

Dispatches from the Raven Crowking

V.2 - Designing and Running Adventures



Daniel J. Bishop

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RPG**

Dispatches from Raven Crowking

Vol.2 - Designing and Running Adventures



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Introduction

Welcome to the second volume of *Dispatches*.

This volume focuses on articles related to adventure design. Although these articles use the excellent *Dungeon Crawl Classics* system, the general principles are adaptable to almost any game system. As with the previous volume, in addition to the focus articles I have included game-able materials that can be used immediately.

This material has been re-edited, cleaned up, and in some cases expanded from original blog posts, as with the first volume. Again, there is also some new material as a “thank you” for your continued interest.

Dungeon Crawl Classics has a fantastic community, both in terms of creativity and affability. I don’t think that is an accident. The thrust of many rules systems seems to be to codify the actions which can be taken by the Game Master, and perforce by the players as well. There is a “right” way to do things, and, by extension, every other way is the “wrong” way. *Dungeon Crawl Classics* steps back into the early days of Role-Playing Games and reminds you that it is the rules, not your vision of the game, which must bend. It’s refreshing. All of the arguments about “doing it wrong” vanish when there is no wrong way to do it.

In addition, *Dungeon Crawl Classics* actively *requires* creativity from its judges and players. This is not a game where you are selecting monsters or treasures from a menu. Instead, you are encouraged...nearly *demanded*... to create creatures, items, patrons, and more, which make each adventure and campaign unique. Once those creative juices start flowing, it is almost impossible to bottle them up again. And why would you?

Be warned: This volume is going to contain *spoilers* for published adventures. I have done my best to keep these spoilers to a minimum.

Basic Adventure Design

I have been a Game Master for a long, long time. I started playing Christmas Day 1979, and was actively developing my own adventures by early 1980. A lot of the articles I found inspirational come from early *Dragon Magazine*, published by TSR. Articles on the art of design – and especially, the methods by which specific writers and Game Masters craft their adventures – used to be a mainstay of periodicals devoted to the hobby.

These days, you have to look through blogs and G+ messages to find the same sort of advice, but it is still interesting to read. That one GM does things differently than I do is more often a source of inspiration than a source of conflict. The basics of my method are not all that difficult.

(1) *Brainstorm.* Take some paper, and write all the cool ideas down. Find links between them. Let the main ideas begin to percolate through your subconscious. In my experience, the best adventures occur when the connection between two or more apparently unrelated ideas becomes apparent.

For a good example, when I wrote *Stars in the Darkness*, I was working off an existing map. The map suggested cosmic expanses beneath the caves. The map also had a Stonehenge-like structure in the cavern farthest from the entrance. Both of these ideas brought to mind a cosmic observatory. This meshed with an image a close friend of mine, Christopher Heilmann, had painted (the cover of the adventure is an homage to this image, by the same artist).

In order to make the base idea work, I decided that the whole adventure would take place within a sort of dreamscape or pocket reality. Mixed with liberal doses of Appendix N references (and at least one Rider Haggard reference), and I had something (hopefully) interesting to look at and play through.

Nothing from a brainstorming session needs to be wasted. Whatever notes you don't use, record in some fashion, and use them for future brainstorming. In fact, doing so will build a notebook of adventure design elements. Periodically looking through your unused ideas may suggest new adventures unlooked for...or add an unexpected element to your current work.

(2) Never base your adventure on expectations of what the players will do.

Players almost always do something else anyway. Make sure that they have meaningful choices. Make complex maps, with multiple routes, unless there is some important reason not to.

It might be helpful to consider designing an adventure like preparing for a series of questions. Through play, the players ask questions of the scenario. It is your job to provide the answers to their questions. It is not your job to decide what questions will be asked. Creating an adventure, therefore, is in a way nothing more than trying to guess which questions will be likely, and to be prepared for when they arise. Through this process, you hopefully generate enough understanding of the scenario itself to answer questions you did not foresee.

(3) The goal of players in an adventure is to control the situation.

The more they control the situation, the less risk there is for their characters. However, after a certain point, allowing the players to control the situation is boring for everyone involved, including the players. The adventure writer must throw in enough situations where things can get out of control to make the adventure is exciting. That way, the GM never has to cheat. If the animated wooden statues are defeated easily by wood wyrding, some fool will drink the enchanted wine, or get caught in the burning web of a daemonic spider.

The important point is that the players' attempts to control the situation should actually be rewarded by a reasonable chance of success. The contextual information available to the players helps them in doing this, and the GM allows consequences to flow naturally. As discussed in the first volume of *Dispatches*, this interplay is (or should be) the basis for all pen-and-paper gaming. In a computer game, a clever idea that the programmers didn't think of simply will not fly. That should not be true for a tabletop role-playing game.

(4) Unless the GM cheats, no group of players will ever find everything.

Therefore, feel free to put all kinds of odd treasures in interesting places. Seed enough potential "Woah! That's cool!" moments so that the players have a chance of stumbling into at least one or two of them.

(5) Be true to the setting, even if it means the PCs get hosed/get a huge reward.

Place what you think makes sense in the location, even if it seems out of keeping with a "level X module". Allowing the setting to make logical

sense, even if the players never discover the logic, is important for two reasons:

First, no matter how detailed your adventure, the GM is going to be forced to make a judgement call sooner or later, and the overarching logic is going to be of help here.

Second, the overarching logic is felt by the players in the presentation, even if they do not understand it. They need to be able to trust that it is there.

(6) Context, context, context! Once you know what is going on in the setting, and what creatures you are using, consider the clues and evidence that they leave behind. The more the players have to guess with, the more engaged they will be. If these clues make an encounter or two easier, that's okay. That's great, actually. That's the reward for paying attention.

(7) If you can, put in an area or two where new PCs can be logically introduced. The larger the adventure, the more important this is. Harley Stroh's 0-level DCC funnel adventure, *Sailors on the Starless Sea*, offers an excellent example of this principle. Likewise Jon Marr's funnel adventures, *Perils of the Sunken City* and *The Ooze Pits of Jonas Gralk*.

Sometimes, the new PCs can be a reward for playing through an adventure. In *Stars in the Darkness*, I made it possible to gain one of more alien PCs. In *The Tribe of Ogg* and the *Gift of Suss*, it is possible to take over play of a space princess NPC. In both *The Tribe of Ogg* and *The Weird Worm-Ways of Saturn*, unique PC race-classes are possible that would not otherwise be available.

(8) Try to remember that two things are happening – the PCs are exploring the adventure area, and the players are around the table playing the game. If you can bridge the two in some way that makes logical sense, you should consider doing so. For a really good example of this, see *Tales of the Scarecrow* from James Raggi. Likewise, some effects in *Death Frost Doom* depend upon player seating around the table. Finally, my own *Bone Hoard of the Dancing Horror* has a nasty knock-on effect when a PC is felled by the titular horror and the player then engages in table talk. More on this in the next article.

(9) Develop the material enough that another GM can understand what

you are trying to convey. When writing fiction as a younger man, I produced many an unsaleable story simply because I failed to realize that I could not assume that the reader would “get” what I was trying to say unless I actually said it. I could not simply assume that the reader knew some specific thing that I knew, and I could not assume that the reader would care enough to find out about it because my story felt unresolved. That is not a fault in the reader; it was a fault in me as the writer. When I learned this lesson, I started selling stories. Adventure writing is not that different in this regard: Be clear about what you are writing. Say what you are trying to say, and say it clearly.

(10) Finally, have fun! Let your own unique voice and sense of humour come through. If that means you disregard any or all of the above, so be it. You should create adventures that you find satisfying. If you don't feel satisfied, what are the odds anyone else will be? And, if they are, what difference does it make? Better faint praise for something you are proud of than overwhelming acclaim for something you find embarrassing!



Using the Table to Your Advantage

When designing an adventure for a role-playing game, it is sometimes useful to consider not only what is happening in the fictive milieu, but also what is happening at the table. By this I mean that the adventure designer should not only consider what the player characters are likely to do, but also what the players themselves are likely to do.

This may seem counter-intuitive, but bear with me.

From the standpoint of the players, they are assembled not only to take on the roles of fictional persons in a fantasy milieu, but also to play (and win) a game. And, make no mistake, even if role-playing games have no preset “win conditions”, each player at the table has some idea at the end of any session whether or not he has done well or done poorly. Players in role-playing games set their own win conditions.

In order to meet these win conditions, players develop meta-strategies. By this I mean that, in addition to the strategies employed by the characters themselves, based upon the fictive milieu, players employ strategies based upon the meta-knowledge that the fictive milieu is a game. This is both expected and encouraged by every “player advice” section of every game book ever written. As a Game Master, you should not actively discourage this. However, you should play with it and make it part of the game.

Let’s take a look at some expectations that tabletop players have.

- (1) Players tend to expect that open communication amongst themselves is always possible.
- (2) Players tend to expect that characters are interchangeable.
- (3) Players tend to expect that they can accept or reject additions made by the GM to their backstories.
- (4) Players tend to expect that seating arrangements at the table don’t matter.

(5) Players tend to expect that they are working together towards a common goal.

(6) Players tend to expect that they know the rules under which they are operating.

I am sure that you can think of more without trying all that hard. In fact, if you examine the earliest adventure modules available from the hobby, you will see that adventure writers began confounding some of these expectations early on.

(1) Players tend to expect that open communication amongst themselves is always possible.

Gary Gygax's excellent ***The Keep on the Borderlands*** suggested that the DM assume that the characters say anything said by the players, and to react accordingly. That is not practical for many people's tables. But what if an adventure forces the characters to remain silent? What if transmitting certain information is dangerous, as in James Raggi's also excellent ***Death Frost Doom?*** I am sure that you can think of other, more recent, examples from ***Dungeon Crawl Classics*** modules. Limiting inter-player communication – and inter-character communication – forces the players to sit up and take notice.

(2) Players tend to expect that characters are interchangeable.

There is an expectation that the character class and/or race chosen (or other criteria in other games) will not matter...the GM will simply make it work. But what if a particular location adds undue hardships to some characters, but not to others? What if it grants some characters bonuses? What if a traditional power that a particular character class relies upon is all but useless? What if an area exploits a character type's weaknesses?

Note that you want to even this out; if you make combat less viable in one scenario, you should even it out by making combat more viable in another. This is what some of the so-called "gotcha" monsters were all about – a fighter could not typically rely upon brute strength when facing a rust monster, and casting spells at some jellies is just asking for trouble.

For example, both ***The Arwich Grinder*** and ***Silent Nightfall*** make use of

the *Dungeon Crawl Classics* elf's vulnerability to iron. *The Folk of Osmon* turns a dwarf's ability to smell gold into a problem.

Another way to deal with this assumption is to grant treasures that cannot be passed on; they become intrinsic to the character. This idea is used in different ways in *Prince Charming*, *Reanimator*, *the Seven Deadly Skills of Sir Amoral the Misbegotten*, and even my holiday adventure, *The Thing in the Chimney*.

(3) Players tend to expect that they can accept or reject additions made by the GM to their backstories.

And they should be able to do so...but you, as the GM, should also consider what happens when they reject a backstory element. The results should not always be so pleasant as simply accepting it, especially for newly-minted PCs. An example of this occurs in *The Arwich Grinder*, which is a 0-level funnel for the *Dungeon Crawl Classics* game appearing in *Crawl! Fanzine issue #9*. Especially in the initial portions of a campaign, it is important that the players have agency to disagree with the GM about their characters' pasts... but this does not come without limitation.

(4) Players tend to expect that seating arrangements at the table don't matter.

James Raggi's *Death Frost Doom* gives the best example of where seating arrangements matter. Certain events in the module instruct the GM to go clockwise or counter-clockwise around the table from a triggering character's player until a saving throw is failed. Sit close enough to Johnny-Pulls-the-Levers and you might find yourself wanting to change seats. *The Winter Home*, by Scott Mathis, makes seating matter in the adventure's basic set-up.

(5) Players tend to expect that they are working together towards a common goal.

You can subvert this in a couple of obvious ways. One is to set a win condition that not all the characters can meet. In an adventure in the DCC core rulebook, a living being must be left in the dungeon when the others depart. If you killed all of the monsters, it will have to be one of you.

Another way is to forcibly split the party, even for a single encounter. A wall

drops in the middle of the room as monsters come in from both sides – suddenly the party cannot use its usual tactics. An example of another way to forcibly split the party appears in the addendum in *Crawl! #9*.

(6) *Players tend to expect that they know the rules under which they are operating.*

The *1st Edition Dungeon Master's Guide* gives advice on adventuring on other planes of existence. The *Dungeon Crawl Classics core rulebook* suggests making magic work differently within the context of different locations. Many classic modules include areas where some spells do not work, or the characters cannot act as they normally would...the floor is frictionless, gravity is reversed, etc.

The adventure designer should remember that, in addition to the PCs encountering a dungeon (or whatever), the players are encountering a game. Just as the dungeon (or whatever) should afford unexpected elements, so too should the game. By playing with what is occurring at the table, on the game level, the GM can make events far more memorable than yet another excursion to kill things and take their stuff.



Advanced Adventure Design

I caution you against thinking about adventures in terms of story. There is a story...what happened before the PCs became involved....and there will be a story after PC involvement is done and the players are reliving the events, but I do not believe that the GM can or should know what is going to happen at each point along the way.

Consider it this way – if the GM knows what is going to happen, how important are the choices of the players involved? Worse, if the GM expects that *this* encounter is going to be the **big boss fight**, he will be encouraged (subtly or not) to fudge events to make it so. Again, the value of player choice is reduced. The element of the unexpected, on both sides, is reduced. As discussed in *Dispatches Vol. 1*, this is not a good thing.

I would like to talk a little bit about layers and trigger events. Also about overt and covert threads.

What most people do when they start working on an adventure is the covert thread...what is really happening that the PCs must uncover in order to bring events to a satisfying conclusion. Most adventures need a layer of overt threads...things that happen out in the open, the ways that the players (and locals) first view the events and places in the adventure.

If you think about an adventure as a mystery, the covert thread is what really happened. The overt threads are all of the other side issues, the alibis, the red herrings, and the daily life that conceals the covert thread from the detective until the mystery's climax.

Some rules of thumb:

- For every part of the covert thread that the characters must uncover, there should be at least six clues.
- For any part of the covert thread that it would be cool if the characters uncovered it, there should be at least three clues.
- For every location you want the PCs to go to in order to discover these clues, there should be overt reasons for them to go there. Note that NPCs “Don’t go there! Even if there is a hoard of gold

lost on those old burial grounds!” is almost certain to make any PC walk into a death trap, let alone a creepy swamp.

As an example of what I mean here, consider ADVENTURE. The characters are going in to GOAL. That’s an overt reason for action. They need GIZMO to get in the LOCATION. That’s another overt reason for action. Along the way, they are given many clues about the covert thread (the nature of the CREATURES in this area) which should lead them to a second covert thread (maybe we shouldn’t DO SOMETHING THEY WERE PROBABLY PLANNING ON DOING). The presence of various treasures and things to manipulate give the players more overt reasons to explore beyond a strict linear progression to the LOCATION.

As the PCs examine the various clues, their understanding of the adventure changes. Some of what was covert becomes overt. This continues throughout the adventure. As a result, the players’ understanding of the adventure (and adventure location) develops a layered depth created through interpreting and re-interpreting what they encounter and whatever events occur. We all experience this in film or fiction, and we all know how shallow a movie or novel feels which fails to cause us to reinterpret what has gone before.

There is nothing like peeling back those layers, as a player, and suddenly seeing the whole thing clearly. It is a great feeling, a moment of sheer exhilaration. Of course, it has to be the players actually doing the work, or it is meaningless. The GM telling you “Bert is Evil” is nothing like putting the clues together and realizing that, very much in contrast to what you’ve been thinking all this time, Bert is actually the evil mastermind who is controlling the entire street.

A note on clues: Different people can be pressured to play the villain’s game in different ways. One might be promised gold, and his greed makes him do vile things. Another might have a shameful secret he is afraid will be exposed. Yet another might simply be trying to prevent the villain from targeting his baby sister.

Various NPCs, being made to do the villain’s bidding through various means, offer more clues than do the same NPCs if they are all doing it for gold. Different motives give rise to different behaviours, which in turn give rise to different chinks in the armour of the mystery, and more ways for the players to crack the shell open. You want to provide as much context as you can,

without overtly spilling the beans, because you want the beans to be spilled. And it should not matter if they are spilled early or late.

That these different motives also raise the spectre of not all the “bad guys” being bad; that “fighting them” in some cases means (or can mean) “rescuing them” is all the better....because, if nothing else, it allows the players to have moments where they must make ethical decisions. It also means that a rescued “enemy” can become an ally, and can impart information (context) to the players.

Instead of imagining a climax where the PCs figure out what is going on, try to imagine the climax where the players learn the covert thread earlier, at the time, or never, and it still works. It is better to offer clues at the end, and give the players an opportunity to either figure it out or not, than it is to spill the beans. Never knowing is better than knowing because the GM told you. Knowing because you figured it out yourself is best of all.

Trigger events are things that happen after a particular condition is met. I.e., after the players ask at the Rusty Fox tavern about the creepy old lighthouse keeper, they are attacked by thugs dressed like ghouls. Trigger events, when at all possible, should follow as a direct consequence of whatever triggered them, so that the timing is a clue to the covert thread. Even the dimmest of players will eventually realize that the priest is a spy if, after every time they go to him for help, the Temple of Chaos seems to know what their plans are.

Layering requires paths to explore apart from the main thread. Each of these paths, in some way, points back toward the major issues and what is moving below the surface. Both layers and trigger events are used to create the impression of things moving below the surface, and to give the players clues to finally peer below the surface and discover just what is going on.

Footprints and Offstage Material

1. Gaming material is not meant to simply be hung on the wall; it has no value until used.
2. Gaming material has meaning even if it is not brought directly into play.

These might seem to be contradictory positions. I would like to explain why

I think that they are not.

Let us imagine that a perspective judge is going to convert *Keep on the Borderlands*, *Tomb of Horrors*, and *White Plume Mountain* to include as part of a *Dungeon Crawl Classics* campaign. (I have chosen these adventures because they are classics: most judges are likely to know at least something about them, and I don't have to worry too much about spoilers!) The judge imagines that the game will start in the vicinity of the Keep, and that the Tomb and the Mountain will be locations within the campaign milieu, the first hidden and the second not-so-hidden.

All of these areas are in play immediately, in the sense that the 0-level PCs could decide to tackle, say, *White Plume Mountain* as their inaugural adventure. The implication of a larger world is useless unless that larger world is actually there, and can be explored. The judge can (and should) offer clues as to the relative risks of various campaign areas, but in the end, it is the players, not the judge, who decide whether or not to venture where angels fear to tread.

More importantly, they are in play in the sense that they have a “footprint” on the surrounding area. The wise judge knows how to use this footprint to give areas meaning, so that when they are brought “into play” in the second sense (actually encountered at the table), they already have acquired depth, meaning, and history.

The evil priests in the Caves of Chaos have a spy in the Keep. This spy never need appear “on stage” for his presence to be felt. If the characters have loose lips around the Keep, the spy will learn whatever they say. That means that the priests in the Caves will learn it also, after some delay, and will be able to prepare for it. The group should be able to deduce the existence of the spy even without ever encountering or identifying him.

So, on the one hand, none of this material is meant to be a work of art, hanging inviolate on your wall. You are meant to make use of it, directly or indirectly. The elements of the campaign world that are not directly encountered can and should impact on those which are. This is an important factor in allowing the game milieu to gain “a life of its own”.

On the other hand, being used does not always mean being brought directly into play. The spy in the Keep is important even if never encountered direct-

ly. Knowing that the *Tomb of Horrors* is out there gives players options even if they never choose to explore them.

It might seem difficult to the aspiring judge to determine how the current *Dungeon Crawl Classics* adventures can be fit into such a scheme. After all, most have a definite structure, with specific beginning points and end points. In some cases, the end point includes the nominal destruction (in whole or in part) of the adventure location.

Using these modules in a sandbox requires that the judge consider what *leads up* to the beginning, and what *happens after* the end. This is difficult to provide examples of without giving away many spoilers about a given adventure. Many of the adventures I have written for the game are intended to make integration into a sandbox easy. The *Campaign Element* series, in particular, is designed to do just that – to allow the material to be used and re-used throughout years of play. I am going to use my own *The Arwich Grinder*, published in *Crawl! Fanzine #9* for my example, because I know it well, it follows the typical structure of many published DCC adventures, and if I am spoiling an adventure for someone, at least it is one of my own.

What leads up to the beginning? *The Arwich Grinder* is a 0-level funnel adventure taking place near Arwich village. A famine swept over the area in the not-too-distant past. Let us imagine that the adventure will not be used to start a new campaign, but to create potential replacement PCs. In this case, all of the background in the adventure becomes events that the earlier PCs live through. Severe famine in the area? Here, eat this. Perhaps a travelling NPC associate with a distinctive ring has disappeared, and that ring is discovered in the Curwen's house.

I guarantee that this sort of foreshadowing will not damage the piquancy of the adventure itself. Far from it – the whole thing will be far more personal for the players.

A judge looking to do this sort of thing needs to layer his covert threads carefully, remembering that in this case the goal is to *avoid* having too many clues early on, while having enough clues that an “aha!” moment is likely to occur. Should a group of 3rd level PCs figure out what is happening up there in the piney hills, though, the judge should allow them to investigate. *The Arwich Grinder* is intended as a 0-level funnel...but as a part of a living world, it is in play once the first footprint appears. *The judge's plans for “what*

should happen” should never trump the players’ choices about what they attempt. Let the players decide what is beyond their prowess...or beneath their concern!

What happens after the end? Luckily, almost every adventure already includes a section on “Continuing the Adventure” or something similar. Read it. Make use of some of the threads to allow the adventure to have an ongoing footprint. Allow the site of the collapsed Chaos Keep to be infested by beastmen trying to excavate a lost treasure. Bring back agents of the enemy’s patron to revenge him even after the enemy has fallen. Make the treasures recovered more than mere power-ups, as others are interested in obtaining them...and willing to take risks to do so.

In short, the more you approach each adventure as being part of an ongoing milieu (as well as an episode in your PCs’ careers), the more the world will form, and the more meaning each of those episodes will have.

Hooks and Win Conditions

It is strongly my position that my job as GM is to supply players with context, from which the players make choices, and then I adjudicate the consequences of those choices. This adjudication, which includes both success and failure, as well as every grey shade between, creates a new context from which additional choices are made.

The players’ choices do not come from a menu. Every ruleset embodies certain default choices within a framework of rules, but that does not mean that players cannot have their characters attempt anything, even if that “anything” requires adjudication from outside the rules or modifications of the rules themselves. The players are not guaranteed to succeed, and I will keep the rules in mind, but if the players come up with a reasonable means to fuel a spell with a major sacrifice, in keeping with the game’s context, why wouldn’t I allow it? The “reality” of the game milieu trumps the “reality” of the ruleset.

What does this have to do with hooks? Well, adventure hooks are sample win conditions that the players can latch onto in order to set goals for themselves, allowing them a sense of completion once some goal has been met. The adventure hooks given for any scenario are not the only possible win conditions for that scenario. If playing **GI**, for instance, the players might simply

wish to rob the giants. They may wish to subvert them, turning them from one evil master to their own uses. They may merely need to get to the Hidden Chapel of Elder Weirdness in order to complete a magic item they wish to create.

Creating and offering hooks is a part of the creation of context for the game milieu. Selecting from hooks, rejecting hooks, and re-forging the information from hooks to meet some new goal are all part of the process of choice, and that lies entirely in the players' court. When creating portions of the game milieu, the wise GM considers how those creations can be used, and what win conditions the players might accept to bring a session or group of sessions to a satisfying close, but the GM should not impose win conditions.

The GM is justified in believing that most players will accept win conditions, such as "survive", when placed into a situation where survival is threatened. However, beyond such very broad goals - and sometimes, even then - players are surprising. Exactly how long will you strive to reach the Grail in the collapsing temple, Indy? Even though you will probably die if you wait too long? What do you value more?

Consider: The GM sets up a campaign, wherein he imagines that the players would be attempting to stop the un-dead causing a plague. Two players have other ideas – one wishes to create a business to exploit the situation, and the other goes along with it. The GM halts the campaign, because the players are refusing to go along with his scenario. If I was running the game, I would not have ended it for this reason. The players devised their own goals, and their own win conditions. The scenario is that un-dead are causing the plague. The scenario is not how the players have their characters react to it. The GM supplies context, the players make choices, and then the GM adjudicates consequences.

Rinse, repeat.

Even if the players and GM discussed the goals of the characters prior to the campaign beginning, this limits the choices of the players. The players and GM discussed and came up with an initial context, the players made choices as to how they wanted to approach it, and then...well, those initial choices delimit what choices can be made as the game goes forward because the discussion creates a sharp differentiation between the context of the players and their characters. Merely by accepting the de facto hook of the campaign, the

PCs no longer have the full range of options that would naturally exist in that milieu had they not.

Hooks present options. They are not intended to be straightjackets. Win conditions are ultimately chosen by the players, not the GM, and a group of players can operate in the same game even with very different win conditions. Sometimes even opposed win conditions. The players decide that, not the GM.

Supply players with context, from which the players can make choices, and then adjudicate the consequences of those choices. It is beautiful in its simplicity.

Objectives

“Now what are we supposed to do?” they ask. And then they sit there, staring across the table, waiting for you to give them some quest, some purpose. Or perhaps they say, “If we sit here long enough, something’s bound to happen. The plot will come to us.”

Gods of Gaming, protect us from those players, spoon-fed from years of so-called “Adventure Paths”, who only know how to react to what the Game Master tells them is their quest, jumping through whatever hoops the GM may provide like so many trained seals. I am reminded of an experiment where researchers put food beyond a fence. There was a trick by which the subjects – wolves, coyotes, and domesticated dogs – could open the gate and get to the food. By and large, the wild canines quickly parsed it out, and got their reward. The domesticated dogs? They whined at the gate and waited for Master to open it for them.

Now, some Game Masters prefer domesticated dogs. They might have only the third adventure of *War of the Angels* prepared, and, come hell or high water, that is what tonight’s game will be. And that’s fine, sometimes, and, for some, all of the time. Others would like their players to be a little bit more proactive. The key to proactive players is to empower them to, and reward them for, setting objectives. Such a little thing to do. Such an obvious thing to do. And, more and more often as the years go by, such an uncommon thing to do.



Empowering your players to set objectives means that, sometimes, you will not be able to rely on materials written by others. To put it bluntly, it means that the players don't have to follow a plot you lay down; they literally "choose their own adventure". It might mean that some materials you've prepared don't get used right now. Perhaps not ever. It might mean that they choose not to pursue the Big Bad Evil Guy, and his schemes – whatever they may be – come to fruition. Meanwhile, you're left trying to decide how to deal with your fighter's romantic advances toward Lady Stark.

For example, imagine that you have decided to run *Savage Tide*. But the players don't "buy in". They simply are not interested in sailing toward the Isle of Dread. They leave their patron's service. They would rather find out where the bullywugs came from, or visit Cauldron after hearing about the events which happened there. The big problem with "The World Will End Unless the PCs Do X" is that the players might rather have their characters do Y instead. This goes back to the *C is for Choices, Context, and Consequence* material in the first volume of *Dispatches* – a Game Master should never set a consequence of failure that he or she is unwilling to accept having to actually play out in-game.

On the other hand, we can have a sandbox game where players can do anything – but cannot think of anything worth doing. Characters end up sitting in a taproom somewhere, waiting for something... anything... to happen.

One of the keys to running a good game is to allow the players to choose their own objectives. If one is running an "Adventure Path", this means either getting the players to buy into the objectives the path lays out for them or allowing them to pursue other agendas. If one is running a sandbox, this means ensuring that there are always obvious objectives that the players can make their own.

If one problem with "Adventure Path" play is that the Game Master may block the players in setting objectives for their characters, the reverse problem can occur in sandbox play. The players are left struggling to find an objective, with little or no input from the Game Master. Both of these two extremes are to be avoided.

Within a sandbox campaign, the Game Master should be guiding the players toward potential objectives, without actually choosing objectives for them. This is actually far easier than it might sound.

Within a game like *Dungeons & Dragons* or *Pathfinder*, for example, players tend to be motivated by a few common things: A big treasure, a powerful item, an intriguing puzzle, some prize to gain, some ally to help, some enemy to thwart. In *Dungeon Crawl Classics*, “Questing For It” is the beating heart of the game, so in addition to patron quests and disapproval, the judge need only know what the players want for their characters to lay hooks their characters will swallow.

Assuming a reasonably developed campaign area, it is fairly easy to place rumours about all of these things. There’s a ruby the size of a man’s heart, it is said, in the Tower of the Elephant. Danger abounds in the ruins under Zenopus’ tower, although some have come out with bright gold and gems for their troubles. Mercenary companies looking for plunder and titles flock to the banners of Robb Stark and Tywin Lannister in these troubled times.

Implied threats raise potential objectives as well. The wildlings have come over the Wall, and are raiding the North. Evil humanoids spew forth from the Caves of Chaos to threaten the nearby Keep. Folk bar their doors at night in fear of a creature that stalks the city streets. If these things happen one at a time, then the Game Master is choosing the objectives for the players. If they happen all at once, the players must choose. Do we explore the ruins, or do we deal with the wildlings? Both choices have potential consequences, which will change the context of the campaign area. Perhaps while the PCs explore Zenopus’ dungeons, another group stops the wildling raids, and gains glory for themselves. Or, perhaps, no one does, and the wildlings become a larger threat.

What’s the most important thing right now? The players must decide. How are we going to deal with it? Again, the players must decide. An objective is set.

The objectives of an initial adventure/play session are especially important. Even in a sandbox game, the Game Master must provide the players with a strong initial objective. If they discard it, and pursue an objective of their own, that’s great. If they don’t have one of their own, though, providing an objective gives the players an interesting game while providing the Game Master ample opportunity to seed each session with hooks and rumours to allow the players to choose their own goals.

By the time the initial objective has been met, the players should know

enough about the setting to be eager to pursue at least two or three other objectives of their own. They know of ruins they may wish to explore, prizes they may wish to obtain, and threats they may either deal with or avoid.

Throw into this mix two important types of NPCs: *The Ally* and *The Enemy*.

The Ally is a character that the players actually like. The Ally provides back-up, council, discounted merchandise, spell support, etc. The Ally doesn't travel with the players; the players must come to her. In some cases, the Ally is not available, because she has a life of her own. In some cases, the Ally asks the PCs for aid....But, generally speaking, the Ally is of benefit to the PCs, giving them more than she asks in return. An Ally is an asset.

Elrond and Beorn in *The Hobbit* are good examples of Ally characters. Simply reaching them can be an objective. Likewise, the Eagles of the Misty Mountains are Allies of Gandalf, repaying him for an earlier kindness. Inclusion of Ally characters is important, because it gives players a motive for such a kindness...and it prevents players from treating every NPC like an Enemy.

The flip side of the Ally is *The Enemy*. The Enemy is not necessarily the Big Bad Evil Guy of the campaign setting, and he is not necessarily someone that the players can deal with by means of combat. Properly used, the Enemy can last for many campaign sessions, with many reversals where the PCs sometimes defeat the Enemy, and the Enemy sometimes defeats them. An Enemy can be an officious little man with political power – like a tax collector or a customs inspector. An Enemy can be a rival adventurer who is friendly to the PCs, but tries to beat them to every prize. An Enemy can be an individual or an organization.

In one of my own games, a clan of vampires controlled the organized crime in the city of Ravenglass. One of the PCs, in an attempt to glean information about an unrelated manner, started beating up members of the vampires' organization. So, the vampires took notice, becoming an Enemy. Since then, the PCs defeated them in combat, were jailed as a result of a vampire charming a city watchman, had their home infiltrated (and a staff that could cast daylight stolen), met one of the vampires at a social function honouring two of the PCs, had dinner with a vampire, considered eradicating them, and considered converting them to Allies.

No player ever hates a creature that is truly dealt with when first encountered the way that the player will hate a creature who dances a long dance of many encounters before its final defeat. Nor does any player ever offer a “one shot” creature the grudging respect that eventually is accorded a long-term adversary.

As another example, I once played a swashbuckler character in a *2nd Edition AD&D campaign*. The DM included an encounter with another swashbuckler. We dueled, and I lost. Rather than have the NPC kill me, the DM had the NPC take pity on me, relieve me of my blade, and leave me alive. Needless to say, I had a great desire to meet that NPC again, defeat him, and leave him alive with my pity.

It is the back-and-forth of repeated encounters, when those encounters fail to fully resolve a rivalry, which gives added emphasis to an Enemy. This is one of the major reasons why *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* was so effective, while *Star Trek: Nemesis* falls so flat. I have seen players shift their course 180 degrees if a chance to deal with an effective long-term Enemy presented itself.

These things together: Allies, Enemies, Prizes to be won, Threats to counter....mix them well, salt the game setting with them, and it is easy for players to have objectives. What becomes difficult (and interesting) is choosing which among them are the most important to deal with right now. A persistent location where adventuring is known to be had – such as a megadungeon – supplies an option when nothing else “feels right”. Obviously, this could also be a stretch of wilderness, a bad part of town, an arena, or anything else that is “always in play” when the players want to take their characters there.

Taken together – along with a healthy dose of encouraging and empowering your players to set objectives – these things ensure that your players will be winnowing through their options instead of seeking desperately for “the plot”.

And if you do hear “Now what are we supposed to do?”, it’ll be because the PCs are in a jam and haven’t found a way out, rather than because they are sitting at an inn and haven’t found a way into the campaign milieu.

Sudden & Dramatic Reversals

He turned toward the arch — with appalling suddenness the seemingly solid flags splintered and gave way under his feet. Even as he fell he spread wide his arms and caught the edges of the aperture that gaped beneath him. The edges crumbled off under his clutching fingers. Down into utter blackness he shot, into black icy water that gripped him and whirled him away with breathless speed.

- Robert E. Howard, *Jewels of Gwahlur*

Think about the best gaming sessions you've had. What are the things that remain strongest in your memory, the gaming stories that you tell repeatedly, or laugh about years after the events? The chances are that these stories revolve around dramatic reversals – the times where you thought you were on top just before the shit hit the fan....or you thought you were facing certain doom just before the dice tipped in your favour.

Grab just about any book on novel writing, and it will tell you the same thing – a chapter that begins with things look up should end with things taking a turn for the worse, and vice versa. Why? Because the sudden reversal is a common human experience, and dealing it speaks to the heart of our existential dilemma. No matter how good our lives may seem, there is always a reversal at the end.

Role-playing games can incorporate these dramatic reversals in several ways. Among them are:

(1) *Intentional Shifts*. When some precondition is achieved, the reversal occurs. For example, in **4th Edition**, when a monster became “bloodied” its new condition might change its combat statistics. In ***Dungeon Crawl Classics***, the Death Throes of a creature might create a new creature altogether – which might even be more dangerous than the creature it originated from! One example of this occurs in my own ***AL 1: Bone Hoard of the Dancing Horror***, where defeating the Dancing Horror triggers the creation of the Hoardling.

Consider also adventures, such as Joseph Goodman's ***The People of the Pit*** or Michael Curtis' ***Frozen in Time***, where achieving the win condition of the scenario triggers a reversal that the PCs may not survive. This is nothing new. First edition module ***A4, In the Dungeons of the Slave Lords***, ends with the eruption of a volcano that could spell the end of tardy adventurers. I feel

certain that many of my readers can easily call other examples to mind.

Other “fortunes shift” triggered events occur within the context of the adventure itself. There is an excellent example of this in the first instalment of the ***Savage Tide*** adventure path. Another great example of a sudden dramatic shift in fortunes (almost certainly) occurs in ***Death Frost Doom***.

(2) Potential Shifts. In a non-linear scenario, the layout of an adventure can include elements which can provide great weal or woe, but which only become active on the basis of the players’ choices. A trap, a monster, or a hidden treasure may all make the difference between success and failure. A series of the same can create a series of dramatic shifts, tracking the PC’s fortunes both fair and foul.

You will occasionally hear some wag claim that the original ***Basic*** and ***Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*** modules were intended to allow every possible XP to be gained. In other words, every monster was to be fought, and every treasure was to be gained. This is regardless of what the authors themselves said:

[I]t is quite conceivable that they could totally miss seeing a treasure which is hidden or concealed. In fact, any good dungeon will have undiscovered treasures in areas that have been explored by the players, simply because it is impossible to expect that they will find every one of them.

- Mike Carr, ***In Search of the Unknown***

These same wags will often express perplexity at the deviousness with which certain items of treasure are hidden: How is it even possible for the PCs to find them?

The answer, of course, is that the PC’s weren’t meant to find them, and they weren’t not meant to find them. The game – and the dramatic reversals in the game – require that the PCs either find them or do not based upon the game’s actual events. These games were not intended to be a linear “adventure path”! To set up this sort of sudden dramatic reversal, the Game Master merely need to seed his adventures with all sorts of potential boons and mayhem. Then sit back and see which the players trigger.

(3) The Devil’s Bargain. The PCs gain an item that seems harmful, and then discover a way to gain great good from it. Or the PCs gain an item that seems

useful, but discover that it comes at horrific cost. There are a few items like this in D&D, and quite a few in various Goodman Games or third party DCC modules.

Note that this doesn't always have to be an item. *Dungeon Crawl Classics* also does this with class abilities – you can call upon your god/patron, but then your god/patron gets to call upon *you*. Michael Curtis' adventure, *The Chained Coffin*, includes a literal Devil's bargain.

(4) Random Results. You want to know why players pay attention to critical hits and fumbles? Because the results matter. And, unlike all of the other forms of dramatic reversals described above, this isn't the GM playing you. This really is just pure, unadulterated luck, good or bad. Regardless of the consequences, there is a lot riding on those dice. Through the use of dice, random tables, and similar means, a game can bring real sudden change into play. Fortunes can be made and lost. That it is not the GM, but the impersonal dice, doing this to you is a good thing.

There is a scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, where Indiana Jones faces yet another thug. This thug has a sword, and it looks like another tough fight is about to begin. Then Indy draws and shoots him down. Sudden dramatic reversal right there, and one of the most memorable scenes in the movie.

The thing is, it wasn't scripted that way. There was supposed to be a big fight. The story goes, Harrison Ford was tired from filming all day, so he drew and fired as a joke. The other actor went along with the joke. The director thought that it was brilliant, and, rather than try to enforce the lavish fight he had imagined, went with it.

Consider this in game terms. In effect, Indiana Jones gets a critical hit that ends a "tough" encounter immediately. Imagine what would happen, though, if Steven Spielberg decided to "fudge" that result, and demanded that the complex fight scene he had imagined would take place regardless. That might have been a fantastic fight scene. Maybe. Maybe not. Either way, we would have lost one of the scenes we remember most from the movie.

And that is the point. Spielberg himself experienced a dramatic reversal from his own expectations, and he was wise enough to realize that this was a good thing.

May we all be so wise!

Empty Spaces

“The room appears to be empty.”

As a player, do those words drive fear into your heart? As a GM, do you find yourself gritting your teeth and wondering why the author of a module would have included another empty room? Well, take heart. There are good reasons to include empty spaces in an adventure design. A few of those reasons are listed below.

1. *The Dread Verisimilitude:* Yes, an adventure location seems far more “real” when every space is not packed to the gills with monsters and treasure. One of the main criticisms of the dungeon crawl is that so many creatures live in such close proximity without murdering each other. A really simple solution to this problem, and one that existed when the hobby began, is to include empty spaces.

2. *Player and Monster Tactics:* Knowledge of the layout of empty spaces allows players to lure monsters into an ambush, and vice versa. Being able to pass through empty spaces may also mean an ability to bypass certain encounters, which may mean the difference between success and a TPK.

3. *Somewhere to Rest:* Those unfrequented areas of the dungeon make ideal spots for battered PCs to retreat to. Which leads to....

4. *Change My Dear, and Not a Moment Too Soon:* If areas are empty as the PCs pass through them repeatedly, they can be caught off-guard by unexpected inhabitants. These might be wandering encounters, they might be ambushes (see #2, above), and they might be battered monsters looking for somewhere to rest (a la #3). In this last case, the monsters may not be so eager to leap into battle, and the PCs may have the rare chance to exchange words with a mantichore (or whathaveyou).

5. *Disguise:* Rooms that are actually empty disguise rooms that appear to be empty, but which actually contain hidden traps, treasures, or monsters. If there is something in every room, then the supposedly “empty” room in which something is hidden sticks out like a sore thumb. This encourages



“pixel bashing”, where having many “empty” rooms actually be empty discourages the same because it is not rewarded.

It should be remembered that “empty” in this case need not mean boring. The “empty” room can have interesting features (aka “dungeon dressing”) that point toward a larger backstory for the adventure location. Such areas can contain clues to the nature of the dungeon as a whole – an ancient kitchen indicates that there should be store rooms nearby, and a dining area. Perhaps there is also a way to the surface close at hand, with which the pantries were stocked!

It is not only deadly monsters and traps that deserve a “footprint”. The good judge considers how to pass context on to his players at every opportunity.

Junk

If I were to empty my pockets right now, in addition to change, there would be pens, keys, a flash drive, a tissue, and a comb. Some of the keys on my key ring open doors that I could no longer identify.

If I was to turn my home into the setting for an adventure, the poor adventurers would have to wade through mountains of paper, clothing, paperbacks, bric-a-brac, kid’s artwork, and more in order to discover whatever “treasure” they were seeking.

Call it fluff, or details, or verisimilitude, or dungeon dressing, or whatever else you like, there are good reasons to include a lot of junk in your adventures. If you don’t include plenty of insignificant stuff, the significant things stick out like a sore thumb.

Take, for example, the Moathouse in TSR’s Module ***T1: The Village of Hommlet***, by Gary Gygax. Mr. Gygax writes:

15. EMPTY ROOM: The place was the domicile of the major-domo of the castle, but it is stripped of everything save broken and ruined furnishings now. One wall cresset remains near the outer wall, and its torch stub is actually a silver baton worth 30 g.p. in its present condition.

Now, the question becomes, how likely is it that PCs entering this area will

discover the baton? Will they automatically know that everything they “see” is significant? Well, the answer is in Mr. Gygax’s design work, where several previous areas (5, 6, 8, 10, 11, and 14) are described as “littered” or filled with specific valueless junk, and at least one of those rooms (11) contains a potential disincentive for exploring too closely! Area 9 seems likewise, but has a fine broadsword hidden within it.

By layering junk into his dungeon design, Mr. Gygax makes it more difficult for players to realize that they should be looking at this particular cresset, and this particular torch stub. In other areas, specific junk is described. For example,

14. EMPTY TROPHY ROOM: Only a few mangy pelts, stuffed heads, and shattered antlers indicate the former status of the chamber. All worthwhile Items are looted. It is possible to spend considerable time searching the litter here, but nothing of value will be found.

And

10. EMPTY BED CHAMBER: Once the quarters of a castle troop leader or some other petty official, the place is now a total wreck, the bed chopped to pieces, the furniture smashed or gone.

Although this level of detail might seem to be wasted, all of the flavor of the area is contained within those details. Moreover, more detail could be given. The “litter” is glossed enough that, should the PCs decide to search these areas more thoroughly, the harried GM will be forced to come up with some quick bits of information. That Mr. Gygax tells you what the room was used for is of some value here.

Although I am no Gary Gygax, I also make liberal use of junk in my adventure designs. To my mind, this only makes sense.

1. It increases the verisimilitude of the setting,
2. It makes it more difficult for the players to determine what is “significant” and what can be safely ignored, and
3. It gives potential clues about the area that is being explored.

In addition, including junk increases the time that it takes the PCs to explore an area, allowing for additional wandering encounters, and dividing the bet-

ter players from the rest. I highly encourage you to use junk liberally in your dungeon and wilderness designs. Even towns should have public dumps, middens, garbage-filled alleys, and the like.

Meaningless Encounters

Imagine, if you would, an encounter occurring which has no relevance to the scenario in which it occurs. It adds no verisimilitude, adds no flavour to the game milieu, and has no impact or potential for impact on future events. Moreover, the encounter is neither fun nor challenging in and of itself. It is a complete waste of time.

Game systems can encourage elements of this kind of encounter. For instance, in games where resources are intended to “reset” after each encounter, it is easy enough to remove the potential for impact on future events.

A hypothetical game system that takes two hours to resolve a chance glimpse of a deer in the woods would make what is otherwise five seconds of description a chore that removes all fun. If a system “balanced” encounters so that the PCs were expected to win, and turned encounters into formula combats that took hours to resolve, a chance encounter with an ogre (for example) could easily be removed of its potential fun and challenge.

An adventure writer can also encourage elements of this type of encounter. “No matter what the PCs do, X will occur....” and “If the PCs kill X, assume that an identical X takes its place....” certainly reduce the potential for impact, if the GM actually follows those suggestions.

Yet, few and far between are those encounters which are completely meaningless, unless the system or the GM makes a clear distinction between “relevant” and “irrelevant” encounters. If this is the case, yes, you can make any encounter irrelevant. Doing so does not improve game play in my experience. Forcing the players to determine the relevance of encounters to their own goals – or allowing them to create that relevance themselves! – is, to me, an important aspect of game play.

Poor encounters do exist. If we take the elements of verisimilitude, flavour, potential for impact, challenge, and intrinsic fun, we can see that the more of these elements an encounter has, the better an encounter it will be. Conse-

quently, the fewer it has, the less interesting it will be.

Adhering to an encounter template or a “plot” to which all encounters must conform is the most common way to create poor encounters. Here’s the second biggest source of poor encounters: Lack of planning. In order to have meaning, an encounter must both have impact on the setting and be able to allow the players to have impact. That means that there has to be some structure to hang the encounter on, and that there has to be enough leeway in that structure that the PCs can change it through their actions.

So long as those conditions exist, no encounter is truly meaningless. And your chance of having a poor encounter go down considerably.

(Your mileage may vary, and if it does, party on! Never throw away something that works for you because someone else has a different idea, or different experiences. What works for me might not work for you. And vice versa.)

All I Have to Do is Dream...

Dream sequences are a significant part of the fiction that inspired the game. Conan meets with the Epemitreus the Sage in a dream in *The Phoenix on the Sword*. Frodo sees Gandalf escape in Orthanc in a dream in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. The Dreamlands of H.P. Lovecraft beckon, and John Carter’s adventures on Mars occur while his body sleeps in a near-death state on Earth. Dreams can reveal information, supply gear, or even be places to adventure in their own right.

I. Simple Dreams

The purpose of a simple dream is to supply information to the player/PC involved. This is what happens when Frodo dreams of Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings*. These dreams may be simply prophetic, or they may be the result of powerful supernatural beings trying to communicate information to the sleeper. This sort of information is generally coded, and must be interpreted correctly to be of value.

As an example, in one *Dungeons & Dragons* game I ran, a paladin character was presented with some ethical problems, and was strongly considering acting as the party wished rather than as conscience dictated. The character had

a dream wherein he was confronted with a man juggling nine coloured balls, with the admonition that no one could hold them all at one time. The balls, of course, represented the nine-point alignment system of that game.

In ancient times, dream interpretation was taken very seriously, because it was known that the gods sent messages to dreamers. Dream interpretation was a valuable service, if one could do it well. Even today, there are many books on dream interpretation available at bookstores – although we tend to believe that dreams are messages from our subconscious, rather than from gods.

I find that these sorts of dreams are best represented by writing the dream out, printing it off, and then giving it to the player to read. Importantly, after the player is done reading it, I take the sheet back. It is up to the player to note the salient points and write anything down he or she may wish to remember.

Some of these dreams should be red herrings – they are just dreams, and not messages from beyond.

Simple dreams can have effects on the waking characters as well, such as lack of rest or even physical damage, if they arise from a choice the players have made. See Jamesaggi's *Death Frost Doom* for an excellent example of how choices made by the PCs can have consequences when they sleep.

II. Complex Dreams

If the character has something to gain other than simple information, it may be worthwhile to briefly play the dream out in-game. This allows the GM to judge just how much should be gained, if anything at all, in the same way as occurs in other parts of the game.

For instance, imagine that your PC(s), like Conan, gain an audience with some supernatural patron while dreaming. In this case, how your players choose to react, and what they have their characters say, is probably important enough to the outcome of the sequence to spend game time playing it out. Character sheets are probably not needed...most dreams of this sort can be resolved simply through description and role-playing.

The simplest form of complex dream allows the character to choose between two options. For example, imagine that a character is being haunted by a

dream hound, which hunts him throughout his sleeping hours. After a brief description of the hound and the scene, the GM asks the player what he will do. If the PC confronts the hound, it is rendered powerless, and the haunting ends. If the PC runs, the hound is empowered, and some debilitation occurs to the PC in the waking world. Again, the simplest form is that the PC gains no benefit from rest.

Within a complex dream, there is something to be gained, something to be lost, or both. In order for the choice to be meaningful, it has to meaningfully affect the game in some way. Otherwise, you are much better off simply treating the sequence as a simple dream, above.

In these sorts of dreams, objects can manifest from the dream world into the material world, as was the case in *The Phoenix on the Sword*, but that is not the only option. A dream might unlock the key to a wizard's spell if the player chooses wisely, or it might grant luck or supernatural patronage. The level or type of information gained from a dream might be linked to choices made in the dream itself.

Characters can die in dreams. They may or may not die in real life as a result. Dream creatures can cause physical injury, or eat away points of Intelligence, Personality, Wisdom, or Charisma (depending upon your game of choice). At this point, though, dice are going to be rolled, and you are probably looking at a full-on dreamscape.

III. Dreamscapes

A dreamscape is a dream which seems to have a physical, objective reality of its own, even if the rules do not conform to those of the waking world. My module, *Through the Cotillion of Hours* (Purple Duck Games), is an example of a dreamscape.

When devising a dreamscape adventure, the prospective GM must determine (1) why the dreamscape has formed, (2) what the rules of the dreamscape are, (3) how the characters enter the dreamscape, and (4) whether or not they are transformed by entering the dreamscape, and if so, how.

Answering (1) will help in answering the remaining questions. If there is but a single player involved, the dreamscape can spring from that character's mind. Otherwise, some supernatural or psychic entity is probably respon-

sible, and that creature can determine to some degree what the conditions of the dreamscape are. A demon-formed dreamscape is hellish, while that formed by a goddess reflects her theology, portfolio, and symbolism. If a dreamscape is formed by the mind of a PC, its texture and details arise from what the GM knows of the PC and her experiences. There is also the possibility that the dreamscape is another plane unto itself, and needs no creature's thoughts to sustain it. H.P. Lovecraft's Dreamlands, and the Barsoom of Edgar Rice Burroughs can be treated in this manner.

So then, what are the rules of our dreamscape?

A dreamscape can be temporary, or recurrent, or enduring. A temporary dreamscape is intended to exist only for a single adventure. A recurrent dreamscape is used as the location of a number of adventures, or even the same adventure repeated multiple times until "solved". An enduring dreamscape, like Lovecraft's Dreamlands, can host entire campaigns.

The prospective GM will have to answer, at the very least, the following questions. It should be noted that, in a game in which dreams play a major part, the answers to these questions can differ with each and every dreamscape encountered, if the GM so desires. In fact, giving dreams their own rules is part of what differentiates dreams from other adventures.

1. Can the characters will the dream to change? Can they introduce elements? Can they change the wallpaper? If so, how? What are their limitations?
2. How does magic work in the dream? If the game system has a cost for magic, does that cost actually get paid by the character, or is the cost part of the dream as well?
3. How does combat work in the dream? What happens if the character is wounded? Do the wounds manifest on her body, or are they healed upon waking? What if the character dies?
4. Are there limitations on the character's actions? For example, in a nightmare, the character might attempt to flee, but be unable to move. This could be given game statistics by reducing movement speed in some or all parts of the dreamscape, requiring a saving throw to act, or other means.

The GM should remember, when describing a dreamscape, that the rules of the waking world need not apply. Within a dream, it may be entirely possible to have conversations with ghouls, for example, without worrying about having your face eaten. Characters may be able to fly. There are no limitations due to time or distance – architecture need not make sense. It is even possible to have the characters abruptly find themselves in an earlier part of the dream again.

Think about what your own dreams are like. Use them. Buy some dream interpretation books. Use the symbolism in them. Think up gonzo shit, and have fun with it.

(3), How the characters enter the dreamscape, is important, because it is entirely possible that the characters do not know that they are dreaming. The *Doctor Who* story, *Amy's Choice*, has the Doctor, Amy, and Rory experiencing two dreams sequentially, with a challenge to discover which is the real world and which is the dream world before they all die.

Randolph Carter enters the Dreamlands intentionally. John Carter is paralyzed in a cave when he feels his soul detach and head towards Mars. *Through the Cotillion of Hours* occurs at some point when the characters are already sleeping. If the dreamscape actually exists as a plane unto itself, there is no reason that the characters cannot enter it bodily and awake.

Which leads into (4). Characters entering the dreamscape need not use the same statistics as they do in waking life. Different dreamscapes can also use different statistics. There is no reason not to devise a dream in which the PCs are all talking ducks, or panda bears, or goblins. They could be disembodied, stronger than normal, weaker than normal, or as normal. They could have to reroll their statistics, and use the new stats in the dreamworld.

In an extended campaign with an enduring dreamscape, each character may have two sheets – one representing his waking self and one representing his dream self. These need be nothing alike. They need not even be using the same game system. They need not even involve the supernatural. It is easy to imagine, for example a *Traveller* game wherein there is a machine that allows characters to share dreams. When hooked up to the machine, characters dream themselves into a *Dungeon Crawl Classics* game. If their DCC personae die, they wake up. Either they can choose to start over, or they can pay X credits to “restore” their personae.

Even within the above scenario, there is no reason that a character cannot have a “dream within a dream” or a separate dream that uses different statistics and/or follows different rules. In *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, the holodeck functions as extended dream sequences, but this did not prevent Jean Luc Picard from experiencing a more visceral dream in *The Inner Light*.

When a character has more than one set of statistics, and is not aware he or she is dreaming, the GM need not tell the character to switch sheets until game events make statistics relevant.

Conclusion

Dreams are a part of life – once considered an important part – and they can easily be used in role-playing games to offer insight, a sense of connection to the larger supernatural world (in fantasy games, anyway, and perhaps in others, depending upon your tastes), and variety in gaming experience.

Use the different levels of dreams to have different effects in your games. Use them sparingly or often, use them appropriately, and have fun with them.

Killing Fields

Want to throw something “Old School” into your game? How about a Killing Field?

A Killing Field is a region where the odds are stacked severely against the player characters. You know it is a Killing Field when characters actually die...and not necessarily by the ones and the twos! There are several types of Killing Field, but they all serve the same general purpose. They are areas where the bodies lie thick on the ground – bitten, mangled, burned, and crushed – but the survivors who limp home have a tale to tell.

The most common type of Killing Field is the Deadly Starting Area, which is intended to weed out the hapless and the helpless, leaving the fittest to continue onward in the campaign milieu. Goodman Games’ *Dungeon Crawl Classics RPG* revels in this sort of Killing Field. PCs start out at 0-level, and the survivors (who gain equipment partly from picking over the corpses of their less-fortunate compatriots) become the 1st level adventuring party.

A more expansive Killing Field is found in the classic TSR module, *The Keep on the Borderlands*. Played as written, the Caves of Chaos and surrounding countryside can chew up and spit out many low-level characters as they deal with the various threats presented. In the end the Caves may be cleared, but most of the characters that began the process are buried in unmarked graves. If the other PCs even bother to do so much.

Likewise, in T1, threats emerge that are probably beyond the ability of most newly-minted parties to handle. And even success has its own perils, for, as with B2, the forces of evil have infiltrated the nearest “safe” community.

Another kind of Killing Field emerges in the mid-game: the Deadly Testing Ground. Few have entered this area, and even fewer have returned. The PCs are now mid-level, somewhere between 5th and 10th (3rd and 6th in *Dungeon Crawl Classics*), and the players have a vested interest in their survival. The Deadly Testing Ground offers great riches and glory for the PCs brave and clever enough to wrest its secrets from it. But the odds are stacked against them, and most PCs will not succeed. Will perhaps not return.

In a fantasy-novel type game, characters enter some “legendary” region because it is part of the plot. They are not really overly deadly, because forcing characters into such an area is grossly unfair. Rather, the Deadly Testing Ground is a place that the characters voluntarily enter, knowingly accepting great risk in order to have a chance at great rewards.

The most famous Deadly Testing Ground is probably the *Tomb of Horrors*, but there are many others. In a classic megadungeon, dungeon level roughly corresponds to the level of threats and rewards that are available to characters. By allowing characters to quickly reach deeper levels, beyond those “appropriate” for their party, the Game Master enables them to enter a Deadly Testing Ground. And, in most cases, Deadly Testing Grounds are entered for a brief period, after which the party will flee toward easier pickings.

A final type of Killing Field is the Epic Endgame, as discussed in *Volume 1 of Dispatches*.

So, why add Killing Fields to your campaign milieu? Foremost, it allows the players to know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that they are winning on the basis of their own decisions. Context -> Choice -> Consequence is only as strong as the belief that consequences actually fall from choices, rather than GM fudging. As soon as a player realizes that the GM is fudging, rendering his choices moot, the context also seems to matter far less. Why pay attention to the factors needed to make a good decision, if a poor decision results in roughly the same outcome?

Killing Fields also grant a greater agency to players in terms of the risks they are willing to accept. This assessment of risk, and the resultant decisions of how much risk to undergo, is one of the hallmarks of “Old School” play. It means that “balance” is not something that the GM alone must worry about. No. Each player must strive to access both her own capabilities, and how those capabilities might meet the challenges of the game milieu. Should she go boldly into the depths? Should she stay closer to the surface? Should she go adventuring in the wilds?

Again, look at the setup of B2, where the easiest caves are close to the ravine mouth, with areas being correspondingly more difficult the farther in one goes. A bold party can try its luck in any of the cave mouths. With a little luck and clever play, a bold party might even succeed. There are many different stories about B2. Each group approached it in their own way. This

ability to choose, to branch out in diverse ways, to surprise the GM as well as the players, and to allow the players to access risk and “game balance” is something that is sorely missing from many modern adventure designs.

Indeed, there are benefits to having Killing Fields in your game, even if no PC ever goes there. Simply knowing that they can increase the sense of risk, the sense of adventure, and the sense of each character’s fate being in the hands of the players’ choices. When this is the case, players pay attention to the context choices are made in, and thus invest more deeply in the campaign milieu.

It should be noted that not all RPGs are as combat-prone as “adventuring” games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* or *Dungeon Crawl Classics* tend to be. It is entirely possible to conceive of a game where little or no combat ever takes place. Imagine a social game, where all interaction is basically arguing. Let’s call it *Forums & Follies*.

Nobody ever dies in *Forums & Follies*, but there can be “Killing Fields” that result in a persona being “Threadbanned” or “Banned From Site” (The F&F version of character death). Killing Fields in such a game might include participation in particular types of threads, or defending particularly unpopular ideas. Likewise, in *Papers & Paycheques*, one could be “Fired”. In *Belles & Ballrooms*, a character could become “Socially Ostracized”.

The important idea is that a player is given the opportunity to take risks that grant exceptional rewards, but remove the character from play (through death, banning, removal from workplace, or being socially disgraced) by making that character no longer capable of making relevant choices in the ongoing narrative of the milieu.

(*Papers & Paycheques*, of course, refers to the cartoon in the *1st Edition Dungeon Master’s Guide*. So far as I know, both *Forums & Follies* and *Belles & Ballrooms* have not yet been produced as the stylish and eminently playable RPGs that we all know they could be!)

How Much Is Too Much?

When designing a game area, how much is too much? There is a real difference between early adventures, wherein PCs could die – or there could even be a TPK – without any obvious clues that the hammer was about to fall, and *Dungeons & Dragons* under Wizards of the Coast's 3rd and 4th Editions, where balance was expected and the PCs should be able to take most encounters they met with.

I will assume that readers understand that encounters do not need to be “balanced” against some idealized party, and that sometimes it is okay for the players to choose to run away. Still, the question remains: How deadly is too deadly?

I have three rules of thumb that help me gauge appropriate threat levels:

(1) Before I put anything truly deadly in, did I include a “footprint” from which the players might be able to deduce that Bad Things Might Happen?

If Smaug lives in the Lonely Mountain, and the PCs head there at 1st level, that's too bad for them. There was certainly enough “footprint” leading up to the Desolation of the Dragon. On the other hand, the footprint need not be so clear.

Adventuring – going into dangerous areas to strive with dangerous things, and hopefully to reap the rewards of the same – is intrinsically perilous. There is a reason why villagers stay home and bake bread, reap the crops, and repair your horseshoes rather than face what lies out in the dark. Sooner or later, what lurks in the darkness will kill you. Expecting that everything you meet will be a “balanced encounter” is not only foolish, but it defeats the experience of challenging the unknown.

Trying to figure out the clues is one of the places where player agency shines. In Wizards of the Coast-era D&D, it has been said that the GM has been given better tools to judge the balance of encounters. In a game focusing on exploring the unknown, it is the players, not the judge, whose job it is to determine whether or not an encounter will be potentially profitable, or even survivable.

This is not a subtle distinction. In one sort of game, the GM is primarily responsible for ensuring that his encounters are survivable by the PCs, and often the GM is responsible for gauging the average resources to be expended and ensuring that replacements are at hand. In the other sort of game, the judge is primarily responsible for creating an interesting environment to explore, and part of that is ensuring that the players can obtain enough information to make reasonable choices. Note, I did not say that the players *will* obtain enough information – merely with good play, and a little luck, they have the *potential* to do so.

There is another real benefit to a good “footprint”: When the Bad Things are finally revealed, the players get either a moment of “Aha! So that is what those clues meant!” or a smug sense of “Aha! I told you so!” Both of these feelings are among those that gamers talk about long after the dice have cooled and the foes are dead.

(2) Is it possible to handle the encounter? Even if handling it means “running away”, is it possible to run?

Imagine an “encounter” where you walk into the dungeon, and, regardless of what you do, the first corridor collapses on the party, killing them instantly. That would suck. Imagine, instead, that at the end of the first corridor was a lever that did the same thing. Now the players have a way to handle the encounter – they have agency. A spell (*second sight*, for example, in *DCC*) might give a clue, or the players may discover a way to pull the lever from a distance. A thief might be able to determine that the lever is a trigger for a trap. The PCs might just leave it alone.

For those of you who have played James Raggi’s excellent *Death Frost Doom*, you will know that there is an encounter which, depending upon how it is handled, affects the way the rest of the adventure plays out. That is a good example of an encounter that can be handled in many ways, but which is likely to be handled in a particularly disastrous way.

Playing *Death Frost Doom*, my older daughter swore at me for the first time. Not unfairly; the game was tense, and I was enjoying their reactions to it. Nonetheless, the players remember that game, and that is an important thing. They did not simply waste their time; they were challenged in a way that was both entertaining and memorable. When they finally managed to undo the consequences of that first disastrous attempt, the triumph was all the sweeter.

(3) Am I willing to live with the consequences of the PCs' failure?

Perhaps the simplest rule of thumb to adhere to. If the PCs failing means the End of the World, and you are unwilling to let the World End, you are doing something wrong. Suddenly, you need to fudge the dice, or the encounters, to ensure that the PCs win. This is not the players being challenged by the game; this is the players being spectators while you play with yourself.

Really, if there is a TPK, so what? As Joseph Goodman points out in the *Dungeon Crawl Classics* core rulebook, you can always play through the party's desperate attempt the escape Hell. And I would not make that attempt easy, either. A "second death" would render future attempts impossible...

In terms of acceptable consequences for failure, all that I can say is look at the material I have written and had published. Even the characters who survive may find that they have been altered for the worse (or sometimes for the better), if they are foolish, or unlucky, or both. And I play a game that supports me in that – an unlucky corruption roll, misfired magic, or a critical hit against you can change your life forever in *Dungeon Crawl Classics*.

Player agency is not only "How do I get what I want?", but also "How do I deal with what I get?" Both parts are important. The judge should never be "out to get the players" – that is an uneven contest, and is frankly not much fun on either side. What the judge should be out to do is to present a world where there are many things which may be out to get the players, and in which it is possible for the players – through greed, impatience, lack of caution, or even sheer bad luck – to discover that they have bitten off far more than they can chew.

A note on horror: Horror in an RPG works best when the players begin with a lot of agency, but as a consequence of their choices see that agency dwindling while they are being herded towards an unknown, but clearly evil, end. The struggle to restore agency before it is too late – often by dealing with choices that you would never otherwise consider – is horror's bleeding heart.

Avoiding those choices and still succeeding offers a eucatastrophe that only works if the choices were real, and the need to consider them equally so. You will never find players so eager to think outside the box as when they are faced with three bad options and they are desperate to invent a fourth.

Another Note on Deadly Games: When I mentioned that I was writing this article in its original blog post format, my son's initial reaction was a blank stare that spoke volumes. Really, what is the point of overcoming a "challenge" that is designed to allow you to defeat it? That's like eating chili without any spices. In many ways, the potential to fail defines the potential to succeed.

In Conclusion

How far is too far?

I don't know. My players surprise me. Every time I think I have gone too far, it turns out that I have not gone far enough. Greater challenges seem to just create greater players.

The night before I wrote this, I played the first session of ***Silent Nightfall*** with a party consisting of two 8th level warriors, an 8th level wizard, a 5th level cleric, and a 2nd level dwarf. One of the warriors was knocked to 0 hp (in his defense, he started with a 4 Stamina). Thus far, they have explored only one room and part of the central shaft.

They did really well against some foes that came into a nearby village when they ignored the village's "silent nightfall" rule, but half the party is already ready to run away from the adventure site.

CE 5: Silent Nightfall is rated for characters of level 2+.

Ask me again how far is too far, and I will tell you again that I don't know.

I try to figure out where the edge is, and then inhabit the zone just beyond it, but my players are always pushing the frontier back. These days, even 0-level funnels often have more survivors than slain, as the players figure out how to deal with what they have available. I think that this is a good thing. It shows that, not only have the characters grown in power, but the players have grown in skill.

Working for a Living

In some games, skills like Craft, Perform, and Profession make it possible for characters to earn a living without adventuring. In *Dungeon Crawl Classics*, a player may reason that, if his PC was once a gong farmer, he should be able to set up shop as a gong farmer in any village or city the PCs come across.

While there are no extended rules for this within most games, the Game Master is encouraged to look at the rules for what NPCs in various professions make as wages, and reward the PCs accordingly. Certainly, having a profession (or similar skill) can be used to allay the costs of “down time” between adventures!

That said, the Game Master should also remember that NPCs have an initial advantage over PCs in almost every profession. This advantage is based on several factors:

- Existing workspace/shop/supplies.
- Existing customer base – a startup business usually makes less than an established one.
- Existing social network – known professionals are usually supported by their community, using a network of friends, family, and business contacts.

In some cases, marketing oneself as a professional requires admission into a guild or other professional association, which may or may not be easily attained.

For this reason, most PCs who both work and adventure will either have to hire an overseer and labourers to build their business while they are away, or will have to hire themselves out as intermittent journeymen.

Busking and begging (using the Perform skill or the juggler occupation, for example) may also be regulated, or subject to guilds, gangs, and assigned spots. A percentage of the gross take might be payable on a daily basis to a local boss who “owns the corner” where begging takes place.

Overall, these considerations are not to discourage players from considering

business ventures for their characters. Rather, they are offered as a means both to prevent players from assuming that working requires little more thought than a skill roll to generate lucre (in which case, why adventure at all?) and to ground the PCs in the campaign world's various guilds, criminal gangs, and professional associations (as appropriate). In addition, it makes it possible for the Game Master to make such contacts available as a form of "treasure" for adventuring!

How long does it take to make a belt buckle?

In many games, Craft skills allow characters to make items, generally at half the cost the item is typically sold for. Usually, the DC for making these items runs between 5 and 20, depending upon the complexity of the item. Assume a crafting time of 1 day to three months or more, depending (again) upon the complexity of the item.

Some rulesets attempt to give you a formula that you can use to determine exactly how long it takes to craft any given item. Thankfully, *Dungeon Crawl Classics* and similar OSR-based games don't do this; crafting proceeds at the rate that the Game Master says it does. The Game Master is encouraged to listen to the players, and to attempt to make a reasonable ruling.

In the long run, though, the Game Master cannot be expected to know how long it takes to make a bow, or a suit of armour, or a belt buckle, and his ruling is final. If it seems like the crafting process is taking longer than it should, or that it is going incredibly swiftly, then there is some other factor influencing it, like a run of good or bad luck.

Generally speaking, trying to meticulously determine how long it takes to craft anything is more time consuming and difficult than any benefits gained by so doing.

The Importance of Crafts

Craft skills are more important in a pre-industrial society than in a modern society. Even in the early industrial era, it was imagined that given the time and tools, most modern conveniences could be recreated. Thus, in Jules Verne's *Mysterious Island*, or Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, the industry of knowledgeable craftsmen is rewarded in a primitive environment.

Characters traveling to wild and exotic locations may not always be able to buy or scavenge the equipment that they need. The ability to make weapons, pottery capable of holding water or grain, shelter, and so on, can make the difference between survival in a primitive milieu, and death.

To people living in a post-industrial society, who have never crafted furniture by hand, or shoes, or worked metal...who have never turned wood, made a cart wheel, fixed a wooden axle, or thatched a roof....how to complete these sorts of tasks can seem “obvious” or “easy”. There is little conception in modern society of the skill, knowledge, or time required.

Players and judges are advised to read Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* for some conception of working crafts under primitive circumstances. The BBC historical series, *Tales from the Green Valley*, is also highly recommended, and is available on DVD, as are many episodes of the BBC series, *Time Team*.



Your Dungeon Crawl Classics Monster Manual

Monsters should be unique, but creatures in the world are not always so. In the *Dungeon Crawl Classics* game, Appendix L suggests strongly that certain creatures probably exist in most DCC worlds....their languages do. Likewise, the descriptions of certain creatures imply an assumption of qualities both known and unknown.

In many of the works from which the game derives, that pantheon suggested by Appendix N of the original *Dungeon Master's Guide*, there are both unique and recurrent creatures. Indeed, examining both the DCC RPG modules put out by Goodman Games and by third party publishers, one sees the same thing. While every adventure has unique creatures, references to the Cyclopedia of Creatures in the core rules is not altogether unheard of. And creatures devised for one adventure may very well appear in other adventures by the same author.

This is not to suggest that monsters should be “generic” - even the orcs of Middle Earth showed variety between the orcs of Moria, of Mordor, and of Saruman. Different, too, were the goblins/orcs first encountered by Bilbo in *The Hobbit*.

A case in point, related to re-usability of monsters is the existence of opossums in many of the Purple Sorcerer “Sunken City” series of modules. One cannot imagine that crocodillos are found in only one location, either. Certain monsters are clearly more far-ranging than a single adventure location. And that is as it should be. While Conan may have fought many unique monsters, it is difficult imagining Middle Earth without orcs and various giant spiders. Note that it is the blend of unique creatures (Tom Bombadil, the barrow wights, the ents of Fangorn Forest, the Guardian of the Pool) and the ubiquitous (orcs, elves, giant spiders, trolls) that makes Middle Earth seem both real and compelling. In the Conan stories, natural animals and men take the part of JRRT’s spiders and orcs (or goblins), but the effect is the same.

A DCC module can be considered not only a unique adventure location,

but also a sourcebook for creatures that may be re-used. Some modules are better for this than others, because some adventures use more truly unique creatures. While Joseph Goodman's *People of the Pit* yields little that is not location-specific (although still recommended!), a module such as Michael Curtis' *Emirikol Was Framed!* or *The Sea Queen Escapes* offers several creatures that may appear elsewhere in your campaign world.

At the risk of being self-serving, my own *CE 4: Sir Amoral the Misbegotten* has details about nine monsters. While the titular Sir Amoral's ghost is unlikely to be used elsewhere, seven of the other eight are certainly usable in other locations. Even where a creature is listed as unique, it is not tied to the module's setting.

If you purchase pdfs, the copy & paste function on Adobe Acrobat and your word processing program of choice makes it especially easy to assemble an ever-growing Monster Manual for your home game. If you purchase only hard-copy products, a few minutes typing can yield the same results with a bit more effort. You may find that copying location-specific creatures is a waste of your time and effort – the goal here is to create a compendium of creatures that can be used for random encounters, or introduced to a scenario of your own creation.

If you are yourself a creator of published adventures, note the generous terms of usage on many third party DCC products. In this case, creating such a Monster Manual (with attribution noted) allows you to have a quick & ready reference for creatures you can use in your published work. For example, with Dragon's Hoard Publishing, there are a whole host of dinosaurs in *Angels, Daemons, & Beings Between* that can be used with correct attribution, and in *The Revelation of Mulmo*, there are lunar creatures just waiting to be used in a published adventure. Explicitly.

Another good resource for DCC monsters is the blog, Appendix M. My submission for the first issue of *DCC Adventure Magazine & News (D.A.M.N. #1)* contains not one, not eight, not ten, but well over 20 monsters that a clever judge could make great use of....

Finally, Purple Duck offers a generous portion of Open Gaming Content, including many re-usable monsters in its line of DCC adventures. Here's one to get you started:

The Following Thing

The Following Thing: Init +2; Atk bite +4 melee (1d3 plus DC 13 paralyzing venom); AC 15; HD 3d8+10; hp 30; MV 30' or climb 30'; Act 1d20; SP venom, pursue, impossible to kill, one night only; SV Fort +4, Ref +4, Will +18; AL C.

It looks like a well-dressed man in a long black suit with tails, but its face is a stag skull with dead white eyes. It does not walk, but crawls on all surfaces with equal ease. Once it selects a victim, it will pursue that victim relentlessly, attempting to paralyze it with its venomous bite (Fort DC 13 or paralyzed 1d3 rounds) in order to remove and eat its victim's eyes. It can remove and devour one eye each round from a helpless victim.

Once a victim is selected, the Following Thing can always follow it, appearing 1d6 x 10' away in a random direction each time an insurmountable barrier is placed between it and its prey. (The judge may wait to have the Following Thing appear so as to build up tension.) If successfully Turned or slain, its body fades away with a high-pitched giggling noise, and it is forced to wait 3d6 turns (30 to 180 minutes) to reform and pursue. It is impossible to kill.

The Following Thing is only active against its selected victim for one night; once dawn arrives the victim is no longer followed. How it chooses its victims is unknown, but some have speculated that miscast spells or the gods' great disapproval might draw it. In some tales, the Following Thing appears as a punishment, sent by forsworn patrons. Few people are ever selected by the Following Thing more than once, and the Wise believe that there is only one such monster in all the multiverse.

(The wise may, of course, be wrong.)

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