

Drowning and Falling

A collection of custom moves for Dungeon World

The name is a self-effacing reference to something Vincent Baker said in an [interview about Apocalypse World](#), about how Ars Magica was bloated with “rules for drowning and falling.” Ars Magica is ostensibly a story game about medieval wizards and their hangers-on, researching spells and politicking with fellow magi and dealing with faeries and demons and angels. And yet there they are, rules for things like drowning and falling.

“You are just lucky that in Apocalypse World, there isn’t a move ‘when you are drowning, roll +HARD...’ or ‘when you are falling, roll +COOL.’”

-Vincent Baker

I always found that funny.

Dungeon World doesn’t have specific rules for drowning and falling. It doesn’t *need* them. Just like it doesn’t *need* moves for being on fire, or starving to death, or chasing someone through a crowded street, or sneaking around. An appropriate combination of GM moves and Defy Danger will suffice.

But...

But those things come up. I’d say your PCs are pretty darn likely to fall, or risk drowning, or find themselves on fire or starving to death or chasing someone or sneaking around. And it’s not always obvious exactly how you should use GM moves and Defy Danger. So maybe a custom move or two would be in order, yes?

What can a (good) custom move give you?

- **Preparedness:** If you have a custom move to fall back on, you don’t have to make it up on the spot, mid-game. Your brain is free to do other stuff.
- **Agreement:** If you share a custom move with your players, and say “this is how we’ll resolve this,” then they know the rules. You don’t have to spend as much game time on stuff like “*Really, I’m running out of breath? I’ve only been down here a couple seconds!*”
- **Surprise:** A good move (not just a custom move) introduces elements that you (or your players) wouldn’t otherwise include. Like, I’m generally pretty averse to maiming my players’ characters with stuff like lost eyes or broken bones or severed fingers. But put that as a choice in a custom move, and now I’ve got *permission*. And a reminder.
- **Flavor:** Custom moves can go a long way toward setting tone. A good list of choices tells you and your players what the outcomes *could* be, even they don’t actually occur. That goes a long way toward communicating danger (or advantage, or whatever).
- **Incentive:** Put a cool custom move in front of your players, out where they can see it, and some of them are going to be tempted to trigger it—just to see what happens.

- **Structure:** You can use a custom move to provide a specific structure to a situation that you don't want to handle through detailed play. This is what the Undertake a Perilous Journey move does: it gives you a way to gloss over the details of a long journey and zoom in on one or two key details.

So: what follows is a collection of custom moves for commonish scenarios. Most of these have seen play in my own games. For each one, I've also added some notes on why it's structured how it is, how you could tweak and/or it apply it to other situations, and GM moves that you might make in similar situations.

You don't *need* these moves. But you might find them useful. I hope you do.

-Jeremy Strandberg

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Drowning

When you **plunge beneath the waves**, hold Breath equal to CON+1 (minimum 1). If you **take a deep breath first**, hold Breath equal to CON+3 (min 2). Each time you roll 2d6 to make a move, pick 1 (after you roll):

- Spend 1 Breath
- Mark a debility
- Take your Last Breath

Design Notes

I have rarely encountered a topic so contentious in RPGs as “what happens when you fall in the water?” We all know that you’ve got to hold your breath, but how long can you do so?

The main goal of this design is not realism, but rather to:

- 1) Put everyone on the same page
- 2) Create tension
- 3) Keep things moving (i.e. no roll--just use up a resource)

I think this captures the tension of being underwater quite well. You’ve got a sense for what you can accomplish with the Breath you have, but it’s not a sure thing. You get a 7-9 on some roll and you could end up stuck underwater longer than expected.

Why did I opt for debilities when you run out of Breath?

- I could have just given more Breath, and then when you run out you take your Last Breath. But that’s either too generous (they have so much Breath that they never run out) or too harsh (you fall in the water, you die).
- I suppose I could have used HP instead of debilities, but then you’ve got weird crap like using bandages to restore HP lost from holding your breath too long. Ugh.
- Debilities are a nice sweet spot. They suck, but they don’t suck *too much*. And most characters can soak one or two without *really* feeling them. But those “dump” debilities don’t go away anytime soon. Next time, you’re really going to feel it.

About the only thing I *don’t* like about marking debilities is that I have a hard time justifying the “Scarred” debility as a result of almost drowning. But even then... maybe their voice gets a hacking, wheezing quality for a few days, or maybe they have this haunted, wasted look from their brush with death? I dunno. Ask the player to justify it.

Variations

If you want to **make this harder on the PCs**, also make them pick from the list when they take damage. Careful, though, because you get into a death spiral pretty easily!

If you want to **make this easier on the PCs**, give them more Breath. Maybe CON+2 by default (min 1), and CON+5 if they take a deep breath. (That's probably what I'd do if I was going to run some sort of seafaring campaign.)

Likewise, if you're using [my alternate debilities](#) (where you have only 3 debilities instead of 6), I'd keep the move the same but make it easier for them to clear debilities caused by this move. A few minutes of rest (with plenty of air to breathe) should clear debilities caused by holding your breath.

You can easily adapt this move for other situations where you need to hold your breath, such as:

- A cloud of poisonous vapors
- A smoke-filled, burning building
- An evil spirit that sucks out your breath
- An entity that possesses you by forcing itself into your mouth or nose
- An airless room (like a vault or a particularly nasty forcecage)

In cases like those, maybe you give a little extra Breath because they're not *also* swimming.

GM Moves

- *Show the downsides of the gear:*
 - "Oh, jeez, you're wearing your armor? You feel yourself sinking, floundering, it's so damn heavy. What do you do?"
 - "You've got a shield, a sword, a pack stuffed with gear, and you're trying to swim? We're going to treat that as if you're encumbered. Each time you make a move, drop something and roll at -1 or miss the move."
- *Tell them the consequences and ask*
 - "Sure, you can try to cast a spell underwater, but if you do it's gonna cost you 1 Breath and you'll have to Defy Danger to get the words out right... probably with CON, unless you can justify something else. You do it?"
 - "That's really deep, like 15 feet down. You'll have to spend 1 Breath to swim down to it."
- *Use up their resources*
 - "The kraken's tentacles SQUEEZE you! Take 1d10+5 damage and lose all your Breath!"
- *Put them in a spot*
 - "After all that thrashing about, you lose your bearings... you can't even tell which way is up anymore, much less how to get out of this sunken ship. What do you do?"

- *Turn their move back on them*
 - “You biffed your Discern Realities roll? Why don’t you tell me about the first time you almost drowned, and why it haunts you still?”

Falling

When you ***glimpse just how far down it is***, pick 1:

- Describe why it doesn’t bother you in the least
- Tell us about an experience that’s given you a healthy respect for falling
- Mark XP and tell us about your crippling fear of heights

When you ***leap across the ravine***, roll +STR (or +DEX if unencumbered and you got a running start): **on a 10+**, you make it look easy; **on a 7-9**, you either stop yourself before you jump or you find yourself hanging, half-on and half-off (your choice which); **on a 6-**, so close! Try to catch yourself or brace for impact!

When you ***make a desperate leap across the yawning chasm***, get a running start and roll +STR: **on a 10+**, holy crap, you made it, but you’re hanging half-on and half-off; **on a 7-9**, so close--try to catch yourself or brace for impact; **on a 6-**, happy landings.

When you ***try to catch yourself as you fall***, roll +STR or +DEX (your choice): **on a 10+**, phew, got it; **on a 7-9**, you catch yourself but pick 1 from the list below; **on a 6-**, down you go.

- Something you were carrying falls and is lost; ask the GM what it was
- Your grip is slipping or your handhold is crumbling; think fast!
- Freeze up, holding on for dear life until you overcome your fear

When you ***fall...***

- ... a few feet (like off a table or a horse), take 1d4 damage
- ... from a modest height (out a first story window, while climbing a tree), take 1d8 damage
- ... from a serious height (off a roof, down a ravine), take 1d10 damage (*ignores armor*)
- ... onto something soft and yielding (water, pillows), roll twice and take the lower roll
- ... onto something hard, jagged (rocks, stairs), roll twice and take the higher roll
- ... onto something sharp and pointy, take an extra die of *messy* damage
- ... from a great height (off a cliff, from the ramparts), roll Last Breath

Design Notes

There’s a lot going on here, most of which has to do with the *threat* of falling and not the falling itself.

The first move (“*When you **glimpse just how far down it is...***”) doesn’t resolve a situation but rather paints the scene and sets stakes. A great way to highlight an unpleasant experience is to ask the player to describe a time their character has experienced that sort of thing before. You, the GM, don’t have to spend time describing the dizzying heights and the sense of vertigo. Instead, you get the player to put themselves in their character’s head, think about how they’ve dealt with heights before and how they might respond to it now. You don’t need a custom move for this, of course. But having it as a custom move serves as a reminder to you (the GM) to ask these questions. It also structures the player’s responses a bit, and gives an incentive (the XP) for players to decide that their characters are afraid of heights.

The next move (“***leap across the ravine***”) is just a predefined Defy Danger. The basic structure is the same: trigger the move >> roll an appropriate stat based on the fiction >> 10+ you do it // 7-9 hard bargain // 6- uh oh.

So why bother? Preparation. You don’t have to adjudicate it on the fly. You’ve decided what using STR vs. DEX will require, and you’ve decided what the 7-9 and 6- results will look like.

Also, if you let the players see this move before they trigger it, you’re communicating difficulty and stakes. You’re telling them what the possible outcomes are, so they can judge whether it’s worth it. This makes the decision to try jumping across the ravine a meaningful choice.

(Relevant: [this post about awesome action vs. tangible obstacles](#).)

Folks often criticize moves with an explicit 6- result, arguing that it’s better to leave the result vague and up to the GM to decide in the moment based on their principles. I generally agree. But by including a specific, fairly forgiving 6- result, I’m deciding (and communicating) the difficulty and stakes of the move. This is most valuable if I’m sharing the move text with players, but also helps me disclaim decision making during play.

The third move (“***make a desperate leap across the yawning chasm***”) is an example of how you can use a custom move to reflect difficulty. It’s clearly the riskier, harder, more dangerous of the two moves. It achieves this by:

- *Adding a requirement to the trigger*, in this case the instruction to “get a running start and roll....” It’s like how you can’t trigger Hack and Slash if you can’t reasonably hurt your enemy, or how you can’t Parley if you don’t have leverage. You can’t even attempt a desperate leap across the yawning chasm without a running start. You’ve got to fictionally position yourself to *get* that running start in order to trigger the move.
- *Requiring that you roll a specific stat*, as opposed to Defy Danger or the more forgiving ***leap across the ravine*** move. Sure, *most* moves require that you roll a specific stat, but moves that give you a choice are generally easier to succeed at.
- *Defining the consequences of a miss*, and defining them hard. If you roll a 6-, you’re falling. Full stop. No chance to catch yourself.

- *Reducing what success gets you.* Defy Danger is generally considered the “template” for moves, with the 10+ result being “you do it” and the 7-9 result being “you do it, but...”. To make a custom move reflect something that’s harder, you can make the 10+ result be “you do it but...” and the 7-9 result be “it’s bad but it could be worse”. That’s what this move does.

You can also make custom moves *less* difficult by moving the “full success” to the 7-9 range and making 10+ give you an extra benefit. For example, see the Ranger’s Hunt and Track move or even the Discern Realities basic move. [Rob Donoghue wrote a nice blog post about this](#). It’s worth a read.

Notice that I avoided a mechanical modifier on the ***make a desperate leap*** move. I certainly could have included one (“...get a running start and roll +STR, taking -2 to the roll”). That’d make the task more difficult, for sure! But it’s not really necessary, or worth it. Adjusting the trigger and the possible outcomes is so much more interesting. And if I was going to put a -2 penalty onto that move, I’d probably just say “dude, you can’t make that jump.”

The ***try to catch yourself*** move is another example of a predefined Defy Danger. A few things of note, here:

- I’m making the move *easier* by allowing either STR or DEX, player’s choice. That’s a design decision. I want this move to be somewhat forgiving, because it often represents a last desperate chance! I’m also pre-empting the discussion at the table (“Why do I have to roll STR? Aren’t I reacting quickly?” “Dude, it’s not about reflexes it’s about grip strength.” “But in the real world....” Ugh.)
- On a 7-9, I’m presenting an ugly choice between 3 unpleasant outcomes. The neat thing, I think, is that the choices let the player make a statement about their character. You might choose to be safe but at the expense of something... that’s the cautious choice, the choice that prioritizes safety over possessions. Or you might choose to find yourself in a worsening situation... the sort of scrape Indiana Jones would get into. Or you might choose to make a statement about your character: they’re freezing up, scared to fall! You can make the choice based on tactics, sure, but you can also choose the one that feels right for your character.
- Originally, that last choice (“Freeze up, holding on for dear life until you overcome your fear”) was actually “Develop a fear of heights.” The idea was to let you get out of danger, but with a long-term effect on your character’s personality. There’s something to be said for that, but I felt that it was too severe for a 7-9 result. Also, what if the PC already *had* a fear of heights (see the first custom move)? The choice wouldn’t make sense—but freezing up in fear certainly would.

Finally: the ***when you fall*** move itself is elaborating on the “other sources of damage” table on page 21 of *Dungeon World*. I like to have something like this handy to avoid conversations like “well, in the *real world*, people die from falling off horses, so it should be d10 damage, right?” I

also like the way that the landing surface modifies the damage, and I like having a nice, simple rule for what happens when you fall off a cliff: you roll Last Breath.

Variations

You can use the structure of the ***glimpse how far down it is*** move for all sorts of unpleasant situations, like:

- When you ***find yourself crawling through the cramped tunnel of damp earth...***
- When you ***find yourself locked in the chamber with the water slowly rising...***
- When you ***find yourself trapped in the burning building...***

Just tweak the choices to match the situation!

The triggers of the two leaping moves could easily be tweaked to match a specific scenario, like jumping from rooftop to rooftop or launching yourself from a rampart onto a dragon's back! The results barely need to change.

You could also use the leaping moves to model a dangerous climb. Obviously the wording would change, but you could definitely reuse the concept of “on a challenging climb, roll... 10+, you do it, 7-9, choose 1, 6- try to catch yourself” and “on a really hard climb, roll... 10+ you barely do it and are in a bad position; on a 7-9 try to catch yourself, on a 6- see ya”.

For the falling damage table, you could easily change the details to reflect your sense of how dangerous any given fall was.

GM Moves

- ***Use a monster, danger, or location move***
 - “The choker hisses as you stab it, uncoiling and flinging you away, and you find yourself staggering over the rampart. What do you do?”
 - “***WHAM***, it snatches you in its talons—take 1d10+3 damage—and the earth drops away as it carries you aloft! What do you do?”
- ***Reveal an unwelcome truth***
 - “You drop the coin into the pit, and wait to hear how long it takes to hit bottom, but it's like... .. nothing... .. ***clack-clack-clack***. A faint echo, from very far down. What do you do?”
- ***Show signs of an approaching threat***
 - “As you step onto the rope bridge, it creaks and sways ominously. About a third of the way out, one of the planks just snaps under your weight, a chunk of rotten wood spinning down down down endlessly into the ravine. You're fine, you catch

yourself, but there's still more than half of the bridge to go. What do you do?"

- ***Use up their resources***

- "You tumble down the rocky slope, OW UMPH OW SMACK. Take [b]2d10 damage, ignoring armor, and a bunch of your gear got smashed or flung out as you fell. Lose 1d4+1 uses of adventuring gear, and you can no longer use it to produce anything fragile or breakable."
- "You land on the ledge, taking only a d4 damage, but drop your lantern with the impact... it goes tumbling down into the darkness. You're left in the pitch black, on a narrow ledge, over a yawning abyss. What do you do?"

- ***Turn their move back on them***

- "Okay, so, you try to dodge as the gnoll comes barreling at you, and you sort of do, but not all the way. It gets one of its claws on the edge of your shield and hangs on as it goes past you over the edge, dragging you with it. There's a lurch and you find yourself on the ground, half over the ledge yourself, the gnoll hanging on to your shield, dangling over the drop, and the shield strapped to your arm, and you're starting to slide over the edge, what do you do?"

- ***Separate them***

- "Sigmund, you see Hawke's ax chop into the worg's skull, but its momentum takes it and Hawke over the edge and into the ravine. What do you do?"

- ***Show a downside to their class, race, or equipment***

- "Jarl, you start climbing and the ropes are just creaking under the weight of you and all that armor. About halfway up, there's snap and pop and you drop like a foot, and there's this creaking noise as the rope starts to give way, what do you do?"

- ***Put someone in a spot***

- "Dagoliir, you smack one cultist in the head with the pipe, but the other one tackles you. You land at the edge of the tower, your head and right arm dangling over the edge, the pipe in your right arm, and the cultist kneeling over you, choking you, his eyes on fire above his red silk mask. What do you do?"
- "Okay, well... I guess you lose your grip then and go tumbling off the airship's rigging. Your guts lurch as you fall, the airship quickly getting smaller, the wind buffeting you, the ground slowly but inexorably getting closer. What do you do?"

- ***Tell them the requirements or consequences, and ask***

- "Yeah, you can try to leap across the ravine. Here's how we'll resolve that..."
<hands them text of ***leap across the ravine*** move>

- “Sure you can try to scale the wall, but it’s pretty sheer and a long way up. You’ll be Defying Danger to make the climb, for sure, and on a miss you’ll be taking [b]2d10 damage that ignores armor when you fall. You doing it?”

Burning

When you **take damage from fire** (incidental damage, not damage from a creature), you take...

- 1d4 damage if it’d cause small, localized burns: a torch, a sleeve on fire, etc.
- 1d6 damage if it’d cause sizeable, painful burns: a campfire, a brazier full of hot coals, getting splashed with flaming lamp oil, etc.
- 1d8 damage if it’s a big and engulfing: a bonfire, a house fire
- 1d10 damage if it’s incinerating: hellfire, a roaring wildfire, lava

Fire damage is often *messy*.

When you **stop, drop, and roll**, roll +CON; **on a 10+**, the flames go out, but the GM might ask you to pick 1 if you were seriously lit up; **on a 7-9**, the flames go out but the GM picks 1, and might ask you to pick another; **on a 6-**, burn, baby, burn.

- Mark a debility: Weakened, Shaky, Sickened, or Scarred (your choice)
- Something you were wearing burns up; ask the GM what
- Take damage from the flames; ask the GM how much

When you are **on fire**, it’s safe to assume that you’ll be Defying Danger (probably with CON) to do anything other than try to put the fire out (the danger being: you’re on fire!).

On a 7-9, the GM might choose something like:

- *Worse outcomes*: you find the fire distracting, so...
 - take -2 forward
 - the best you can do on the task at hand is get a 7-9
- *Hard bargains*: sure, you can do __, but...
 - you’ll take damage
 - you’ll have to mark the Scarred debility
 - the fire will spread to your cloak
 - the thatched roof will catch fire as well!
- *Ugly choice*: cool, yeah, you do that just fine, but...

- the fire has spread! stop, drop, and roll *right now* or take 1d8 damage and lose your cloak
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Design Notes

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Variations

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GM Moves

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Starving to Death



Scouting Ahead

When you **go off on your own to explore a dangerous area**, tell us how you do it and add...

...+DEX if you rely on stealth and agility

...+CON if your path is one of hardship and endurance

...+CHA if you blend in with the locals

On a 7+, you make it back safely and the GM will describe what you encountered. Then, **on a 10+** pick 3; **on a 7-9** pick 1:

- Ask a question from Discern Realities about what you encountered (you can choose this more than once)
- You were able to sneak something out of there; ask the GM what
- You made some preparation or created some advantage to exploit upon your return; work out the details with the GM
- You got away clean: leaving no trace, rousing no suspicion, etc.

Regardless of your choices, answer the GMs questions about what happened out there.

On a 6-, choose 1:

- You make it back to the others but with trouble hot on your heels!
- You're missing in action; the details will be revealed later

Design Notes

You know what sucks, in pretty much every game system? When the sneaky/stealthy/social character sneaks off ahead of the party into some dangerous situation, and you follow that character's actions and play that out while everyone else sits and twiddles their thumbs.

It can be particularly bad in Dungeon World because of the 7-9 results' tendency to escalate situations, and because of how you GM: describe the situation, make moves, ask "what do you do?"

One of the best experiences I can recall having with "the sneaky guy" was playing D&D, where the party's rogue was an NPC with very little personal initiative. He'd scout ahead if we asked him to, and he'd disappear for a bit and then the GM would tell us whether he returned and what he found.

That got me thinking... is there a way to frame "scouting ahead" in such a way that the scouting happens off-camera, and the details come out as what *happened*? (Rather than playing them out *as they happen*.) And that led me to this move.

Because the move's outcomes jump us squarely to the end of the scouting action, the situation is now in the past and the triggering player has just experienced it. That means the GM can ask the player leading questions about what happened without [crossing The Line](#). *"So you scoped out the bandit encampment, figured out that the young sorceress was in charge, realized that most of the wealth was being stored in her tent, and snuck out of there with that weird totem thing. But you didn't get away clean, so... what happened? What clear sign did you leave that will alert them that you were there?"*

A great question to ask the scout is: *"What made you decide to get out of there?"* Or something like that. Basically, get them to tell you what made them turn back and return to the others.

I'm not normally a fan of moves that mix-and-match positive choices (like "you were able to sneak something out of there") with choices that avoid a negative (like "you got away clean"). In this case, though, I think it makes sense. You might not always *care* about getting away clean. Like, if you sneak into a cave and find it's inhabited by ornery owlbears, you might not care if they catch your scent and start sniffing about because, screw that, you'll just avoid that cave. On the other hand, having that choice sometimes provokes an interesting choice, especially on a 7-9. Yeah, you slipped forward and spotted the kobolds working on something in the tunnel, but it's not clear what. Did you stick around and get more info or did you slip away unnoticed? Tough call.

When I first presented this move, someone asked whether the choices on the 6- result were necessary. I think they are. Without them, we could easily make the mistake of zooming in on the scout's predicament and playing that out--which is exactly what this move is trying to avoid.

Variations

You could probably tinker with the approaches and the rolled stats pretty easily. The three examples I used cover the majority of cases I can imagine (sneaking, pulling a stakeout, or going incognito) but maybe you can imagine others. Don't push it, though... some attributes just aren't that useful for gathering intel.

You could give a mystical character an advanced move that lets them Scout Ahead via astral projection or scrying, rolling +INT or +WIS but changing the "missing in action" result to "your spirit is somehow ensnared and your body lies insensate; the details will be revealed later."

Speaking of intel, you could use something very similar to this to cover doing research. Tell the GM what you're researching and how, roll the approach stat, and then zoom ahead to the end and the results tell us what you've learned and/or what the complications were.

GM Moves

- ***Reveal an Unwelcome Truth***

- "What did you see? Hobgoblins. Dozens of them, alert and hunkered down in a fortified camp."
- "Okay, cool, so you managed to slink up the walls of the abandoned temple and peer through the broken stained glass, and what you saw chilled you to the bone: they had Malcor! He was tied up and bloodied, and they were clearly setting something up near the altar. Maybe a ritual or something. It didn't look good."
- **Show Signs of an Approaching Threat**
 - "As you finish filling everyone in, you hear something from back the way you came. Voices, getting nearer! What do you do?"
 - "About a hundred paces down the ravine, you rounded a corner and spotted a trio of trolls lumbering your direction. You'll run smack into each other if you keep on your current course. You got a 7-9, right. What do you choose?"
- **Turn Their Move Back on Them**
 - "Vaughn's been gone, what, maybe 30 minutes now. Ropar, you hear a noise in the dark from the way he went, and you're thinking it's him returning to camp. But when you look that way, you catch a glimpse of something short and hunched, eyes reflecting the light of the campfire, then blink, it's gone. What do you do?"
- **Separate Them**
 - "You're slinking forward towards the archway, about to slip inside and see what's what. The camera's looking out of the archway at you, we see your face getting closer, eyes wide to peer into the darkness, and then GLARB something thick and ropey shoots out of the dark, grabs you and drags you in before you can make a sound! Ovid, Krikor... Trixie's been gone entirely too long now... what do you do?"
 - "Yeah, now that the fight's over and you have a chance to look around, Zil's nowhere to be found. Zil, you were scouting ahead and never came back... what happened that caused you to head off alone, further into the Necropolis? What's chasing you, or drawing you in?"
- **Give an Opportunity that Fits a Class's Abilities**
 - "You exit the pass just as the sun is dropping low, putting you all in shadow. Below, you see some sort of encampment down on the edge of the woods. A couple small fires, at least a dozen or so figures moving about, maybe more. You can't make out any more detail from up here. Anyone want to scout it out?"
 - "What's useful for valuable to you? Well, you're not sure exactly, but it's probably whatever they've got locked up in that fancy chest. You haven't seen a lock like that since you left the civilized lands of Pertjia... definitely beyond your skills but maybe Guyver could get it open. What do you?"
- **Show a Downside to Their Race, Class, or Equipment**

- “You didn’t get away clean, though, right? Let’s say that, while you were spying on them, one of the trolls looked up abruptly and starting sniffing the air. ‘Y’small dat?’ it grunted to the others. ‘I smells halfling.’ The others started sniffing to, and the one closest to you turned in your direction and licked its horrible lips and growled ‘Delicious, delicious halfling.’ Seemed like a good time to slip away, yeah?”
- ***Offer an Opportunity, with or without Cost***
 - “What should you be on the lookout for? That sorceror, for sure. He gives you the willies. And what’s useful or valuable to you? Well, he left that golden rod in the tent, unattended. You’ve got one choice left, right? You could use it to grab the rod and get out of there, or you could get away clean. Or ask another question, I guess. What do you do?”
 - “Lady Etrias looks at the map and frowns. ‘I dare not commit our troops without knowing what’s waiting for us in the swamps.’ Diana, she looks you dead in the eye. ‘I already owe you so much. But I need to ask another favor. Be my eyes, Diana. The House of Etrias will be in your debt.’ What do you do?”
- ***Put Someone in a Spot***
 - “You pick up Mouse’s bullseye lantern from where it fell and shine it around. At first, the place appears to be just a smallish room, one of the walls caved in and the floor covered in dirt and straw and the rest of Mouse’s things. But a noise above you makes you shine the light up, to see a chimney-like tunnel in the ceiling and, Mouse hanging limply from the top of it, his legs bound up in some gooey mass stuck the ceiling. He moans a little as you shine the light on him, but he’s clearly out of it. What do you do?”
 - “Danbrethe, you’re hauling ass back to the clearing and the others, the gnolls yapping and cackling at your heels. Your friends are clearly on alert and hear the commotion, but don’t seem to have spotted you yet. Then, out of nowhere, this big ropey gnoll bursts out of the brush ahead of you, blocking your path. You’re charging straight into his claws and his leering grin, what do you do?”

Sneaking...

When you ***infiltrate a place by stealth***, roll +DEX: **on a 10+**, both; **on a 7-9**, choose 1; **on a 6-**, neither.

- You get in
- You go unnoticed

Chase Scenes

When you ***pursue your quarry***, roll and add...:

- +DEX if you attempt to outrun or outmaneuver them
- +CON if you must outlast them
- +WIS if you track them

On a 10+, you corner your prey or catch them in the open; **on a 7-9**, your prey picks one:

- You've all but got them, there's just one challenge in the way
- They've gone to ground; you know where they are but they're hard to get
- They wheel unexpectedly and attack

When you ***run away from determined pursuit***, roll and add...:

- +DEX if you attempt to outrun or outmaneuver them
- +CON if you must outlast them
- +WIS if you seek to lose or befuddle them

On a 10+, you get away clean; **on a 7-9**, pick one:

- Ask the GM to describe one last obstacle or challenge; clear it and you'll get away
- Lead them to a place of your choosing, say where
- Turn on them unexpectedly and attack

...

Mind Control

When you are **compelled to act against your will**, mark XP if you act as bidden. **If you resist**, roll +WIS: **on a 10+**, you shake off the compulsion and act as you wish; **on a 7-9**, choose 1:

- Stand dazed, fighting for control of your mind
- Start acting as compelled but stop yourself at the last moment
- Harm yourself to regain control (1d6 damage, ignores armor)

On a 6-, pick 1:

- Run with it. You come to your senses having done gods-know-what.
- Mark a debility, take 1d6 damage (ignores armor), and do something drastic to regain control.

When you are **ensorcelled, beguiled, or charmed**, ask the GM to describe what the enchantment would have you do (such as “*keep the secret of the Blue Idol*,” “*please the dryad and earn her affection*,” “*treat Bargle as a trusted friend and confidant*,” or “*burn it all down*”). Write this directive down, along with as many boxes as the GM says (1 box for a weak enchantment, 3 for a powerful one, 5 for a truly mighty one).

While you are so enchanted, the GM gains this move:

- Compel them to act on their enchantment

When you **act according to your enchantment, without being compelled to do so**, mark XP. Each session, you can mark XP this way only once per box you have drawn (marked or not).

When you **would act contrary to your enchantment**, it compels you to do otherwise.

When you **resist the compulsion of your enchantment and roll a 10+**, mark one of the boxes. If you **roll a 6-**, add another box. When you **mark the last box**, you break free.

Design Notes

Mind control is tricky. It violates the one thing that a player typically has complete authority over: their character. But it's also a trope of fantasy and horror. It's going to come up. We should have some way of dealing with it.

As with many things, you could handle mind control with a combination of GM moves and (usually) Defy Danger. The GM uses a monster move (like a vampire's “charm someone”) and

describes the strange feelings and compulsions, then asks the player what they do. If they acquiesce, cool. If they resist, they're Defying Danger.

But why would they acquiesce? There's no incentive to just go along with the compulsion. This is the kind of situation that benefits from both a stick *and* carrot.

If you're familiar with Apocalypse World 1e, you'll recognize the carrot & stick structure from Seduce/Manipulate. When you use it against another PC, on a 10+, they mark XP if they do it and Act Under Fire if they don't. It's a pretty solid move. That's what the ***compelled to act against your will*** move is modeled on.

I thought about making the move simply "mark XP if you act as bidden; if you resist, you're Defying Danger." That has the advantage of simply asking the player "what do you do" and resolving it appropriately. But the custom move makes for faster resolution. It also establishes that WIS is the resist-mind-control stat (which aligns with rolling +WIS to Defy Danger "through mental fortitude").

More importantly, this move establishes a specific result on a 6-, whereas Defy Danger doesn't. And this specific 6- result is important: you still have a choice. And if you choose to lose control, that loss happens as a fugue state. You don't force the player to play out their character doing things they don't want to do. You just (from that character's standpoint, at least) fade to black and the GM tells when you come to your senses and maybe you remember what you did or maybe you're just leaning up against the wall as the sun comes up, panting and sweating, with someone's blood on your hands and *what do you do?*

If other PCs interact with the mind-controlled PC during this fugue state, treat the mind-controlled PC as an NPC: make GM moves with them, not player moves like Hack & Slash. Use the character's damage, HP, and Armor, but otherwise wield them like any other NPC or monster you control. Because, for the time being, that's what they are.

Why Two Moves?

The first one (***compelled to act against your will***) is the broader move. I use it by itself for in-the-moment compulsions, like the Voice of a Bene Gesserit (you've read *Dune*, right?) or the hypnotic gaze of a Derro's "fill a mind with foreign thoughts."

The second move (***ensorcelled, beguiled, or charmed***) represents longer-lasting mental influence: a vampire's charming gaze, a dryad's enticement, a demon's curse, the overpowering weight of the One Ring, etc. You'll note that this one also directly ties into and triggers the first one; it doesn't really work on its own.

Ensorcelled, Beguiled, or Charmed

There's a lot going on with this move. You could even argue it's actually multiple moves, but whatever.

The "directive" part was inspired by [Jason Cordova's mind control move presented in the Discern Realities podcast](#):

When you come under the influence of X, the GM gets Y hold (*3 is a good number, but more/less as you see fit*). The GM can spend 1 hold to suggest a course of action that conforms to the following statement...

e.g. I want to cause death and destruction

e.g. I must support Lord Crabapple in his incursion

e.g. Pait the Torchbearer is a traitor

If you take the course of action, mark XP. If you refuse, the GM regains 1 hold.

Jason's move does a nice job of providing a carrot, but I've got four problems with his version:

1. There's no stick. You can just choose to ignore the influence, to no real effect. (Yeah, the GM can keep suggesting courses of action to you, but you can keep ignoring them indefinitely.)
2. There's no incentive for the character to proactively act on the enchantment. It's up to the GM to push it on them.
3. There's nothing inherently preventing you from acting contrary to the enchantment. The GM has to spend 1 hold to keep you in line.
4. You weaken the influence by doing what it wants, rather than by standing up to it. That doesn't jibe with my sense of how manipulation and coercion work. You overcome oppression through resistance, not acquiescence.

The version I've presented here is an attempt to address all four of those concerns. There is both a carrot and a stick (because the GM can trigger the **compelled to act** move whenever). The player marks XP if they act (unbidden) according to the enchantment. The enchantment itself compels them to stay in line. And the mark-the-boxes-when-you-successfully-resist mechanic models the process of standing up for yourself, asserting your will, breaking free of subjugation.

The part where you add an extra box on a miss? That's me being cynical.

Final thought: giving the GM new moves ("compel them to act on their enchantment") in response to conditions (in this case, being enchanted) is something I've played with in other PbtA designs (most notably, in [Heartbreaker World](#)). I think it's valuable here because without it, the GM doesn't *really* have a good GM move that represents "I think you should do this because enchanted." You could argue it's **offer an opportunity with a cost** or maybe **put them in a**

spot, but that's a stretch. More importantly: giving the GM this specific move serves as a reminder that they can and should use it.

Variations

Resisting is Defy Danger

You always roll +WIS to resist when you are **compelled to act**. That might bug you. (It bugs me a little.) Here's a variation that's avoids that:

When you are **compelled to act against your will**, mark XP if you act as bidden. **If you resist**, you're Defying Danger (where the danger is the compulsion to act). Tell us how!

This approach allows your players to tell you *how* they resist, and roll whatever stat makes the most sense based on their description. In this case, the fighter might choose to stab himself in the leg to break free, taking 1d4 damage and rolling +CON. The wizard might mutter a counterspell to herself, rolling +INT. The thief might try to convince himself that such a course of action is silly and totally not something that they'd do, rolling +CHA. You'd then resolve it like any other Defy Danger: on a 10+, it works! On a 7-9, offer a worse outcome, hard bargain, or ugly choice based on the fictional circumstances. On a 6-, make a hard move.

The downsides of this approach are:

- 1) Increased handling time. You've got to negotiate exactly how the PC resists, and on a 7-9 or you've got to come up with something interesting and appropriate
- 2) Players fishing for their best stat. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it can get annoying when players stretch logic to justify using their best stat. *Especially* if they're under an enchantment and going to be resisting a lot.
- 3) On a 6-, the outcome isn't defined. You make as hard of a GM move as you like.

#3 might not look like a downside, but compare it to the 6- result on the original version ("you come to your senses having done gods-know-what"). That specific result is pretty brutal: they do the thing they didn't want, and the GM controls exactly how far they went. Without that guidance, there are a lot of ways you *could* handle a 6-, and a lot of them aren't great.

Insanity

You could easily tweak these moves to reflect insanity, phobias, or other mental disorders: First, replace the trigger of "When you are **ensorcelled, beguiled, or charmed...**" with "When **your mind snaps from the horrors you have seen...**" (or something like that). Then, make the directive reflect the nature of the insanity, such as:

- *Hear voices telling you what to do*
- *View everything (including inanimate objects) as either on your side or against you*
- *Freak out when confined to small places / exposed to heights / encounter spiders / etc.*

- *Set things on fire*
- *Act and think as if you are the Royal Prince of Andalusia, dead some 40 odd years*
- *Vacillate between hopeless lethargy and manic, barely controlled agitation*

This shouldn't need to be said, but: if you're going to include insanity and mental disorders in your game, make sure everyone playing is okay with that, and is okay how such disorders will be represented, and is willing to speak up if they get uncomfortable. This shit is real. To the people it affects (and their loved ones), it's not a fucking joke.

Posthypnotic Suggestions

Want to invoke a creepy, my-mind-is-not-my-own feeling in your players? Give them a notecard that has something like this written on it:

When ***your mind touches that of the elder horror***, write your character's name below and give this card back to the GM.

When the ***GM gives this card back to you***, read what's on the back.

Read the following command (silently, not out loud):

If you ***do what it says***, mark XP and give this card back to the GM.

If you ***resist***, roll +WIS: **on a 7+**, you resist the compulsion but choose 1 (on a 10+) or 2 (on a 7-9):

- Give this card back to the GM.
- Drop to your knees, clutch your head, and lose 1d10 HP
- Start acting on the command, but stop yourself partway through

On a 6-, you come to your senses having done gods-knows-what. Give this card back to the GM.

This doesn't have the "carrot" part of the **ensorcelled, beguiled, or charmed** move. And it's easier to shake off (on a single 7+, you can choose *not* to give the card back).

But it's way creepier. Why? Because at first, the player doesn't *really* know the consequences of giving you the card. They might have suspicions, but unless they look at the back (or have seen this happen to someone else), they don't know for sure what's coming. Even if they've seen you use this trick before, they won't know what the command will be. Suspense builds! Then, when you give them the card, there's the suspense everyone else feels as they read the card and decide what to do. (Oh, also: plenty of players have had terrible, dysfunctional experiences with note-passing at the table. This taps into that unease, too. But, you know, for good!)

GM Moves

- *Use a monster, danger, or location move:*
 - "The vampire's gaze catches your eyes and you feel yourself drowning in them, drowning, losing yourself. What do you do?"
 - "The naga's head sways gracefully back and forth. 'Peacccccce,' it hisses. 'Lay down your armsssss and come to meeeee.' Your mind fogs and you'd like nothing more than to do what it says. I'll give you 1 XP if you do, or you can roll +WIS to resist."
- *Reveal an unwelcome truth:*
 - "You wake up in the middle of the woods, in your nightshirt, clutching a dagger and soaked in blood. It doesn't appear to be yours. What do you do?"
- *Show signs of an approaching threat:*
 - "As you approach the idol, you hear a noise. It takes a moment before you realize it's not really a *noise*, more like a voice, in your head, saying *sooo looong.... waaaaited... sooo... longgggg....*"
- *Turn their move back on them:*
 - "You cast the *charm person* spell, but as you touch Lady Bhalzar, you sense something... wrong. But only for a moment. Now, you're just thinking about how nice it is to see her and how pleasant her smile is. Write down '*Treat Lady Bhalzar as a trusted friend*' and put two boxes next to it."
 - "The *contact other plane* spell works, but... uh oh. You feel... *something* in your mind, something unexpected, and dark, and terrible. You try to cut the connection but it won't let you. 'TELL ME' it belows. 'TELL ME WHERE YOU HAVE HIDDEN THE BLOODTHORN KEY.'"
- *Give an opportunity that fits a class' abilities:*

- “Rook is just standing there, glassy eyed, like he’s listening to something you can’t see. You want to use Arcane Art to shake his mind clear? Or what?”
- *Offer an opportunity with a cost:*
 - “‘*Great power! Knowledge!*’ whispers the spirit. “*The strength to crush your foes! Just let me in... let me... in....*’ What do you do?”
 - “You feel the sword, like, ask. No so much with words but with a deep and endless longing. It’s wants you to plunge into the prisoner’s heart and let it soak in her lifeblood. If you do, you sense it’ll reveal one of its powers to you.”
- *Put someone in a spot*
 - “Bilshi, your faithful porter, turns towards you, touching his cheek where the dryad kissed him. His eyes lock on yours and go cold, then hot with rage. He charges!”
- *Make them backtrack*
 - “Try as you might, you just can’t force yourself to approach the door. The enchantment is too strong. You’ll need to find another way.”
 - “You search and search and search, but can’t find the Red Door, even though you’re sure you saw it earlier! In fact, you don’t even realize how long you’ve been searching until you start to get shaky from hunger. There must be some sort of enchantment keeping you from finding it.”

Working Together

When you **Defy Danger as a group**, acting despite the same imminent threat or suffering the same calamity, roughly describe your strategy and you each roll +stat. **On a 6-**, you find yourself in a spot, tell us how you got there; **on a 7-9**, you get through just fine; **on a 10+**, you do well enough to get someone else out of a spot, if you can tell us how.

If you roll a 6- and someone else saves you, don't mark XP.

Design Notes

This is mathematically a lot more forgiving than "everyone rolls Defy Danger."

If someone misses and no one is able to cover for it, you zoom in and put them in a spot, resolving that in detail.

If someone misses but another PC can cover, you get this cool little vignette. Like, maybe the thief gets caught out in the open by a suspicious guard, and while he tries to bluff his way out of it, the cleric slips forward and *bonks* the guard on the head. Then they proceed to their destination.

If everyone nails it, you give some color and proceed to the next point of interest.

Variations

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GM Moves

...

Reaction Check

When you **approach a wary or hostile NPC and try to communicate**, roll +CHA: **on a 10+**, they'll hear you out and choose 1 from the list below; **on a 7-9**, they'll hear you out but they remain hostile/wary/alert.

- They are impressed, intrigued, or amused by you, as the GM sees fit (*otherwise, they remain wary or hostile*)
- You've got their complete attention, for now at least (*otherwise, they remain alert*)
- You glean a valuable insight; ask a question from the Discern Realities list at take +1 forward to act on the answer

Design Notes

- 1) *It's a callback to old school play*
- 2) *It encourages a sort of fairy tale/fantastic setting where high Charisma is universally appealing, regardless of species/cultural norm. Which is both a hugely problematic but hugely interesting trope.*
- 3) *It's an encouragement to "try talking first" instead of reacting to hostility with hostility*

Talk about the trigger, and why this isn't something you can (or at least, would want to) use in the middle of a pitched fight.

Variations

GM Moves

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Navigating a “Megadungeon”

...

