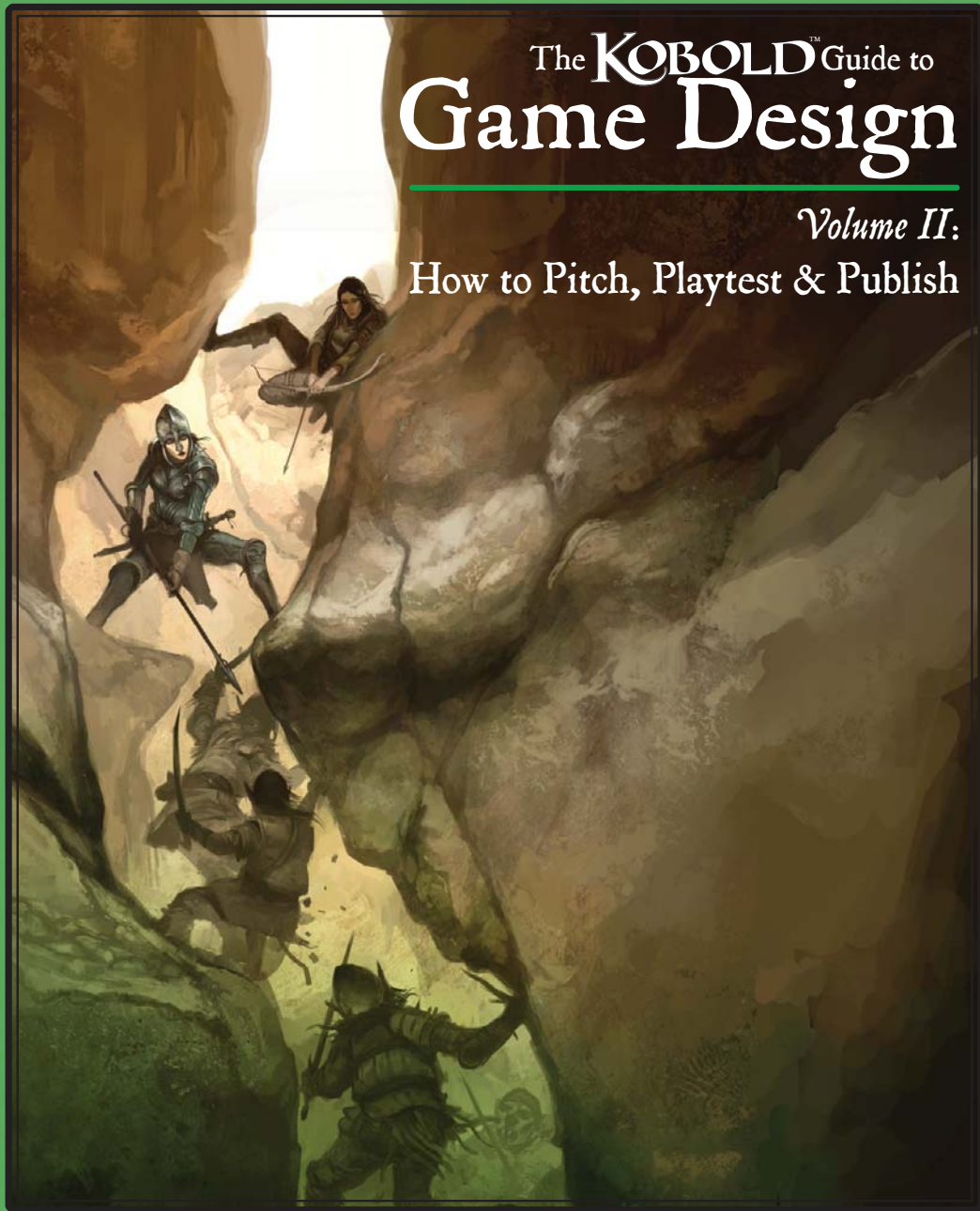


OPEN DESIGN™ presents

The KOBOLD™ Guide to Game Design

Volume II:
How to Pitch, Playtest & Publish



by Wolfgang Baur
with Nicolas Logue

The KOBOLD Guide to Game Design

Volume II:

How to Pitch, Playtest & Publish



A Compilation of Essays from OPEN DESIGN

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Foreword

Freelancers & Sellswords

There's a fine line between successful freelancer and cynical hack. This book takes the position that knowing your craft and caring about your audience is the first step to success for young designers, and that caring about your audience and listening to their wants and demands is an important skill for older designers who may have grown a bit jaded.

I'm sappy enough to suggest that ya gotta love game design, or your work will never amount to much. It's not that sweetness and true affection for the field are required to get ahead: it's that if you are a cynical hack only looking to climb the ladder to the top...well, everyone figures that out pretty quickly.

And once you do stab your way to the top? Congratulations: you're the king of a field you've grown to despise. It's understandable in an industry in which layoffs are the usual company reaction to shipping a new videogame title or a new edition. But it's also a sad end when so many designers continuously find ways to invent and reinvent what is the dominant cultural form of the day (yes, I mean gaming—just compare computer game revenues to Hollywood revenues).

So, with that warning against cynicism out of the way, please consider the following dozen takes on some classic problems of design (and, to a lesser degree, of playtest, development, and gamemastery). There's still a great deal left to be discovered about the ludic principles. I hope to shed a little light on one corner of them.

Wolfgang Baur
December 17, 2008

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1

Fortunate Accidents

October 9th, 2008

The things I talk about so often in design—the matters of design discipline, writing every day, using outlines, sticking to word counts, and meeting deadlines—are all important.

But sometimes luck and serendipity have something to do with it as well, and I find this is especially true when dealing with collaboration. People misunderstand and miscommunicate about shared settings and shared ideas.

And that's a great opportunity. Some of my favorite design moments come from that, and one of them just showed up today in the ongoing work of map labels for the Zobeck map. The list included the Moon's Grace Temple, the Moon Temple, and the Temple of the Dawn Goddess, in three different districts of the city. Now, these are all ways to refer to the Temple of Lada, the Golden Goddess. And originally, they were all meant to be a single place.

But the list made me think: "Why should there be just one temple of each god in a city? That's ridiculous!" And in fact, you never see this in the real world. Temples to the same god appear in many parts of the same city. Even in pagan times, there was more than one temple to Jupiter in Rome.

*"People misunderstand and miscommunicate...
Some of my favorite design moments come from that"*

So, likewise, this kicked off some thoughts about the gods and temples of Zobeck. There may be just five main gods and two lesser ones in the Zobeck pantheon, but that doesn't mean just five main temples and some lesser ones. And the map reflects that.

I love these moments in design, when what seems like a mistake becomes a feature that sets a monster apart, or makes a map richer and more detailed, or makes an NPC worth talking to.

You got any favorite "splendid mistakes" from your campaign or your games? Visit the Kobold Forum (www.koboldquarterly.com/KQForums) and let me know.

2

Lessons from Playtest

October 1st, 2008

Tales of Zobeck generated some super-long and detailed playtest reports and designer responses. That material is very valuable for anyone wanting to see a set of playtest issues and a measured response to them.

That exchange also offered at least three more general lessons, which I'll summarize here for everyone:

1. Your Audience Is Not Your Group

One of the things that interested me most about having Terraleon playtest Eyebite79's scenario is that difference in their play styles. And it's a useful reminder that D&D has so very many different styles of groups and play.

Terraleon comes from the RPGA and action side of the gaming world, and my impression is that eyebite79 comes from a more mechanically loose, story-focused style of play. I wouldn't say that either one of these styles is better or worse; they both have lots of fans. But both are important audiences. As a designer, you need to know your own biases.

This is especially true when you are trying to design for a particular purpose or audience, such as an introductory adventure, a **PATHFINDER SOCIETY** organized-play adventure, or a similar subset of the wider gaming community. You need to either be a member of the target audience (not always possible), or you need to make sure that the playtest cycle includes lots of representatives of that interest group.

There's an opposite danger as well: designing too closely to a target group. What I mean is, a designer who doesn't leave the company/local orbit very often can fall into the trap of niches and grognardism, answering only to the needs of your local play style, an internet play style, a particular company style, or a style that features a certain set of requirements or tropes.

At the very least, if you do decide to design for a niche, know that you're doing so...

For example, during **Tales of Zobeck** playtesting, I was hoping that eyebite79 might playtest terraleon's adventure. This was not out of any sense of "getting back" or turning the tables after the adventure pitch process, but just to hear the

reasoned critique of a rules-heavy style by a gamer who privileges other elements more highly.

2. It's Not Always in the Text

Some of Eyebite's responses are about what the NPCs are doing or what the setting implies. That's valuable information that shows why designers who playtest their own material never get as much out of the playtest process as strangers who test the material. As a designer, you assume a lot. And one of the things to learn is where to draw the fine line between too much information and not enough.

But if you find yourself saying "Well, it should be like this . . ." a lot in response to playtest reports, you may not have created enough supporting text for some sections. This doesn't mean double the section length, but consider adding a paragraph addressing concerns that more than one playtest group bring up.

3. Doing Is More Important Than Telling

The third and most important point is that gameplay is always about what the players do. What the DM knows or tells about the setting, motivation, and backstory is secondary. The first goal of any RPG designer is to create scope for player action.

If you fail to create that scope, or if your scope is too narrow, the playtest results you'll hear are going to tell you about symptoms of the problem: feeling railroaded, missing information for the DM about key terrain or roleplaying actions, not enough depth. Those aren't the real problem. The real problem is that the design has focused too much on a single path or style of play, and failed to provide sufficient scope for action by the players. All DMs know that players are unpredictable; designers sometimes forget this.

I'd argue this is the fundamental flaw in **Keep on the Shadowfell**, but that's another discussion. Without derailing this essay entirely, here's the short version: There's not enough for players to do in **KotS**, so they get bored easily. Or rather, they do the same thing over and over, and it gets dull. The design assumes that learning combat is the most important thing (and maybe it is), but it fails to provide scope for character development and plot advancement by clever or advanced players. End of digression.

Scope for action is the biggest challenge of successful adventure design. And to get there, the solution is simple. Realize that each encounter is not about the scenery, or about the wordplay, or the history. It's about what the PCs can do. If an encounter element is not related to player action but only provides descriptive color, it should be cut.

This does not mean rules for actions are more important than flavor or story. It's just as easy to include useless mechanics that players won't take as it is to provide descriptive text that serves no purpose. Mechanics must be as obsessively focused on the player effect as are the plot points and dialogue.

3

Talent Won't Save You...

September 2nd, 2008

... if you blow your deadlines. It's true; insanely genius-level epic freelancer chops will not get you a second chance if you blow a deadline.

Here's the ways that this can bite you in the butt as a freelancer, because there's only so venues that publish game design work. Sometimes it's not your fault. Sometimes it's completely your fault. In either situation, you can handle it either more or less professionally.

Eyes Bigger Than Your Stomach

Sometimes you start a project with the best of intentions, but you suffer some calamity. This is especially common with freelancers just starting out, who may overestimate their ability to write text to a high standard. Here's how that happens. Ye Happy Freelancer is offered a project on an aggressive deadline for good pay, and says yes, because he knows he can write 2500 words a day, and so a 50,000 word project should take just twenty days, right? A three-week deadline? No problem!

That is freelancer naiveté and optimism, and most publishers know better. Freelancers get sick, their children need medical care, their spouses blow up domestic tranquility, their parents unexpectedly visit for weeks at a time, their dogs die. Sad but true, real life interferes. Even getting a promotion at the day job may mean spending more hours at that job and less time on freelance writing. So, know your limits.

What are those limits? I shoot for something around 1,000 words a day right now, and I give myself weekends off and have a magazine to run, so roughly 20,000 words a month is good (yes, I do make exceptions now and again). A single man with no children might shoot for 2,500 words a day, and might write seven days a week to try to break into the industry in a big way. Yow, that's 75,000 words a month! I sense burnout, but it might be sustainable for a while.

On the other hand, a new freelancer who has trouble with some basic craft issues, and needs more time for rewrites, and has a demanding spouse might manage just 400 words a day, with most weekends off. Call it 10,000 words a month. That's 120,000 words a year, which is two good-sized game books or a fat novel. Not bad.

Everyone is different. Publishers like high-output, but as long as you know what you can realistically deliver, they're usually willing to talk about scaling a project size to fit your available time.

Making Wordcount

The hardest part of getting to your wordcount goal is often getting started. I know that once I'm typing, I'm usually fine for hours.

But some days I'm too tired, too distracted; the room is too noisy; there are too many "honey-do" items or other jobs competing for my time. This is maddening when a deadline approaches, which is why staying ahead is always a good strategy.

Two other tricks to get you started. The first is to choose a set time of day for your writing. One well-known novelist got his start (and continued for years) writing on his lunch breaks. He had to produce at a given time, so he did. If he stalled or delayed, nothing got done that day. I find a set time works for me as well.

The second trick is even easier. If you are unable to get started, pick up your papers and your PC and go somewhere that worked last time. It might be another room in the house. It might be a library. Wherever it was, that place was productive before: give it another shot. Maybe it will become your regular writing spot (combined with a regular writing time).

Design time needs to be a habit. Make it one with repeated times and places.

Things Go Horribly Wrong

But let's assume that you know your limits. You can still get in huge trouble.

Sometimes you start a project with the best of intentions, but you realize that the work is beyond your abilities. That is, you can't actually deliver the length, complexity, or deadline required. This is super hard to admit to yourself, but . . . it's better to tell the publisher as soon as you realize it. Because you're only hurting your chances for future work if you fail completely.

Sometimes you start a project with the best of intentions, and then real life interferes. You move cities, you change jobs, you get divorced or married, or you just find that your interests drift away from the project. Um, if merely moving house upsets your writing schedule, you may want to rethink the idea of freelancing professionally. People with regular jobs manage to fit in major life changes without dropping the ball on their work.

If you aren't taking the work that seriously, you have no business agreeing to a game design contract with anyone. I'd recommend doing your game design work as a sideline, and publishing it on a blog or fan site. Seriously. Publishers pay the rent and feed their children with what they earn from their work. They make payroll for their staff and freelancers. Don't be a dilettante.

How to Save Yourself From Drowning

But let's say you are serious about the work, and events have spiraled beyond your control. The deadline looms, and the manuscript is a complete trainwreck. Now what?

The real problem is that sometimes your dog did eat your playtest notes, and your hard drive did crash, and your parents or grandparents are hospitalized. The thing to do in these cases is always the same, for artists, for writers, and for editors alike: Fess up immediately, and beg for an extension. Before your deadline comes and goes.

Publishers are not entirely cruel and inhuman. Most of them have families or some distant memories of a childhood, or may even have experienced a technical snafu that made them learn the value of frequent, dependable backups. So they are likely to grant an extension for some projects, and will work hard on their end to find some other way to cover the gap in the schedule.

The sooner you tell them you'll be late, the sooner they can start that process, and the more painless it will be for them. The worst time to report this is after you have missed the deadline, because it's almost impossible for a publisher to recover their schedule at that point. The best time is before you sign the contract, but anywhere in-between can be helpful. Sometimes another project can be bumped forward, or another freelancer can take a chunk of work, or an in-house staffer can leap in to save the day. The only time there are no good solutions is long after the deadline. That's when publishers get (justifiably) enraged that you signed up for something, didn't deliver, and kept it to yourself.

It's Not the Deadline, It's the Cover-up

If you blow a deadline and say nothing about it, your name is mud with that publisher. Probably forever. Begging and pleading is all very nice, but it's beside the point. As a freelancer, your job is to deliver the goods on time. This does not mean turning over junk, and it does not mean turning over nothing.

And if you can't deliver, it's your job to give the bad news. It doesn't have to be much, just a "I'm sorry, I'm way behind on this project. Can I get an extension?" is usually enough to get the conversation started. After all, you gave your word to deliver. If it's not working, it's not really the publisher's job to hunt you down. Nevertheless, that's usually what winds up happening.

As humans, we hate to admit failure. We prefer to keep our mistakes out of public view. And yet we all make mistakes. The ability to confess to those mistakes is a source of huge strength to a freelancer. It means you take the work seriously, it means you treat the publisher as a partner and value his or her opinion. It means you realize you screwed up, and you act like a grownup.

You will be shocked to learn that there are surprisingly few grownups in the games industry. The ones who do exist, well, you probably know their names. Because it takes that level of responsibility to become a successful freelancer.

Either you know your limits and don't try to do too much, or when you do find yourself unable to meet a deadline you make the problem known so that a solution can be found.

This is why honesty and early warnings get you so much respect as a freelancer. You save a publisher from sleepless nights, from paying ludicrous fees for a rush solution, from tearing his hair and abusing his printer. Saying "I can't" is a difficult thing for any freelancer, because the urge is always there to say "Yes! Totally! I'm on it!" and earn that next contract. But smart publishers know that taking "no" for an answer is in their best interests as well; it won't count against you with most publishers.

Exceptions to the Rule

Not every venue is obsessive about deadlines; most of what I've been saying here applies to standalone projects such as modules, sourcebooks, and the like. There are some places where forgiveness is much more common.

"If you aren't taking the work...seriously, you have no business agreeing to a...contract"

At the head of the list, magazines are more forgiving. This may seem counterintuitive; I mean, aren't magazines totally deadline-driven? Well, yes, and they assume that half of their accepted queries will never turn into a submission, much less an accepted article. Besides, there's always next issue, and in any case they buy stuff on spec. Even so, it makes you look bad if you swore up and down at the convention that you would have an article in time for the Halloween/April Fool's/Big New Edition Spectacular, and you don't deliver. Even websites prefer to work with freelancers they know they can count on.

Now, there are publishers who will take a manuscript months or years late (they are called Chaosium and Pagan Publishing), and their fans are very patient people. Most fans are not so patient, and certainly book and hobby stores aren't sitting around breathlessly waiting for the releases that they know are unlikely to ship this year.

And finally, there are fan sites and Web publishers and PDF publishers who pay little or nothing, and so (you might think) have less cause to complain if you flake out on them. That's not exactly the case. If you make a commitment to one of those publishers, your reputation still suffers if you fail to deliver.

Conclusion

Most freelancers (myself included) hate to own up to lateness, but it's one of those unpleasant realities of the job. It's a bit like going to the dentist; the longer you put it off, the more likely that you're going to suffer for it.

Professional freelancers quickly learn to judge their available time and not to overcommit. That word professional is the essence of it. Treat your freelance writing as a real job, because writing and game design are a business. A very weird business, but a business nevertheless.

4

Design Guidelines: Playtesting

August 21st, 2008

Given that I ran two events at GenCon just to get some feedback on a few encounters, it's worth talking for a while about playtesting. This essay covers the basics of setting up, running, and reporting a successful playtest. How you run the table is entirely up to you. As long as someone is tracking the results, the playtest can be considered a success. However, detail always helps.

The Golden Rule

Here's the Golden Rule of Playtesting: "Note it and move on." It's not uncommon for playtest groups to get caught up in the testing spirit and discuss the fixes for an unbalanced encounter or a misjudged CR rating. You're probably correct that there's a problem, but fixing it during play is usually a time sink that keeps the group from completing the playtest.

Avoid the temptation to redesign at the table; ask people to note the problem, scribble down any obvious fix, then continue playing. You can always "debrief" the problem areas at the end of the session and offer some potential fixes then, or when you write your report. The goal of playtesters, though, is to break things, not necessarily to fix them.

Character Generation and Levels

If you already have a set of balanced characters available at the right level, the ideal is to use those. If not, use a standard 25-point-buy character, roll 4d6 and drop the lowest random generation, or take characters from the lists on pages 113–126 of the **3.5 Dungeon Master's Guide**. Note the method you use.

If you do use an existing set of characters, please explain how they were generated.

Regardless of how the PCs are chosen, include all the race/class/level details in your write-up.

Books and Resources

The approved list of playtest books is the **Player's Handbook** (PH), **Player's Handbook II** (PH2), **Expanded Psionics Handbook** (XPH), **Dungeon Master's Guide** (DMG), **Spell Compendium**, and all the **Complete** books for *3rd Edition* playtests, and the **PH**, **DMG**, and **Martial Powers** for 4E tests. While there's a lot of great stuff beyond that both from d20 publishers and from WotC, no one can cover everything. If you're itching for an exception, discuss it with your freelance coordinator.

Note that the **Magic Item Compendium**, **Book of Nine Swords**, **Tome of Magic**, **FORGOTTEN REALMS Campaign Setting**, **EBERRON**, **Vile Darkness**, **Exalted Deeds**, **Planar Handbook**, and many others are deliberately left out. If you absolutely must include something from these sources, flag it in the character generation notes.

Notekeeping

Taking notes is crucial for successful playtesting, though it shouldn't override everything else (playtests are still meant to be fun, after all). Because it's important, you should designate one player as the official notekeeper. This person must track rounds in combat, noting major events (like criticals that knock someone down especially quickly, or every PC failing a save or skill check, etc). The notekeeper also tracks non-combat events such as plot twists or clues, items, and information that helped or hindered the party's progress.

*"The Golden Rule of Playtesting:
Note it and move on."*

As DM, you may wish to keep a few notes as well. If you modified encounters or you needed more information (and there are lots of gaps in most playtest manuscripts), please mark it down. Likewise, note the smart or dumb things players do (and that you have NPCs do).

Combats, Death, and TPK

Most of playtesting is combat testing, both for CR and by encounter. That said, there's no reason you shouldn't enjoy all the flavor, character roleplay, and fun of the game. For the write-ups, though, the combats, traps, and skill checks warrant the most attention. So please watch for the following.

- *Combats Lasting Less Than 4 Rounds:* If it's quick and easy, note that.
- *Combats Running Over 10 Rounds:* If it's a longer fight, what was tough about it?
- *Healing Surges:* Track how many healing surges (total) are used in a given encounter.

4. Design Guidelines: Playtesting

- *PC Death and Dying*: Even though all PCs are automatically *raised* and the game continues, please note each time a PC drops dead. Note whenever a PC has to make a death saving throw.
- *Daily Powers*: Note how many daily powers are used in a given encounter.
- *PC Leveling*: Note how quickly the party levels up.
- *Save Success*: Please note when a saving throw is especially critical or impossible.
- *Turning Success*: Track all turning attempts and their success or failure.
- *TPK*: If the whole party is wiped out, note it and (depending on time available) either replay the encounter using what you learned from the first combat, or skip it and simply move on as if the party had survived. DMs should note roughly what percentage of hit points or surviving monsters remained at the end of any TPK encounter.

Problems in Mechanics or Balance

You know what these are: saves, skills, abilities that just don't work. Encounters that are too easy or too hard for your group's levels. Anything that violates the core rules as generally played.

Problems in Story, Setting, and Logic

These are tough for a designer to see, because he or she's too close to the text and unconsciously fills in the gaps. And, frankly, a typical playtest manuscript has lots of leaps of logic and missing connections between parts. Many areas are still pretty sketchy in their descriptions, because of the realities of publishing schedules that contain limited time for formal playtests.

Feel free to point these out, or just to solve the issues with DM ingenuity and mention your take in a report.

Praise Where It Is Due

Playtest reports should not be unrelentingly negative, if only to salve a designer's wounded ego.

Also, if something in a description or encounter really creeps players out or makes the whole table go "Oh Wow!" I like to note that for the benefit of the creator of the adventure or supplement. Sometimes those elements can be further reinforced in later development and editing.

How to Playtest Successfully

If you want to playtest again (for Open Design, Paizo, or WotC projects), it's worth making sure that your reports are solid and that you have provided the core information about how the encounters went in a timely way. Play the encounters as written. If they're terrible, let that come up in play rather than adjusting for it ahead of time.

Avoid using slang or emotional descriptions of a playtest session. A devastating presentation of the facts will get a lot more attention (and gather you more respect as a skillful playtester) than a string of "elves are wimps" or "this sucked." If it sucked, say why. If the elves got run over by the PCs, spell it out.

That's really all there is to it.

Though session reports written in character are always appreciated, not everyone has the time, and it's not necessary. Given a choice between a timely report written a day or two after the session was played and a wildly entertaining read written three weeks later, most designers always prefer the timely write-up. I know I do.

Credits

Most publishers will include your name and your players' names in the credits. Please include them in your report.

Convention Playtesting

If you don't want to playtest with your "usual group" (and there are clear problems with having a set of default assumptions about RPGs built up over years), there's no better way to clear away the gaming detritus than to use conventions for on-the-spot playtesting.

Playtest groups at a convention have two advantages. First, you control the PC stats and thus the overall power level. And second, the players don't have a history with you and are really aiming for maximum fun in minimum time. This forces you to generate typical characters (or swipe some from the **DMG** section on NPCs) and to make the case for your adventure in a short period. Each encounter (and a convention game may have no more than three to five encounters, depending on the length of the slot) will really need to shine.

There's one other big advantage to convention playtesters. If you hand them a piece of paper and ask for their feedback on the adventure, they'll give you a less-diplomatic opinion on what they liked and disliked than your friends and regular gamers will. Conventions playtesters are candid, and that's a powerful reason to run convention playtests.

5

The Infinite Onion: Creating Play Depth

July 17th, 2008

Some game designers would have you believe that they are powerful authorities with a lot of secret knowledge about the world. And it's true that game designers are generalists with good math and language skills, and skill with both syncretic work and reductive analysis. But design is a process of invention, and so it always proceeds by fits and starts. If there were a simple formula for it, everyone could do it. So all that deferring to authority is a bit of a scam.

Here's the truth: Sometimes, I don't know what I'm doing with a design. And that's okay, really.

This is a normal stage of design, the stage I think of as playful discovery. It's not that I don't have ideas (ideas are the easy part!). It's that the ideas I have don't work together smoothly. For instance, the character motivations don't all click in the backstory. Or an encounter is sort of boring tactically, or it playtests badly. The things that I find exciting may be elements that the playtesters find pretty routine, or even too easy. Resource management may be completely out of whack.

Nobody's first draft of rules is perfect. Not Richard Garfield's, not Sid Meier's, not Gary Gygax's. No one's.

Design as Layering

A large part of the design process, for me, is about making the pieces fit. I call this process layering, or lacquering, or making connections in the design. Erik Mona talks about the technique in his interview in *KQ*#1, and most of the better designers I know depend on it. Build a prototype game. Playtest. Fix. Iterate.

There's no substitute for spending time with a design and working it from many angles. Over time, you find more and more of the plot holes in an adventure, or more of the mechanical holes in a new subsystem, or more of the powergaming rules abuses when a new creature or type is combined with existing material. The more complex the game is, of course, the longer this process takes.

With adventures, I usually think of “outline, revision, first draft, playtest, second draft” as the minimum requirement. That gets me a manuscript that has enough interest on every page that a publisher can hand it to an editor and get something out of it. I’ve written faster in the past, and I have always regretted it.

Playtest Types

I’ll make one further statement on process: hands-on design is just as important as mediated design. That is, you can’t always count on editors and playtesters to find the flaws that you care about. They’ll find most of them. They’ll find flaws you would miss. But whenever I can make the time, I like to playtest the material myself, as well as having it playtested externally.

An external playtest is always (rightly) lauded as more likely to find the gaping holes that a designer mentally “fills in” during his own playtest runs. That is, he applies the rules that are assumed to work a certain way, or adds in the unwritten NPC reactions crucial to an encounter setup.

Those are flaws you won’t find yourself, so I think external playtests are crucial for revealing your blind spots. For instance, they helped pinpoint the need for improvements to the investigation/clue structure in **Blood of the Gorgon**. They nailed the need for better treatment of the maelstrom in **Six Arabian Nights** and led to a partial redesign of the nightwing in **Empire of the Ghouls**, not to mention the revisiting of game balance on several encounters.

“Sometimes, I don’t know what I’m doing with a design. And that’s okay”

The Perfect Game

But doing a playtest myself gives me another kind of data. It tells me what isn’t working in the “ideal game” that I am striving for with a design. That Platonic ideal of a game is sometimes a spark that inspires me (such as the clockpunk of **Tales of Zobeck**), or it can be an attempt to match a particular genre tradition (such as the use of faerie lore in **Wrath of the River King**).

In an adventure, this is usually tone or theme or roleplay elements that external playtesters may or may not pick up on. In a rules set, it’s usually about gauging player reaction to a new mechanic; is there excitement, or is playtesting it a chore? How much sizzle does that mechanic really bring to the game? Even a boring mechanic can work flawlessly in mechanical terms. But if it’s boring me at the table, or cycle times are too long, I need to know.

This is a long-winded way of saying some encounters are written in rough form knowing that they must be rewritten, trimmed, expanded, and improved. But every encounter and every rewrite should bring the resulting design closer and closer to that ideal that a designer carries around as a target for a particular project. Sometimes I get very, very close to that target indeed. Sometimes I miss by miles.

And the difference between the two is usually time. Rushed projects almost always lack the connections between parts that make the whole worthwhile. Whether those are mechanical connections or story connections doesn't matter. Anyone can string together a set of dice tables and character generation systems. Anyone can put together a quick set of location descriptions and monster stats. But to rise above the level of "just another rules set" or "just another crawl," there needs to be a little more to it.

What-If Design

The time I spend examining design permutations and drawing new connections is the game of what-if. What if the spellcasting mechanic feeds back into the hit point mechanic? What if the mounted rules use the same action points as unmounted combat, but in a new way? What if the archvillian changes over the course of the story, jumping body to body? What if the stories are all set in a shared world that ticks to a devil's timetable? What if the King of the Fey got really, really angry, and the only way out was to placate his even more evil sister? What if . . .

"Good design isn't a road with milestones you can tick off until you arrive at Done"

So that's where layering comes from for me. Asking what if 100 times, and throwing 90 of them away. There comes a point where the number of choices is paralyzing (usually fairly early in a project). And there is a point where the number of choices is really already determined, and it's a matter of trying to keep things pointed in exactly the right direction.

Once rewrites start to feel like I'm drifting from the goal, I know I'm done with a project, and it's time for editors and developers to take it further. When what-if turns from a tool into a problem, and each new what-if starts to annoy me, it's done.

While I suspect I have the right answer, I want playtests to support that view. If they show me that players are getting out of the design what I hoped, then further what-ifs will degrade the value of the design. Further playtest may overload it with features, subplots, backstory, subsystems, or chrome that seems valuable.

That temptation to overdesign is deadly; you wind up with lots of design junk. Avoid adding too much stuff. Good games are pretty simple at their core, and good adventures are not too convoluted. Leave exposition and backstory to novels and films. Concentrate on action, connections, and setting that gives players exciting things to do.

Conclusion

When people ask me about the process of design, that's where I start. Take two or three or ten ideas, and see if they connect in new and interesting ways. Layer them together with what-ifs, test that in playtest, and repeat.

Good design isn't a road with milestones that you can tick off until (ta-da!) you arrive at Done. This is why publishers who manage creative types like artists and designers sometimes go quietly mad. It's not easy to wrap a schedule around layering and connections.

In my experience, good design is more like an infinite onion, layers of junk and variables and better and better approaches to a goal. A goal that, in most cases, you never quite reach. But that's the joy of it.

6

Promises, Promises: The Art of the Pitch

July 11th, 2008

A pitch is a writer's promise. It says "I'm going to entertain you, and here's how." The *number one rule* is simple: *Don't be boring.*

When you write a pitch for work at a magazine or website, or when you pitch a novel or short story for that matter, you are making a promise to deliver that entertainment. But the promise is more than word count and deadline, important as those are. The real promise is about the style, the genre, and the approach you take. If you don't nail the audience's expectations about those elements, the editor will (rightly) reject your pitch, no matter how great it might be for another audience or venue.

So rule #2: *Know the audience you are pitching to.*

You and the Audience

Most of being a writer or game designer is your relationship to the audience. For most freelancers, this starts with the pitch. You need to know (and explain clearly)

- What you are going to write, and
- Who you are writing it for.

Then the pain begins, because communication is imperfect and people such as editors may (no, they will) bring their own interpretation to your pitch.

How many ways can you go wrong in a pitch? Well, lots. People who you think are your natural audience may be offended or put out by what you write. They may interpret an adventure as supporting some real-world political or religious view (ask me about **EBERRON** fandom's views on whether religions can be both intolerant and good, or whether the Church of the Silver Flame can, at any time in its history, be described as fanatical and zealous).

Worse than that, people can miss the point entirely. They ignore your (natural and completely obvious) genius. That really hurts, especially as it means you failed to make your point clear. What was in your head did not translate onto the screen, and then back through the eyeballs of your readers to their brains.

And that's a writer's main skill (and yes, I do include game designers as a very specialized form of writer: text is your business).

So one of the first lessons you learn as a writer is to develop a thick skin where criticism and rejection are concerned. If you fail to develop this trait, you will fail as a writer. Maybe not right away; you might become a powerful jerk in the design world, whose opinions are feared but who is consumed with self-doubt. You might be a frail ego, easily set into a tailspin when deadlines loom and an editor demands another rewrite. But overall, success comes from having some degree of confidence that you as a person and as a designer have worth, and standing, apart from your creations.

If you seek validation only through your work as a designer, you will live a life of misery, because out there are always going to be people who think it stinks. You literally cannot please everyone with a single work of fiction or design. It isn't possible, because different audiences want different things.

*“write for love as often as you can. Which means,
pitch what you love as often as you can”*

So, pitch to the audience you want to write for. Know the venue: read the magazine, study the website, read all of the modules from the campaign setting. Sure, usually you pitch for a setting or world you already know and love, but sometimes you'll pitch to someone new. Know their language and the assumptions of their fandom. If that audience fails to connect with you, pitch something else. The work itself may be fine, but if you pitch paranormal romance to the hard SF editor, it will never work. Likewise, if you pitch exotic-anime-heroics to the clockpunk setting, your odds are slim.

Pitches = Persuasion

To craft a successful pitch, you need to be persuasive. You need to convince your readers, whether patrons or editors, of at least three things:

- *First*, you have a smoking hot idea that people will want to read,
- *Second*, you are putting a new twist on something that everyone agrees is a classic and
- *Third*, you can be trusted to carry it off.

Most pitches I see fall into two categories of failure. The first category are the easy ones to discard; these are simply boring. You may want to write “10 New Torches”, but it's probably a dull read. You may take a great topic, like “Weapons of Japan” and make it boring by adding too many academic or pedantic footnotes. Likewise, an adventure that's really all about NPCs acting and PCs watching is pretty dull.

The other form of failure is the twist that's just . . . dumb. This is mostly a matter of style and taste. Some people might say that an article on the Elven

Industrial Revolution is brilliant (and it might work for some), but for me, it's a dud. Likewise crossing real-world dinosaurs with halfling tribes, or making dragons into arcane machines. Might work for some fans, doesn't work for me. These pitches are trying too hard to be original and different, and wind up being weird and unappealing.

But it's tough to know, sometimes, whether your idea for a submarine in Zobeck is going to fly (er, swim). I actually think that premise could be a great idea, but it might be a niche taste. Such a vehicle has some trivial technical problems (river currents, power sources) and some larger story/world problems (Why build a submarine on a river?). With "high concept" pitches, you give it your best shot. If it works, you are hailed as an original and creative genius. If no one bites, you move on.

Who Pitched This Thing?

This brings us around to the issue of trust. The more of a track record you have, the easier it is to sell a pitch to an audience that knows your prior work.

I trust Nick Logue to deliver a great horror adventure on a pitch that might not fly from an unknown. I trust Ed Greenwood to do archmages and high magic right. And so on.

"a large part of [a successful pitch] . . . is explaining what the PCs do in the adventure"

This is why your first publication in any new venue is the most important; it's your ticket to recognition and return visits and establishes your competence in a particular genre.

Tangentially, then, the most difficult pitches for an editor to discard are the ones that promise the world but editors aren't convinced you can deliver. "Reinventing the Cthulhu Mythos" might be a great theme for an entire adventure arc, but it's probably a terrible pitch for a 2,000 word article.

Likewise, a dancing-bears-and-bandits adventure may be mildly interesting, but . . . Well, to carry that off, you better have some chops. I pitched just such a project to the patrons anonymously for **Tales of Zobeck** and was soundly rejected. The voting might have gone differently if the pitch hadn't been anonymous, as some voters would have trusted me to carry through on a slightly odd premise.

So while your first pitch gets you recognized for a particular thing, your long-term track record gives you more rope to play with. In other words, an editor might trust a long-time freelancer to make something odd work, where he or she would not trust a new voice. This is the so-called inside track, which is widely perceived as unfair by new authors.

And to an extent, it is unfair. The exact same pitch sent in by Joe Public and Monte Cook is going to get two different reactions. The Monte Cook version will get more of a hearing. It will still be shot down if it is a stinker, but for cases where the execution requires a certain level of talent, Monte would get a green light while Joe Public would get a rejection.

But the inside track is not a conspiracy, and authors who get extra credit from editors have earned it by years of delivering good adventures or articles. Going with a known quality writer is simply the way that editors and publishers and Hollywood try to improve their odds in the creative arena. If you rage against it, well, rage away. It won't help you make the first sale, but if it makes you feel better to call the editor a hack and the publisher the tool of sycophants, go ahead. The bar is set at a certain level for a reason.

Which is why I was so happy to submit some items anonymously as pitches to the **Tales of Zobeck** anthology, and see them shot down (and yes, to see one accepted). I was messing around with concepts that I like for Zobeck, but that might not have broader appeal. One was shot down hard, the other I rewrote for round two (and it still went nowhere). Humility is good for a writer's soul, as I keep telling myself. And everyone, even published authors, should expect rejection as a normal (though certainly not enjoyable) part of the creative process.

“If you seek validation . . . through your work as a freelancer, you will live a life of misery”

If you find a need to blame people when your pitches are rejected, you might want to consider another line of work. Writers get rejected often, and must learn to cope with it and even learn from it. My *Dancing Bears* pitch went nowhere, alas. It is the sort of thing I might have convinced people to try based on my past reputation, but it was too simple a scenario to make most patrons bite without that extra bait on the hook. Maybe next time.

Design = Doing

So what's the secret to a successful pitch? I think a large part of it for adventure design is explaining what the PCs do in the adventure. This part of a more general rule of game design, which is that game design is about what players do.

This may seem obvious, but many game designers waste a lot of time on what NPCs do and their backstory, the setting's history, and showing us the environment. These are all hangovers from fiction. RPGs are not fiction, some *White Wolf* supplements notwithstanding. RPGs are about the PCs and their various forms of mayhem, investigation, exploration, and triumph or insanity. Quick—name these games:

- “Heroes kill monsters and loot tombs”
- “Heroes investigate cults and are driven mad”
- “Heroes fight crime with super-powers”

Pretty straightforward, no? An adventure pitch would (ideally) contain a sentence that does the same. Pitches for Open Design projects would include the following:

- “Heroes discover an alchemist with a split personality and destroy the cult that plans to destroy the city”
- “Heroes visit the Underdark and stop the Ghoul Empire’s latest conquest”
- “Heroes visit a haunted castle and set right the consequences of its tragic past”

Sometimes, It’s Not You

There are cases where a pitch is perfect and still gets shot down. These are inevitable. It may be that the editor/publisher/site manager just recently accepted something similar to what you are proposing. It may be that they have a project underway using the same central monster, or drawing from the same real-world source as yours (say, Vikings). Or it may be that they like your pitch perfectly well but have no room for it on their schedule, due to length, edition, or timing.

There’s nothing you can do about this. Sometimes a “No” is just a “No.” The best way to tell is if the editor or publisher offers a personal note or invites you to pitch again. If that invitation is extended, brush yourself off and get back in the game. Pitches are just promises. Keep offering the promise of something great, and sooner or later an editor will agree.

Deliver

There’s one more step, of course. You may find your pitches are being accepted often, but your articles or complete designs are not. This may indicate that your work is mechanically lacking (your great ideas are translating into dull rules and boring tactics) or it may indicate a lack of craft (your great ideas are getting buried in dull prose).

These are separate problems for another essay. But learning to pitch is step #1 for a freelancer. Practice your pitches, hone your lines, and work will come to you.

Pitching the Editor

Many writers believe that the best way to succeed with a pitch is not to think about the second audience (the readers) but to think about pitching the editor. This is a dangerous path.

The thinking is that if you can just find out what an magazine editor or adventure publisher likes, wants, or needs, you can pitch that thing and you're set. But it's not always true.

First of all, an editor often doesn't know what he or she wants or needs (they always know what they like!). They are looking to a writer to show some originality, or remind them of a great hit with a new twist, or do something exciting with the standard game and story elements. If the editor knew what it was they wanted, they might very well just assign it to a trusted freelancer ("We're doing drow this issue. You're my ace writer; give me drow by the first of the month.").

The other problem with this approach is that you will never become known for the things you love and do well. Instead, you become a hack or at least a hired gun, willing to write anything that pays. I'm not so noble that I've never taken a job for the cash, but if that's all that you are getting out of an assignment, you are doing yourself, your editor, and your readers a disservice. Sure, make enough to pay the rent, but write for love as often as you can. Which means, pitch what you love as often as you can.

7

Challenge and Response

May 6th, 2008

When I'm thinking about challenge in design, it ain't about CR or XP totals.

The fundamental unit of adventure design for RPGs and MMOs is the encounter, just as the fundamental unit of text in fiction and screenwriting is the scene. Until you master the encounter, your adventures or quests will always fall flat. Isolated, episodic, unconnected encounters can grow dull and repetitive, but surely not every encounter needs to connect to a larger plot or narrative. So, how to construct encounters organically, and let story or sandbox options grow from the base up?

One way to think about encounter design is in purely mechanistic terms. You don't know the details of the Dungeon Master who will run an encounter, or the players and characters who will try to beat it. But you do control the presentation of the challenge, and how it works out.

That is, you can present a stimulus to the game, and predict the likely paths players will take to overcome it. If you predict the player actions well, you can avoid discussing cases that are best left to the GM to decide, and you can offer follow-ups, which can be the difference between an okay encounter and a great one. I'll discuss follow-ups in more detail at the end of this essay.

The setup could be as simple as saying "You see a goblin" or as complex as "You find a heavy, locked book in the abandoned room." Those two particular examples show two extremes on what I call the Action Spectrum.

The Action Spectrum

The easiest way to think about an encounter's place in the spectrum is "How likely is this encounter to kill a character immediately?" It's an assessment of threat. Another way to think about it, though, is "How does this encounter further engage the characters in the plot?" The book discovery mentioned above seems innocuous, but it might score very high on the killing-PCs scale if the book title is "Rituals of Diabolism" and the book is found in the chamber of the king's mistress. And the book has a silent magical alarm, and so on.

Encounters on different portions of the action spectrum require different challenges and setups. Let's run through the six most common types, from highest action to lower action.

1. Combat

Everyone knows what a combat encounter is: any situation you have to fight your way out of. This could be an ambush, a duel, a toe-to-toe slugfest, an arena fight, or a running battle through difficult terrain or long stretches of dungeon or castle halls. These could all be discussed in a separate design essay on combat encounter design. But because they are the most common and most familiar type of encounter, I'll pass over them for now; they are vital encounter types and deserve a full treatment on their own.

2. Threat and Negotiation

Though we usually think of combat as the most exciting type of encounter, I'd argue that the encounters with the greatest tension are actually the threat and negotiation encounters. I call them "almost-combat" encounters; they are hostile but one or both sides hasn't quite decided it's worth fighting.

In this situation, the challenge presented to the players is someone or something that is powerful, non-threatening, or interesting enough for them to hold back from attacking immediately. A party of 1st-level characters meeting a demon might fall into this category, or any level party encountering elves in the woods, or a PC on watch who hears a voice in the woods but cannot see the speaker.

"Most players . . . assume that any monster they meet is meant to be destroyed. Finding out the hard way that some encounters . . . could overmatch the party is an interesting twist"

In these cases, the encounter can be designed to maximize the fun by obscuring the difficulty level (such as the hidden speaker), by providing an unexpected foe (the elves), or by clearly signaling to the players that they are overmatched (such as the major demon and the minor heroes). Combat that could wipe out the whole party may make the players do more than hesitate; they may wet their pants in fear, offering bribes or other concessions to get out of a fight. You have to lay it on pretty thick, though, to get that reaction. Most players, especially in *3rd Edition*, assume that any monster they meet is meant to be destroyed. Finding out the hard way that some encounters are written in more of a 1st or 2nd *Edition* style (where encounters could often overmatch the party) is an interesting twist.

The hidden speaker is usually a conduit for negotiations with a Big Bad Guy, offering terms or threatening dire reprisals if the party does not cooperate. It's common for the players' reaction to default to either Tricksterism or Heroics. By "tricksterism," I just mean that the party uses social skills, bluffs, or a well-constructed lie to make the BBG's minion go away, or even reveal information that the party needs (see Information Gathering, below). They outsmart the voice through conversation and leverage, threatening something or someone dear to the villain. This can result in a stand-off or in the hidden speaker making a few somewhat hollow threats. The encounter ends without a strong resolution,

unless the hidden speaker actually does return with reinforcements, or carry out whatever threat he claimed would befall them.

Heroics, by contrast, is great for keeping the spotlight on one or more players, but it should come with a price. The hidden speaker may have ranged attacks that can't be countered, he may unleash hellhounds when the party defies him, he may follow through on his plan to annihilate the paladin's beloved warhorse. By no means allow heroics to come cheap; it makes the villain less despicable, and it cheapens the player's efforts. Heroics are the response that you might want out of a particular encounter, but that does not mean that the players should be rewarded for making the right play. On the contrary, things should get more difficult for them. This is why they are heroes, after all.

3. Chase

While chasing down a villain is a great action scene in films and books, it's a lot less so in video games or RPGs. Movement is inherently less exciting than combat, unless the movement involves lava, rivers full of crocodiles, or rafts sailing down deadly rapids.

So, make sure that when you challenge a party of heroes to chase down a villain, that it really does require big successes. Work up the average party success rate with, say, a Ride or Climb check (Athletics or Acrobatics in *4th Edition*). Then make sure that 60% of the party will fail any given check. In three or four rounds, you'll likely be down to a single hero trying to catch the pyromaniac/diabolist/slaver. Then, require a secondary skill to bring him down, such as a Jump from one horse to another, an attack while climbing, or a confirmed critical skill check (as described in *Kobold Quarterly* #3, *Up the Action!*).

While players can turn down the chance to participate in a chase scene, it's relatively easy to goad them into it. A phrase like "The orc courier takes the wand from the dead necromancer and sprints toward the boat by the river" is a good start. A phrase like "You make the Spot check just in time to see the orc captain slip into the darkness. He's heading toward the main army camp!" might be even better. You know your players' hot buttons; use them shamelessly to start a chase.

4. Terrain and Devices

Traps, environmental hazards, alarms, and even watchdogs can fall into this category. The challenge is that the terrain can harm the party or summon watchers if the PCs aren't careful. It's lower on the action scale because the party can always choose to walk away; there's no active threat. The best solution is to always pair a terrain, trap, or device with an engineer, gong-ringer, or monster that is at home in that terrain.

One type of terrain is usually plenty, though you might place obstacles within that one type. Put rocks and whirlpools in a rushing river, for instance, or put some islands of safety in a pool of thin-crust magma.

Don't forget your terrain in the heat of running an encounter. The two easiest ways to be sure everyone knows about it are to mark it on the battlemat or to use an index card or other terrain stat card. Hand it to one of your players if you like.

Finally, you can combine terrain with most of these other types: a chase plus terrain is especially entertaining, and so is stealth plus terrain.

5. *Stealth*

The stealth encounter type is all about tension and release, so you need to ratchet up the danger one notch at a time. Each time the party gets past a guard or a monster, they are putting one more obstacle between themselves and eventual escape. Each time they blow a Move Silently check or inadvertently trigger a magical alarm, the odds increase that they cannot recover by silencing the area or knocking out a minion.

So, work with this. Put weak creatures at all perimeter pickets, and put stronger creatures on patrol paths or in chokepoints. Make the characters aware that their disguise or magic is fraying after a combat; eventually, all that blood spatter will give them away.

In addition, time is a powerful addition to stealth encounters of all kinds. Stealth takes time and caution; time pressure prevents the party from dawdling and beating the encounter through dull, repetitive, but effective tactics (scurry, invisibility, silence, etc.). When dawn comes, when the army awakes, when the temporary damping of the magical wards is over, the party will be discovered and must flee or fight. Remind the players of this time limit frequently.

6. *Information Gathering*

Some groups do this all the time. **CALL OF CTHULHU** adventurers probably spend at least 60% of their time in various forms of information gathering, from witnesses, books, court records, letters, and the like. In **DUNGEONS & DRAGONS**, the value of information is still high (wouldn't you like to know exactly what monsters are in the dungeon?), but most play-group styles minimize the role of reconnaissance because it is time-consuming and/or involves only a single player.

This is foolishness on the players' part, but unless they have a military background they may not realize just how profoundly dumb a lack of recon really is. One possible solution is that the deadliest encounters come with what I think of as an antechamber or waiting room encounter. This is a meeting with a creature or clue that says "Big fight ahead! Figure it out; it won't be a cakewalk!" Yes, you are signaling to the players that an encounter is deadly. Eventually, one hopes, they'll figure this out for themselves before they lose a lot of PCs.

For instance, if the party must defeat a batch of evil druids, they might have an earlier encounter with three or four ettercaps who serve the druids and who are all too eager to brag about their masters' strength. More than that, though, it's best if these pre-encounters mention the numbers, or the general invulnerability of the foe. You might not give details, but if a minion brags that his master

walks through arrow fire and cannot be slain by mortal hands, the party may choose to spend a few spells or skill checks figuring out the likely immunities and resistances. If not, well, you've given them fair warning; let the heroes' corpses fall where they may.

There's a second problem with these sleuthing encounters: they're often dull—poking at documents, or deciphering dusty script, or quizzing some archivist. How do you make the actual information-gathering scene interesting? While divination and class abilities like Legend Lore or Gather Information can make these scenes mind-numbingly mechanical, it need not be so. Open Design adventures make frequent use of player handouts, because having something tangible focuses player minds on that element of the story or mystery. Your own handouts are easy to throw together with a very small bit of prep work.

And of course, documents can have guards, owners, and keepers who must be appeased or outwitted. You can force the party to seek out lorekeepers, scriptoria of arcane knowledge, or wild-eyed hermits who have survived meetings with such foes.

Unfortunately, this runs close to the realm of rampant clichés: everyone is a bearded wise elder, or the tome is dusty and hidden in a dungeon or ruin of some kind. Consider using an unexpected lorekeeper character to hold the vital clue. For instance, if the survivors mentioned above are a maimed paladin and his tielfing mistress, they'll make an impression. If a talking polar bear was once a member of the evil druids' order and has now been banished—well, he's not the average conversationalist, especially if the party needs to climb over pack ice to question him and placate him with a few tasty seals.

Discovery and Reveals

While the “Ah-ha!” moments can be really satisfying from a campaign arc perspective, they do not necessarily occur at moments of high drama. They could be very dramatic (and certainly I'd recommend that if possible), but they could just as easily fall into the party's lap, kicking off or redirecting an entire adventure. Adventure hooks, clues, and climaxes can all fall into this category.

For instance, learning the identity of a smuggler or the awful fate of a young noblewoman could easily come from reading a book, intimidating a witness, or bribing a courtier. The information itself has a huge effect on the storyline and future PC actions, and you want these scenes to be successful ones to keep players engaged. But in terms of spell-slinging, sword-thrusting action, not so much. Don't underestimate the preparation required for these scenes; if they flop, your adventure might have to be shelved, or you might need to do some hasty improvisation. Consider the likely Q&A, and just how much information the players need to follow the story elements.

Follow-ups

I recently ran my *Madman at the Bridge* city encounter at Paizocon. It's a fun "ticking time-bomb" encounter that starts with a drawbridge that is stuck open, and some misbehaving machinery. The PCs are sent to fix the problem and find some missing engineers.

But of course this scenario quickly spirals out of control, with alchemical fire, insane clockwork guards, a gnomish plotter and his undead servants, and so on. The final encounter starts as a simple fight against a kobold zombie, then escalates to include the gnome wizard, and then escalates further when it's clear that the entire structure the party is standing in is about to suffer a massive boiler explosion that will destroy the bridge and maybe a chunk of the city and some innocent bystanders.

This adventure winds up as rather more than a simple turn undead check. By going from an easy victory, to a fully engaged party, to a party with more threats than it can deal with, you put the players under ever-increasing pressure. Typically, that's where a good group of roleplayers will thrive and come up with some clever solution to the overall problem. A bad group will fall apart and the mission will fail. I'd recommend that you let them fail, especially if they did not do research, information gathering, scouting, or character preparation for the major fight that is clearly approaching. But adventure failure is a topic for another day as well.

Conclusion

While combat encounters get most of the glory, you can make other encounter types more prominent and more successful to improve the overall strength of your campaign. By pushing players in social situations, dilemmas, and non-standard challenges in addition to a healthy diet of heroic combat, you give every class and every player a wider range of responses. Or, the way I prefer to put it, you give players more ways to be a hero.

Open Design Editor Bill Collins Comments on Chases

"Impromptu chases can be fun especially when it looks like a villain/enemy/opponent is about to get away, but someone wounds them. Improbably and from a distance, but it works. The difficulty with a chase scene in d20 is magnified by the

rules which suppress a free flow of dialogue to get the players standing on their feet and the adrenaline pumping. I ditch initiative and ask players to declare actions from left to right. Spells can enable easy escape or capture, so if the option is

there, I include a couple of lesser individuals in the chase who the party can catch and interrogate later, and who can bear the brunt of a *web* without the PCs feeling cheated out of a clever move. Rules lookups during a chase scene really are anathema."

8

The Mystery of Mysteries

by Nicolas Logue
February 19th, 2008

A body in the alley or floating in the river turns out to be the daughter of Baron Zargaard, and not just another indigent nobody. The Baron wants answers. He wants his precious Becca's killer brought to justice. The task falls to the PCs.

Actually, the task falls to you, Mr. Dungeon Master, and good luck . . . Because a good mystery, while it may be loads of fun for the PCs to unravel, can be a nasty tangle of a knot for you to tie. So let's get to it.

Step One: Planning the Crime

First, let's look at a few cardinal rules to whipping up a conundrum for the party to solve.

1. *K.I.S.S.: Keep It Simple, Stupid!*

A lot of DMs y overthink the whole endeavor when they sit down to craft a myster. The basic component of a mystery is nothing crazy; it's just a question that needs answering. Someone is killed, or something is stolen, or something apparently impossible occurs. The PCs don't know how it happened or who is responsible. They need to find out. It's that easy. Start with that. We'll add plenty of spice later.

2. *Think Like An Investigator*

Your PCs will do this, and that will be their experience of playing the adventure, so you should do the same as you design it. Remember, an investigator looks for clues that point to suspects (How was the person killed? When? What traces of evidence were left behind by both victim and murderer? Did anyone see anything?), then investigates suspects these clues point to (Who had a motive for killing the victim? Who had the opportunity to do so?). Make sure the trail doesn't run cold on the investigators. Leave some clues behind. Provide a list of possible suspects who have motive, opportunity, or both.

3. Think Like a Killer

Plot the demise of the victim as if you wanted them dead personally. Be smart. Don't get caught. How do you kill someone and make sure nothing points to you? Do you manipulate someone else into doing your dirty work for you? Do you make it look like an accident? Do you dispose of the body (no body, no crime)? Do you leave clues at the scene that frame another person who also has a good motive for killing the victim? Do you concoct an airtight alibi?

Think like a murderer. If you do your job too well, you'll need to backtrack in order to not break Rule #2 (leave a few clues behind), but this is unlikely. There is no such thing as the perfect murder. Just watch a bunch of episodes of **Law and Order** or **CSI** and you'll see just how hard it is to get away with it when a dedicated and competent team of investigators is hunting you.

"It's all about the clues"

4. There are Exceptions to All These Rules

It's true! Look at **Blood of the Gorgon**. The murders that kick off this adventure are byproducts of the villain's larger plot and not his main goal at all! That's definitely a hard turn away from your standard mystery, but it's a fun turn, and it creates a great mystery. Remember, in a mystery, things are never what they seem.

Step Two: Fine-tuning the Plan

Great, so we have the basics in hand. Let's look at some nuance. All we've discussed so far applies to mundane mysteries, though these concepts can extend to cover the supernatural. Now let's consider that pesky subject of magic as it concerns mysteries in **D&D**.

"Don't be afraid to change the facts as you go"

1. Plan for Divination

If your PCs are high enough level to cast some interesting divination spells, the mystery might very well be solved before it begins. That's no good. So what do you do about this problem? There are two schools of thought here.

The first is to disallow or otherwise render useless divination ("The city is in the midst of an omen-storm that blocks the use of divination magic for the duration"). *Lame*. The second is to give the PCs carte blanche to go divination-crazy and let them solve the mystery in the time it takes them to cast a spell or two ("another body . . . no problem. Just let me restudy my spells so we can go kick the snot out of the killer."). *Even more lame*. I don't like DM fiat, so I never disallow anything, really. Let the PCs use the divination magic they earned or bought. That's part of the game, and part of the fun.

But if the PCs know about divination magic, so do the villains. Don't let divination magic be a problem for your adventure. Instead make it an opportunity

to add new levels to the mystery. A smart villain thinks of what questions a PC might ask a higher power and finds ways to circumvent them.

- “*Who killed so-and-so?*” If the party has access to the ability to ask such potent questions and receive answers, then it’s up to the villain to take this into account and make sure someone else strikes the killing blow. If a PC casts *zone of truth*, the villain just needs to get sneaky with his answers or make sure he can answer them truthfully without incriminating himself.
- “*Where were you the night of such-and-such?*” “*I was at a party.*” Smart villains make sure their alibi is true. They show up at a party and get seen while their shadowy hirelings, a slow-acting poison, or a trap dispatches their quarry across town.
- “*Do you know who killed so-and-so?*” “No.” A truly devious villain works through many buffers and cat’s paws and never meets face-to-face with the actual killers or even learns their names.

2. You Get Magic Too!

Magic is friggin’ awesome. Use it to the fullest. In *Blood of the Gorgon* we’ve used fantasy to create murders that are wildly difficult to solve. Look at how we used magic to twist and turn the crime. The gorgon’s blood infects the “killers,” who then produce blood doppelgangers (or commit the crimes in their sleep), and they don’t even know they did it! Now that’s awesome. How are the PCs going to figure that out? Great stuff. When designing mysteries for **D&D**, pull out the stops. The PCs get an arsenal of clue-finding spells, so you go ahead and use yours to the best of your ability.

Spells like *nondetection*, *Mordenkainen’s private sanctum*, *misdirection*, *false vision*, and *undetectable alignment* are villainous staples, but let’s take it a step further. Think outside the box. Want a way to turn the PCs’ divinations against them? Let’s look at how you can make detect evil blow up in the party’s face. A villain casts *magic jar* and trades souls with a key witness or other NPC, maybe even a red herring framed by the clues.

When the PCs cast *detect evil* on this patsy, they’ll get a positive result (thanks to your sinister soul mucking up his body). Provoke a fight and abandon this patsy’s body when he’s nearly dead. Case solved, or so the PCs think, all wrapped up in a nice neat package that you put a ribbon on for them. Justice is served and the streets are safe . . . until you decide to kill again.

3. Misdirection is Better than Magic.

Never use magic to cover a crime when old-fashioned legerdemain can do the trick. Pesky spells can pierce illusions. Sure it might be a great idea to use disguise self to sneak up to your victim, but if someone bothers with a *dispel* or a *true seeing*, then the jig is up. Villains who can pull off a great disguise on skill alone, or cover up a crime without resorting to spell-slinging, are the most dangerous. The mere presence of a magical effect or aura is a big red flag to an investigator right away, and suddenly a death that might have been passed off as an accident

becomes a definite homicide. If you feel like using magic, make sure you use something that can't be traced or even identified as magic, unless you feel like dropping a pretty potent clue at the PCs' feet.

Step Three: The Master's Touch

Okay, so we have the basics and some thoughts on dealing with magic. Let's move on to the real nitty grit: techniques for crafting a truly awesome mystery.

1. *Small Pieces of a Greater Puzzle*

Clues! It's all about the clues! PCs love finding 'em. You love hiding them between the cracks. Clues rock! But what makes a good clue?

First and most importantly, a clue is specific. It should point to inconsistencies with the apparent circumstances. Every clue should tell the PCs something, but a given clue doesn't necessarily need to tell them anything particularly useful by itself. It's when the clues pile up that the real answers come and the fuzzy picture of the murder starts to come into focus.

2. *Control the Clues*

Make sure the first clues you give the PCs offer them a lot of possible suspects, and maybe even mislead them. Read any Sherlock Holmes story and you'll see that our super sleuth gets it wrong more often than right early in his investigations. He barks up a few wrong trees and, after he exhausts these avenues of investigation, he gathers more clues that throw a different light on the ones he discovered earlier; now he's got the real culprit in his cross-hairs.

"It's not cheating if it makes the game more fun for the PCs"

You need to control the flow of information in a mystery adventure. You also need to make sure the nuggets you leave hanging out there early on don't give away the real killer or point to your adventure's mastermind in any direct way. Send the PCs fishing for red herrings, lead them on a wild goose chase for awhile, and then cough up more clues to get them back on track. Keep the party guessing. Just give them enough info to keep them hungry for more answers, and they, like starving rabid dogs, will devour your mystery and enjoy every damn minute of it.

3. *Clues Aplenty!*

Make sure you have a ton of clues to toss out there. Don't make the PCs' success or failure hinge on one crucial clue that they need to make a DC 30 skill check to discover. This is a sure-fire way to watch your mystery turn into a train wreck.

Even with reasonable DC skill checks, a party may miss the obvious or spend too long on a false trail. Have back-up plans in case the PCs miss a bunch of important hints. Maybe a witness, afraid to come forward before, appears later in the game with a crucial piece of information, and then gets killed for helping the party—Bam!—Drama and a helpful little hint.

4. Don't be Afraid to Improvise

Best-laid plans can explode in your face. Don't panic, don't fret. This is a roleplaying game, not a novel. There is no way to predict what your PCs will get up to. That's the fun of this artistic medium. It's like improv acting; anything can happen. Think on your feet, and find ways to make your PCs' actions part of the adventure even if they are waaaaay off the beaten path. Don't be afraid to change the facts as you go.

If the PCs won't drop a red herring, or even invent one all their own, find a way to tie that red herring into your mastermind's plot. Maybe the red herring, terrified she'll be arrested for a crime she didn't commit, does some detecting and churns up some facts on her own. Conversely, if the PCs figure things out too quickly, go ahead and throw some more smokescreen at them. Heck, go ahead and switch masterminds on them if you want. Remember, it's not cheating if it makes the game more fun for the PCs. Don't worry too much about "reality" or adhering too closely to what you prepared. Keep the mystery going.

Let Things Slip

As the DM, you might think that it's good to "compete" with your players by holding out on clues, throwing lots of red herrings out, keeping the NPCs really tight-lipped, and generally making the mystery part of your game unsolvable. This is a recipe for disaster. Whenever you sense frustration rising, as DM you should be willing to let something slip, or offer a clue, or nudge them in the right direction. Mysteries are meant to be solvable, and as DM, you know your players best. Don't let them get so frustrated that in future they avoid all mystery adventures.

Plots are always much easier to understand from the DM side of the table, so be sure to give lots of (small) clues. And small is important here; if the clues give everything away, you've stolen the players' sense of accomplishment. Always make sure that they put together the final pieces of the puzzle themselves, even if you help them a lot with the first few elements of the mystery.

Resurrection

Long-time Open Design patron and designer Ben McFarland added some pithy comments to this on resurrection.

“There’s also the option of *dominating* the killer, the option of *modify memory* to eliminate his memory of killing the person, and the option of having the mastermind later kill the proxy killer (to eliminate a vital link in the chain of evidence).

“And, in a world where *raise* and *resurrection* are available, I’d have killers who are intent on keeping people dead do things like . . .

- Kidnap people and hold them for a few days while both alive and dead, to make determining the day of demise uncertain without more magics.
- Remove a portion of the body when killing the victim, preferably the tongue but the whole head if you want to keep identification slow. Without a whole body investigators can’t *raise dead*, they have to *resurrect*—and that’s more expensive. They also can’t *speak with dead*, which will help foil those who might be hunting for you.
- Use an OGL material like thinaun, (from **Complete Warrior**, page 136) which captures the soul in the weapon as the person is killed, to prevent that person from coming back or talking.

“You’ll want to do all three to both the victim and the proxy killer, which should break most of the chain of association between the victim and your primary killer.

“High-level magi can also use things like *baleful polymorph* followed by an unfortunate drop into a pit of hungry dogs, a butcher or bait shop delivery, or a furrier of some sort. Not only is the killer unaware of his murder, but he has no idea that you gave him the victim. Again, without a body or an idea of time of death, investigators are forced to use *true resurrection* . . . and that’s not cheap, or necessarily all that available, depending on the faiths in the area and their attitudes on death. (Take a look at **A Magical Medieval Society** from Expeditionary Retreat Press for some ideas on how much coinage a noble’s manor might generate.)

“Really high-level magi can do things like *trap the soul*, but that’s less killing and more long-term imprisonment.”

9

The Magic Bullet for Publication

December 27th, 2007

There's a mode of thinking about publishing that is common among aspiring writers and game designers—namely that the game industry is a small one, and who you know determines who gets published.

This is pernicious nonsense with a single grain of truth.

The Truth About Breaking Into Print (or Pixels)

The truth is that yes, the tabletop RPG industry is exceedingly tiny, with 80% of the people who can make a living at it sitting in Hasbro cubicles of some kind. The number of active freelancers is much larger (surely in the hundreds, as any look at the Pen & Paper database will show you). The computer-game field is much larger in terms of number of employees, but it is no easier to break in there, because the number of aspiring designers is likewise much larger.

The pernicious assumption is that you need to know a secret handshake, or some mathematical formula, or just have impressed the right editor, to see your work published. This is wildly and spectacularly untrue.

Editors and publishers are in the business of finding talent and introducing it to an audience. If you are talented, thick-skinned, and persistent, chances are good that your work can be published in the field. The number of markets available for RPG writing has gone up sharply in the wake of the OGL, even after the glut and die-off, even after the retreat of some major players from the field, and even in the wake of the split in the market created by the 4th Edition of D&D. The size of those markets is much smaller, but there are a lot of small publishers.

True, the disappearance of **DRAGON** and **DUNGEON** as magazines hurts, but the DDI will eventually need to work with many freelancers. Paizo's **RPG SUPERSTAR** contest is a brand-new avenue for talent to be recognized. **KOBOLD QUARTERLY** is always looking for art and articles that don't fit into the marketing plans of the big companies. I'd say there are so many venues right now that an ambitious freelancer should be able to publish within a year of starting a serious run at it.

Three Magic Bullets

How do you start? The real magic bullets are organization and persistence. Start at the top: pitch your ideas to Paizo if they have a contest or an open call. Then work your way down the list: try **KOBOLD QUARTERLY**, **NO QUARTER**, or **WHITE DWARF**. Depending on your article topic, you might drop some of those venues, but they are all fine places to break into print.

If you don't care about print publication, try Wizards of the Coast's DDI; the competition is intense, but you might hit the sweet spot. And know your markets: the DDI, for instance, is only taking adventures and 4E material at the moment, and it is weighted toward staff articles. There are plenty of other online-only venues such as **THE ESCAPIST** and **MASSIVELY**, though they do mostly MMO and video game articles. Keep looking for markets that match what you want to write; it may be that not every pitch is about **D&D** or **WoW** or whatever you happen to be keen on at a particular time.

“an ambitious freelancer should be able to publish within a year of starting a serious run at it”

Read the submission guidelines for each venue and follow them. Know how to write a query (it's about the sizzle, not the steak). After each rejection, dust the query off, reformat, and send it to the next market.

And here's the final magic bullet: After you send your query out, forget it and move on to the next one. Never, ever wait for an answer before you send the next one out. I know some writers who keep a spreadsheet of all the magazine queries, website queries, short stories, and complete articles they have in circulation, which markets they are sent to, and so on. You may not be writing that prolifically, but you should be sending out a lot of queries.

Think of it like setting traps for editors. One perfect trap is all very nice, but you'll have more success if you have 100 really good traps instead. Volume matters, because not every idea is a perfect, unique snowflake.

What If That Doesn't Work?

Of course, it's possible that you just aren't hitting the button for any of the periodical venues out there. If the periodicals won't have you, you could try pitching projects to some of the print or PDF markets. The goal, oddly enough, isn't necessarily to get that project published but to introduce yourself to the publisher as a credible, capable, professional freelancer.

The bigger houses like Paizo, Green Ronin, White Wolf, and Mongoose almost certainly won't take an out-of-house project, but if your pitch is good enough (and you have some credits elsewhere) they might take you on for something else. As with the magazines and sites, be relentless. Start with the bigger houses or with your favorite publisher and work your way down the list.

In all of these cases, it pays to know who you're addressing—meaning you should put a real person's name on your cover email if at all possible, rather than “To Whom It May Concern.” It also pays to subscribe or at least pick up a few issues of the venue you are trying to break into, and it pays to keep sending queries on a regular basis. Make it a habit weekly, monthly. Eventually, you'll catch someone's attention with the right hook on a good day.

When you get that first acceptance of a query, you're onto a whole new problem: delivering an exciting manuscript that gets accepted and published. But that's another essay.

Q&A

Q: *What aspects of good play and good DMing translate to good writing and design?*

A: The aspects of good play that translate are a powerful imagination and creativity, as well as core understanding of the rules. The good DMing that translates is an appreciation for your audience and narrative power, the ability to spin a story with words, and the ability to extend mechanics from the core to subsystems and variants.

Q: *Design doesn't get my blood fired up; development does. Any tips?*

A: Development is usually done in-house and is often combined with editorial functions. In my opinion, it's not all that relevant to most freelancers. That said, it is worthwhile to both read your work aloud (to hear the clunkers and fix them) and to give it to a “first reader,” meaning someone whose game and language skills you trust.

Q: *At some point, RPG writers need to be sat down, and their work needs to be vivisected in front of them. There's no game-design analog to comics artists asking professionals about a portfolio, or writers going to short-story writers' workshops. Will Open Design do something like the **RPG SUPERSTAR** and **Flight of the Red Raven** contest? I want to see real editors' reactions to real proposals.*

A: You are absolutely right about **RPG SUPERSTAR**, and you raise an interesting possibility for down the road. Open Design does offer this sort of critique in the anthology projects like **Tales of Zobeck** (and soon in another venue that I'm not quite ready to talk about yet).

But you're right, a professional critique is very valuable to someone starting out in the field. That's one of the elements of Open Design I enjoy most: seeing the workshop approach to material that senior patrons contribute. We should probably do more of that.

10

Maps, Monsters, and Bottom-Up Design

October 27th, 2008

The one lesson that I never seem to learn, but that 4E has hammered into me again, is that maps are not something that can be done after the fact in a skirmish/tactical game design. About half of the encounters in **Wrath of the River King** are combat-oriented, and so there are maps for them. And drawing those maps always, always, always makes me think of some cool new twist for the encounter.

For example, in the case of the ettercap, suddenly it became obvious that the spiderkin could take cover behind the trees. For the black fey, a fallen log creates a solution for protection of the controller/witch whose magic is crucial to the foes. For the quicklings, the hollow tree and the cliff were already there, but it wasn't clear where to start the PCs. Following the tradition of many minis and skirmish games, I've added a "starting zone" for the PCs—and fiendishly counted squares to make sure that the foes get a good crack at the PCs early.

None of this is edition-specific, of course. The 3E **Tales of Zobeck** benefitted from a playtest where one of the players decided to swim out to the barge where the ogres were reloading their ballista. This was a truly heroic but thoroughly dumb move that I hadn't anticipated. Leaping from the bridge to the barge suddenly seemed like a good option to consider. And so on.

The Value of Maps

What maps do, of course, is force a designer to make some tradeoffs. You only get one map for a 4E encounter. You only get one map for a **Tale of Zobeck**. The limitations of page size and budget really do bump up against what you want the encounter to do. It doesn't matter whether you're writing for Delve format or a more free-form approach that leaves more design options on the table: you've still got only so many maps and illustrations to work with.

So, you pick your favorites, or the ones that really need the maps to work. In the WotC 4E adventures in particular, there's an assumption that every encounter needs to have a map. I've bucked the trend in **Wrath** because there're so many roleplaying and skill encounters, but it's still 15 maps, some of them very simple, and others very complex indeed.

There's a method to good maps. The person whose map turnovers always impressed me most when I was editing **DUNGEON** were the ones from Chris Perkins. They were crisp and complete, with a legend you could read, all areas neatly labeled, lines that met at corners, solid black for the earthen sections of the dungeon, and so on. About a million times better than my typical map turnover.

But being clear and legible and having a full explanation of what the various symbols on your map mean is only half the battle. The other half is that the map should encourage a variety of tactics and playstyles. The *Madman at the Bridge* encounter in **Tales of Zobeck** takes the Paizo/4E approach of piling encounters on top of one another in rapid succession, with no down-time between them. The whole point of that combat sequence is to build up tension and to wear down party resources so that the finale is, well, explosive. Things can go horribly wrong, of course—that swimming PC I mentioned earlier should have been out of the adventure due to the player's own stupidity, but it was a GenCon game and his party tried to pull him to shore—exposing themselves to additional ballista fire—so it all worked out in the end. The point is, each encounter is just a few feet from the next, turning an empty city street into (effectively) a dungeon fight.

The goal for other maps is quite different. You may want to channel the party onto a narrow cliffside path, or have them leaping along tree branches, or climbing up and down crates and barrels in a warehouse. But as long as you have considered the map ahead of time and tested it out, you're serving the needs of the tactical-gamer audience. They love hazards, difficult terrain, cover, and options for flanking or charges. Empty terrain is dull, dull, dull.

Which isn't to say that you can't please storytelling and exploring-oriented players with a good map as well. Planting a chandelier to swing on or a set of scrolls to protect from fiery immolation gives more cinematic and knowledge-oriented players something to work on as well, and many a villain may decide to give a nasty little monologue before using the terrain to effect an escape. Build that into your design right from the start, and your BBEG's escape from the battlements will flow more smoothly both as a story element and as a tactical one.

For instance, a creature in a castle may leap off the highest tower, land in the moat, and swim to safety. This happens more smoothly at the table if the designer has already determined the falling damage into the moat ahead of time, the swim speed of the escaping foe, and the creatures that his splash riles up and that then attack pursuers on the following round. Piranhas or crocodiles are traditional, but there's no reason not to try enormous killer frogs, electric eels, or even a water troll. A little preparation can make this a seamless getaway—and standing by the side of the moat giving a little monologue while the party fights to keep their heads above water and somehow burn the troll(s) should be a scene worth remembering as well.

In other words: Stats are nice, but tactics are priceless.

Bottom-Up Design: Know Three Things About Your Monsters

All this discussion of terrain leads me to a larger point. My adventure designs start with an outline, but they don't end there. Things change mid-stream, and some monsters become more important, some less so. In particular, you may find that your group will want to occasionally talk to the monsters they meet. It's true that for every encounter, your setup helps determine whether initiative rolls and a fight happen immediately. But it's often more satisfying for experienced players to talk to the monsters first.

For that, you need to have at least considered a sentence's worth of material. Think a bit about how each creature fits into the larger picture. A design need not have a full family history, quirks, and lore about every monster. But you would do well to include three things about every speaking monster.

The three things are a **name**, a **relationship**, and a **purpose**.

Name

The name is obvious in some ways, though you'd be surprised by how often you'll find monsters, even major foes, without a name. This is a huge design mistake, because that tiny little element makes a huge difference.

"Faceless hordes are easier to kill than creatures with even the thinnest personality"

The presence of a name is an invitation to the DM. It says, "Other monsters can talk about this one by name, in tones of fear, or respect, or contempt." It says, "This monster can introduce himself and banter with the party during combat, or urge on his minions." Having a name means that you are promoting that monster to higher billing in the adventure/movie; it's not an extra or a walk-on. I mean, can you imagine a dragon without a name? What a horrible waste of potential!

The reason to give a name is actually broader. The players control when and how they encounter monsters. That is, they decide whether to press on to the next room or retreat. As a result, they might meet a mid-level baddie when they are exhausted and trying to find an escape route or a bolt-hole to heal up for an extended rest. In those cases, they might be willing to haggle or intimidate the monster that they would otherwise crush.

In the end, giving monsters a name saves the DM from coming up with one on the spot that he might regret later. "Bloodlips" might sound okay at first, but . . . Surely something better is likely to come up if you give it some thought.

Relationship

Monsters also have relationships, and I don't mean they have girlfriends. I'm speaking of intelligent monsters, who are accountable to the bosses in an adventure. The monsters may have rivals, lovers, or minions of their own. This matters, because a monster with friends or enemies has something to say if a

parley breaks out. You don't need a flow-chart to realize that a minion knows less and is easier to intimidate than a mid-level boss. A major devil may just be a mercenary to the main villains, but he's got an agenda of his own. Giving each monster a position in the hierarchy can help you later if the PCs question him. It's not something you need to make a big deal out of in the design, but you should have a slot for him in the rankings.

Purpose

Finally, monsters have a purpose beyond fighting adventurers. They serve themselves (seeking food and treasure), they serve others (as slaves, minions, henchgoblins, trusted advisors, hired assassins, what have you), and they serve powerful causes (a nation, a cult, a church, a genocide, a vision of power, a coup). Some monsters will just attack to kill the heroes; that's fine for the majority, but eventually the game grows pretty stale if every encounter is a fight.

This is easy to fix, if you've thought through the facts of everyday life for those monsters. Those monsters who are less devoted to a cause might break and run sooner, and those who are purely mercenaries might be willing to change sides. The lowest kitchen servant might be tired of the constant beatings. He might even make the offer to betray his masters or their cause . . . And suddenly the story-oriented "talky" players will really want to run with that scene, while even the most tactical powergamer will appreciate the value of inside information from a turncoat. Suddenly that lowly goblin is a lot more interesting than his AC and hp might indicate. Make sure to give at least a quarter of your monsters the option to do something with the party other than fight.

So this is design from the bottom up. Yes, you must have a big, powerful, interesting villain (a topic for another time). But it also pays to consider the rank and file, the middle-ground monsters, and the least powerful servants who hear everything. They are rich in roleplaying and story options; they can provide clues and hints exactly because they are less of a threat than the big combat guns. It's still up to the PCs to decide not to slaughter every foe, but I've found that even relatively bloodthirsty players will stop when it's clear that the foe is frightened or treacherous, has information, and has a name. Faceless hordes are easier to kill than creatures with even the thinnest personality.

Making Monsters Monstrous

Not many monsters should be cowards willing to sell out their cause. Most should be tough grunts, silent undead, or whatever creature type works for the adventure. This is where the use of minions and large numbers of foes in 4E provides a design opportunity. The vast majority of the foes are suddenly cannon fodder for the skirmishes. But the elite and solo monsters are surprisingly durable against a party, and (unlike in prior editions) they can easily retreat and act as recurring foes. It's just a matter of the math; they have so many hit points that they can retreat without fear of dying on the way to the door.

What does this mean for 4E design compared to 3E?

It means that recurring villains and recurring monsters are easy to set up in an adventure, though I haven't seen it done yet outside of **Wrath of the River King** (tell me if I've missed something!). Elites and solos are more than a tough fight; they can be a fight that PCs don't win unless they have planned a way to keep a foe from escaping. Again, terrain and options for escape are crucial. If the party knows that the River King's servants can easily escape by reaching water, it changes their approach to combat. If the party hasn't figured that out, well, tough luck.

"you'd be surprised by how often you'll find monsters, even major foes, without a name. This is a huge design mistake"

And it affects story elements as well. Though the Delve format isn't really set up for recurring villains, it is easy to see how a monster can recur throughout an adventure, each time with a new set of minions, each time escaping. This drives players nuts, of course, especially if you've set up some taunting quips as parting shots from the villain as he escapes. Again. And when they finally run him to ground, they may well find it a lot more satisfying.

This is also where 4E's emphasis on movement powers and spells comes into its own. A cooperative party with decent abilities can usually keep one foe from running at will. The fey—with their teleportation powers—can actually escape these nets rather easily, which makes them perfect recurring foils for the party. The talking bear, the green knight . . . these are characters the party may meet repeatedly and yet never defeat. Should they be worth more XP when they finally are defeated? I'd argue that a recurring villain is worth a minor quest if he reappears once or twice, and a major quest if he reappears more than twice.

Conclusion

I consider this entire approach to be design based on the encounter and the monster, the smallest discrete units of adventure design. Those small units can connect through the relationships of the monsters, their reappearance and their mutual betrayals, to be a more complex and satisfying set of enemies for the party. This approach is frustrating to the players in the short run, and much more satisfying in the long run, than a simple top-down villain and his faceless swarms.

11

How NOT to Design a Magic Item

December 7th, 2008

As a judge for the RPG Superstar contest (twice), I have to admit that I have seen more than my share of fan-designed magic items. And the majority of them are perfectly reasonable items for a home campaign, but don't meet the level of Superstar design. What does that mean? It means standing out from the crowd through the originality, strength of mechanics, and unity of design that makes an item demand attention from DMs and designers.

What I hope to share here is the inside scoop on how to design a competitive item in a contest of any kind. The general principles apply to anything similar: monster-design open calls, design tests for WotC jobs, item contests or open calls from other companies, submissions to magazines. There's a difference between designing for yourself and your players, and designing for publication. And there are also very specific things to avoid when designing magical items.

Here's the list.

Gimme an Excuse

First off, the basics. If the contest offers a particular format (such as, say, following **PATHFINDER** RPG style for items), then it is in your best interest to follow the rules of the contest. It amazes me that some people submit a Superstar item without following the guidelines, because in any contest of this size, with hundreds or even thousands of entries, judges are really not looking for the gems on first reading.

We're looking for an excuse to reject your item.

Yes, judges are bastards. We have to be. There are so many submissions, and not enough hours in the day to read each one in a flattering light. Frankly, I'm not interested in putting the item in a flattering light. That's the designer's job: to make the item compelling. But putting it in the wrong format is one strike right off the bat.

Another strike is poor grammar, bad punctuation, and lack of writerly craft. If you can't write your way through a couple hundred words of item description, why would anyone trust you with a larger project? Your work would be hell to edit, so it gets rejected on that basis.

These are two things that are very easy to fix. Follow the rules, and ask someone to review the language if your English skills are not stellar. Don't give the judges an excuse to reject you out of hand.

Design Choices: Boredom

But, I hear some readers exclaim, I followed the formatting requirements and I did fine with the text. Why didn't I win?

Formatting and basic English are just the start. Judges are really looking for a magic item that inspires them, that cries out to be part of a big adventure, that makes them smile with glee at the thought of this item in the hands of a potent PC or villain.

And yet, so many of the items are solving mundane problems that most heroes don't have. Or at the very least, non-heroic problems: food items, shelter items, maps and navigational items. Those are all fine for an adventure hook or extended wilderness campaign, I suppose, but they're not all that interesting. These utility items have their place in the game, but no one gets that excited about a *Leomund's tiny hut* or a *create water* item. I think of these as camping items: boots, tents, lanterns, *everful canteens*.

"it's a joy to see someone go absolutely right over the edge, flap their wings a bit, and bring back a bit of game design fire stolen from the heavens"

To stand out in a slush pile or a cattle call, you need a hook. You need a bit of flavor that makes the item sing. It could be appearance, a new power, or a killer name. Sell the sizzle on the item; make it sexy. This is not the same as gonzo weirdness for its own sake. We'll get to that.

Design Choices: Spell in a Can

For some reason, many contest entries focus on divination, like the mass of *augury* coin items we had in the first **RPG SUPERSTAR** contest. These items aren't original and aren't all that flashy. I'd love to own one in the real world, of course, but that's not enough.

It's not just augury and divination items. The problem is a general one: repeating something already in the game is inherently balanced, but also dull. So unless you have a great twist, avoid designing what the judges generally refer to as "a spell in a can." That is, one-shot items might as well be a scroll or potion.

Those single-shot items are great when you're a player, but they're pretty dull stuff, mechanically speaking. You can dress them up with a bit of flavor, I suppose, but the level of originality is pretty low on these. Why would anyone hail a *lightning bolt*-shooting necklace as great design? For one thing, there's already a *necklace of fireballs* in the game. For another, the item is just an overgrown wand.

Design Choices: Swiss Army Knife

Some designers attempt to get around the spell-in-a-can angle by just giving the item multiple powers. And this is often a fine way to go, but some people don't know when to stop. An item that grants *command*, *hold person*, *fireball*, *cure serious wounds*, *prayer*, *cone of cold*, and *stoneskin* sounds pretty exciting from a player perspective. But it's doing several completely unrelated things, and that weakens it quite a bit. It's meant to solve too many disparate issues for players, both combat and healing and defense.

This design would be better served if it were split into two items, one divine item for *command*, *hold person*, *cure serious wounds*, and *prayer*, and one arcane elemental item for *fireball*, *cone of cold*, and *stoneskin*. They still wouldn't be great items from that list alone, but at least they'd start to trend toward a unified design.

I suppose there are exceptions to every rule, but any wondrous item that goes beyond four or five powers is immediately suspect. It begins to look a lot less like a well-designed and fine-tuned item and more like a player wish-list. Wish lists are for Christmas shopping; they should not be the organizing principle for serious item design.

It's very rare that a well-designed item uses more than a handful of powers. And the best items don't just replicate skills and standard spells; they do something original.

Design Choices: Über Items and Breaking Class Abilities

Clark Peterson likes to talk about "über items," meaning overpowered junk that is a player's wet dream and a Dungeon Master's nightmare. If the powers lack any coherent theme other than raw power, the item is definitely a loser. That is, designing an item that does everything well is a terrible design strategy. Wondrous items are not meant to solve all of the problems a game might provide. On the contrary, they are meant to provide focused power around a theme or to extend a character concept.

And this is where designers also get into trouble.

Some items grant a free class level, do away with the need for rest for spellcasters, or grant class abilities. These are all big, big, big mistakes. The time and class restrictions are there for a reason, serving overall play balance and

keeping the game enjoyable for all characters, not just the ones with overpowered items. The scale of rewards, even at epic levels, should never overshadow core class abilities, and items should never make it possible for one character to take over the function of another class.

In other words, granting better turning abilities to a cleric is fine, if powerful. Granting undead turning abilities to a rogue is just a mistake, de-valuing the cleric's contribution to the party and blurring the lines between classes. Same story with barbarian rage, wizard spells, or sneak attacks: these abilities can be enhanced but should not be granted by a wondrous item. Maybe an artifact could do it, but they come with their own costs. Overall, I think you'll find that the game plays better if characters have mastery of their role, not other classes' roles.

The Gonzo Factor

Some items are just plain weird. They summon eldritch things, they break a game rule in an interesting way, their descriptions are squamous and rugose and likely crepuscular. Robes filled with eyeballs, chests full of mechanical men, undersea contraptions with lobster claws. D&D has a tradition of some weird stuff.

I'm of two minds about it. If you have the talent, it's a joy to see someone go absolutely right over the edge, flap their wings a bit, and bring back a bit of game design fire stolen from the heavens. If you don't have the talent, it just comes across as overdone, weird, and perverse design, possibly excessively showy or unusable.

It's largely a matter of taste, and as the culture vultures say, *De gustibus non est disputandum* ("there's no accounting for taste" to you and me).

"The time and class restrictions are there for a reason...keeping the game enjoyable for all characters"

I'm probably as guilty as anyone of doing occasional gonzo bits (the Shining Children of Thassilon from **Pathfinder #4** break a few rules around blindness and fire and ranged touch attacks to generate a particular reaction of fear among players, and the ghoul necromancy tends toward overblown prose in **Empire of the Ghouls**). It's fun to design this way, but it's a risky strategy in a contest. Clinton Boomer has the knack for it and rode that knack all the way into the finals of the first **RPG Superstar**.

If you've got it, run it with. But know that it's not going to suit everyone's taste, and it could flop completely.

Pricing, Cost, and Balance

I don't want to underplay the importance of numbers, either. The bonuses, charges, uses, and creation costs of an item need to be correct. However, obsessing on the numerical side of things is only partly a designer's concern. In fact, it is secondary to having a great core concept for the item to begin with, and errors or omissions in this area are relatively simple fixes for a developer or editor to make.

Which isn't to say that these mistakes won't cost you. Forgetting to include the proper spell in a construction entry, making an error in calculating cost, or failing to balance an item so that it works for the most likely levels of play are all serious mistakes, and count against you. The rules for all this, though, are out there in the SRD and the **Pathfinder** rules. Read them, know them, and use them.

Flavor

Finally, beyond mechanics there are the intangibles of flavor and feel. It's absolutely true that the look and feel of your item matters, starting with the name. The "Idol of Bladderwort" is not quite as cool an item to own as the "Black Stone of Devesh-Nar," to my ears. *Mordenkainen's Magnificent Mansion* is a much more compelling spell than *Morton's Hidden House*, and *iceberg* is a better spell name than *crushing snow mountain*. Based purely on the names, of course.

A good name and a cool description won't save bad mechanics (and vice versa, of course). Yet some designers submit entries that are mechanically wonderful and totally devoid of soul, spark, or any animating glimmer of life. If you are designing primarily from the mechanics to the flavor (which is absolutely as valid an approach as the reverse), you need to be sure that you have given the item enough personality to keep the reader's interest long enough to digest the mechanics. If there's no personality, an item design has failed, no matter how wondrous the mechanics underneath, because no one will read it long enough to appreciate the worth of its rules.

Conclusion

So, as you can see, there are many hurdles leading up to a successful item. The easiest ones are formatting and clean prose. The hardest are style and flavor decisions that every designer may treat differently but that define your work as your own.

As an example of glorious design, consider the *portable hole*. It has style, it has solid mechanics, and it does something that no other item does. It's a classic of **D&D**, giving rise to no end of stories and retellings. Best of all, it solves a core need for players and is widely lusted after by adventurers. A success on every front. Go forth, and create items just as wondrous!

12

Design that Matters

December 8th, 2008

Every volume of the **KOBOLD Guides** (okay, both of them) has tried to demystify some of the aspects of design. But just as last time I tackled inspiration and what motivates good design, this time I'm going out on a limb as well.

I want to talk about art for a minute. Bear with me.

I know, I know. RPGs are entertainment, **D&D** is a great bit of escape from the mundane, and fantasy shouldn't poke its nose into the grownups' tent. This is what our culture tells us.

Seriousness of Purpose

In volume 1 I talked a bit about taking fantasy seriously, about making sure your design is plausible and meets genre expectations. That's important, but it's not the seriousness I'm talking about here. When I say that a really good designer should at least be attempting art some of the time, I'm not saying that every adventure or every rules set needs to be considered in light of the human condition. That's ridiculous, pretentious, and generally a waste of your time and your reader's money.

But I am saying that, like great fantasy novels or films, a great designer should at least be aiming at something beyond entertainment. Jonathan Tweet certainly did this with **EVERWAY**, which came in for a lot of criticism (and poor sales) based on its visual and mythic style. But it was an attempt to broaden the audience for RPGs mechanically, to use a more collaborative and softer resolution system than **D&D** did. It wasn't meant for the core hobby audience, necessarily, but it was meant to make you think about what roleplaying games are. **ARS MAGICA**, with its troupe style play of multiple characters in an upper and lower class, does the same sort of thing, restoring the class structure of the medieval era, with a fantasy spin. Another Tweet design, and a more commercially successful one.

These are game designs that broke new ground and changed the way later designers think about their work.

Defining Success

But again, I'm talking about commerce when I should be talking about art. I don't mean something created in a coffeeshop or some studio apartment by half-literate painters or anguished emo videographers. I mean stories and entertainment that withstand the test of time. For medieval fantasy as a genre, those include **The Lord of the Rings** (books and films), Jack Vance's **The Dying Earth**, and Robert E. Howard's Conan stories. Probably Michael Moorcock's Elric and Poul Anderson's **Three Hearts and Three Lions**. Looking at current writers, I'd put my money on George Martin's **Song of Ice and Fire** to still be in print 50 years from now.

These are the stories that work in the fantasy novel world. What are the RPG equivalents? Well, the hobby hasn't been around for 50 years, but let's just look back 25 or 30 years and see what has been revised, rebuilt, shared, and made into canon. What are the core **D&D** adventure series? I'd argue that they are the **GDQ** series by Gygas, the **Dragonlance** adventures by Weis and Hickman, and a few one-shot bits of brilliance like **I6**, **Ravenloft** and Zeb Cook's **Dwellers in the Forbidden City** (which gave us the yuan-ti and the lost city adventure). Probably **Tomb of Horrors** as well, though the current WotC design staff seems to disagree with me.

Since these are games rather than novels, we see the signs of art in mechanics and setting as much or more than we see character and plot as crucial. The introduction of the drow, of draconians and kender, of yuan-ti and tasloi are all elements of these designs that have become central to what we think of as high adventure, sword-and-sorcery gaming. Beyond **D&D**, some of these iconic fantasy tropes have since been swiped by **World of Warcraft** and other MMOs, just as minotaurs have been swiped from **Magic: the Gathering** and **Dragonlance**.

Imitation and shameless swipes are signs of huge artistic success for a game designer and worldbuilder.

So we have one metric of success. Another, of course, is whether your adventure modules spawn ongoing fiction (as **Ravenloft** has done), and whether your design's mechanics have been taken up by later adventure writers, and whether you have created a whole new category of adventures.

But Is That High Art?

Praise from one's peers and impact on future generations are definitely outward signs of success, but I think I'm still not quite as pretentious as I could be here. So I'll climb a little further out on this branch and see where that leaves me.

The praise and future impact are outward signs of the real success of those adventures. But I'd argue that those are symptoms of the designer's high art, and that the real reason the adventures are praised is how they work to appeal to us as gamers, emotionally and in narrative terms. They give us everything we want from our fantasy, and then a little more.

That “little more” is tough to nail down. Sometimes it’s an unforgettable character (like Strahd). Sometimes it’s an unforgettable place (like the **Vault of the Drow**). Sometimes it’s a matter of the choices that the heroes are asked to make during play or the sheer challenge of the environment (**Tomb of Horrors**). If it were easy to pin down, it wouldn’t be art, now would it?

Mostly, though, I think that great game design opens up new vistas of imagination for our play, offering new places to explore, new roles to take on, and an emotional connection to those imaginary people and places that we return to often.

“a really good designer should at least be attempting art some of the time...a great designer should...be aiming at something beyond entertainment”

Some might argue that this is a function of the DM and his group of players, and that’s true. But as a counterexample, consider the Lady of Pain from **Planescape**. She’s a figure of mystery and the heart of the setting, and the DM doesn’t actually get to play her that much in a properly-run game. She doesn’t say anything. But I say she is a figure of art precisely because she is mysterious and her history largely unknown. **Planescape** is about mystery and layers of meaning and proxy wars among gods. If the central figure of the central city were just another big-statted brute or high-powered wizard, that character would have been a design failure. As it is, the Lady of Pain is an iconic figurehead who makes the setting what it is just by her presence and influence. That’s smart design. That makes you think a little about the campaign, and what might be possible in Sigil. It is, in other words, inspiring.

Good design aspires to be more than mere story or mere mechanics. I think any designer who simply puts together a setting, sourcebook, or adventure to amuse is doing himself and the gamers who buy that book a disservice. While it’s probably overkill to make everything in an RPG attempt to serve some higher art, designing without any attempt at a point of view and a deep impression is a sorry bit of hack work. There’s plenty of that in the RPG field already—I won’t name names, but you know the sort of hackfest and munchkinism I’m talking about. Why design for the lowest of the low bars?

Instead, good designers set up a memorable coming-together of friends against something a bit frightening. They strive to give the DM tools to make a mark on gamer’s memory. Without shooting for the moon in at least a few sections of a book, you’re just grinding out generic power fantasy clichés, which seems very sad work to me indeed.

Let Me Tell You About My Character

I want all of my work to make an impression beyond entertainment. I know that the pay is going to suck. I don’t care, because I like to think (and maybe I flatter myself) that a good adventure is a chance at joy, and a chance to laugh, and a

chance to shiver when the beasts of ravening darkness come. We remember how it almost turned out all wrong, but one hero stepped forward and made it work out. Maybe a game is intense enough to keep us lying awake at night, thinking of the options for the next session.

This is why gamers are notorious for “Let me tell you about my character” stories—because when RPGs work right, they are memorable, and people want to share that memory with friends. It’s not always possible to convey the magic to those who weren’t there, but it makes me happy that RPGs have that power, the strength to make us say “That was so very cool. Let me tell you how it was . . .” That shared experience is what amazing design and strong DM skills get you.

And that’s what I shoot for in my designs. I want to give a DM the tools to make his or her players say “Wow!” Not just “Yeah, we killed monsters and took their stuff,” but “That was the best adventure you’ve ever run.”

Ruthlessness and Personality in Art

To get there, you have to surprise people a little bit. Throw a curve ball. Make an encounter work inside-out. Turn a brawl into a hostage negotiation. Threaten the PCs’ favorite mentor, barmaid, or magic shop owner; someone they already know.

And make it personal. One of the lessons I learned repeatedly as a DM and that does translate to design is that you do the players no favors by taking it easy on the PCs. Yes, they may get lots of loot for little effort. In the long run, though, that’s boring. Dilemmas, close calls, and villains who will do the vilest thing you can imagine are the ones that stick in a player’s memory. Be ruthless when you design. Cheat a little to threaten what the PCs value, the way that **Wrath of the River King** threatens the party’s gear and magic items.

They may curse you in the short run. In the long run, though, they will remember the hard times and the difficulties they overcame. Ruthlessness is required for your design art to thrive. Cowardice in design means always balancing everything, always giving the PCs an easy way out, always making sure that there is no chance of real failure. That’s a recipe for boredom, and I don’t recommend it.

Finally, show your personal fears and quirks in design. Those are elements that should not dominate the adventure, but they make it distinctive rather than just another auto-generated corporate hackfest. My wife still raves about a hedgehog gardener NPC from literally years ago, because he was a hub that the party could return to again and again for information in a hedge maze dungeon. I’m still not sure quite what she saw in that NPC, but he was one of those personal quirks that worked, because folks hadn’t seen it a hundred times before.

There's a fine line between quirky and dumb, of course. Some mechanics are too quirky or complicated to work at all. Some stories are too niche or too weird to function. But consider a fantasy like Miéville's **Perdido Street Station**, or Ken Scholes' **Lamentation**. They are hugely powerful and successful because they aren't like what came before them. Take creative chances; it is the only way to make sure your design work is noticed and rewarded likewise. If some of those creative risks fail you completely, that's part of the price of trying something new. Fall down six times, stand up seven.

"praise and future impact are outward signs of the real success of these adventures...They give us everything we want from our fantasy, and then a little more."

And there you have it, folks. I have taken my chances here a bit, trying to talk about something quite as highfalutin' as Art in the context of roleplaying games. I'll be curious to hear what folks make of it, either mockery or agreement.

At the very least, you know why that weird little hedgehog is showing up in my next project.

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