes potential getaway routes. Not every battle has to end in a fight to the death, and not every flight from battle has to spell the end of the encounter. Running away is merely the end of the scene—and, potentially, the beginning of another.

BEYOND THE STAIRS

Making Your Dungeon Vertical

Wolfgang Baur

We tend to think of our world and our game worlds primarily in straightforward two-dimensional terms. Our maps and our mental images of roadways and cities are flat, and our board games are commonly a single board, a battle map, or even a sheet of paper. It works for the way we think and move in space.

However, making the effort to turn a flat, single-sheet dungeon into something more inventive and multi-dimensional can add hugely to your enjoyment of any tabletop RPG—especially heroic games of thrilling adventure. Here's how.

Layer Cake Dungeons

For *Dungeons & Dragons*, vertical design goes back to the 1970s and to the invention of layered dungeons, where depth indicates difficulty or danger. Professional dungeons are still created this way and published to great acclaim because the formula works.

Some well-known examples of the layer cake dungeon are *The Ruins of Undermountain* by Ed Greenwood (TSR Inc., 1991) and *Dragon Mountain* by Paul Arden Lidberg and Colin McComb (TSR Inc., 1993). More recent examples include the 5e Undermountain adventure, *Waterdeep: Dungeon of the Mad Mage* (Wizards of the Coast, 2018), the *Rappan Athuk* megadungeon by Bill Webb & Clark Peterson (Necromancer Games, 2001), and *Scarlet Citadel* by Steve Winter (Kobold Press, 2021). Each has multiple layers, loosely connected—and *Scarlet Citadel* includes the classic cutaway side view as part of the package—stacked from top to bottom.

What these adventures have in common is somewhat limited vertical options. The Undermountain levels are connected by stairs and a vertical shaft. Dragon Mountain features a huge labyrinth of dungeon halls. The Rappan Athuk levels can be bypassed by a shortcut, and the Scarlet Citadel connects some areas with an underground river.

In each case, the usual style of adventuring is to address each level separately, then go down a layer to the next, more challenging one. This provides a clean progression of difficulty for the players to explore, at the cost of some linearity—a familiar tradeoff for many adventure designs. And it means that each level is, fortunately, easy to map on a sheet of paper.

Natural Cave Systems

In contrast to the layer cake dungeon, caves, caverns, and natural underground formations are more irregular—and often more challenging—in their vertical elements. Chasms, stalactites, ledges, and uneven floors make for interesting tactical options in combat that are not present in rooms carved from stone. We see this kind of adventure design again and again, such as in the introduction of the Underdark so richly presented in *Vault of the Drow* by Gary Gygax (TSR Inc., 1978) and continuing on to the present day with *Rise of the Drow* (AAW Games, 2014), the vast subterranean *Empire of the Ghouls* (Kobold Press, 2020), and the kobold underground cliff city of Lillefor (*Warlock 36*, Kobold Press, 2022).

All of these pale in comparison to the deepest cavern known in the real world, which is Veryovkina Cave at 7,257 feet deep (2,212 meters) in the Western Caucasus region of Abkhazia, Georgia. Roughly 1,500 feet deeper than the Grand Canyon, it has required many expeditions to explore since its discovery in 1968, but it is a perfect example of a site that could use vertical difficulty to enforce game design goals.

In layer cake design, the element limiting characters from going straight to the bottom is finding the stairs or passage down to the next level. Cavern systems are not often limited that way, because of the gnarly nature of connecting passages. Instead, they are limited by the ability of the characters to move around a difficult cavern space.

In particular, low-level characters have ropes and climbing skills, but not flight, shapeshifting, or teleportation. So getting to the bottom of a deep cavern can be limited by the ability to bring enough rope, to fly down, or to pass through a very narrow space, as well as simply by finding the passage down. By the time the party discovers the deepest layers of a cavernous Underdark, they have the tools needed to explore a thousand-foot pit or a cavern of shifting, animated stalactites, even if there are no convenient stairs into the fathomless abyss.

33 Vertical Elements to Add to Your Design

The vertical axis is sometimes less obvious when designing on a sheet of paper, so, to make creating vertical dungeons easier, here's a list that should provide ways to improve climbing, flying, and vertical movement in your own dungeons.

Adding one or two of these elements to any room in a dungeon will immediately increase the value of flight, climbing, ranged weapons, and similar options, and it will decrease the sense that every room is a straightforward melee. In the best cases of original design, you'll create story possibilities and tactical options by making the players think about how and when to go vertical.

- 1. Abyss:** A classic bottomless pit or open-air cavern is a barrier or a method of travel. Examples include the balrog's chasm in *Lord of the Rings* or the abyss of the cloaklers in *Empire of the Ghouls*.
- 2. Air Shaft:** Bringing air into engineered or magically-constructed dungeons is logical and provides a possible way for stealthy heroes to enter a region or catch opponents from an unexpected direction.
- 3. Balconies:** Any large room can have a balcony well above ground level to provide a place for snipers, speechifying villains, or fireball-flinging mages to stand. The addition of a solid wall provides partial cover.
- 4. Beams:** A horizontal stone or wooden beam may cross a mine shaft, an air shaft, or simply a large vertical hall or space—a vertical beam is a support for those higher beams or for the roof of a cavern or mineshaft. Slanted beams can lead up to a new tunnel space, and the beams themselves can be lifted by ropes or magic, as a makeshift elevator.
- 5. Bridges:** While bridges are horizontal, they can also lead up or down. Bridges of rope, stone, or wood are fine, but why not add a bridge of dragon bones, magical steel, or ever-burning timber for additional dramatic effect?
- 6. Catapults or Engines:** A catapult can be used to hurl goblins, skeletons, or other foes up or down at a party, or could be used by a clever acrobatic halfling to move around between areas.
- 7. Cavern Chimney:** Small cracks in cavern walls can be used to climb to greater heights; if the crack is entirely enclosed, it may still be a useful route up and out for a character or villains using shapeshifting or gaseous form.
- 8. Cliff:** Even within a dungeon, a cliff wall makes an impressive barrier and sometimes a great home for monsters. The cliff dwelling goblins in *Dwellers of the Forbidden City* (TSR Inc., 1981) are an example, but so are the cliff side homes of the Underdark kobolds of Lillefor or the subterranean Falmer elves of Skyrim.

- 9. Elevators, Mechanical:** Standard elevators can require particular keys or might be traps that a villain uses to catch adventurers half-way up or down.
- 10. Elevators, Magical:** From Willy Wonka's glass elevator to the classic dungeon elevator room that moves without characters noticing, magical elevators are practically teleporters for lower- and mid-level characters.
- 11. Floating Platforms:** With a permanent *levitate* spell, any flat surface can become a flying platform subject to magical commands or maneuvered by the use of a controlling circlet, wand, or other item. The physical appearance could be a wooden door, floating clouds, or a construct of shining bronze and sheer magical force. Once the party decides to go up or down via a platform, they are subject to its ability to lift or drop them. But what if a weakened platform only has enough magic power to take them safely down—and not enough to lift them back up?
- 12. Handholds:** Any dungeon or cavern wall could feature climbing holds for hands and feet, making it more accessible to characters in armor or characters with less natural athletic ability. And naturally sometimes the handholds might lead directly into an ambush at the top.
- 13. Ladders:** The classic ladder provides some good tactical options when it is pulled up behind a party (or pulled up by a villain's goblin henchmen). Leaving a ladder lying around in a dungeon will also encourage players to think about where that ladder could be used.
- 14. Ledges:** While ledges are usually outdoor features, they certainly work as missile platforms or spellcasting redoubts in a dungeon, removed from melee risks. Clever monsters might keep oil or rocks on the platform to discourage climbers.
- 15. Mine Shaft:** Straight up or winding down in slow ramps, mines are naturally three dimensional as miners follow a seam of ore.
- 16. Moonbeams or Radiant Stairs:** Used in film and in adventures like *Court of the Shadow Fey*, a set of glowing, translucent stairs adds a magical touch to a location or a combat. If combined with the risk that those stairs might vanish at any moment, they introduce a way to split the party or to isolate the barbarian who charges ahead.
- 17. Mushrooms:** Any underground plant will do, but a tree-sized or house-sized mushroom provides the possibility of stairs inside it leading up to a rooftop locale. Especially interesting in a cavern with a mushroom forest.
- 18. Open Pit or Quarry:** While most pits are traps, an open pit can also make an interesting site, either as part of a cavern or as a mining site for ore. A quarry is used to mine stone and might be the source of material for magical statues.

- 19. Pillars:** Heavily carved pillars are easy to climb, and even smooth ones can be flat-topped. A dungeon hermit might live atop a pillar, as a sort of underground stylite.
- 20. Pipes:** Dwarven boilerworks or human aquatic engineering can both result in pipes that can be used to travel in (like vacuum-driven mail systems) or that can be walked along or climbed on the outside.
- 21. Pit:** While a pit is pretty much the classic vertical trap, and it can be made even more interesting if creatures inhabit the bottom of it or if passageways connect to the bottom as well as the top.
- 22. Platform:** The perfect stage for archers or monologuing villains is an elevated area, such as a raised stone platform or a natural cavern plateau.
- 23. Ramps:** While the ramps themselves are not exciting, ramps do allow for pouring out burning oil, pitch, or marbles and watching them run down. Rolling down stones or barrels could also work.
- 24. Ropes:** A rope just out of reach is a spur to curiosity; a rope leading down into a chasm or a pit is at least a suggestion or a hint to dungeon explorers.
- 25. Stepwell:** The open many-staircase step well as found in Indian architecture seems ready-made for reinvention as a dungeon watering hole, underground ritual site, or simply an elegant location to surprise adventurers with.
- 26. Stairs:** The classic stairs work not only as an enclosed linear set of dungeon stairs, but also as a spiral, a ring around a circular space, or even along a cliff or wall with open space on the other side. Better still, creatures such as giant bats, trappers, cobbleswarms (see *Tome of Beasts*), or grey oozes can all make fine ambushers on stairs—with the added bonus of the possibility of falling damage on open stairs.
- 27. Switchbacks:** A cliff or abyss with a narrow, winding, switchback path is a terrific place to raise tension or spring an ambush, especially by a flying foe.
- 28. Teleporter Portal:** While a portal need not shift someone vertically, it is certainly entertaining when it does, especially to some precarious upper end, or some crowded and dangerous lower destination.
- 29. Tower:** Some caverns or dungeon chambers are huge enough to contain a tower (such as the aforementioned *Vault of the Drow*). A narrow archer's perch, a ship's mast, or minaret-style tower are all still useful for lookouts, archers, and battle mages.
- 30. Vines:** Dungeons can contain a surprising amount of magical plant life; a wall covered with vines could hide spiders—or a path up to a higher elevation.

31. Webs: Why should spiders have all the fun? Make traversing a web part of the adventure in a spider-infested dungeon.

32. Well: A well with rope and bucket is also a path straight down to lower regions of a dungeon. Perhaps a water elemental lives at the bottom, or perhaps treasure glints from the clear well water.

Encouraging Vertical Movement

Once you've added vertical elements to your dungeon design, the issue is figuring out how to encourage your players to use them. The easiest way to do this is usually for monsters, villains, and NPCs to use those elements to their own advantage; being ambushed from above—or being dropped into a chasm—teach players to consider their options carefully.

If you've tried the “monsters are doing it” method and want to further encourage players, be sure to mention your 3D elements when such locations offer valuable sightlines, tactical advantages, visible treasures, or the only route to dungeons deeper still. “You gain a bonus to ranged attacks from the balcony” is a straightforward idea, as is “There are some barrels stacked at the top of the ramp.” If players don't bite right away, keep using vertical elements regardless—characters with ranged attacks will appreciate it, and characters without climbing or flying options may value them more highly.

By the time player characters in your game start poking at air shafts and investigating pillars for climbing, you'll know you've successfully added another dimension to your dungeons, in more ways than one.

DUNGEONS BY DESIGN

Keith Baker

Sometimes you're in a mood for a classic dungeon crawl—a labyrinth of deadly traps and monsters that lies between your adventurers and glorious treasure. The fate of the world doesn't rest on the success or failure of this adventure. Often, the classic dungeon is an isolated or shunned ruin, which is what makes it a valid target for salvage; whoever built the dungeon is long dead, and no one has any better claim than our heroes to the treasures that lie within it. Consider the hobbits gaining their blades of Westernesse from the ancient barrow or Indiana Jones braving countless traps to seize the golden idol at the start of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. These challenges aren't tied to the larger story, but they're an opportunity for the protagonists to hone their skills and to pick up a magic dagger or three. And sometimes that's all you want—a fun, interesting challenge with puzzles to solve and monsters to battle. You don't want it to be tied to a powerful enemy, and you don't want the adventurers to be committing a crime when they carry off their loot; you just want a nice, unclaimed dungeon full of traps and treasures.

And yet, in a well-developed world, these classic dungeons often don't make much sense. If there's valuable treasures and the ruins are ancient . . . how is it that they haven't been picked clean by other adventurers over the years? Who would *build* a place littered with deadly traps, and, if there's monsters in the dungeon, how have they survived all this time? What do they eat if a few decades go by with no adventurers?

Well, what if the dungeon isn't the ruin it appears to be? What if there's a method to this madness—if the dungeon was carefully and intentionally designed?

The Façade

“I was hoping to find a group of bold adventurers like you,” the old man says. “My land’s gone fallow, and as is, I stand to be ruined. I’ve only one hope. It’s said that the Golden Acorn of Alyanta is hidden beneath the fallen temple in the Forest of Fears. None have dared to enter that place since the wood took it over a hundred years ago. But if you can brave its dangers and bring me the Acorn—I’d be forever in your debt.”

The companions look at one another, considering. Finally the halfling Oreg speaks up. “This place—it was a temple, a place of worship? So it’s not going to be full of traps or anything like that, right? I mean, who’s going to put a pit trap right in the path little Balo’s going to use to walk to prayers.”

“A pit trap?” The old man shakes his head. “Of course not. Nothing like that, no. Of course, it’s said that when the woods took the temple, Alyanta set a dozen traps on the path to the Acorn—challenges that would ensure no unworthy soul could claim this treasure.”

Oreg sighs. “Of course she did.”

There’s an old, ruined temple on the edge of town. Everyone knows it’s haunted, that anyone who ventures inside will face the curse of the ancient gods. Go ten feet inside and you’ll encounter a trap that spits poison needles. And yet, a character skilled in Investigation might notice something strange. The temple has been abandoned for a century, but the poison on such a trap would surely lose its potency within a year. Even stranger, the old gods of the temple considered poison to be a coward’s weapon—they wouldn’t defend their temple with such a trap. So what’s going on?

The Façade follows the time-honored tradition of *Scooby Doo*. A villain needs a place to carry out a nefarious plan, and they want to make sure the locals leave them alone. So they lay claim to a local ruin and take advantage of existing superstitions—adding traps and defenses to make sure that no one discovers their secret sanctum at the bottom of the dungeon. Typically this dressing will follow the overall theme of the dungeon but hold several clues that suggest things don’t add up. A Religion check reveals that the old gods despised the use of poison. A Nature check reveals that the dire wolves have been imported from elsewhere, and the flame patterns in their fur was applied with dye. The idea of such a dungeon is that it initially feels like a straightforward and not particularly logical story, but as the adventurers go deeper they discover that there’s no curse at all, but rather a compelling modern mystery.

A key question with the Façade dungeon is what the villain is hiding. One option is that the villain’s plans are directly tied to the location—that while the temple had been looted long ago, the villain is certain that a powerful

artifact is still hidden somewhere in its depths or that there's a way to claim a boon from the old gods. Can the adventurers succeed where the villain failed and actually claim a great treasure from the ruins? Or was this outpost in fact just one piece of a grand nefarious conspiracy that stretches across the realm?

The Proving Ground

It's been two hundred years since the Dragon of Calyth Boc ravaged the land, and most folk believe she's dead. But recently folk have seen the ground shake and the smoke of the wyrm's breath rising from her mountain lair. She will awaken again soon, all are certain. And unless someone walks the Slayer's Path and claims the Champion's Spear, all will surely perish in her flames.

This dungeon is a ruin that's been abandoned for centuries, and that has indeed been looted by countless generations of adventurers and meddling kids. Whatever treasures could be taken were stripped long ago, and everyone knows there're no actual traps. At least, there weren't last week . . . but there are now. The traps and challenges of the Proving Ground were created for a purpose, and now that the stars are aligned and the ancient enemy rises again, the dungeon has come to life. Glyphs of warding have powered up. Secret doors have been revealed. Guardian beasts have been summoned out of stasis. And both a treasure and a task await the champions who can prove themselves worthy.

This allows the Proving Ground to be ancient without raising the question of why it's still fully functional, and also avoids any conversations about the ethics of tomb robbing; this dungeon *wants* you to claim its treasures, as long as you're worthy of them.

If the story of the Proving Ground is well known, this could be an important part of a primary campaign arc; everyone knows that the Dragon of Calyth Boc is the big bad, and eventually someone will have to walk the Slayer's Path and claim the spear. However, it can also be interesting to have a Proving Ground whose provenance has been long forgotten. The villagers know that the old ruin has suddenly come to life, that the Wilson boy saw golems stomping around in there, but no one knows the reason. If the adventurers make their way through and claim the artifact that lies within, they may be charged with a greater purpose as well. Whoever can take the *Crown of Hastalacar* is the rightful ruler of the realm, as set forth in prophecy long ago; if they don't take the throne, a grave disaster will befall the kingdom. But today no one remembers the prophecy. Will the adventurers press their claim, and if not, what disaster will come?

Another option is to combine the Proving Ground and the Façade. The challenges adventurers face weren't set up by a forgotten god or ancient

power; they were set up by a modern secret society as a way to recruit capable agents. Reaching the bottom of the dungeon won't get you an ancient artifact—it will get you a modern job offer.

The Literal Dungeon

The wizard Calastor hated everyone. We all thought he was too evil to die, but he finally did and we tore his old tower down. But the catacombs below it were full of his traps and bound demons. No one who goes down there has ever returned, but you know he must have been hiding something powerful down there.

Why fill a structure with traps and deadly monsters? One option is to protect treasures, certainly. But what if the traps aren't just there to keep people out . . . what if they're holding something in? In this story, people assume the evil wizard died. But perhaps adventurers of yesteryear destroyed his tower and bound this vile lich in the catacombs below, placing the traps to keep anyone from ever releasing him. This helps to explain why anyone would invest so much effort and mystical power defending a ruin. In setting an adventure in a literal dungeon, the next question is whether the adventurers themselves are acting purely out of ignorance—if no one remembers the true purpose of this place—or if the adventurers' patron is intentionally misleading them. The old man isn't actually trying to lift the curse on his farm; he was Calastor's apprentice, and he's sure these adventurers have what it takes to blunder through the dungeon and to free his master.

A Literal Dungeon can be an interesting way to set up a future enemy. The adventurers triumphantly carve their way through the traps and summoned guardians and pull the sword from the seal—only to find that they have unleashed the spirit of darkness across the land, a spirit they definitely aren't prepared to fight. This can set in motion a series of future quests, as they must learn more about this enemy and find a way to rebind it. While this could be a major campaign arc, it could also just be the work of a single follow-up adventure; learn the truth and use the sword you pulled from the seal to drive the fiend back into its prison.

With a Literal Dungeon, one question we must ask is if it's possible for the adventurers to figure out the true purpose of the dungeon as they drive through it. Are there clues that the spirits are Calastor's wardens, rather than his servants? Can the heroes realize they're being duped and turn the tables on their false patron . . . or will the truth only be revealed when it's too late?

The Living Dungeon

You stumble on a mysterious ruin in the middle of the wilderness. It's filled with slimes and oozes, but there's certainly lots of treasures—scattered coins, suits of armor, abandoned weapons. And yet . . . why is it here? There are no other ruins in the area. The architecture is entirely unfamiliar. And the air is moist and warm . . . almost like the hot breath of a hungry beast.

Consider the mimic—a creature that can perfectly disguise itself as a piece of furniture to lure its prey close. The classic mimic takes the form of a treasure chest, using an adventurer's greed to lure them to their doom. But where do mimics come from? One could imagine that the treasure-chest mimic is the full adult, and baby mimics are the size of coins. On the other hand, what if the treasure chest is the spawn . . . and the final, full-grown mimic is a far larger creature that copies not chests or furniture, but an entire building? Imagine the mimic-spore dropping in a clearing in the forest and slowly growing . . . first a stone outcropping, then a tiny crypt, then a series of tunnels, and finally a full-fledged dungeon. What adventurers see as independent creatures—slimes, puddings, gelatinous cubes—are in fact all part of the dungeon's digestive system. The treasures it contains are things that it's collected from its previous prey; it consumes flesh and bone, but coins, arms, and armor are all left behind. Over time these are swept into hoards by the patrolling oozes or gathered by smaller mimics . . . but adventurers might also find random scatterings of coins and equipment, left where they fell.

While the dungeon is alive, the idea is that it's so large that it no longer interacts with adventurers directly. It's full of traps, but those traps are often alive—piercers fall from the ceiling, lurkers rise up and attempt to smother our heroes. It's full of monsters, but those monsters are oozes and mimics, creatures that have no motives beyond consumption. Given that the dungeon is a massive mimic, it can change its layout—doors can become walls, sealing off the path back to the surface. However, in order to give the adventurers a fighting chance, perhaps the dungeon can't track the specific movements of its denizens any more than we know exactly where our food is in our intestines. The dungeon changes layout on a regular basis, and this will prevent adventurers from retracing their steps . . . but there always is a path back to the surface, and if our heroes can figure out the pattern of the changes, they can find their way out. Of course, even if the dungeon doesn't fight the explorers directly, it can still make life difficult. What at first appears to be a stone floor could become gooey difficult terrain—or a chamber could have sticky walls and floors, mimicking the adhesive skin of a mimic.

Part of the fun of a living dungeon is the slow revelation to the players. Think about the order of the clues. First there's the basic point—*there's no*

reason for there to be a ruin in this location. But hey, there's gold scattered on the floor as soon as you go in! But why is there gold just scattered randomly around? And these are recent coins—almost like someone just dumped their purse on the floor. The historian may realize that the architectural style is completely unfamiliar. The dwarf may think there's something odd about the stone floor—it has the texture of stone, but it's warm. By the time they figure it out, the walls have shifted and the way out is closed.

The Living Dungeon is a good standalone dungeon crawl. It's not tied to any other plot; it's just hungry. On the other hand, adventurers could recover the treasures lost by its previous victims; perhaps there's an important heirloom or the key to a long-forgotten mystery!

The Obstacle

The Sunken City of Golath was an outpost of the lost civilization of the Menethi. They bound fiends and worked great wonders—until the consequences of their pacts came back to haunt them, and everyone in Golath was dragged off to the netherland. Golath has stood empty ever since. Looters have come in search of treasure, and they surely found it . . . but Golath is still home to countless fiends, and only a fool invites their ire. And today, I'm afraid we're the fools. Because the only way we can reach the King in time is to travel through the Sunken City. Be careful, and don't touch anything!

Sometimes a dungeon isn't the quest; it's an obstacle. There's no question why the adventurers are venturing into this trap-filled pit; they'd rather avoid it, but there's no choice. Consider the Mines of Moria in *The Fellowship of the Ring* or Shadar Logoth in *The Wheel of Time*. There was a time when the dungeon was a prosperous, useful location. It wasn't designed to be full of traps; it had a purpose. But something went wrong. Perhaps it was besieged by enemies, and the defenders fortified every structure. Maybe it was wiped out by plague, and the tormented victims linger as hungry ghosts. The thing about the Obstacle is that it's not a place anyone would want to go to. Certainly, it holds treasures, but that's not what brings the adventurers there; instead, they just need to find a path through it . . . and quickly.

An Obstacle dungeon can be an interesting way to shed some light on the history of the setting. It's the remnants of a once-prosperous place. Who built it? What became of them? An Obstacle dungeon can be an excellent place for the adventurers to acquire an object that seems innocuous at first, but which turns out to have far greater significance in the future. The rogue finds a +1 dagger—beautiful, but seemingly of no great importance—but when that dagger spills the blood of a dwarf—the ancient enemies of the people of Golath—the blade awakens and reveals its true power as an artifact.

Conclusion

Don't be afraid to embrace the classic dungeon. It can be delightful to pit one's wits against a gauntlet of traps and fiends, and a dungeon can be a ridiculous deathtrap and still have an interesting role in the world. Is it preparing your heroes for an unknown challenge that lies ahead? Is it a cover for something nefarious? Or is it just *hungry*?

There's only one way to find out!

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DAVID "ZEB" COOK has been a writer and professional game designer for 43 years, working in video and tabletop games. Most notably he was the designer on TSR's *AD&D 2nd Edition* ruleset, the *D&D Expert* rules, the *Oriental Adventures* rulebook, and the *Planescape* campaign setting. In videogames, he was a designer on *Fallout 2*, the lead designer on the *City of Villains* MMO, and most recently a zone content lead for the *Elder Scrolls Online* game. He has written novels and short stories, including *Soldiers of Ice*, *King Pinch*, and *Horselords*. Although technically retired, Zeb still can't resist the lure of game and adventure design.

DOMINIQUE DICKEY is a writer, editor, cultural consultant, and Nebula Award-winning RPG hooligan. In addition to creating *TRIAL*, a narrative courtroom tabletop role-playing game about race in the criminal justice system, and co-creating *Tomorrow on Revelation III*, a tabletop role-playing game about surviving and building community on a hyper-capitalist space station, Dominique has written for *Thirsty Sword Lesbians*, *Dungeons & Dragons*, and *Pathfinder*. Their fiction has appeared in *Anathema Magazine*, *Fantasy Magazine*, and *Lightspeed Magazine*, among other venues. Dominique works as a designer and editor at Monte Cook Games. They live in the DC area and are always on the hunt for their next idea. You can keep in touch at dominiquedickey.com.

KELSEY DIONNE is a game designer and the founder of The Arcane Library, a TTRPG publishing company based out of Las Vegas. She released *The Secrets of Skyhorn Lighthouse* in 2017, which went on to become the highest-rated adventure of all time on DMs Guild. Since then, she's continued to publish critically acclaimed 5e material and work on her passion project, an old-school dungeon crawling system called *Shadowdark RPG*. She also has writing and design credits for the bestselling indie game *Index Card RPG* (Runehammer Games). Her claim to fame is that she met Gary Gygax once long ago, and he encouraged her to become a Game Master and dungeon designer. She's glad she took his advice!

BASHEER GHOUSE is a writer, game designer, and cultural consultant based out of San Jose, California. He's worked on projects for Kobold Press, Rowan Rook and Deckard, Paizo, Critical Role, Wizards of the Coast, and more. He's currently working on his first major independent game, *Guns Blazing!*

RAJAN KHANNA is an author, reviewer, podcaster, musician, and narrator. His three novels, *Falling Sky*, *Rising Tide*, and *Raining Fire*, take place in a post-apocalyptic world of airships and floating cities. His short fiction has appeared in *Analog Magazine*, *Lightspeed Magazine*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, and multiple anthologies. His articles and reviews have appeared at Tor.com and LitReactor.com and his podcast narrations can be heard at *Podcastle*, *Escape Pod*, *PseudoPod*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, and *Lightspeed Magazine*. He lives in Brooklyn where he's a member of the Altered Fluid writing group. His personal website is rajankhanna.com and he tweets @rajanyk.

SADIE LOWRY is a freelance ENNIE award-winning writer, game designer, and editor who has worked with Critical Role, Wizards of the Coast, and MCDM, with notable credits including *Critical Role Presents: Call of the Netherdeep* and *Spelljammer: Light of Xaryxis*. She enjoys adding rich narrative and roleplay opportunities to the game she loves. An editor at a book publisher by trade, she has a passion for making worlds come to life through books. When she isn't buried in words, she can usually be found baking cupcakes, stargazing, or drawing her *D&D* characters. She lives in Utah with her husband and border collie, and you can find her online at sadielowry.com or on Twitter at @incandescaent.

FRANK MENTZER ([wiki/Frank_Mentzer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank_Mentzer)) became world-famous for writing the *Dungeons & Dragons* game of the 1980s (its global surge), including five boxed sets translated into a dozen languages and played by millions. Working closely with Gary Gygax (co-creator of *D&D*) Frank also wrote many accessories, the most famous being *The Temple of Elemental Evil* with his friend Gary. Frank also started and ran the international Role Playing Game Association (RPGA).

BRUCE NESMITH is a veteran video game designer and roleplaying game author. He served as lead designer for *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, and senior designer for *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, *Fallout 3*, *Fallout 4*, *Fallout 76*, and *Starfield*. During his many years at TSR, he authored the *Ravenloft Boxed Set*, as well as numerous other roleplaying supplements and adventures. These days, he is a novelist with two contemporary fantasy books out, *Mischief Maker* and *Odin's Escape*, with *Ymir's Return* due out in early 2023.

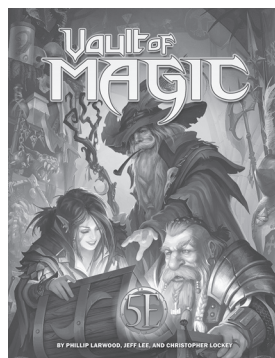
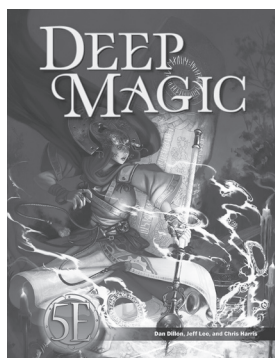
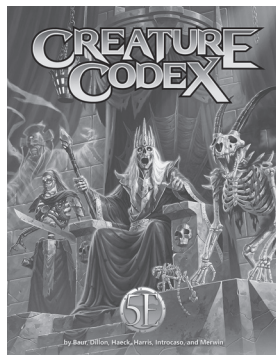
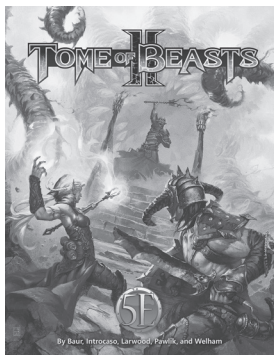
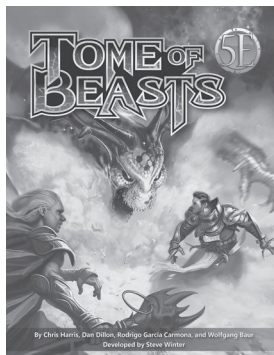
ERIN ROBERTS is a writer of stories and games. Her recent game writing has appeared in *Dragonlance: Shadow of the Dragon Queen* (D&D), *Hunter: The Reckoning Fifth Edition* (World of Darkness), *Interstellar Species* (Starfinder), *Journeys Through the Radiant Citadel* (D&D), *Lost Omens: Travel Guide* (Pathfinder), and *Zombies, Run!* Her fiction has been published in magazines including *Asimov's Magazine*, *Clarkesworld*, *Podcastle*, and *The Dark*. She is currently an Early Career Provost's Fellow at the University of Texas at Austin and joined the popular podcast *Writing Excuses* as a core host in 2023. You can find the latest links to her writing and other escapades at linktr.ee/erinroberts.

LAWRENCE SCHICK has worked on a lot of roleplaying games. He also wrote *Heroic Worlds* (1991), one of the first comprehensive guides to tabletop RPGs, but nowadays most books he writes are under the name Lawrence Ellsworth and in the historical fiction genre. His big ongoing project is editing and translating new, modern English editions of all the Musketeers novels of Alexandre Dumas, a series that when complete will fill nine volumes, from *The Three Musketeers* to *The Man in the Iron Mask*. (The later volumes are currently running as serials at musketeerscycle.substack.com.) In 2023, Applause Books will publish *Cinema of Swords*, his guide to movies about swashbucklers such as knights, Vikings, barbarians, and samurai, from the Silent Era to *The Princess Bride*. Schick/Ellsworth's website is SwashbucklingAdventure.net. See you there!

JAMES L. SUTTER is a co-creator of the *Pathfinder* and *Starfinder* *Roleplaying Games*, and served as both the first Creative Director for *Starfinder* and the Executive Editor of the Pathfinder Tales novel line. He is the author of the fantasy novels *Death's Heretic*—a finalist for the Compton Crook Award for Best First Novel—and *The Redemption Engine*, which won the 2015 Scribe Award for Best Original Speculative Novel. He's published short stories in such venues as *Nightmare*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and the #1 Amazon best-seller *Machine of Death*, as well as essays in *Clarkesworld* and *Lightspeed: Queers Destroy Science Fiction*. In addition, he's written comics, a wealth of tabletop gaming material, and video games—most recently the *Starfinder* Alexa game featuring Nathan Fillion and Laura Bailey. For more information on his work, plus worldbuilding classes and writing advice, find him online at jameslsutter.com or on Twitter at @JamesLSutter.

BARBARA J. WEBB grew up in a house with a library of thousands of science fiction and fantasy books, which gave her no choice but to become a writer and gamer herself. A writer of fantasy, romance, and RPGs, her recent titles include *City of Burning Shadows* and *Midnight in St. Petersburg*. Most of her free time is taken up with video games and running *D&D* for her friends, but she has co-taught the CSSF Intensive Novel Workshop since 2009, as well as various online and in-person workshops on novel structure. She enjoys her small-town life with her husband and cat, and dreams of keeping horses. Or even better, unicorns.

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