

Book - Draft 1 - organizing

# PREFACE

Were you born with the innate ability to write a good adventure? No, of course not. The ability to write a good adventure is a skill, like any other. And, like all skills, you start off bad at it. You don't really know what you are doing. But you must practice your skill in order to get better at it. But, what if you practice the wrong things? If you start off holding a violin and bow the wrong way then, two years later, when you learn the right way, you're going to have a hard time breaking your habits.

There is painfully little, approaching zero, actually useful advice on how to write an adventure. Oh, there are things published. Have a warm-up encounter. Give the party something to do. Other, trivial advice of dubious quality. That's not what this book is about. This book is about larger issues. It is, for the most part and with a few exceptions, not about writing an adventure FOR THE PLAYERS but rather how to write an adventure FOR THE GM.

At best, people copy the formats and techniques they have seen used in other products, techniques and products that are, generally, terrible. There are very few positive examples in this space. Hence this book. My goal is to educate the designer on how to write an adventure so they don't learn bad habits. Ideally, this results in more quality adventures for DM's, and more people running the designer's adventures.

You have a vision in your head. It's exciting and colorful and full of wonder. I'm going to try and help you get it out of your head. That seems simple. It is not. Oh, it's easy enough to put something down on paper and get it printed. But that's not the goal. You want to communicate the vision you have. The excitement that lives in your head needs to be transferred to some random gamemaster who has picked up the adventure to run it. Communicating your vision, getting it out of your head and into someone else's without losing anything in the process, is quite hard.

I've read and critically commented on over two thousand adventures. I've seen some of the very best adventures ever published for the hobby. Those adventures tower over the nostalgic memories of quality we have of the older and earlier products. I've seen some of the very worst. Confusing, wordy, and boring that doesn't communicate the excitement the designer must have had in mind when they sat down to write it. I think I've come to some good conclusions on the differences between an excellent adventure and a poor one. You don't have to listen to my advice. You may have a very good reason to ignore it. But if you do, ensure you ignore it for the right reasons. Make a choice for the impact it will have on communicating your vision. The advice herein should work fine 95% of the time for the vast majority of RPG systems.

My criteria for what makes a good adventure are not very innovative. The vast majority of this advice has already existed for quite some time. It's scattered throughout the internet, in blog posts and forums, magazine letter columns and short essays. It is, I believe, the general consensus. The blog-o-sphere has a lot of very smart people in it; more intelligent than I, to be sure. I've attempted to place references to articles you can explore if you'd like more information on a topic. I've been greatly influenced by some of the authors; attributing to all of them would be impossible. If I've left someone out I apologize. It's not my intent to minimize the impact they've had on the topic.

Write On!

## Introduction

The number one complaint about published adventures is that they are hard to run. There is prep time. You have to read them ... usually more than a few times in order to understand what is going on. You might have to use a highlighter on it. Scratch that, you probably have to use a highlighter on it. And then you'll need to take notes about it. Extensive notes. Sometimes you need to do even more additional work in order to run it. I would hazard a guess that most people think published adventures are too hard to use. That's what this book is aiming for: to make adventures easier to run and, hopefully, more enjoyable.

This is not a book of DM advice. This is not a book about how to design an adventure for your home game. You might find some words of wisdom herein to help you with aspects of your home game, but the book isn't targeted at you. This book is advice on how to write an adventure for publication. It's targeted at the person who is writing an adventure to sell, or give away on the internet, or present in some other public way to have someone else use it.

There's a key difference between personal use and having someone else use it. When you write something for personal use you have this vision in your head. You came up with an idea and it's floating around in your head. You imagine a deep chasm, darkness down below, the other side barely visible, a tattered rope bridge, voices and furtive figures glimpsed in the shadows, their yellow eyes blinking in and out, and a dim red glow from below with a low rumbling and the smell of sulfur wafting up. In the notes you jot down it says "rope bridge over chasm." You know that's what you meant when you jotted that down on your notepad because you know what you imagined. The words on the page are only a memory cue to recall what you initially imagined.

When you write for someone else you are not trying to cue your own memory; you have a different problem. You have to transfer that vision from your head down to paper and in such a way that it can then get into someone else's head. They can't see what's in your head

and there are at least two translations between your head and the gamemaster who's reading your adventure. Those translations seldom happen successfully, leading to dry and tedious encounters. I would hope this book helps with that.

This isn't a book about OSR adventure design, or fantasy adventure design. I like the OSR and have certainly learned a lot reviewing OSR adventures, but the advice herein can be used with any type of RPG. Chummer or knight, P.I. or Malkavian: the principals apply. I'm going to focus on using fantasy in my examples but it should be trivial for you to see how these transfer over to your genre of choice. Likewise, I prefer more open-ended RPGs, but the principles apply to plot-based adventures also. Both of these points should be self-evident in the concepts to come.

You're not going to find a lot of advice in this book about plot, or villains with personality flaws, or drama, or other things of that nature. A lot of advice about that already exists, even in fields such as literature and screenwriting. Besides, that's not the chief complaint about adventures, is it?

Finally, there's more than one way to make an adventure evocative and usable at the table. The advice in this book is, I believe, an effective way for most designers to reach that goal for most RPG adventures. Do what thou wilt ... but be purposeful in your deviations.

## The Adventure is a GM Aid

That rather simple section heading is actually quite important. In fact, it is the most important concept in this book. Everything else flows from it. The Adventure is a GM aid to running the adventure at the table.

There are many different types of GM aides available. There are books of monsters. There are books of magic items. There are campaign guides and regional setting guides. And then, of course, there are published adventures. But, what exactly IS a published adventure?

The adventure is, first and foremost, an aid for the GM in running it at the table. Let me state that last phrase again: at the table. This is the critical aspect of an adventure. It's what defines the term "Adventure", at least in as far as this book is concerned. It's an adventure meant to be run at the table. If it's not meant to be run at the table then it's not an adventure. The goal is to write and design a play aid for the DM. You'd be surprised how much disagreement there is on this point. The adventure could be used as a doorstop. It could be used as insulation. It could be used as kindling. It could be used for inspiration to create your own adventure. The purpose of a published adventure though is not any of

those things. The purpose of the adventure is to help the DM run the game at the table. If someone reads the adventure and they get the idea for the next Dahlgren then that's great. If they read it and don't use any of it but it haunts their dreams and they write the anti-version of it then that's great also. In both examples, though, the adventure has not been used for its primary purpose. The DM needs to be able to pick the adventure up, hopefully having enough time to read/scan it quickly once, and then use it **as is** at the table to run a successful game. The need to point this out seems absurd. If you want to write a setting book, sourcebook, or novel then have at thee. I truly wish you well. But that's not an adventure. The purpose of the adventure is to help the DM run their game *at the table*. That's how we're going to define "adventure" for the purposes of this book. The adventure IS the aid that the DM uses to run it. I know, it also sounds strange to actually write that, but it is from this that everything else in this book flows. And from this we derive three other statements that the bulk of this book will be exploring. First, the adventure should be easy to run. Second, the adventure writing should be evocative. Third, the adventure should be interactive.

Why is it important for an adventure to be easy to use? Because the DM will be using it at the table to run the game. Why should it be written evocatively? Because the DM will be using the writing to visualize the room. Why should the adventure be interactive? Because the DM will be using those encounters to enable the back and forth interactivity between players and DM that is at the heart of RPG's. An adventure should be open, out in front of the DM, being used by them to run the game. It is from this definition, this premise, that the rest of the book advice follows. It's a reference document, and therefore adventure writing is technical writing.

The goal is evocative writing that is organized well, with situations that encourage interactivity. That's the goal of this book. To get the creativity out of your head and onto paper in such a way that the person reading it is just as excited as you, if not more so, to run it. The characters walk into room two, the DM glances at the adventure for half a second, their eyes light up with excitement, and the players face the challenge of the chasm. That's the goal I'm setting for myself, on your behalf; the DM glances at the page for half a second (perfectly organized adventure) and their eyes light up (evocative creativity) and the players face the challenge (interactive).

To this end the book concentrates on three core concepts: the adventure must be easy to use, the descriptions must be evocative, and there should be interactive situations for the party to face.

## Core Concept One: Ease of Use

The adventure needs to be organized. The DM needs to be able to find information quickly, scan it quickly, and use it. The adventure must contain the resources the DM needs at the table in order to run it. It's amazing how many adventures fail at this, as if the designer has never run a game at the table. Conveying the information to the DM in a way that is useful to them is non-trivial. It requires focus. You have to understand what you are trying to do in the adventure in order to convey that to the DM easily.

## Core Concept Two: Evocative Writing

You need to convey your creative vision to the reader. Unencumbered by mechanics, you are attempting to paint a picture in the DM's head. You **cannot** succeed by being detailed. It would take a thousand words to convey the full scene in the designer's head. Instead, you need to convey the seed of a thought ... a tiny granule that will lodge in the DM's head. Their own imagination will then take over and fill in the details. This idea seed has no rules. The old saying is that English is the most descriptive language ever. That's not enough. You have permission to contort it, twist it, bend it, use it in every manner possible to get your idea across. As long, of course, as the adventure continues to be easy for the DM to use at the table.

## Core Concept Three: Interactivity

The adventure needs to be interesting to the players. In short, it needs to be interactive. There must be things for the players to have their characters do. In the simplest terms this generally involves stabbing things, and activities related to that, such as sneaking around to delay stabbing things for a bit of time. Stabbing isn't a requirement for an adventure, but does tend to be the one that most published adventures have a handle on. The party can also talk to things. This is sorely underutilized in most adventures, but it is still not uncommon. Beyond this is another degree of interactivity. Classic examples include puzzles, statues that you can move their arms up to discover a treasure or secret door, and big red buttons begging to be pushed. Things to do other than stabbing and talking. Exploration elements.

Finally, I want to mention something about adding value. Specifically, adding value beyond what's in the core books for your chosen RPG. A DM can create an adventure using the monsters in the monster manual, slap down a few magic items from the magic items section, and so on. As an adventure designer, though, you should be striving to do more than this. The elements of the adventure of your adventure should add value beyond the core books. The DM is, in essence, paying for your creativity. In its most basic form, they are paying for you to bring more than the core book monsters and treasure. Be creative. Introduce new creatures and treasures. Add value through your own creativity by not just relying on the same old same old elements found in the core books.

We have begun.

## Core Concept 1 - Ease of Use

The first core concept is that the adventure needs to assist the DM in running it. It needs to be easy to use. This is the chief complaint that people have about adventures. It's not that they are not "good" (we'll reserve judgment on that ...), but, rather, that they are hard to use. You have to read it multiple times. You have to take notes. You have to use a highlighter. Information is hard to find. They are not easy to use at the table.

A key concept in usability is Scanability. The DM needs to glance at the adventure page and immediately find the information they are looking for. It should take only a few seconds to locate the information they need and absorb it. This makes sense. Imagine the flow of a game. The players direct their characters into the next room. The DM glances down at the page, locates the room, absorbs the immediate need, and relates it to the players. While the players are ruminating on their follow up actions the DM is absorbing additional information about the room. If the players search the chest in the room then the chest information must be quickly locatable. This allows for seamless play at the table without the long pauses and the need for the DM to read and understand paragraphs in order to launch into the room's actual play. The DM needs to locate the initial information quickly and they need to be able to locate follow up information quickly.

The Ease of Use section will be broken down into roughly three main sections. The first is on comprehension; making writing effective, at least in as much as ease of use is concerned. This is also going to include a subsection on summarizing your adventure in various ways to frame things for the DM. Next will be a section on keeping your writing on the terser side of the spectrum, a key element of scanability. Finally, there will be a section on actual reference material, tables and the like, in the adventure that makes it easier for the DM to use.

For what follows I'm going to use the example I referenced above and thus it may be helpful to keep it in mind. The party enters a room. The DM glances down at the room's description for just the briefest of moments, absorbing the immediate need for information: what the party first encounters. The DM relates this to the players and, while they ruminate, the DM is further scanning the room's text in the adventure. As the party begins to interact with things in the room the DM quickly locates the needed information and relates it to the players.

## Framing What's to Come

### Overview of what happens

Our brains are quite amazing things. I can recall, once, seeing a commercial for a Peugeot. I had never seen a Peugeot before in my life, on the streets or otherwise. However, once I saw that commercial I now saw them everywhere. Thick as thieves they were! I couldn't turn a corner without seeing one. It's as if my seeing that commercial suddenly summoned a Peugeot convention to town for the next three months.

Priming the brain for what's to come can help it accept the information it's about to receive. If you tell the DM up front, before the dungeon is encountered, that the orc slaves are in rebellion, then the DM's brain will be primed to "orc rebellion" connections while they read the text. They will receive all of the dungeon information with "the orcs are in rebellion" floating around in the back of their mind and everything they read will be colored through that lens. A brief summary of the adventure, prior to the meat of the text, can be quite a useful thing for the DM to see. This helps the DM place the text, encounters, scenes, and plot, into context as they are reading over the adventure for the first time. This doesn't have to be background and history, but, rather, a summary of the adventure and even how it's meant to flow. As the DM is reading the text they then can more easily make the mental associations necessary to put the entire adventure flow together.

Certainly this isn't necessary for all adventures. Some are very basic and don't need much of an overview or summary. Multiple locations, plot elements and the like, though, almost certainly call for a very brief overview at the beginning in order to get the DM's brain ready to accept the associations it's about to be presented with.

(There's a related issue with room names that I'll cover in that section.)

### Vista Overlook Summaries

I can recall playing one of the *Fallout* videogames. Wandering about at night, I came to the top of a small rise. In the distance I saw a faint red glow, there were figures silhouettes in it. "I want to go there!" I said to myself, all excited. Note how I came to an area in which I could see a lot (a small rise) and I saw things that got me excited to do things.

This is a specific instance of overviews: the expansive view. Imagine the party comes up over the top of a rise and see, down below them, a great manor home, the destination of their journey. The DM might tell them something like "You see a manor home sprawled out before you." The players are then sure to ask for details. Where are the entrances? Anything unusual going on? Consider also, what if the adventure has the southern dome on fire or the



northern wing is under attack by ape-men, or both? Don't the players deserve to know this? Of course! Doesn't the DM deserve to know this? I mean, without the DM having to read through every single page of every single room description to figure out which parts of the manor are collapsed, on fire, previously on fire, or under siege? The players deserve to know the obvious things going on and the DM needs the most pertinent details at their fingertips, otherwise, how will they respond quickly to the players' inquiries? By digging through the individual room entries? I think not! This could be handled through read-aloud or through a small DM notes section.

Note the similarity of this topic to that of a well written room description. The room description quickly provides an overview of the room to the players and then follows it up with other text that expands on those points. These "expanse overviews" do something similar, stating the most obvious things up front and then following up on other minor points. The general concept applies to rooms, to coming upon the adventure site for the first time, or any other situation in which a new area is revealed to the players. Some of this can be provided by the map, in some cases fully by it. Copses of trees, waterfalls, doors, etc. But the siege of the ape-men, fire, collapsed domes and the like? If it's obvious when looking at it then make it obvious to the DM so they can respond to the players.

This applies to many situations. Coming down into a massive open and well-lit cavern. Adventurers love to climb things, so surveying the countryside from atop a bell tower or cliff. Arriving outside of just about any location that you can walk around. A hexcrawl where you can see something in one hex from another hex. And, obviously, this doesn't mean for ALL of those locations all of the time. Only gameable content and locations, only information likely to be of interest to the party.

This could be a general principle: the site does not exist in isolation. In other places I'll cover related issues like seeing light coming from the next room, or hearing something down the hallway, or monsters in the next room checking on the noise the party makes in their current one.

There's no need to be pedantic about every light, or every tree being climbed, but a general overview of commonly sensed features from where you are makes sense and makes the DM job a lot easier.

## Vista 1

Picture if you will an abbey building, the kind that is full of monks. There are a few outbuildings scattered around it and it's surrounded by a small wall with a gate in it. There are some barley and hops fields also surrounded by the walls. The monks brew beer. You stay at an inn just

outside the gates and, in the middle of the night, are woken up by the screams of dying monks and the smell of smoke and burning flesh!

Adventure is upon us! We rush outside to see what's going on! What do we see?! The DM doesn't know. The adventure doesn't tell us. It tells us that the gate has been left thrown open and flames burn in several places, flickering through the church windows, consuming a building to the west and some half-burnt fields of barley ... with vague movement in it. Beyond this ... we don't know, and neither does the DM. The DM must dig through each individual section to figure out what state it is in in order to relate it to the party. Because that's what the DM is going to need to do, right? The party is going to ask "What's going on?" and the DM needs to respond. In this adventure the DM will state "Hang on gang, give me a few minutes" and consult each individual major entry to figure out what is going on there and tell it to the party.

The party is outside the inn, looking over the monastery compound. This is a great example of the need for the Vista Overview summary. That barley field fire? It's almost out. Hang on, I'm still digging through the adventure. Ok, it looks like black smoke is pouring out of the main building. That building to the west? ... Uh ... I don't see it it mentioned at all. One sec ... Ah! Ok! You can see flames through the churches stained glass windows, smoke pours out from multiple places in the complex, and it's so thick you can't see the top of the tower from the ground. Yeah, I guess it has a tower. Oh! And the church bell is ringing continually.

I could continue this example. Picture in your mind visiting a brewery in a warehouse. You walk in through a door. What do you see? The main brewhouse is wide open space, wooden trays, a mill, shallow troughs, an office, some brewing vats and so on. But you only know this, from the adventure, by looking at each individual numbered encounter key on the map, absorbing it, and relating it to the party.

In both of these examples there should have been an overview of what was going on. "What do I see?" is perhaps the most common RPG statement, and yet in both of these cases the DM, in this adventure, is left digging through each individual location, looking it up, absorbing the information, and relating it to the party.

Ideally the designer should have included a small section at the start of each of these sections that outlined what the party saw. In both cases the party sees something unfolding in front of them. They have an expansive view of what's going on. A small paragraph, before each section, relating this would keep the DM from having to dig through the adventure, looking at each individual location to figure out what is going on and then relating it back to the party in a broken format.

## Vista 2

The party is travelling along a road and comes to the top of a small rise. They look down below, towards where the road is going and they see a small village in a valley. Smoke rises from the village, it's under attack! Adventure Awaits! "What do we see?!" asks the party. It is at this point

the game stops. The DM must now consult the village map, the valley map, and the keyed locations for both the village and valley in order to describe the general goings on.

This is the start of the adventure. It is the Call To Adventure, seeing a scene below you that beckons. And yet, the adventure is laid out in standard room/key format. Each location independent of the others. There's no way for the DM understand what's going on, except perhaps taking notes and/or highlighting things before hand. And that would indicate a failure on the part of the designer to provide te DM what they need to run the adventure well.

The church is on fire. There's a crowd in the main square and what looks like a bonfire. To the east a group of marauders are driving cattle through the town. Elsewhere in the valley there's a great dark cloud to the north and signs of dust clouds. To the west the village graveyard has a dull green glow and to the east lightning repeatedly strikes a lone tower on another small hilltop. It doesn't have to much more than those few words, perhaps written a bit more evocatively, but it's enough to provide a summary to the party of what they see and get them going in a direction.

## Scanability

Imagine how the typical adventure is used. The DM purchases it and reads it once. Then, they have the adventure open in front of them as a reference during the actual running of the game.

The core of the adventure, beyond the introduction and so on, is a reference document. The DM needs to be able to glance down at it and locate the information they need in order to run the game that is happening in front of them right now.

Most adventures fail in their ability to be a good reference document, to be able to be scanned quickly to locate information. The writing style they use is more conversational, the text padded with phrases that detract from quick comprehension and, in the worst cases, exhibit the dreaded Wall Of Text.

Most of the adventure, therefore, is a reference document: something that the DM quickly references during play in order to run the game. It should be written as such, and the following advice should help with that. But, also, it should be noted that some of the adventure is NOT a reference document. A small part of it is just meant to be read once, to set up the DM's mental framing for what's to come. To explain something to orient the DM and so forth. We're all familiar with the background and introduction material that the DM reads to orient themselves to the adventure, for example.

It's important to recognize which part of the adventure is which when the designer is writing the supplement. Some portions should absolutely be written to be read, perhaps once and never again. Other portions, though, the majority in fact, should be written as a reference document. Which is what they are. Adventure writing is technical writing.

## First Things First

"As you enter the cavern," the DM is saying, "you see a variety of bunk beds laid out in a haphazard fashion. There's a smoky cooking fire in the middle that looks like it's got something on a spit over it. You can see a number of dismembered bodies scattered around on the floor, clearly dead."

"Great! Marcus the wizard will go over to the ..." relays Frank.

"Wait, wait," says the DM, "you also see a giant red dragon barrelling down on you, breathing fire."

Our journalism friends use a phrase: Burying the lead. "To begin a story with details of secondary importance to the reader while postponing more essential points or facts."

Most adventures are not written with scanability in mind. When the party enters a new area the DM must pause the game, and quickly read the location text. After absorbing the text the DM must then rearrange it in their head and relate it to the party. This all results in a game delay for the players while the DM tries to mentally comprehend and prepare the room, in their head, for play.

Let's contrast that with a well-written adventure. The DM glances down at the location, quickly locating it, and scans the text. They begin speaking, relating to the players the objects and atmosphere of the room, even as they are continuing to scan the text. As the party decides what to do they continue to scan the text and interact with the players.

When writing a location description there's a natural order to the writing. When the players first encounter the room then what's the most important thing for the DM to relate to them? This is almost always the most obvious and/or pertinent thing in the room. If you open the door and see a giant red dragon, then that's probably what the room description should lead with. If you can HEAR something before you open the door then that's probably what you want to lead with. If twelve Death Troopers are charging at the door with lit plasma rifles, then maybe the room's description should mention that first?

This same principle holds for rooms that are more mundane. If you look around the room then what do you see? A rope hanging from the ceiling, a writing desk and cask? The introduction to the room should mention those three items. Further bullets, paragraphs, sentences, etc can then follow up and relate more about those objects as appropriate.

The general principle here is twofold. First, note the important and/or obvious things first. Second, move from the general overview of the room to specifics. The DM, when scanning the room text during play, will view that opening overview first and relate it to the players.

While they are considering their actions the DM is then scanning the more specific text and when the players announce "I'm looking at the rope" the DM can then quickly find the rope section and relate it. From the general to the specific. From the obvious to the hidden.

## First Things First 1

The party has been exploring ruins, looking for an evil cultist. They come upon the following read-aloud:

"A limestone altar carved with religious symbols is in front of a statue of the light goddess. The statue's head is missing and black goo flows from its fractures to the floor. It's pooling around a huge black spire in the center of the chamber, reaching upward like a great hand. Stairs lead up to the southwest. Collapsed stone fills the northeast of the room. A beam of red light is coming from the stone, shooting up through a hole in the ceiling."

Overall that's not too terrible a description. I might suggest leading the description with the black spire and the red light, since that's the most obvious thing, and then following it up with the goo, the statue, and then the altar, leaving out the religious symbols entirely as something for the party to discover when they examine the altar more closely. There is, however, an issue. In the real adventure that's a three paragraph read-aloud taking up about a quarter of the page. It's not until two paragraphs later, and on a separate page, in the DMs notes, that we learn that there's a figure lying prone on the floor in front of the altar that rises as the party enters. The cultist in question.

Invariably during a game the DM will pause after relating the read-aloud and the party will begin asking questions and taking actions, perhaps even interrupting the DMs read-aloud, while the DM scans the notes. In this case we get to the dreaded DM interrupting the players to say "Wait, wait, there's a cultist lying prone on the floor that gets up when you enter." Not good.

This could be resolved by placing the cultist at the end of the read-aloud, or even better, putting the prone cultist up front, right after the spire, and then at the end noting that they rise up. Alternatively, in some adventures it's possible that the creature may not be in the room, having responded to the party previously by hunting them down. In these cases it might be appropriate to have the creatures be the very first thing in the DM notes after the read-aloud, allowing the DM to move it to immediately after reading the text to the players.

## First Things First 2

These problems are not only relegated to the realm of read-aloud. Many adventures don't have read-aloud, but all have a section for the DMs eyes only. The ability to organize information in a logical order for the DM is critical.

The party has reached the final room of the adventure. They have found the room they were looking for. They had been tracking the creeping plague through the wilderness for days, explored the ruins at the center, and made it to the final room. The DM is now faced with a page and a half of DM text, this being an adventure with no read-aloud. The first several paragraphs

of the room description detail the history of the room and the rebel priests actions over the last few months. How they found the object in the room and manipulated its levers, turned it on, couldn't turn it off, and how a number of them volunteered to stay behind. Buried in this is the fact that there are two zombies in the room. Then what follows is the journal "next to the device", which we still don't have a description of yet. Then it notes that there is a piece of paper in one corner of the room in the trash. Oh, it looks like the room has trash in it. We then get notes about the parchment. Then, finally, we get some notes about working the machine and to go look in the appendix for more information. The appendix does indeed have more information, but still, no real description of the machine, or the room for that matter, anywhere. There is an art piece of an iron lung.

First, kudos for putting in some art to show the machine, even if it does little to bring it to life beyond "a metal tube." And, putting the more detailed notes in the appendix is a good idea to help keep the main DM text workable. But, multiple paragraphs of history, before getting to the zombies trying to eat you, and burning important facts like a journal in the middle of a history paragraph, and no real description of the machine ever, is not exactly working with the DM to run the adventure.

The DM doesn't need the life story of the recent events of the room. The description should lead with a brief description of the machine, then the zombies, and sprinkle in the room state via an adjective or two. An enormous brass tube on squat legs, covered in levers, blocks the middle of this grimy room, with two figures in tattered red robes stumbling towards the party." The DM notes can then handle the zombies (the most important thing) and then the parchment/journal and then the machine. Normally I might note the machine being, very important, might come second in the DMs notes, but give the length of its description in some cases it makes sense to end a room description with the longest entry, as long as it's easily findable by the DM.

### First Things First 3

The Forbidden Barrow is an adventure by Nickolas Brown, published by Five Cataclysms. It uses a terse format to describe a room, with the first paragraph being a general overview, with the follow up paragraphs being keyed to the first one by bolded words. Let's look at room ten:

Dozens of **skulls** are suspended from chains or settled on metal spikes in this room, their mouths all agape in silent laughter. The East and South walls are clearly sealed crypts, with words upon them in an **ancient language**.

This is presented as DM text, no read-aloud is present in this adventure, but might just as well be read-aloud and could clearly be used as such. While it's a little hand-wavey in the "clearly sealed crypts" portion of the description (I'd prefer a description that causes a player to say "oh! A clearly sealed crypt!"), it does a decent job of setting a scene with the skulls. What's the first thing you would notice in the room? Dozens of skulls. And dozens of skulls come first in the description, with the secondary feature, the sealed crypts, following. The bolded words indicate that there is more DM text for those items, in the following paragraphs, making it easy for the DM to locate.

## Avoid Single Column Formatting

The world is a wonderful place, just about everything that exists, or has existed, now has a journal article about it. And that includes Single Column vs Double Column layout styles. In a traditional Letter or A4 sized page the eye tends to get fatigued when it travels across the entire page, as it does in a single column layout. This, and the distractions that cause it from the eye wandering up and down as the text gets longer, causes a kind of cognitive confusion, which makes it harder for the brain to comprehend the information being presented. The shorter lines found in double column (or triple) formatting reduce this effect considerably, making it easier, mentally and physically, to scan and read the information being presented.

Obviously, this doesn't apply to digest sized publications. At least reasonable font sizes are selected.

## Active Voice

No one really liked Yoda. Consider, dude is an ancient Jedi master and he still can't master modern English sentence structure! "The dark side it was." The anticipation in talking to him must have been great ... "Oh boy, another round of passive voice ..." Accepting even that his own native language always used passive voice, no one else did. It's just being polite, Yoda!

Don't be a yoda; don't reverse your sentence structure and use passive voice. Active voice is clearer and more easily understood, making scanning the text faster and easier. The difference between the two is that in active voice a noun one commits an act and the other, passive voice, has a sentence subject who has an act committed to it. "The boy climbed the tree" makes sense. It's in active voice. The boy is the noun and the tree was climbed by him. The boy is climbing and the tree is the subject of the climbing. "The tree was climbed by the boy" still makes sense but is much more indirect. It's passive voice. In this case the subject of the sentence is the tree and someone is doing something to it, climbing it.

It sounds technical when explained, but in practice it's easy to recognize. "The cauldron was stirred by an orc" is easily recognizable as "The orc stirred the cauldron." "was [something]d by" is a clear indication, and there are many more examples available. The subject of active voice/passive voice has a lot of reference material available for writers to take advantage of.

This is not to say that there are not times in which passive voice can be appropriate. A short green NPC in robes may speak in passive voice all the time. Or, perhaps in a short evocative writing section you are setting the adventure's tone. In these cases passive voice is adding color. Generally, though, in text meant as a reference for the DM--the NPC descriptions, DM

room text and so on--you want to keep your sentences simple and direct, which includes avoiding passive voice.

There are a lot of variations to this theme and some have real names, like predicates, dangling whatits, and passive voice. Keep the text tight, not The Text tight must be!

## Legibility

As I'm writing this I just had my first COVID shot. I had to fill out the standard "Do you have any preexisting conditions" form. The lines alternated between a dark yellow box and a dark green box as a background, spaced tightly together, with a bolded black font. It was impossible to read. I removed my glasses and brought the form right up to almost my nose in order to read it, and it was still hard to read. This was not an easy-to-read document.

It seems obvious, but the choices you make in your design affect legibility. The DM actually needs to be able to comprehend the words on the page, to actually make them out, in order to read and understand them. This is not a binary process of Can Read and Can't Read, but rather an appeal to ease of use. How easily can the DM read the text? Common legibility concerns typically revolve around three areas in adventures. First, long sections of italics or other "interesting" fonts/effects are hard to read and hard on the eyes. Second, maps need notations, numbers, lettering and features that the DM can make out easily at a glance. Finally, there is the issue of single-column text and font size.

Unusual fonts make it harder for the brain to actually make out the words. A single word or two in Comic Sans is not likely to cause a significant issue. As with bolding, a font change or size change can help call attention to a phrase or keyword. This is a great reason to select an unusual font or effect, to call attention to a word or phrase. It's the main font selection of the adventure that's relevant for this discussion. For that you should select a font that's easy to read. This is not something to worry about as long as you keep to the more mainstream choices, but there are two specific use cases to watch out for. Or, perhaps, one general case with two specific use cases: the special DM text. This most commonly appears as the read-aloud text in the adventure, and sometimes as a handout. This sort of special DM text has a tendency to appear in some special font choice: it's common to use italics for read-aloud and some cursive fonts for special hand-outs, like a diary page or some such. Feel free to make a handout, meant for the players, in a special cursive font, etc. Part of the fun of a handout is in puzzling it out! But, if the text is meant for the DM, meaning if it's reproduced for the DM in their section of the adventure, then it should NOT be in cursive, etc. It needs to be in a format that the DM can absorb quickly. Likewise read-aloud. It's common for read-aloud to be formatted in italics. Long sections of italics are hard to read and read-aloud, even in three-sentence form, qualifies as "long sections of text." A word or short phrase, highlighted via italics, is fine. But when the text becomes a sentence, or multiple



sentences, then something besides italics should be turned to. Starting the paragraph with "Read Aloud:", or offsetting it, or placing it in a (lightly) shaded box are all good alternatives. This does not mean that you are limited to black text on a white page. Please take a minute to think, though, before making your page backgrounds black and your text white. It is fatiguing and running an adventure is hard enough as it is.

Map legibility is another issue to watch out for. This is most prevalent in hand-drawn maps and maps with fancy background colors. Ensure that room key numbers, the map features and terrain, the walls and so on can be easily made out by the DM. Maps can frequently have a background text color, which means the room keys, in particular, will go over a colored background that can, if not selected carefully, make the room keys hard to make out. The size of the map is another issue. There's a modern trend to make the map fit on half a page, or even a quarter page. This is fine ... unless it reduces the legibility of the map. The DM has to be able to easily make out the room keys and features on the map.

Finally there is the issue of the background image. This is most commonly found and an issue with the fancy document templates provided by places like DMsGuild, etc. These sometimes have background images on the page that add visual interest to the page. The visual interest isn't the issue with these, but sometimes they, rather perplexingly, contain elements that detract from legibility. It's not uncommon for sections of the background image to, for example, contain large sections of yellow. The black text of the adventure, when overlaid on this, becomes hard to read. This makes it hard for the DM to pick out the text and actually make out the words being used. Generally, the background imagery and/or color is too dark which obscures the text being overlaid on top of it. Making the background text lighter tends to be an easy solution. I would note also that in the modern era it's not uncommon for people to run off of an electronic device like a laptop or tablet. If you're using a background image or a background boxes for text then make sure it remains legible in both print and on the screen.

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## Legibility 2

{nightmare map)

## Focus the text on the meaningful interaction

Perhaps you've had the pleasure of listening to someone tell a long rambling story. The speaker has a point, but diverges time and time again during the story. By the time they get to the point they have either forgotten it or the listener has lost all interest in whatever the main point of the story was.

It's critical for the text of a room to actually be related to the focus of the room. If the focus of the room is to have a chandelier that can drop on the group then the writing should be focused on that. This serves two purposes. First, it makes it easier for the DM to find the information they need. Digging through a description of all of the minutiae of a dining room in order to find the phases related to the dropping chandelier, during actual play, slows down the DM. It makes it harder for them to find the information they need to run the game. Taken to the logical extreme (I wish it were the logical extreme, for many adventures do this ...), if the chandelier trap was built by Fred then this is not the right place to put in the description of Fred, his likes, dislikes, wants, goals, and full life history.

The main focus of the room's design should remain the main focus of the text describing the room. The sideboard in the room is not relevant to the chandelier problem and need not be mentioned except perhaps in passing. Unless, of course, it's related to the chandelier issue or some other interactivity. It's not that a room can't have multiple things in it, or that the room can only describe the main feature, but that the core of the writing's focus should be on that feature. Don't bury it, particularly in minutia.

The application of this principle goes beyond rooms. When describing a barkeep, the focus of the description should be their interaction with the players, plot, and so on. It doesn't matter that he was an orphan raised by the former owners of the inn. Unless that detail is directly relevant to the adventure then it should not be included. All it does is distract the DM from running the game during play. Focus on what is directly and immediately relevant to supporting the actual play within the context of the item.

### Text Focus 1

The Dining Room has a long and battered formal table, made out of rotting elm, with twelve once elegant wingback chairs upholstered in red velvet. One of the chairs has deep stains on it as if someone has spilled wine. There is a sideboard with several drawers made out of cheap pine with a peeling veneer of oak. The drawers are empty and it's missing on the left side. It looks like there was once a rug on the floor, from the discoloration, but it is no longer present. A chandelier hangs over made of wood beams that will fall if someone stands under it. There are plates on the table that contain the scraps of the last meal (mutton and carrots and peas) that is now moldy. There is a musky smell in the room, as if there has been water damage although there is no sign of it.

There's a lot wrong with that room description, but for our immediate purposes we can see that the point of interactivity, the chandelier drop, is buried inside the more general flavour text. A DM, glancing at the room to first run it, will have trouble locating it and that's not the goal. This could be solved by, perhaps, bolding the chandelier portion. Better yet is to rewrite the entire entry. Placing emphasis on the chandelier high up in the room description, or lower, or after a line break, or some other way in order to call attention to it.

## Proper Nouns

Shrl'dhsk'usjs the dragon is a fearsome foe, opposed only by the knights of the Royal Shdj-djskmetru order, led by the gallant Sir Drojstra and his rival Sir Drojstran. Please don't do this. I'm not saying that the dragons name needs to be Fred. I am saying that the popper nouns you use in an adventure should be easy and memorable for the DM to recall. A certain fantasy RPG setting is famous for the incomprehensible pronunciation of its names. Sorba the Worm is much more relatable to the party than Shrl'dhsk'usjs the dragon. It is understandable, the desire to be authentic. But you don't have to be authentic. It just has to seem to be authentic, and you can do that and still make the names pronounceable. There can be an allowance for historical settings, but, still, perhaps select from the possible choices those that may be easier for the DM to manage at the table. And, likewise, placing names that are very similar to one another should generally be avoided as well. There may be a palace for one or two to be similar, with much hilarity from the confusion, but remember tha the DM must be able to keep them separate in their own head in order to be able to run an effective game,

## Terseness

Far too often the DM has to fight the text of the adventure in order to find the information needed to run the game. The DM is trying to run the room but instead is wading through the mountains of irrelevant backstory, motivations, and minutia that clog up the adventure text.

A key aspect of scanability is writing tersely. A tersely written room can be more easily scanned than one with irrelevant detail. This encounter bloat can generally be attributed to two things: putting information in the encounter that the DM is unlikely to need and padding the text with words that do not contribute to meaning. In both cases this extraneous information can clog up a description, hiding the pertinent details important for the DM to run the room during actual play.

Adventure encounters must be explained in just a few sentences. Again, this is an appeal to the DM at the table who is actually trying to run the encounter. The characters enter room five. The DM looks at the entry and sees: four long paragraphs of text? A column of text? That's not going to work out well for the DM. The players are waiting and the DM is staring

down at the adventure for several minutes trying to take in what the room is doing so they can run it.

The goal is, generally, not to communicate details. "The elf has grey eyes" is not a meaningful bit of data that moves the adventure forward or communicates anything interesting to the DM. In all likelihood the elf having grey eyes is not meaningful to the adventure. If it doesn't matter to the adventure then leave it out. "Heresy!" will shout a certain group of village torch & pitchfork manufacturers. It's not that I feel that worldbuilding and setting atmosphere are useless. They can be quite valuable, but only if done in the right way, and more importantly in the right place, which is rarely in the middle of a room description.

### Focus on action, what is relevant to the party

The focus of a room or encounter description should be on the core intent of the area. In other words, if the intent of the bedroom is a tapestry then the focus of the description should be on the tapestry ... and not on the bedroom. A "whimsical bedroom" may be enough to describe the rest of the bedroom while the rest of the text should focus on the main event: the tapestry. A long-winded description of the bedroom and its contents does nothing to assist the DM. In fact it harms the DM's ability to run the room during play. A long description forces the DM to wade through the text and steals the focus and DM's attention away from the main subject: the tapestry.

In no way am I saying that each area should only have one focus. Instead I'm encouraging a style of writing that keeps the focus on the ACTIONABLE details of a room. The irrelevant and the trivia can be added by the DM. The designer needs to focus on the new, different, and interesting elements that they are bringing to this otherwise "mundane" room.

The room description, proper, can be as fantastic as you want. The most bizarre wizard's lab possible, or the most gory and grungy orc lair imaginable ... as long as you can communicate that in a couple of sentences. The rest of the description, if there is any, needs to be focused on the main event. The big stew pot and line of Halflings about to go in it, or the giant brass clockwork spinning about.

This isn't permission to add a 20-paragraph description to the set piece, or to eliminate the room description. Rather this is an exhortation to remember to keep the focus of the text on what's important.

### Text Focus 1

Osmond the barkeep hails from the lands to the south, a little village called Rasmon. He wed there and after the birth of their first child he moved his family here to Dundogan because of his pride. After working for several years in small jobs he took a lease on the tavern and now

runs it with the help of his family. He is a portly fellow, always wearing a clean apron because of his vanity and quick to make travelers feel welcome. His eyes are blue with a balding head of brown hair. He usually wears a set of brown pants as well as a clean yellow shirt. He can be found tending bar most days or cleaning up the place.

Osmond The Barkeep is friendly, vain, and prideful. The rest is trivia, of no matter to the adventure at hand, presumably. All we've done with the longer text is tell the DM what a fantasy barkeeper looks like and how he acts, as well as some facts about his past that, again, almost certainly don't matter to the play of the game. It is not that you can't add some color to your NPCs, you most certainly can, but don't bury the most important details, those that will come up immediately in play, in the middle of other text. Make it easy for the DM to grok that he is friendly, prideful and vain.

## Common Padding

In a matter of course you may come to find yourself in a place wherein you need to make some decision regarding the degree to which you pad out the word count of your adventure.

Ug ... even that much was painful for me to write. Don't pad your text. Padded text detracts from the DM's ability to scan the text quickly and understand it. They have to fight through useless words that add nothing to the room's meaning. If the first phrase of a sentence is padded out then it makes the second phrase all the more difficult to find.

Padding can sneak up on you and comes in lots of forms. I'm going to list a few of the more common types to watch out for. I would also recommend the book *Writing With Style*, by Ray Vallese. Ray is an editor and so it's full of somewhat dubious editing advice, but he does cover padding quite well with several examples, and his commentary is directly related to RPG writing.

## If/Then Writing

"If the party enters the room then they see a dragon." What?! Is this a quantum dragon? It doesn't actually exist unless the party enters the room? Or, more correctly I guess, the party can't SEE the dragon unless they enter the room? This is all nonsense, of course, but I like to call this the quantum conditional. "If the party searches the box then they find a trap." In both cases the sentences are padded out with the 'if' conditional. The box IS trapped and there IS a dragon in the room. A much more effective sentence is "The room has a dragon" or "The box is trapped." Even better would be "The box is trapped with poison gas" or "A dragon snores on a treasure pile." Both have fewer words and the descriptions are easier to scan and much more effective. Note also the relationship to keeping the focus of the sentence on the main activity, the dragon or the trap. Both the dragon and trap appear in the first few words instead of being buried deeper into the sentence.

Appears to be ...

“The room appears to be empty” and its close cousin, “The room seems to be empty.” No. It does not appear to be empty. It IS empty or it is NOT empty. If this is text for the DM then why are you telling the DM it appears to be empty? Why not say “A spider hides on the ceiling” instead? Tell the DM what is going on without padding the thing out. And, while this isn’t a section on read-aloud, telling the players in the read-aloud that “The room appears to be empty” is the best way for the party to nuke the room with napalm from the doorway. Anything that “appears to be” is a key clue that it is not.

## Rooms – skip the empty and mundane

The DM only has so much ability to absorb information quickly during the game. When writing descriptions it's important to concentrate on the aspects of the encounter that are unique and/or interactive, the elements that are meaningful to running the room. The DM themselves can be leveraged to provide detail and description for the portions of the encounter that are not interesting.

There's a shorthand phrase for this: Everyone knows what a kitchen looks like. Everyone who ever runs an adventure knows what a kitchen looks like. Why is the room description and DM's attention being wasted telling us what the kitchen looks like? We know what the kitchen looks like. What makes THIS kitchen special? Tell us that. That's what we're paying for. The special. And it's completely ok if there isn't anything special about it. Just skip it. We don't need an exhaustive list of what's in the guard room ... unless there's something special about it. Special has many meanings. It could be a bit of description that cements the room in the DM's mind. It could be directly related to the adventure, like a map, or the mumbly-pegged hand of the princess. But if it's NOT then you don't need to include it in the description. Feel free to say “the guards pull down the table to hide behind.” That's great. That's action oriented. But don't just give a laundry list of things in the room. When you do that it distracts the DM from what's important. They have to dig through the mundane and boring descriptions to find the important stuff in the room. You're supposed to be helping the DM. Describing a table almost NEVER helps the DM. It also bores the players, or perhaps even misleads them by thinking that if you're spending so much time explaining to them what a kitchen is in minute detail that surely there's something there worth spending many minutes turning the place over.

This principle applies to most parts of the adventure. The tavern the party will walk into? Is that special? What's special about it? Don't just include a description of the barkeep, his wife and kids and the usual "cheerful tavern" description. Just like with the guard table, it's okay to cement a description with, say, a Green Dragon head, over the bar, or some other

description to anchor the tavern with. But we don't need an exhaustive description of a "normal" fantasy tavern. We all know what that is. It's common for NPCs to fall into this trap also. Exhaustive descriptions and long stat blocks aren't needed for most NPCs. Maybe a quirk or two to make them a bit memorable and then move on to what IS important about them. Or, move on if there is nothing important about them.

But wait, there's more! You don't need to tell the DM about other things they also expect. "The statistics for the monster are in the appendix." Yes, that's where we expect them to be. A cross reference page number? Ok. A full-on sentence? No thank you. "There is nothing else in the room." Sure ... just like every other room when its description has finished. "The monsters have no treasure." And we already know that, because if they did then you would have noted it. This is all just padding.

## Rooms 1

This former kitchen has a cabinet full of large pots and pans, most battered and showing signs of heavy use. The cabinet drawers have battered utensils in them, three forks, two spoons and five knives, as well as a ladle. The upper cabinets have some old crude chipped plates. Nothing is really worth anything of value.

So, it's a kitchen right? A well worn kitchen? A battered kitchen? A heavily used AND battered kitchen? All of those summative the kitchen and allow the designer to move on to the important part: what makes this kitchen special, if anything. And it's ok if it's not special, it's one of those mythical OSR Empty Rooms. Some color is fine. A victorian laundry list of the contents is just padding.

## 3-Sentence Read Aloud

Player attention span is a treasure beyond worth. Ideally, the players are staring attentively (with adoring rapture ...) at the DM while the DM relates a few statements. Then the players plan and scheme, totally engaged among themselves, before shifting back to the DM to tell them what they want to do. The cycle then repeats. Far, far too many adventures break the players' attention with bad read-aloud.

I'm not against read-aloud. I'm not for it either. But if you're going to engage in it then you have to do it correctly. WOTC did an informal study at a gaming convention and found that no one listens after about two to three sentences. The players' attentions drift off. They pull out their phones. They look at their character sheet. They stop engaging with the game through the DM. Two to three sentences! That's about all you get for read-aloud. After that you should be providing facts in the DM section for them to relate ad-hoc in response to the players inquiries and actions. And yes, this applies to the villain monologue as well. And also



the king's monologue in the beginning. A couple of sentences, then find a way to turn it interactive with the players and their characters.

Use your sentences wisely. Cue the players who are paying attention. Be evocative, even with a room's rundown. "A 30'-wide room with a statue in the middle. The walls are grey blocks." That is not evocative. That's relating facts. You're not supposed to be relating facts. Well, you are, but you're supposed to be doing it in a way that paints a picture in the players' minds. Remember Core Conceit #2? The whole purpose of read-aloud is to do the DM's job for them. If you're not bringing the room to life in the read-aloud then why are you including it? The read-aloud must bring the room to life in both the players' minds and the DM's. The DM needs to get enough from it that they can, with the brief follow-up DM text, fill in the details. The players need a vivid picture to interact with.

Also, it's almost universally true that you want to avoid the use of second-person writing. "As you step through the door to the tavern you see ..." Second person is not effective in read-aloud, and comes with all sorts of traps, such as the entire party being insubstantial and floating through the door, or blind, or any of a host of other immersion issues. Write neutrally, and without a second-person narrative style.

### Read-Aloud 1

The near platonic example: *Rock crunches underfoot as you enter a cave tunnel that descends gradually. It is mostly 8 feet wide and there is clear evidence of people widening the tunnel. You can see a larger opening 15 feet across with another normal size branching off to the west. The tunnel looks to only be about 5 feet high and it is very narrow. Your light strains to reach the end of it. In front of you your tunnel you've been travelling along continues to go along with another decent.*

To be fair, it was in the adventure this was paraphrased from, the front WAS in italics, but it was also in a curve font to add an extra degree of difficulty. Note the repeated uses of "you" and the implicit assumption that the party is travelling DOWN the tunnel when the map has a loop in it and the party would be travelling UP it ... a continual risk when using "you". Note also the emphasis on size, using exact dimensions. As I'll mention later, this sort of fact based information tends to destroy the mystery of a locale; it's far better to generally use approximations until the party gets out their laser level. We can detect some purple prose in these, as the rock crunches underneath our feet, and, in general, a lifeless kind of description. Long, focused on specific measurements, and not doing a very good job at painting a picture.

Later, in the same adventure, read aloud will tell us, in the initial room description, that papers we see on a desk across the room are sea charts, and that sealed barrels contain rope, salted fish, tar and biscuits, destroying the parties ability to conduct an investigation of a room full of mysterious barrels of unknown contents.

## Read Aloud 2

Tower of the Black Pearl, by Harley Stroh and published by Goodman Games, gets a purple intro read-aloud at times, but Harley is generally masterful at writing a description. In one room “The air in this room is thick with the scent of mold. Rotten crimson robes hang from hooks on the wall and several dark vessels rest on a rickety shelf. A seemingly endless series of runes are carved in to the floor, wall, and ceiling, covering every square inch of the room.”

Note its length, quite short and yet doing a great job of painting quite the vivid picture of a room. Not over revealing the contents and yet intriguing the players to have their characters investigate.

## Using the Appendix

Woe be unto the designer! Woe! Woe! The cruel, cruel arbiter of adventures has decreed that there can be no fiction piece or twenty-page historical backstory! Woe! What is a designer with a strong authorial vision to do in the face of such cruel dictates? Put in an appendix.

The appendix is safely in the back of the book to be ignored by those of us who just don't get the majestic vision of you, the designer. It's tucked back there with new monsters, magic items, and spells, safely out of the way of running the adventure.

And what makes the appendix so special? Why can't the backstory or fiction piece go up front? Because of the need to run the adventure, that's why, as per usual and always. Imagine there were eighteen appendices in an adventure and they all just gave historical references to further the DM knowledge. Except for appendix eleven smack-dab in the middle; that one has all the monster stats in it. This would be bad for the same reason that putting the backstory up front is bad: you have to dig for what you want. By organizing all of the non-critical information in one place you make it easier for the DM to find the critical information. Supplemental information should go in the appendix. Fill it to your heart's content ... especially considering PDF page count is essentially free.

Well, I mean, except for ... too much generally means something. I sometimes start a review with something like “This two-hundred page adventure uses ten pages to describe a four room dungeon.” In other words, a very high page count with a very low number of pages for the actual adventure tends to indicate that the designer's focus was somewhere other than the adventure proper. The backstory, historical reference, etc has taken up the designer's focus to a degree that the core of the product, the actual adventure, has suffered. This is not automatically true; I'm sure it's theoretically possible for a short adventure to be great and still have a long supplemental page count ... but, possible and probable have different definitions. If you find yourself with a lopsided page count then, perhaps, what you really wanted to publish was a setting guide and not an adventure?

## Simulationist Detail

How much is too much detail to include? How much is too little detail to include? You don't want to provide every minute piece of detail of an encounter, but at the same time there needs to be enough detail to get the DM's imagination working and firing, in order to leverage it.

A common area in which overwriting abounds is the description of secret doors, traps, machines, and the like. There can be a somewhat creeping simulationist text in these sorts of encounters, a desire to point out how they work and every little detail about them. The exact dimensions, how they work in every detail, how to open, close, detect, disarm, interact with them. Certainly, in some cases, it may be necessary to detail the inner workings of one of something, or at least an aspect of it, but it's important for the designer to take advantage of the best resource they have: the DM. Allow the DM to fill in; the description just needs to be enough to get them going in the right direction.

### Simulationist 1

Let's go on a short adventure in an old Dwarf mine. One of the rooms has a pit trap with a creature at the bottom, the entire thing covered by an illusion of the floor. A simple pit, this feature takes an entire page column of text to describe. A description of the trap takes up the first sentence, and could have been stopped there. Then comes a section on noticing the trap ... which repeats some of the information in the very previous sentence. Then another entire section on interacting with the illusion. Then ANOTHER section in what's in the pit. Then ANOTHER section on falling into a pit. And all of this in spite of the fact that a pit trap may be the single most common trap in all of fantasy gaming, almost certainly outnumbering all other traps combined. The emphasis on mechanics and describing every little aspect of the trap detracts from the actual ability to grok the trap and how to run it.

### Simulationist 2

You are exploring an old tower. There's a corridor. It has a trap in it. A blade slices down, 1d8 damage, DC15 reflex save to avoid. But, no, it couldn't be that simple. The description tells us the trap is triggered by stepping on a special floorboard of a slightly darker color. Ok ... we can handle that. This is ALMOST enough to run the trap. It gives us some feedback to relate to the players in case they ask about the hallway. "Yes, one of the floorboards has a slightly darker color." This should be enough then for the players to follow up on, IE: Up until this point the description encourages the back and forth interactivity between the players and DM that is a hallmark of a good game. But then it continues, taking up two decent sized

paragraphs to note EXACTLY where the discolored floorboards are , how the players detect them, what the trap is made out of, the roll to avoid and the damage taken ... and then what happens next to reset the trap automatically. This is far, far too much information. Just the basics and a little evocative writing. The specifics, in a world of magic and/or superscience, are seldom if ever needed.

## Empty Rooms

Some rooms are more important than others. Some rooms are full of interactivity. There are buttons to press. There are people to talk to, grow to know and potentially ally with ... or stab. Things to do! And then there are the filler rooms. These are the empty rooms. Such rooms are not necessarily devoid of contents, but rather rooms that are not as directly interactive as others. Some games, such as D&D and others that demand a Rest/Recharge element, need empty rooms as a kind of safe haven. Others have them for plot purposes or light simulationist purposes; the cultists need someplace to prepare food or else pizza delivery is going to leave their secret lair exposed. Or, perhaps two groups of creatures just need some empty space between their lairs as a buffer zone.

The key phrase here is "not necessarily devoid of contents." There is both a negative and positive aspect to an empty room that still has things in it. In a negative aspect, empty rooms can be holding tanks for trivia. Full of words and descriptions of things that do not matter to actual play. This is the exhaustive list of a room's contents, and a textual emphasis on elements that do not drive the adventure forward. Does this room have a lot of text? It must be important! Or, it's an empty room that the designer has padded out with trivia.

The room can still be empty and help drive the adventure forward. They can be viewed as foreshadowing--rumors in another format. Spoor on the ground can hint at a nearby monster. Scorch marks on the walls hint of laser rifles nearby. These don't need to be elaborate. Just enough to let the DM build upon them.

Rooms could be listed on the map with no key number at all. Or listed with the word "Empty", instead of a key number. Or they could be keyed with just a name "12: Opulent Ruined Bedroom", or they could have a sentence to give it some life, or another for clues or such. But, after this, the length starts to drag on and efforts should go into polishing other, interactive rooms. Focus on what's important.

## Background & Fiction

Every time I crack open an adventure and see it starting with a piece of fiction, or a page or three of historical backstory, I sigh. I understand that some people like these elements; I do not sigh because I don't like them. I sigh because I suspect their existence implies things: pertinent information hidden within them and too much emphasis on supplemental information and not enough on the core of the adventure.

Fiction elements in an adventure are something to be cautious of. Using a fiction element, a short story to set tone or introduce characters, can be fun for some readers. What it is most definitely NOT is an enhancement to usability. Pertinent information for the DM should not be buried in the text of a short story. Requiring someone to read a fiction element in order to comprehend or run the adventure is not good design. If the DM needs to know the information then it needs to be somewhere other than a short story. Further, I would go a step further and recommend putting the fiction in an appendix. An appendix is an excellent location for supplemental information that may be optional to the adventure. This way the core of the adventure booklet can be reserved for the Play At The Table elements, making them easier to find and reference during play.

The same goes for background information. This is really just fiction in another form, disguised as historical fact. This can be another case of burying information needed during play in a long section of text that is trivia. If it's really important what happened 18 millennia ago then you're being too specific with your backstory. You don't need to be specific. You've got the DM's imagination to leverage to be specific. The Earl's 18th and 26th sons are trivia. And if they are not trivia, but critical to play, then burying them, their names, pertinent information in a long section of trivia is detracting from the adventure's usability. Background that is more than a couple of paragraphs long generally falls into the Backstory/History/Fiction category. This only obfuscates the adventure and the information the DM needs during play. In fact, if the entire section were to be called "Overview" and provide JUST enough information, or maybe even a bit less, to get a high-level view of what's going on then it may be more appropriate. Again, if you simply MUST include background information then put it in an appendix. And if it is pertinent? Put it in a short summary, overview, table, bullet points, or something else to ensure the DM can find it easily during play.

## Reference Material

Recall that the core conceit is that the adventure is supposed to be a play aid. An aid to help the DM run the adventure at the table. Far too many adventures require the DM to read the

adventure over and over again, to use a highlighter extensively, research monsters, and to take notes. Copious, copious amounts of notes.

If the adventure requires the DM to take extensive notes prior to running the game then the adventure isn't written well. It hasn't fulfilled its core mission: to be a play aid at the table. Everyone has hunted through books for monster stats, or maybe even hunted through an adventure for someone's name. I'm always a little bewildered when I encounter this. It's almost like the designers either don't play D&D at the table or, more likely, they know the adventure so well that they don't need notes. Which begs the question about just what kind of feedback is coming back from playtest groups (and you did playtest, right?). The designer may be too close to their own work to recognize the gaps in it. The solution here is easy: reference data.

Things the DM needs should be readily available and 'in their face.' A separate map, tacked up behind the DM screen (or, the virtual DM screen, these days ...), is an excellent example of this kind of reference material. Putting additional data, like a wandering monster table, on the map is another example of this. If the adventure is NPC-heavy and/or social then putting a brief summary of the NPC's on a reference sheet seems more than a worthwhile endeavor. Combat? Putting the monster stats on a reference sheet seems like a good idea. If the DM needs it during play then ensure they can find it easily. It doesn't have to be completionist, but does have to trigger their memory.

And for those with dreams of actual print books, take special note of the front, back, and middle of the book. The inside of the front cover and first few pages, as well as the back cover and last few pages are all excellent places to place reference tables and pages since they are very easy to thumb to. In certain bindings the middle pages, where the book naturally falls open to, is another potential location to place reference material. The early generation D&D modules by TSR illustrated some of this. They came with a heavy stock removable cover that doubled as a DM screen, the map being available on the inside with the artwork on the outside. The specific use case here, a removable cover with a map inside, doesn't necessarily need to be emulated however it is a great early example of thinking about how the game is run and providing the reference material in an easily referred to location.

## Details on the map

The map is a very powerful tool. As a resource for those adventures that have a map, the map is almost always open in front of the GM, or at least a quick flip away. It's an exceptional reference tool for many types of adventures. It's clear that it is also an underutilized resource. Most maps confine themselves to simply showing gross details and layout, with a basic room key number, "14" on each room. The map has a special place in

games though, it is the one thing that is almost always in front of the GM. As such it represents a terrific opportunity for presenting more information for the GM to reference during play.

The map generally presents some basic information: a layout, a room key, some dimensions and a scale; "one square equals 10 feet" or some such. But there's so much more that can be leveraged with the map. Some adventures like to have a section in every room description describing the light. Why not put that on the map instead, shading the areas for different light? Or put the noise radius, or listening radius on the map, showing what the monsters can hear or what the party can hear? Both of these let the DM know at a glance what those conditions are and they can convey them to the players without referencing the text. For that matter, why not put room names on the map in addition to the numbers. "11" is pretty meaningless. "11. Throne Room" or "11. Throne Room of Ming" is likely to trigger some memories in the DM. In some cases, why even number some rooms? "Decrepit Bedroom" might be enough for the DM to run an empty room. Just noting a room as "Empty" can be an effective technique also. Water? How about depth shading, or a little arrow for current? Put a pool of water or a giant cauldron could liven up a fight. Even just noting in the room labels that there is a minotaur in a room makes it easier for a DM to have the creature respond to nearby noise; the DM now knows at a glance there is a creature nearby to respond.

Some adventures have a little section right before the room keys that notes the dungeon conditions up front. Something like "damp stone with tree roots hanging from the ceiling." But the DM has a lot of information to keep in their head, and this sort of atmospheric information can quickly be lost. These sorts of "always on" conditions could be text located around the map, a constant reminder for the DM to add them to the rooms on an ad-hoc basis. No room on the map? The same could be done as a footnote or header, or in the fancy borders around the page edge that some adventures have. Other information the DM may forget could be the wanderers table, that is, again, something that could go on the map. The point is to put this sort of information where it is easily referenced by the DM, and in some cases in their face all the time.

The map tends to be something that is always open in front of the DM, or quickly at hand, and it can serve as an excellent tool to help prompt the DM. And while I'm using a map here as the most common example, other reference pages could also serve the same function.

## Maps 1

Diogo Nogueira did an entry for the 2012 One Page Dungeon Contest called The Hidden Shrine. He's put a rumor table on the map, he's put a wandering monster table on the map ... and the wanderers are even up to things! He's also put same-level stairs on the map, altars,

statues, streams with the current flow, rubble, chasms, sinkholes, rock formations and included a bit of a third dimension with the same level stairs and the passages passing over others. Those details add a lot to the usability of the DM, both as a logistical resource, with the rumor table and wandering monster table, and in helping the DM's imagination. The dungeon features go mostly unmentioned in the text, so he's adding details for the DM's imagination without even needing to bore the DM with words.

## Maps 2

Benoist Poire did a map for an adventure appearing in AFS Magazine #3, the Hyperborean Laboratory. It would be hard to miss his use of color and how it conveys information. Note also the many texture lines, noting elevation changes and even obstacles on the map. These are all extra challenges for the party, and advantages/disadvantages to be used in any encounters they have. This is a map on which you can have an adventure!

## Maps 3

Back to Sham again. Take a look at his map for Spawning Grounds of the Crab-Men, from Fight On! magazine #3. Chasms, ledges, lots of details with holes in the floor over in room 39. Rubble and sinkholes. Pretty easy, eh!

## Maps 4

In a 2011 post called "Dungeon Quarters" Gavin Norman described a bit of "Keying the Map on the Map" at his City of Iron blog. It's just an example, but it shows what is possible and with a bit of imagination you can see how this would be a great tool to both jog a DM's memory and provide additional resources to them.

<http://the-city-of-iron.blogspot.com/2011/10/mapping-idea-dungeon-quarters.html>

## Adventurers Love the Third Dimension

I know that whenever I go to a friend's house I like to climb in through an open window. Or climb up a trellis to get to a balcony, or up a tree to get on their roof. It makes for a great party entrance! Tada! Bryce is here! Adventurers thrive, both literally and figuratively, on oblique thinking. Why go in through the front door, which is sure to be trapped, when you can go in through a window, a hole in the roof, or climb up to a second story balcony?

Some types of adventuring sites lend themselves to this sort of outside-the-box exploration style, especially in a world of grappling hooks, grav boots and levitation spells. Houses, warehouses, castles, towers, anything that can be climbed up will, you can be certain, BE climbed up by a party looking to gain an edge.

While it doesn't have to be extensive, some note of the windows and/or condition of the roof can be appropriate, as can a sprinkling of chimneys, balconies and the like across the building's



map. Don't just say they all have iron bars across them; that implies that the designer is dictating the flow of the adventure instead of the party doing so. Instead just note the condition of the windows, or how breaking glass causes wandering monster checks or some such, where appropriate. Every single abandoned home I've driven past has had broken windows and the plywood pried up from at least one of the covered openings. Is there a tree nearby to get on the roof? We want a party that thinks and we want to reward them for doing so. It doesn't have to be easy and it doesn't have to be consequence free, but it's the job of designer to think about those windows and NOT make them unbreakable glass.

## Using Varying Map Types

"Maps" are used here to mean visual representations of something. Different types of adventures require different ways for the DM to interact with them and that needs to be a consideration when you are developing the adventure maps and describing them.

The typical old-school D&D adventure is about exploring a dungeon. A map comes with the dungeon and it contains numbers on the different rooms. When the players enter that room then the DM looks it up from the map key text and relates the information to the players. Perfect. The map and key text work together for the style of game: exploration.

Next let's consider a village or small town. There's a small map of the village, say a main street with rows of buildings on either side, and they are numbered and as the party goes down the street and looks in each building then the DM looks it up and reads the key text. Perfect! Wait, no?!? That's NOT how villages and towns are interacted with. Do your players walk down the street and visit every shop, in order? Or pick them out at random and walk up to them? Or do they instead ask about the inn, or the tavern, or the armorer? It's a more goal-oriented objective interaction style. Typical map keys make no sense in this situation.

Likewise, imagine a "bug hunt" in a small ship with three decks and a dozen rooms, total. In this sort of situation it doesn't really make sense to have a traditional room/key either. You might have one, to give the room a title/use, or common objects, but the goal is to hunt/be hunted and the adventure text should concentrate on that. You don't embed the information about the axe murderer in the description of the room where he sleeps. Instead you describe the axe murderer and how they operate up front and then just give a brief description of the locations.

Social situations can be brought to life by giving people little personality quirks and, even more so, giving them relationships to others in their social environment. Not only does Pa Ketchum chew & spit tobacco, but he's in love with the widow Sally and trying to keep it secret. The widow loves the baked goods at the bakers, and the baker can't stand her. The relationships BETWEEN people is what makes a social setting come to life. These are trivial to add and provide so much more for a DM to work with. It brings the folks to life. Mechanically listing details about villagers is boring. "51. 5'11, 175#, brown hair" does

nothing for the DM. It adds no life to the adventure. Telling us he speaks with a lisp, chews tobacco, and is in secret love with the widow? That's thirteen words that just communicated WAY more to the DM and provided them with significantly more experience both in running the NPC and in running village encounters. Now there's someone else for the party to see out late at night while they are on watch for the vampire ...

One way to visualize this is with a mind map. This easily shows, at a glance, the various relationships in the village, and perhaps can contain other information as well, such as personality quirks and so on, making it a breeze for the DM to run the social setting without having to constantly refer back to long sections of text and pick out the important details. A textual description is fine, but what's important is how the DM will interact with it during play, and that can call for a reference sheet for any but the most simple relationships.

## Tables and Bullets and Whitespace and Bears, Oh My!

Let us all pray that we are the last generation that has to experience Wall of Text in an adventure. We all know that is: a giant column of text, unbroken except for some perhaps an occasional paragraph break. It contains all the information to run the encounter, and none of it is easily found, being mixed in a giant chunk of text that causes the eyes to glaze over and DMs everywhere to breathe a sigh of despair.

The DM needs to be able to find information easily. If important data is mixed into the freeform text of the adventure then the DM will need to hunt for it during play. There are a variety of techniques to ensure that the DM can find information easily. Bolding, italics and other font changes, bullet points, whitespace, tables and other offset techniques can all assist in drawing the DM's attention to information quickly.

A typical paragraph with multiple sentences about a series of rumors would make it hard to find and use in play. Separating those rumors out into bullet points helps the DM locate the information more easily. Likewise, the information that an NPC knows when questioned could be handled this way, making it easier for the DM to find the answers to the questions the party asks.

Likewise, bolding, italics, and other font changes can immediately call the DM's attention to creatures, or other important features, of the encounter. Whitespace, such as indents, can help as well, as can shaded text boxes or offset boxed text.

It is important, though, to keep in mind that the correct information needs to be highlighted in some manner in the text. Otherwise, the DM's eyes are going to be drawn to the wrong topics; the secondary clause of a sentence is generally not the place to place important information, or highlight it.

## Formatting 1

Granny Gretkin is the oldest woman in town, if she lived in town. She takes a dim view of the mayor, having known him since he was a young rascal. She has a peculiar take in that she disbelieves what most people would claim to be true, such as the mines, and believes wholeheartedly in what no one else does, especially when it comes to the state of the village cows.

**Granny Gretkin**, the local Wise Woman in the boonies;

- Old **Tom McMurdow** is up to something, could always tell by the way he wore his britches
- Thinks the hype over the **old mine** is just that, hyper.
- **Kids are behind it!** Old Tom loved to fool around down there when he was a youngin
- Folk should be paying attention to the **cows, they aint giving milk!**

I'm not suggesting this is the end all be all of a NPC information font, but it should be obvious from this example that the second, bulleted entry with bolding, is easier at a glance to locate the information the DM needs to run ol GranGran. That's the goal, to make information retrieval trivial for the DM running the adventure.

## Formatting 2

Gargantuan buttresses disappear in to the darkness of the roof of this cavern, lair to the **ancient red dragon** Arturo the Golden. Atop his **towering golden hoard** he slumbers, smoke curling out of his nostrils. **Golden orbs swirl** overhead illuminating all in a dazzling array of scintillating colors.

It can be tempting to follow a style guide: always bold nouns, always bold traps, always bold treasure, and so on. I would generally avoid this. Some consistency is good but what's most important is that you look at each and every entry with a critical eye and ask yourself: What's important here? That's the information you need to highlight or call attention to, be it through formatting, placement in the entry or sentence, or through other methods.

## Order of battle

Order of battle refers to how the creatures react when the party is detected. When the party invades a keep, or cave, or some other structure that's got a band of bandits, tribe of humanoids or other organized foes, the reactions of the occupants to invaders needs to

come up. Inevitably the worst adventures say something like "They all stay in their rooms and don't come to the aid of their comrades in the next room." They hate the other creatures. The creatures want to "test" the party. Or, much more frequently, the reactions inside the complex are ignored. This clearly violates core conceit #1: Assist the DM. It's likely that the DM will need to pull out the map and key descriptions, figure out who is nearby and who can hear and react and how they do so, either during play or by taking notes before play. This is another piece of work that the designer should be handling for the DM.

A couple of sentences up front on how the complex reacts to incursions can be appropriate in some adventures. Some individual room notes would also be appropriate in places. It's fine for some of the folks to ignore the orc room because they are always fighting. But the room right outside the Necromancer's door? Or the Captain's quarters? Or noise at the main gate? Better yet, the guard captain comes down to chew the orcs' asses out, or the Necromancer has had enough and it's Zombie Orc time!

The point here is that intelligent monsters react. They might not react in an organized manner with well thought-out defenses, but they will react to the murder hobos in the next room and/or the sounds of that bully Ur-gon finally getting what's coming to him (see Social/Factions). A full reaction matrix in each room isn't needed and would distract from the adventure at hand. But general notes, either up front or special cases noted, is a welcome addition to the toolkit running the game at the table. Maybe just noting on the map which rooms have creatures in them that will react--another case for offloading information onto the map.

In some cases just a touch of verisimilitude is called for. In the case of guards, generally, the ratio of on-duty guards to off-duty guards is about one in four. If you've got ten watching, then there are thirty more somewhere else sleeping, drinking, gambling, and so on. That's who is in those barracks and common rooms. It's also important to remember that these are unlikely to be crack troops. Or, perhaps, remember they are bored and have had to deal with a lot of false alarms and thus slow to respond to "another one?!" And how many are foot dragging, not exactly excited about being the first guy through the door into the room full of trouble? Drunk villagers don't react the same way special ops soldiers do. These aren't words to live by, but rather enhancements to the verisimilitude that can be inserted for even more fun. There's a definite line between verisimilitude and simulationist. And simulationist is never good unless the system the adventure is for is a specifically simulationist one.

This isn't license for full-on tactical turn-by-turn combat advice to the DM. "Turn 1 the wizard casts spell shield. Turn 2 they cast haste. Turn 3 they run out the door behind then down the left hallway and through the next two doors." This sort of tactical level advice is prescriptive and tends to be a sign of over-investment by the designer in their creation. Keep the advice high level and trust the DM to run it; the designer just provides the tools.

## Order of Battle 1

### 2 - Dank Guardroom

Five orcs huddle in the center of the floor roughhousingly shooting crooked dice. (23 cp) They escalate encounters quickly from annoyance to anger to violence.

...

### 8 - Barracks in disarray

16 orcs mill about, sleeping, gnawing on bones, throwing knives, and shooting crooked dice. (125 cp) They will all react to any sounds of combat from room 2 that lasts over 3 rounds.

-Or -

### 2 - Dank Guardroom

Five orcs huddle in the center of the floor roughhousingly shooting crooked dice. (23 cp) They escalate encounters quickly from annoyance to anger to violence. All 16 of the orcs in room 8 will react to sounds of combat from here that last over 3 rounds.

The first room pair requires that the DM have a perfect understanding of the adventure. They know, somehow, that there are orcs in room eight, removed from the room two key by six other room keys, that are ready to respond to combat in that room. This sort of familiarity with the adventure is seldom achieved by anyone running an adventure. The second example takes care of that problem. It directly notes, in the room in which the party will have the interactivity, what will respond and under what conditions. The information the DM needs is right there ready to be used.

## Order of Battle 2

### Fortress Reactions to Incursion

The fortress will respond intelligently to incursions. Guards will attempt to send a runner to raise the alert to all but the most trivial encounters (>2 combat rounds or high odds.)

Nearby rooms will then react to the incursion as notified, while named NPCs will rally a more organized response force. If two of those forces fail to push back the incursion then they will switch to a defensive structure, fortifying positions, until a "better plan" is come up with, typically in 2d4 hours, in which an coordinated attempt is made to send assault forces from several directions at once. If this plan or the defensive plan fails then morale will start to break (-2 on rolls) while small groups of guards attempt to loot and escape. Hired NPCs will follow suit while True Believers will commandeer small groups and kill the looters and/or attempt to organize defenses.

There you go, nothing more needed except perhaps a couple of words about Fanatic or Hired Gun for commanders/NPC's.

## Cross References

One of the more annoying things about adventures is the need to dig through them to find the information you need. The party is in the local bar questioning the bartender about a former employee. The DM then inevitably needs to go digging through the adventure in order to find the section that contains the employee's information, so the bartender can tell them his address and habits. Sitting around while the DM digs through the adventure looking for information is no fun, nor is taking notes as the DM while prepping the adventure for play. It doesn't have to be this way. Cross-reference notations can help.

Adventures are full of things that need something ELSE to make the story progress. Farmer Fred wants a red cow, or the party finds a blue key, or Mike is in love with Mary. In each case there is more information about the other thing, the red cow, blue key or Mary, located somewhere else in the adventure. A cross-reference, to a room number or page number, helps the DM find the information. In a game where you can plead the gods for "the path to the blue gate", the DM needs a way to find the information about the blue gate easily, to know where the details are in the adventure. Or, when they question the barkeep for Mary's location, a location cross-reference gives the DM that information. A room number, a page number, something to help point the DM to the information they need.

A special note here on Monster Stats. Placing them where the DM needs them, in the room in question for example, or in a sidebar, is quite appreciated. It helps the DM run the encounter that is in front of them right now. Ancient history had adventures with just their HP listed: Orc (6hp.) Modern creatures tend to have VERY long stat blocks. These can fill a column if not more, of space and can interrupt the flow of the adventure. Consider placing abbreviated blocks at the DM's hands and then noting a page number in the adventure where the full stat block can be located. If the trolls just erupted through a wall from their tunnelling efforts then perhaps we don't need to see the rules for Troll Trap Building right then and there.

### Cross References 1

Imagine the party confronts a tower. This princess they are looking for IS in this castle, but it is locked by special magic. Only three keys can unlock the door. [#6, #14, #18.] This tells the DM exactly where to consult when the party casts their "locate keys" spell, or uses the ship's sensors, or whatever.

### Cross References 2

"The smallest guard will flee from combat, heading towards the necromancer's lieutenant (#24.)"

We now know which direction and/or door the guards will flee, as well as where the party will find him and the path he will take to get there.

## "Place any treasure you wish"

A play aid for the DM. This is what adventures claim to be. Yet many seem to shift the workload from their own shoulders, where it should be, to the DM's shoulders, where it should not be, for creating the adventure. It's one thing to say "You can expand this section if you wish", or for the DM to place their own items in an adventure. It's another to require the DM to do the work.

It is sometimes tempting to instruct the GM to place a treasure, creature, encounter, NPC, or other element into the adventure. "Have the Minotaur lair contain any treasure you wish." This is the road to danger! Isn't the GM free to make ANY changes they wish to the adventure? And isn't the DM free to replace all of the treasures? And all of the monsters? And the entire adventure? Which makes the value add from the designer what, exactly? The designer is adding value by doing the work FOR the GM. Shifting the work onto the GM, through these phrases, does not align with that value.

There is a difference between a rubble-filled hallway that the design includes to allow for the DM to expand the adventure. In this case the designer is leaving room for the DM to include their own creations and not diminishing their own work or requiring the DM to do additional work to use the product. This stands in contrast to, say, the cave the dragon holds the princess in, the object of the entire adventure, being described as "Create your own cave and place the dragon, the princess, his minions, and his treasure as you see fit."

Likewise the obligatory "you can change any of the place names in this adventure to align with your own game world." This is, of course, within the purview of the DM. Just as continuing to breathe air is in the purview of the DM, as well as a host of other things they can do. It's not necessary to point this out explicitly.

There's clearly a difference between "This hallway could link up to one of your own dungeons" and shifting the load on to the shoulders of the GM. The purpose of the adventure is to do the heavy lifting for the DM.

## Evocative Writing

Evocative writing is a very hard part of creating an adventure. Making an adventure usable? This can be done with a good checklist and just knowing what the common mistakes are. Interactive adventures? You don't need to create THAT many new ideas to build up from. Evocative writing? Every description. Of every room. Of every monster. Of every scene. Of every object. Does it all work together to cause a mental image that springs instantly to the DM's mind? One that causes them to imagine it vividly, their own minds feverishly racing to fill in the details? No; the answer is most likely no. Almost no one is very good at this. The good news is that the more you write the better your writing will be. You might start using a thesaurus and some clumsy attempts at conveying images, but eventually it will become easier.

## Information transfer

Deidre would say that no two people can ever truly understand what the other is saying. Let's look at how this applies in the context of adventure writing.

The designer faces a terrible problem. They must first come up with an idea and visualize it. Ug! Creativity! Then they have to get it down on paper in a way that matches what their vision is in their head. Then, facing an even greater challenge, it has to go down on paper not so that THEY can understand it and visualize it, but in such a way that someone else, someone who has purchased the adventure, can read it and understand it. And I mean REALLY understand it, in such a way that they visualize it perfectly in their mind. In a way that their mind runs with it and fills in the gaps ... thus allowing the DM to then transfer the ideas to their players. Not only is the designer trying to get their ideas out of their head and down on paper, but they need to do it in such a way that someone reading it can take up the mantle of creativity. It's a wonder any of us can ever understand anything anyone else says! [Footnote weird early century writers and word order]

You need to communicate the core concepts of the adventure, room, monster, whatever, in a flavorful manner. In a way that gets across all of the imagery you have in your head that only you can see. You have the most powerful tool at your disposal: English.



There's a tool that the best authors use: ignoring the rules of language. You have my permission to murder the English language. Grammar, spelling, using nouns for verbs and verbs for nouns ... it doesn't matter. Do it. Do whatever you need to with the words in order to communicate what's going on in your head. You need to lodge an idea seed in the DM's head. The DM is going to read the adventure, once, probably just skimming it. From that you need to lodge an idea in their head that they can then riff off of. Something interesting. Something that springs to life and takes on an existence of its own, growing and festering their mind. This is the paradox of writing adventure descriptions, the more you put down the less room there is for the DM to fill in and that kills inspiration. The DM needs fuzzy edges around what you are describing. They need flavorful impressions. Then, their own mind will fill in the rest. Less, in fact, is more. If you do a good job you can do that for each and every room.

This is not permission to engage in purple prose. This is writing so flowery that it moves from enhancing a description to overwhelming it, flooding the text with a sea of overwrought adverbs, adjectives, and cumbersome thesaurus picks. . These sorts of overly dramatic, as it were, descriptions are recognizable as coming from fantasy novels with soft earth crunching underneath one's feet and wisps of smoke from cheery fires. This comes off as trying too hard to set a scene.

## Abstracted Descriptions

Specificity, a famous judge once said, is the soul of narrative. What, however, does that mean? What is specificity? It's detail. And, more specifically, detail in a way that adds more value than the words would alone suggest.

"Treasure: Coins, gems, statues". Well, that's certainly a worthwhile description, isn't it? What's the point of putting in a description like that? There's nothing really there beyond what a generic description of the word 'treasure' alone might imply. And, yet, the goal of the designer is to add value. To create those evocative descriptions. To put out there something that adds value, more so than rolling on any number of random treasure tables one can find online. Not just in a treasure, but in the way a room looks. In the way a monster looks. And you do that by very finely targeting something, to be specific about some aspect that implies much more than the words on the page does.

### Abstracted 1

Let's take two examples of the same thing. First, a room with a description that says something like "There's a wooden carving." Well, ok. A wooden carving of what? Where is it? How does it make the viewer feel? What does it do to the room? The description is, by itself, static. It does nothing to enhance the room description. The DM needs just a little bit more to get their imagination racing. And that's the goal: just enough specificity to get the DM's imagination racing.

In opposition to this take another description: "A leering wooden frieze of a demon towers over the entrance". It's not that many more words, keeping the description terse, but while the initial description was generic, an abstracted description of what was in the room, the follow-on is specific. It tells us what it is. "Murals adorn the walls." Murals of what? That description does nothing to enhance the room while the leering demon frieze immediately forces a picture to spring to the DM's mind.

## Abstracted 2

The party is attacked by thugs who wield clubs. Uh. Ok. I guess that's a pretty standard encounter. But it's an abstracted encounter. Thugs and clubs both are appeals to a kind of generic and rote RPG encounter. Let's be specific. Wielding a claw hammer? Or shivving the party with an awl? By being specific we appeal to a kind of relatable environment that the players can understand. The encounter is grounded in reality. And thugs? If the party is in the guild quarter then perhaps drunk apprentice carpenters with their claw hammers? This generates a visceral emotional reaction, much ore deeply than a generic 'thug with a club' can.

## Common Adjectives/Adverbs

English is a very powerful language. It has more words in the dictionary than any other language. Also, you can steal words from other languages. Also, you can make up words that don't really exist, all gangnam Jabberwocky style. And yet, in spite of English having the richest set of possibilities for picking the EXACT word that describes something, designers use words like "large."

There's a large chest in the room. There's a big rock on the floor. The flag is red. The bottle is small. These sorts of common adjectives and adverbs are almost always a terrible choice to use. They convey little in the way of additional information, just giving the DM a relative size of something or some such. And each other word that could have been used communicates far more information.

A thesaurus lists the following as synonyms for Large: broad, considerable, enormous, extensive, full, generous, giant, gigantic, grand, great, hefty, huge, immense, massive, populous, sizable, spacious, substantial, vast, wide, comprehensive, gross, liberal, roomy, super, sweeping, thumping, tidy. And about a dozen more. Each one of those conveys a different tone, tenor, or context than the word "large." Each of them is overloaded with meaning that isn't carried through when the word "large" is instead used. A broad chest. There's a thing! A colossal stone. Similarly, a vermilion banner along the road. The imagery is much more intense. The vision is communicated to the DM much more effectively, which in turn allows them to communicate the scene to the players in a richer manner. Inspire the DM's mind with vermilion banners and colossal stones and let their imaginations spring to life with inspiration and color to then communicate to the players.

## Archaic Words of Mystery

I blame the English. Victorians, Edwardians, whatever. It's their fault. Their dictionaries, grammars, and taxonomies. The incessant need to explain and categorize everything. There's a song lyric I'm fond of: If you think I'm magical, 'Cause roses bloom with my touch, that's mathematical, I think you think too much, I touch roses.

Trying to overly explain something kills the mystery. It stops the mind from wandering and racing to fill in the details. Just let it BE. There's a mouth on the wall talking to you. Why is that? Who cares? "The wizard who built the keep cast magic mouth and then a contingency spell and then permanence and then ..." Oh boy. Good job. You explained how a mouth can appear on a wall using a predefined set of things that appear in a rulebook. You're the designer (or DM.) You don't got to explain anything. You get to make things up. It is because you said it is. You touch roses. The roses bloom. The mathematical explanation is irrelevant. WHY do the roses bloom? Is it important? It usually isn't. But in explaining the why then the mystery surrounding the phenomena is eradicated. And the soul dies just a little bit more. The mouth exists. Focus on the gem INSIDE of the mouth and stop explaining the why's. When you don't explain the Why of something then the mind races and imagination blooms. And that is exactly the effect we want to encourage. We want to create something that encourages the players, and DM, to want MORE. And not fulfill that.

### Mystery 1

A shimmering iridescent barrier, like a cocoon, hangs from the middle of the room. Inside is a featureless humanoid, smooth, devoid of features, except for piercing sky blue eyes from which just a hint of golden rays emerge from, and a bloody left hand. And a sign about its neck. MURDERER.

Why is that body there? Is it important? Is it explained in the context of other rooms? The barrier ... what powers it? How did it come to be? Is it important? If so, maybe we throw in a level or some gemstone studs. But we don't need the backstory. We don't need to know who put the creature there. How the device is powered. What his crimes were. C

**Rick Stump addresses a bit of this at the end of his article on Building Tension at his Don't Split the Party blog. In particular, he focuses on creating positive emotional connections for the players by engaging their imaginations and the human mania for their minds to fill in the blanks and WONDER>**

[http://harbingergames.blogspot.com/...ng-tension-part.html?\\_sm\\_au\\_=iVVQ565868v778H](http://harbingergames.blogspot.com/...ng-tension-part.html?_sm_au_=iVVQ565868v778H)

## “Show, Don’t Tell” and Concrete Descriptions

“Show, don’t tell” is common advice in many writing circles, and it applies to adventure writing as well in several ways.

A well-written adventure shows the players what is going on instead of telling them. This in turn allows the players to filter the scene through their own lenses and draw their own conclusions, which will in almost every case be the same as what they would have been told. But because the players then discover it for themselves, it resonates much more viscerally with them. In spite of this, a great many adventures tell the players instead of showing the players. What does this mean? The descriptions convey a conclusion directly, rather than communicating what leads to the conclusion.

Abstracted descriptions relate conclusions. They summarize. They tell instead of showing why. “The altar looks evil” is an abstracted description. In very simple terms it is telling us that the altar looks evil. But what does this mean? Why? Why does it look evil? Is it made out of skulls and dripping blood with a bird-demon statue on top? Those are specific things. When seeing those things someone might make a reasonable conclusion that the altar is evil.

Concrete descriptions are much more effective in conveying a scene than an abstracted description or a conclusion. Again, “specificity is the soul of narrative.” Imagine a room that smells weird. That is a conclusion. The players may smell dust, sweat, and that sweet sweet smell of rot. They may think to themselves “this room smells weird.” That’s the conclusion the players are drawing from the DM’s description. We WANT the players to draw those conclusions rather than feeding them the conclusion directly. Instead of the text indicating that the room smells weird the text should indicate that the room smells of dust, sweat, and that sweet stench of decay. A room that has scary lights? Again, conclusion. What makes it scary? Green, faint, flickering, darting about? That’s a more effective description. It SHOWS why the lights are scary rather than just TELLING it is scary.

Avoid those conclusions and instead provide the specific detail that allows players to reach those conclusions on their own, be it in read-aloud or in DM text.

### Show 1

“The Salvage Market is a dirt-floored warehouse built from scorched wood planks scavenged from the Mournland. The room reeks of dust, sweat, and oil. In here, the town’s brokers do business from behind armored counters.”

Note the conclusion here: “In here the town’s brokers do business from behind armored counters.” This is a conclusion. We don’t get a sense of the brokers, or their armored counters. We’re just told that’s what happens here. A better description would have left the player with the impression that the town’s brokers do business behind armoured counters.

## Show 2

The party travels through a fog bank straight out of *Fury road*. This is the text provided: "Leaving Salvation, you're soon swallowed by the fogbanks that encircle the ruined nation of Cyre. Strange shadows flit through the mist, distorted voices bellow from afar, and a supernatural chill reaches deep inside you. Beyond this border, a twilight landscape of blasted battlefields stretches as far as the eye can see."

Note again the "strange shadows" and "distorted voices." (As well as the sin of telling you what you think by referencing a supernatural chill running through you.) [Move this to the correct section?] Contrast this with the description of the fogbank from the first adventure in the series: "As you approach it, the fog churns into ominous shapes: screaming faces, collapsing buildings, and outstretched hands. Explosions flash within the gloom, but no sounds are heard." Much more visceral. It's not telling you what you think, that you feel a chill or that the sights are shadowy. Instead it is showing us what is going on and then the Players get to make the conclusion that the sights are shadowy.

## Show, Don't Tell

In writing a description there's a place for the raw communication of facts. But facts communicate very little compared to the power of a person's imagination to fill in the details.

"Show, don't tell" is common advice in many writing circles. A well-written adventure shows the players what is going on instead of telling them. That then allows the players to filter the scene through their own lenses and draw their own conclusions, which will in almost every case be the same as what they would have been told. But because the players then discover it for themselves it resonates much more viscerally with them. In spite of this, a great many adventures tell the players instead of showing the players. What does it mean? Conveying a conclusion directly rather than communicating what leads to the conclusion.

Describing a bandit gang as evil or describing the Baron as a terrible person is an example of telling. The bandits are evil. The baron is a terrible person. Ok, sure. Whatever. In these cases you're telling the players that the thing has some aspect. The [bandits/baron] is [evil/terrible.] Instead of telling why you want to show why the thing has that aspect and then lets the players A,draw their own conclusions. The Baron routinely publicly flogs people to death in the town square, and the characters witness that. The bandits crucify one person from each wagon they hit. Now the players get to draw their own conclusions. Instead of abstracting the specifics of a situation into a conclusion [Evil! Terrible!] you show an aspect of them that is evil/terrible. This could be done through exposition "They crucified old Sam. They do the same to every wagon they hit." or through events in the game such as

the party coming upon a destroyed wagon train with several people crucified. In both cases the players are then left to draw their own conclusions about the parties involved, and certainly will have a much more visceral reaction than simply being told that, in the abstract, they are evil.

This abstraction of information, telling instead of showing, can creep in in unexpected ways. Describing a monster, or a temple, as scary, for example. That's a conclusion. Instead, describing a scene in which the monster/temple is active and having the players think "man, that's scary!" is much more effective.

And do it tersely. No one said writing a good adventure was easy.

## Preparing the mind to accept information

The imagination is fertile ground. However, there's an interesting phenomenon when it comes to the imagination: the less constrained it is, the harder it is to engage effectively. "Write a short story about anything" generally produces no immediate results. "Write a short story about a tiger" and suddenly the imagination springs to life. With just a little framing the imagination is ready to spring to life. This is a very valuable thing to understand. By laying just a little groundwork, the DM's mind will become all the more receptive to the information about to be imparted to them through the writing.

This constrained imagination principle has a corollary: fuzzy impressions work better than details. The more someone tries to explain an environment, in excruciating detail, the less our imagination has to work with. By communicating the gist of an environment you leave the edges fuzzy, and the mind naturally races to fill in the rest. It's almost as if you need some blank space around the edge for the brain to work with.

## Effective Room Titles

A specific, and often overlooked, aspect of this is the name of the room the party is entering. The room title can be leveraged to provide some initial context loading for the DM, preparing the ground for the description to come. This orienting to the context can be a critical tool. By introducing the topic you then help frame what's to come. Imagine an encounter description that has a tree in it. What you imagine changes if we're already in a giant sequoia forest versus a bonsai garden. By introducing the room concept, through a room title, you help put the DM in the proper frame of mind to interpret what's to come.

### Room Titles 1

Room keys typically come in a couple of varieties, depending on the layout person. Let's look at a couple of (bad) examples. One style has the room number and first sentence on the same line, like:

12. This bedroom room has twelve orcs

A second style has them on separate lines. Such as:

12.

This bedroom has twelve orcs in it.

Note in particular all of the wasted space in the second example. All of that space after the "12." is just blank and empty. In addition to orienting the DM, we can, in this example, also do it without necessarily affecting page count.

12. Bedroom

There are 12 orcs.

But wait! All we've done here is put our orcs in a bedroom. What if instead ...

12. Ruined Bedroom

There are 12 orcs.

Ah, now the context has changed. We know it's a ruined bedroom! But wait, there's more!

12. Opulent but Ruined bedroom

There are 12 orcs.

And now we're getting somewhere! We're building up a context through the room title. As these progress you should, no doubt, be imaging things in your mind, and that should be changing. Getting more concrete. Situations with the orcs are developing.

12. Frilly Victorian Bedroom

There are 12 orcs.

Now what? Trying on clothes? Bewildered?

This is, clearly, a forced example and a badly written room. The orcs are not doing anything. But, from the perspective of the ROOM'S description, IE: what kind of room is it, or what kind of a bedroom is it, the power of room titles should be coming into focus. While the orcs could use some work, does the room description, proper, actually need anything else? That depends. If it's just a room to encounter 12 orcs in, then maybe not.

## Suspension of Disbelief

Verisimilitude: the appearance of being true or real.

The players are at the table to play the game. That's why they drove through traffic. You don't need much of a hook; if they want to play then they'll take the bait offered. But, also, why not just sit down and roll a d20, if it's greater than 5 then you won tonight and get to level up and everyone gets to go home early. Clearly, the journey is the destination and they want the experience they are about to have. Immersion in to the game world, the suspension of disbelief that allows that, is what the designer should be aiming for. People, creatures, they are all dynamic and act in an explainable, if not always rational, manner. You don't have to provide enough bathrooms for everyone, that is stumbling in to simulationist territory, but do things make sense? Or, better yet, is there the appearance of things making sense? That appearance of being real is what helps immerse the players into the game.

## Suspension of Disbelief 1

There was an early draft of an adventure in an old house in a village. The townsfolk were up in arms because their children had disappeared into it and not come out. They party shows up and the villagers want to hire them to go in and find/rescue their children. Is that how people act? Wouldn't they mob up and go in, no matter the house's reputation, to save their own children, and probably their neighbors also? They all have a relationship to each other, in the village, and at least value their for the free labour they provide. The hook is not plausible. And, thus the party is not going to be immediately immersed in to the framing of the adventure. But, if they come upon the survivors of the first foray, as they stumble out back in to the crowd that didn't go in, bloody, some missing, a chaotic mess, and maybe a portion of the house now on fire from the torches



that accompanied the pitchforks, then that's more grounded in human nature. The party can empathize and relate on a basic human level. The villagers are acting like they should. And, perhaps, it provides for more dynamic play, with a portion of the home on fire, and some of the survivors and few from the crowd insisting on going back in with the party.

## Transitioning to The Mythic Underworld

There is an element of The Fantastic in many RPGs. But there's also an element of the mundane. It's the juxtaposition between the two that provides moments of tension in the adventure. As the characters transition from the mundane world to that of The Fantastic, by leaving town, the starport, etc, the game changes tone and tensions begin to mount. It is at this point, the transition between the mundane and the fantastic, that, if an adventure can communicate it clearly, will prepare the players for what's to come. This is both character preparation ("I'm going to be more cautious now when opening doors") and player preparation. This second element is even more important. This transition point prepares the players' minds for the excitement and tension to come. They are now primed to accept the more fertile descriptions, and their implications, from the GM. We call this the transition to the Mythic Underworld.

The world around us is mundane. We get up, go to work, come home, eat our meals, go to bed. The people that make up the RPG world, be it fantasy, SciFi, Horror, or other, also live mundane lives. They farm. They run a shop. The sun rises. The sun sets. It's the same old same old every day. But the dungeon is different. There's a monster in there. It's full of weird things like giant glowing mushrooms. The haunted house in a horror game has spirits and demons in it. Planet X-223 has a predator life form on it. HUNGRY predator life forms. In most RPG adventures there is a point where the characters begin to encounter weird things. The characters transition from the mundane world of villagers farming turnips to a place full of giant glowing mushrooms. The world no longer works like you expect. Magic mouths appear on dungeon walls and talk to you. Spirits cause the candelabra to float around the room. And an unknown species turned the hunters into the hunted. The characters transition from the real world, and the mundanity they expect, to the FANTASTIC.

The goal is to make it clear that the party is SOMEWHERE ELSE. And by somewhere else, I mean in the mythic sense. The rules of the real world no longer apply. Physics would be wonky. There could be pit traps in the floor. Something is probably trying to eat you, maybe something that somehow(?) has acid for blood. These things don't happen in the mundane world but they do here. This transition communicates this to the players. It sets the tone. It prepares the group for things to come and sets the stage for all of the evocative descriptions that are to come. They will now interpret what the DM says through this transition lens. There is an element of tension, and perhaps fear, as the party begins to face the unknown.

## Mythic Underworld 1

There's a mountain in front of you. A sheer cliff face. You can see an arch in it. It's dark on the other side, pitch black. There's a lake in front of it, running up the cliff edge. You row across the placid lake. You reach the arch. You see a set of stairs, going down. Narrow. Long, they run for a while. The elements here communicate that you are Now Somewhere Different. You have passed from the mundane world to the Mythic Underworld. You should expect things to get weird. You are entering The Unknown.

## Mythic Underworld 2

You approach the house. It's old. Vines and dead bushes are overgrown in the yard. The exterior is weathered. Shutters hang from a broken hinge. Glass is broken. You can see cobwebs in the windows. The massive oak door stands open revealing a half-seen room covered in shadows. You may now begin your occult investigation because you KNOW, deep down in your bones, that you are somewhere else. The players' minds have now transitioned from the businesslike "dealing with the librarian to get information" to "ready to get creeped out" that you need them to be in to run the atmosphere of the house effectively.

## Mythic Underworld 3

There's no communication from the colonist outpost down below. The planet's atmosphere is barely breathable and there are dust storms as you land. You force the door to the outpost. You see a long hallway without a seeming end, but with it's ceiling and floors tiles in disarray, wires hanging down, and bullet holes everywhere. Something is not right here ...

PHILOTOMYS MUSINGS links

# Monsters

## NPC's

NPC's are the lifeblood of many adventures. Be they the shopkeepers, the townsfolk with a problem, or the lonely ogre in the dungeon. An NPC that comes alive can be a joy for the players to interact with, a fun time that they will remember and talk about for years to come. Alas, most adventures don't contain THOSE NPC's. Instead they contain boring NPC's with too much backstory and irrelevant physical detail. Avoid that trap and instead concentrate on giving your key NPC's a quirk, vibe, a subplot, of all of those.

### NPC's 1

The typical shopkeeper perfectly represents several of the principles of good adventure design. A typical one might be something like:

"Mary & her husband Jorg came to town eight years ago. After working for the saddler they saved their money and opened The Rough Saddle. Mary is 32, blond with a stout figure and a kind face. Jorge is seldom seen, working in the kitchen cleaning dishes and making stew. He is 33, black hair, and has a fair complexion."

Note the backstory that (presumably) doesn't contribute actively to anything in the adventure. And the physical features that are, essentially, common. This adds nothing to adventure and just takes up space. It's just the normal sort of filler stuff that can be inserted on the fly by the DM. There's nothing for the DM to hang their hat on. If Jorge was NEVER seen, or had leprosy, or Mary was bald and didn't know it, then we've added something for the DM to work with, to riff off of. A quirk, that makes the NPC memorable, be it their physical appearance, or a mannerism or something, to make them stand out, both to fire the DM imagination to run them and to remain fixtures in the players minds. "Black hair" just doesn't do that.

## Striking Fear

I am the master of stating the obvious. Ready for another one? You want the players to be afraid of the monsters.

That thing ... that thing that we just saw in the hallway. That we just caught a quick glimpse of ... Does that thing level drain? Does it shoot lazer beams from its eyeballs? Can I actually stab it at all? Does it regenerate? Will it rip Frank to shreds with its razor sharp claws? You want the party on its toes. You want the tension that THE UNKNOWN creates. Every time they see something you want them anxious just a little in anticipation. These are DELICIOUS gaming moments to be savored and encouraged. And you do this, in this instance, by making the party afraid of the monsters. Combat is never routine, or certain, when the party is terrified of what they face.

## Using Unique Names

Specificity is a wonderful thing. It brings things to life. Rather than a boring old abstracted thing "it is scary", you can instead build a certain vibe by being specific and instead describing things that are scary. This helps turn the routine of "Yet Another Creature Encounter" into something more memorable. Showing, instead of telling. One way to do this, with creatures, is to give them a name.

I'm not referring to Vargash the hobgoblin, Frank the bandit or Fen'Gol the orc. There's a certain effect from that, but not the one I'm referring to. There are two common ways to do this well. The first is to change the indefinite article to the definite article, which is just a fancy way of saying "the THE instead of A/AN." It's not that A troll lives under the bridge, instead THE troll lives under the bridge. Or, think of THE dragon or THE medusa. There could be one of two things going on. Either this is the ONLY one of those creatures, hence the THE, or it's the only one that matters to the people at hand. They don't usually encounter dragons in the village of Bogtown, dragons being only a legend. So when one moves in it is THE dragon instead of A dragon. This adds to the mythic nature of the beast. It's not just another old boring "a blah blah blah." It's not routine. It's a threat. It's THE ogre. A ogre is routine. THE ogre is a direct threat to the people at hand, and that's how they refer to it.

Another way to handle this is to give them a name that is both more and less specific at the same time. It's not a plain old gang of bandits. Instead they are Shorty Bill's gang or Fat Mamma Cass's boys. Specificity. Now they are instantly more memorable than just a plain old "there is a group of bandits here." Likewise "the troll of Boggstown" or "the Hangertown ghost" are both better than just saying "a troll." Bandits have been seen on the road? No. Y'all be careful, Mamma Cass' boys been seen down that way. That's specificity.

## Creating new Foes

RPG's should have a significant degree of uncertainty in them. The players are continually making decisions for their characters. They don't know the outcomes. But, when there IS certainty then things become more routine. It's like playing poker with an open hand of cards: everyone knows what everyone else has and then it's just a random draw from the deck determining who wins. There's not a lot of tension in that. Contrast this to the tension of the unknown in a normal game of poker. You never quite know what everyone else has in their hand and are weighing your own chances.

Monsters should be scary. It's implied in their very name: monster. Fifty years of roleplaying means that significant numbers of players are now aware of most of the standard monsters

in any game system. Not to mention That Guy who has read and memorized the monster manual; he exists in every game system. This familiarity with the standard creatures makes them less scary. The players know their weaknesses and strengths. They know how to recognize them. They may even know their stats and/or how powerful they are. None of this contributes to anything interesting or meaningful in the game. The tension is removed, replaced by a random draw of a card from a deck of cards and/or roll of the dice to see if you hit.

Towards this end, why not make up new monsters? The book monsters are easy to default to, but I would suggest that this generally be avoided whenever possible. It's fairly easy to re-skin a classic monster: medusa, basilisk, cockatrice, catalopulus? Four forms, all turning someone to stone. This can be done with just about any standard creature in the game system. Giant scorpion body, face of a man, turns to stone with their breath? Sure! You now have something that creates uncertainty in the group, which leads to the tension that makes RPGs so delicious. For folks that need help there are a decent number of creature generators available. Now, the party is guessing, not knowing what to expect. And that creates the tension that an RPG thrives on.

A word of caution: Take care to warn the players of extraordinary danger. If the creature looks like an 1 HD orc but has 20HD and a +20 to attack and does 2d100 damage then some foreshadowing of his abilities would be in order. Rumors, tales of his feats, spying on him ripping the arms off a person or its lightning quick reflexes. That's why there are always statues around the medusa's cave.

**Over at his Metal Earth blog, Aos has a nice little article on how he keeps his monsters fresh, and his players guessing.**

**<http://themetalearth.blogspot.com/2010/09/retro-redbox-outrage.html>**

**Gamer Plenipotentiary Jeff Rients talked a bit about monsters in a 2012 blog post called "fine tuning your monsters." While he talked mostly about campaigns, his last section, 3, on repurposing monsters, gives some fine examples of quickly & easily turning old monsters into new. <http://jrients.blogspot.com/2012/11/fine-tuning-your-monsters.html>**

## Creatures in Action

Palace of the Vampire Queen is generally acknowledged as the first adventure ever published. Its room entries looked like "Room 3: 12 zombies." IE: just a notation of what kind of creature was there and how many. This is generally referred to as minimalistic keying. Fast forward a few years and we get adventure module B2, The Keep on the Borderlands and

the creatures in the Caves of Chaos. Now the creatures are doing something. They play dice. They are feasting. Or, at least some of them are.

This sort of dynamism in the rooms adds to the flavour. Rather than just 12 orcs, or 12 orcs waiting to attack, suddenly the party is coming upon something that resembles real life. Verisimilitude. They are dicing. They are wrestling. They are debating the search for meaning in an existence that is inherently meaningless. This gives the party and DM the chance to interact. Even if it's going to inevitably lead to combat, the suspension of disbelief is still intact and it gives something for both the party and the DM to riff off of during the encounter.

The creatures need to be doing something. They have not been waiting in ambush for the last seven days. They are not just "in" their rooms. They need to be doing something. Bored and setting up an elaborate "chopy choppy" game while in ambush? Ok. Giant rats in a room are boring. Giant rats eating a corpse is better. Giant rats feasting on the corpse of a monster whose buddies lair two rooms over is even better. Make sure things are engaged in an activity. It brings the adventure to life.

## Creature Descriptions

There can be a tendency to normalize The Fantastic in RPG's. What should spark wonder, joy, or fear is instead treated as routine. One way this manifests is with creatures. There can be a tendency to simply state what the party sees, in mechanistic terms. "There's an ogre in the room." But in this description the wonder of what the thing is gets lost.

Describe instead what the characters see, or sense. It doesn't have to be long. In fact it shouldn't be long. But you should describe it. "You see an ogre" is not a good description. "A grey hulking brute with massive muscling and long upturned tusks from the jaw." That's a decent description. Put it in the read-aloud, or the DM info, or give the creature a one sentence description in your bestiary. You're inspiring the DM and striking the fear of the unknown into the players. There's some doubt. You're showing, not telling.

Speaking of that principle of First things First and the bestiary, consider the monster entry in the bestiary, if you are including one. If the DM is looking up the monster it is most likely because it was just met by the party. In these cases it makes sense to lead with the creature's description, with how it looks, smells, etc, and perhaps some notes on the attacks. It pays to be flexible and put things in an order they are likely to be needed in the adventure. What is almost NEVER appropriate is background and ecology information coming first. This sort of fluff/world building can be appropriate if the creature is to be reused, but in terms of THIS adventure the entry is not being used that way it's being used to run the encounter. And thus, the description is likely the thing that should come first.

## Using Humans

Juxtaposition: the fact of two things being seen or placed close together with a contrasting effect.

Human enemies tend to be underused in adventures. They serve as a great point of comparison to the monstrous opponents the players will meet. If every opponent is a monster then what fear do the party have of monsters? If a lot of enemies are human then the Otherness of the monster is more pronounced. Humans also serve another purpose: they are more relatable. A monster committing atrocities? Sure thing. We expect that. Fellow human bandits who have turned to cannibalism? A little more real and relatable and therefore tending toward the more visceral. Need more HD? Give them more HD. Need a higher AC? Give them a higher AC. Want two attacks? Give them a second attack. Don't feel limited by what's in the published books. Those rules are for the players. Your humans can be as powerful as you want them to be.

I mean, within the confines of the game system you're playing. If every guard in the fantasy town is a superpowered fighter then the suspension of disbelief comes into play.

## Wanderers in Action

Random encounters/wandering monsters tend to be a staple of adventures. It's important to understand their purpose in your system of choice in order to both use them correctly and write them correctly. They should be written in such a way as to support the DM during actual play. This means helping them create an appropriate and evocative encounter.

The wandering monster is a staple of older versions of D&D. In older versions they serve as a timer mechanic; the more the players have their characters search, rest, etc then the more wandering monster encounters they will have, and since wandering monsters don't have treasure and treasure is where the majority of experience points come from ... it's very clearly a "push your luck" mechanism. Compare this to the more modern version of D&D where there is no reason for the mechanism ... then what purpose does the wandering monster serve? Does it add a touch of realism? Or does it just slow the game down and detract from the plot of the adventure? Understanding what purpose the random encounter plays in your system helps make the decision on if it should be included and how it should be included. A wandering monster chart in an older version of D&D that contained mostly dungeon dressing and sensory experiences would be working quite explicitly against the timer mechanism that the monsters on the chart represent. But in a different game system these may serve to help enhance otherwise empty rooms and/or long stretches of travel.

Assume an adventure for a system that does not have this timer mechanism. What, then, is the purpose of the random encounter? Or, rather, why is the random encounter not just a pre-planned encounter? Instead of a random table, a short paragraph describing the encounter the party has on their way to the cave. This could be entirely appropriate in many,

if not most, game systems. (Older D&D being a notable exception.) This then leads to the second point: an evocative encounter.

The encounter should help the DM run it, wanderer or no. The standard wandering monster table in an adventure tends to just be a list of monsters and perhaps how many of that type appear. This is, essentially, just a copy of the same chart listed in the DM's book for the system, or perhaps a subset of it localized to the creatures in that particular cave, etc. What is the purpose of this? If the chart is in the DMG then what purpose does it serve to also include it in the adventure, beyond not having to flip to the correct page in the DM's guide? An argument could be made for ease of reference, but let me point out what the chart is really missing: action.

If everything in the adventure is meant to inspire the DM to run a great game, to help them do so, then how can the wandering monster chart be leveraged for that? What the standard monster listing chart is missing is action. Any time you meet something, in a room or wandering, they should be doing something. It's this extra bit that inspires. The brown bear that shows up in the chart should be eating a deer, or getting goaded by a couple of goblins, or has treed a couple of goblins. Almost any activity would do. I say almost because there is one activity that I almost never like to see: "waiting to attack." That's stupid. It conjures up images of those old adventures in which an orc stands on either side of a door, eternally waiting for someone to open it so they can attack. Get your creatures doing something. It's this extra little bit that helps the DM.

And why should this be? Isn't the DM free to have the creatures doing anything at all, to create something for the creature to do? The blank chart allows the DM to do this, right? Theoretically, yes, that's correct. In practice though it works against that well known cognitive concept mentioned earlier. Too much freedom, in creativity, can be a bad thing. If the human mind has no place to start then it tends to have a hard time getting started. If, however, you place just a small constraint on the idea, you get it started, then the mind races to fill in the details. But it needs SOMETHING in order to start filling in the details. "Goblins" does nothing. What encounter is that? But if the table has "Goblins hunting" then, suddenly, the DM's mind takes over. Hunting? Hunting what? Have they caught it already? Or are THEY being hunted? The mind races. And that's a good thing. The designer has now helped the DM run a better game for their players by just including one extra word.

Wanderers 1:

I think the principle is so important that I have one entire page of my DM screen devoted to it. You can find examples from Sham, or 1d8, or several other sources. Other good examples can be found in Jungle Ruins of Madoro-Shanti. In it you can encounter a deer on a hill chanting "Beware Cho-odo! Beware cho-odo!" before it falls over dead. Examination reveals it's been dead for several days. Not only is this an action encounter but it also is directly related to what's going on in the adventure and helps build dread.



## Wanderers 2

Another good example is in Dzeegbagd. In this the animals act like animals, not psychotic rabid dogs. The other creatures will talk to you. That one gets a little long-winded, but the general principle of adding a bit more is followed. "Looking for a straggler to pick off" or some such gives the DM something to riff off of. Sometimes you have to narrow things down in order to get the old brain juices going. Give your creatures a reason to wander about or have them engaged in something.

## Wanderers 3

There's a line here between a good bit of extra detail and a bad bit. Dungeon Magazine #24 has an adventure called "A Hitch in Time" which includes a wandering monster table for the wilderness between town and the tomb. It has eight monster entries, with stats, and each has a little description. The description for the Shambling Mound says something like "It resides in a stream or marsh and attacks only at night. It's lair may be found blah blah blah." What's lacking here is action. Another entry has a flesh golem wandering the forest. It attacks anything it encounters. "This monster was created by a wizard who subsequently lost control of the golem. It has been wandering the wilderness in a confused state for many weeks, and it attacks anything it encounters that it perceives as being animate. The monster may be met day or night. It cannot communicate with the PC's, nor will it obey any wizard's attempt to control it. It may be mistaken for the golem rumored to be guarding [quest guys] tomb, if the PC's heard that rumor in the village." That adds nothing to the adventure. It adds nothing to the encounter. More than this, it detracts: useless information has a cost, in that it takes time to read it, whether prepping for a game or scanning for the actually useful bits in the middle of one. What we're looking for is something that is actionable. Maybe something like the flesh golem is clearing the forest of trees, and it may mistake the PC's for one. Or it is mindlessly stacking objects in a pyramid state, including dead forest animals, etc. It may mistake the party for one. These are things the party can interact with and the creature is engaged in some activity. Maybe the shambling mound is lecturing some giant beavers, or tearing down a beaver dam, or damming a stream, or engaged in a commune with a dryad, or worshiping a fairy circle, or marking his territory with deer heads. All of that is better than what's given.

This is a negative example; find something like it

### Wandering Monster Table

1. Centipedes, giant (1d4+1)

2. Centipedes, giant (1d4+1)
3. Kobolds (2d4)
4. Bugbear (1)
5. Skeletons (1d6)
6. Rats, giant (1d8)
7. Green Slime (1)
8. Albino Ape (1)
9. Crab Spider (1)
10. Gelatinous Cube (1)

You don't have to write a book for each one, you just need more than a single monster entry and have a verb associated with it. (With 'hunting' and 'attacking' used VERY infrequently.) Something like "Brown Bear" is lame. A paragraph on the brown bear is better, but probably too much. "Brown bear being baited by 2d12 goblins" or "Brown bear family eating an owl bear corpse" gives the DM enough to riff on while still being terse.

Some examples to riff:

<http://shamsgrog.blogspot.com/2011/04/monster-business.html>

<http://1d8.blogspot.com/2011/04/what-are-those-wandering-mon...> (dead)

<https://blog.d4caltrops.com/p/ose-encounter-activity-tables.html>

## Other Duties As Assigned

Magic items, Treasure, and Items of Wonder

"Each player receives a treasure parcel worth 250gp."

"Place any treasure you wish in the adventure."

"Treasure worth 2,500gp is present."

"6 gems worth 50gp each."

"Jewelry worth 1,000gp."

"a +1 sword."

"a broach of shielding."

"a potion of flying."

The above, in one form or another, is the usual part and parcel of the published adventure. Those treasures stink. No one is excited about finding one of those. "Ohhhhh! A +1 sword! I'm a bad ass now!" That's not D&D. That's some generic nonsense masquerading as D&D. Let's not forget: the job of the designer is to communicate imagination and wonder to the DM. That's what we're paying for, the designer's imagination. Those treasures don't do that. There's nothing in those. Let's compare those items to an excellent example, from the 1E DMG:

"Seldom is the name of Vecna spoken except in hushed voice, and never within hearing of strangers, for legends say that the phantom of the once supreme lich still roamed the Material Plane. It is certain that when Vecna finally met his doom, one eye and one hand survived. The Eye of Vecna is said to glow in the same manner as that of a feral creature. It appears to be an agate until it is placed in an empty eye socket of a living creature. Once pressed in, it instantly and irrevocably grafts itself into the head, and it cannot be removed or harmed without slaying the character. The alignment of the character immediately becomes neutral evil and may never change. The Eye bestows both infra vision and ultra vision to its host, and gives the following additional powers/effects. The minor or major powers may be used without fear of harm, but the use of the primary power causes a malevolent effect upon the host character."

Now THAT'S a magic item! If I found an agate I'd immediately pluck out my own eye and shove it in the socket. "DM: You find an agate. ME: I rip out my eye and shove the agate in the socket! Do I have infravision?!?! DM: No, you moron, you do not. ME: ARG! Are there any other agates around in the hoard?" That's the kind of behavior you are looking for. You want your PLAYERS excited about what they find.

You don't have to go all super-backstory on things either. It's pretty easy to reskin something. A bag of holding? Meh. How about ... A Maggot! It's actually a Maggot of Opening. A couple of inches long, squirmy, pale .. ie: looks like a maggot. Except it can open its mouth REALLY wide, let's say the size of a fist. It has an extra dimensional stomach so it otherwise acts like a bag of holding and it never digests anything. Ya gotta reach in to pull stuff out. Who knows what else it's swallowed? It tries to digest, so reaching in is a bit slimy & gross. A horn of blasting? The horn is either a tuba or a stork-like bird that you squeeze like bagpipes. A potion of flying? How about the potion is full of flies? And the user grows fly wings? Or a

scroll of flying that is actually a magical window cling film that is used like a tattoo? If you use it on a pig you have a pig balloon ... and then what happens when you eat the pig? All sort of weird and wonderful things happen when effort is added to a magic item. None of that shit happens with "sword, +1".

A +1 sword? Nope. How about AIDRU - SLAYER OF MEN. A longsword engraved the full length with arcane runes. The hilt is bare and will need to be recovered. Created by the death-priests of Ghoekra and wielded during their bloody crusade to rid the earth of all life. Moderately well know; feared and coveted. Drips blood, not because of the creation but through the sympathetic magic caused by all of the bodies it has been soaked in while killing them. Disturbing dreams while possessing; slaughter, etc. +1 hit, causes immediate morale check for any creature/group that recognizes it. (Who then inevitably yell "Aidru – Slayer of Men!!!") Glows with a pale red light and gives the wielder a +1 CHR bump when wielded BECAUSE OF FEAR! Aidru is a kick ass magic item. If I was playing I would use Aidru long after I found a +2 sword, or even a +3 sword. Those things, they don't cause monsters to yell "AIDRU! Slayer of men?!?!!" A broach of shielding? How about a snake circlet that comes alive and eats magic missiles? It's not that hard to reskin items. So why are you putting a +1 sword in your adventure? I'm paying for your imagination ... so IMAGINE!

You can see an excellent example of this in Fight On! Magazine, issue #3, in the Spawning Grounds of the Crab-Men, by Dave Bowman. In one of the rooms you meet a crazy crab-man who has picked up something he shouldn't have ...

"Grog the Gladius is a finely crafted short bronze stabbing sword. Grog glows a dim violet when held by a living being. Grog is a Lawful Sword +1, +3 vs. Dragons. Intellect 7, Egoism 12, with the power to See Invisible. Grog will communicate the presence of such things via Empathy." It's going to be hard to argue that this represents a wall of text, and yet the magic item is flavorful and is found in an environment (wielded by the crab-man, accidentally) that heightens its interest. Similarly, I just reviewed They Came from the Stars from the ... and the sky full of dust blog. The aliens have death ray guns and force field belts. These are nothing more than the same effects of a wand of magic missiles and a broach of shielding. Flavor. Reskin. Repeat. Ambiguity is ok, and even in some sense desired. Boring is not ok.

Further, don't focus on the mechanics. Focus instead on the effects. Too often items get bogged down in game mechanics. The designer attempts to divine all the ways the item can be misused by the players, or attempts to make the item "make sense." You don't need to do that. Over-explaining kills mystery and the DM is present to arbitrate the rules. Again, the role of the designer is to inspire, not explain. Kas and Vecna are much more interesting when left as throw-away references in a magic item description. Your magic item is much more interesting when it turns something to jelly once a day. No volume reference. No details like "save for apricot", no boring mechanics to weigh the world down, other than what it actually

does. If you are taking a paragraph to describe the game mechanics behind the device then the description has failed. Magic, Mystery, Wonder, Whimsy, and THE FANTASTIC are the enemies of Aristotle. If you tell me the bumble helmet lets me shoot poison bumblebees from its mouth once a day then I'm cool.

Mundane treasure is similar. Your PLAYERS should want to keep it for their characters, not just melt it down into slag. The treasure in room 46, level 1 of Dwimmermount is boring. A jeweled pin. A gold necklace. A comb. Not. Interesting.. The jeweled pin (800gp) will be adjusted to a jeweled CLOAK pin worth 800gp that is in the shape of scantily clad female elf beheading an orc. The splattering blood is shown in small rubies. [Someone is gonna keep that one and wear it, for sure!] The gold necklace is a locket and shows the face of a loved one back and a family name that still exists in Marburg today. They would love to have it back (sentimental value) but they are also poor and selling it would make a world of difference in their lifestyle. The comb is part of a 3-piece set. Finding the other two (mentioned previously) brings the value of the set to 200gp. Taking any of the coin treasure will result in wandering monsters being checked for every turn, and they will always be Lab Rats, as long as the coins are carried in the dungeon. That is all SO much more interesting. The PLAYERS are now interested in the treasure. Those items have some backstory, but you don't even need that. A jar of saffron, or ANYTHING with an adjective attached is going to be much better than "gold necklace."

## Hooks

Ah, the hook. A little piece of text at the beginning of an adventure, an idea of how to get the party involved. This is the start, for the players and their characters. It is where the framing, and immersion of the adventure begin. And, far, far too often, it is the first thing the party will encounter that goes wrong.

A hook is not strictly necessary, the DM can usually insert an adventure into their own campaign flow. But when it IS offered then it should be well offered by the designer. The hook is the external force of motion from outside the party to kick things off. There are many many examples of bad hooks. By far the most popular is "X hires the party to do Y." And, usually, several variants of this in the same adventure. Being hired isn't always bad, but it does violate a couple of the principles of immersion. It's better to show, instead of tell, and having the party stumble over something that they take an interest in is a much better design. The very best hooks motivate the players, instead of motivating their characters. After all, we're all here to play D&D tonight, the party knows a hook when they see something in the first ten minutes of play that should be followed up on. But by providing a decent hook, and even in motivating the players, the depth of immersion gained is quite a bit greater. Hell hath no fury like a motivated player. And, please, no more missing relatives? This is why characters are murder hobos, so nothing can be used against them to take their agency away.

Great hooks have some color to them. A missing mogul who you must find – because they have wronged you! And by god you'll not let some monster have her! A search for a group, charged to you by The Scarlet Tyrant ... to bring them back for a lifetime of torture. The king has heard the story of a great fish ... and must have it! He offers a massive reward, title, lands ... and people from all walks of life join in on the hunt! Monsters in the village? Nay! Nay! Villagers getting their shadows ripped from their bodies by nightmarishly described creatures. The local wizard is dead ... and you hear that a gang of thieves is organizing to hit his tower to loot it. Tomorrow. Specificity. Motivation. The players are not just hired. Compare the motivation you have to do a good job at work vs your motivation to do a good job with something you care about.

## Interactive Adventuring

When discussing interactivity in an adventure there are two usages: the DM/Player interaction and then Things To Do in the adventure. Both contribute to a good experience at the table.

There is a core concept at the heart of role playing games, and it's not the roleplaying. It's the interactivity between the players and the DM. The DM describes a room. The players have their characters react to what the DM says. The DM elaborates based on the actions of the players characters, and on it goes. This sounds very basic, but it's the basis for a good role playing game. And thus, a good adventure will facilitate this sort of interactivity between the DM and the players. And, of course, a bad adventure will reduce or minimize that DM/Player interactivity, robbing the game of one of its core joys.

There is a second type of interactivity as well; the environment that the party explores and interacts with. There needs to be things for the party to do. People to talk to. Buttons to push. Murals to examine for clues. Puzzles to solve. Hazards to avoid. This sort of interactivity gets the parties juices going. It gives them something to do on the adventure other than just stab things. This is critically important. Stabbing things is easy to design for and a very basic form of interactivity. Talking to NPCs and/or monsters is another sort of interactivity that's also a design principle. And a really good adventure will have interactivity beyond those two elements. Not just a place to hide from the monster that you are stabbing, or a fetch quest for an NPC you talked to, but interactive elements beyond stabbing and talking and their directly related events.

## Designing without mechanics

There is a tendency to design adventure encounters around mechanics. The platonic example is to design around creature encounters and some sort of challenge, be it environmental, social, trap, or something else. These sorts of encounters generally feel like they were designed around the mechanics involved, feeling less organic. The flip side of this is an adventure encounter in which the designer dreams up a situation and THEN adds

mechanics to it. I know this sounds like I'm splitting hairs and, to be fair, it is a nuanced point. It really has to do with an attitude switch inside the designer's head. When designing an encounter sit down and think about it, and do it in such a way that doesn't involve mechanics. For that underground river in a cave, really just imagine it. Thinking about the environment, how it's flowing, the terrain, without bringing mechanics into the situation at all. Then write it up, again, without mechanics at all. Then, once that is all done, think about the mechanics of the situation and add as needed. It's transparently obvious in an adventure when a designer thinks "I need a skill test, I'll put in a DC15 jump test." And it comes off flat and uninspired. But an imagined river, or chasm, that the party needs to get across comes across differently. It feels more natural, and a jump test is one way that the party might negotiate it. Instead of a challenge you have created a situation, and situations are key to encouraging creative play. Sometimes a trap is just a trap, or a monster is just there to be a challenge. But the heart of an adventure is a monster that wants something, and stabbing it is just one way to negotiate the situation.

### Mechanics 1

An underground river crosses through the cavern. Characters can make a jump check to leap over it.

-or-

A cavern with a broken ceiling and floor has a raging river 12' wide rushing through it. The slate is slick on either side, and jumbled roof pieces lay in the river.

This is a crude example, but the first fairly telegraphs what the designer intended. The second though lays out a situation to overcome. The environment is more present. This presents multiple opportunities and challenges. Leaping, on a slick take off and landing? Throwing ropes to attach to things to help? Moving rock pieces to build a kind of stepping stone bridge, or leaping from piece to piece? The second entry is not much longer but the emphasis on the environment presents many more opportunities for creative play.

## Creating Tension Through Telegraphing

There's a tension inherent in adventures. The players are making choices for their characters, the GM adjudicates, something happens, and the cycle repeats. This is a core RPG mechanic. An example of this mechanic and the tension it creates is The Obvious Thing.

This is a situation in which everyone knows what's going to happen, the players and the DM. And everyone knows that everyone knows what is going to happen. Imagine a skeleton sitting on a throne with a jewel in its hand. The players want the jewel. The players also know, they just know from their years of being alive,, that if they take the jewel the skeleton

will animate. And the DM knows that the players know this. They just know. It's obvious to everyone. And the players know that the DM knows that they know. And thus a kind of gleeful gaming results. The players are pushing their luck. They are trying their character's fate, trying to do the thing and succeed in the act that obviously has a telegraphed consequence to it. And thus ensues the wacky party plan, from which flows much fun. The tension in these situations is palpable. And it comes with a kind of glee for everyone at the table, players and DM alike.

A related point is character information. Imagine a powerful evil wizard in a room. If you defeat him you find a key on his body to a treasure room with The Thing in it that you came to get. Defeating the wizard, only to find the key, is an anti-climactic moment. Now consider instead what happens if the party knows the wizard has the key. It's hanging right there, on his belt. Everyone can see it. Now the party has a reason to defeat the wizard. They want the treasure. They need the key. Plans are made. Perhaps it starts with talking to the wizard. The tension created here is different. There is potential energy. In both situations the treasure room is the reward, but in the first it's merely that, an after defeat reward. The treasure might as well have been placed on the wizard's body for all it matters. In the second, though, the party has heightened anticipation. The mere fact of making some information more readily apparent to the group can heighten the tension of the game.

## Complex environments

### Adversarial Design

A good adventure is written from a neutral standpoint rather than from an adversarial one. This general guiding principle has shadows that reach into "Magic Items That Can Only Be Used By The Evil Bad Guy" and in other areas such as gimping the parties abilities, and even non-linear design in general.

The goal is to produce an environment with a situation going on that the characters discover and insert themselves into. This stands in opposition to the more adversarial style in which the designer attempts to block the characters from all options not planned for by the designer or a more railroad environment in which only one path is allowed. The designer knows that the party is coming for the opposition, but the opposition only has a vague idea that someday, someone might be making a non-social call. Further, a more naturalistic design pattern recognizes that the baddies sometimes have visitors, and killing the fence that comes calling, or the booze salesman, is no way to keep everyone happy. It's important for the designer to approach the adventure from this more natural viewpoint and not from "a challenge for the players."



This is not to say that villains can't exist, or that they won't hit the party back In The Chicago Way, but rather that the adventure isn't designed around confrontations with the player characters. Too much forethought by the villains, planning for every party contingency, with nothing in the environment for the party to take advantage of, and so on. Neither the DM nor the designer is the party's opponent. The designer is simply creating a place, a situation, and so on that the party will stumble into the gas factory, flamethrowers in hand.

The situation must exist outside of the parties interaction with it.

## Design Density

I frequently begin my review with a statement like “This fifty-page adventure uses sixteen pages to describe a six-room dungeon.” I do this because it's indicative of the design density of the adventure. This is relevant in two aspects.

First, it deals with marketing of the adventure. “Wow! I'm getting a one hundred page adventure for ten dollars!” That's a great deal! And it's quite a bit less than a great deal when 95 of those pages are battle maps to be printed off and four others are NPC stat sheets. It is somewhat disingenuous to advertise a hundred-page adventure when one page could actually be considered adventure content and the rest is supporting appendix information.

Second, as I explored in the *Using the Appendix* section, it tends to indicate where the designer's efforts were placed. A high page count to “pages used for the adventure” ratio tends to indicate that there is quite a bit of appendix information and supporting information. This may indicate that the designer has spent an inappropriate amount of time on things other than agonizing over the core adventure. Is this always true? No. But it's true enough that I can think of only two examples otherwise.

A high number of pages for an adventure with a low location/scene count would tend to indicate that a lot of words were spent on each location. That would tend to indicate that the Ease of Use of the adventure is not going to be great. It is seldom the case that a “one page per room” adventure is easy to run. It tends to indicate that the designer has loaded down the rooms with information, almost certainly more information than is needed which makes it much harder to scan the room during play. Again, it's not always the case but it tends to be true.

## Density 1

Hark! It is game night! You pull out your 48 page adventure and open it up to prepare it. There's a blank page. And then a title page. And then two pages of licensing boilerplate. And then Two pages of the designer talking about themselves and what brought them to the game and motivates them. And then there's two pages of fiction. And two pages of how to read a stat block and how to play an RPG. And a three page backstory. And then there's an overview of the game world which will never come in to play that is three pages. Then there's the introduction page to the actual adventure which is quite generic. And then a four page listing of a generic village that has nothing special going on in it. Then, The adventure! Eight pages. And it's not

very good. Then another blank page. You then get five pages describing magic items and new spells, and then ten more pages of monster descriptions & stats. There's also about six pages worth of art, none of it very specific. 44 pages for an eight page adventure, that's not very good, means that the designer put their focus in to areas OTHER than the actual adventure. And it shows in the finished product. The primary focus needs to be the actual adventure.

## Faction Play

Stabbing monsters is one of the most boring parts of role playing. You know what's more fun? Getting to know the monsters ... and then stabbing them.

Factions help increase interactivity in an adventure. They help with emergent gameplay by providing roleplaying and interactivity beyond combat. Factions imply that a group exists with some sort of goals and motivations, especially in contrast to another group they are working against. This now means that instead of "stab the orcs" there now exist the orcs, who want the goblins stabbed, and, implicitly, the goblins who want the orcs stabbed. Of course, given any group, there will be fractures within it. The sub-chief of the orcs who really thinks it's about time he was the new chief. And the shaman who wants a leadership change but not the chaos that comes with it. This opens up roleplaying opportunities with all groups. Lying to all. Conniving. Scheming. All of which offer further springboards to adventure through emergent gameplay, gameplay which seldom exists in a game that only features interactivity solely as combat.

Note also the similarity to independent and not adversarial gameplay. While combat, initiated by the creatures or the party, is always a possibility, the party now has the possibility to leverage the factions' groups as a resource to accomplish their goals. And the creatures likewise have the opportunity to leverage the party as a resource (figuratively, the party would hope ...) to achieve their goals. Thus a more complex and dynamic environment is created, one with interactivity beyond the simple rolling of dice to resolve combat. Combat can always be included, and come later, but talking to them first and playing politics can add an extra dimension to the fun.

## Making Meaningful Decisions

Imagine you are standing in a room. There are two open doorways about three feet apart, both leading outside. If you go through the right door then you are outside. If you go through the left door then you are also outside ... but, also, the sun will explode tomorrow. Your choice to go through a doorway is, seemingly, random. You don't KNOW you are making a choice about causing the sun to explode tomorrow. This is bad design. There are a thousand variations on this theme. If you take the sword out of the tomb then The Evil One will rise again. If you X then Y happens. It's not the conditional that makes it a bad encounter, but rather the information hidden from the party.

Role playing games are better when the players can make meaningful and intentional decisions for their characters. The players have to know the consequences for their actions in order to make a meaningful decision about which choice to take. The making of that decision creates tension. Tension, in a role playing game, is delicious. Generally this is in reference to hidden knowledge that the party needs more information on. There is always implicit knowledge that can go unsaid, like stabbing the gate guards will have consequences.

Imagine again, the room. This time you KNOW that going through the right hand door will cause the deaths of ten people you don't know. But, by going through it, you also bring back to life the person foretold to defeat The Evil One. Now, the squirming starts!

I'm not advocating for these types of moral situations in games, but, rather, that seemingly arbitrary consequences for the characters be kept to a minimum. This is not a call to avoid random tables or the like, but, rather, to ensure that "Hahaha! You didn't do X so Y happened!" is kept to a minimum during the adventure design.

## Timers

A specific and well abused instance of this is the timer. The world will end in three days. The villagers will be sacrificed at midnight. The Evil One returns when the bell strikes three. In these cases the party is working against a timer, something important will happen at some time. But, if the party doesn't KNOW they are on a timer, then the impact is lost. The Evil One just appears. The party felt no urgency. They took a few days to rest and recover instead of pushing on through their wounds. If they don't know they are on a timer then the effects on their play can't be realized.

## Overloading the Sandbox with Potential Energy

Many adventures feel flat. Unnatural. Adventures benefit from having a lot of things going on in them. This provides a lot of resources and/or situations for the party to take advantage of. It also facilitates the creation of those wacky plans that good RPGs are made of, as well as the failure of those wacky plans that even better emergent gameplay develops from. Sometimes I liken this to a junkyard full of open 55-gallon drums full to the brim with gasoline. All over the place. And then the party shows up, holding their torches, making their ways between the barrels. And then a bunch of pit bulls show up. Fun ensues!

You want things going on in your town/dungeon/cave/starport. Things, plural. You want three or four different situations, even minor ones, happening around the party. An example might be in the adventure hook. Generally these are presented as a list of ways to get the party involved, pick one and go. A better design would be to have ALL of the hooks going on at the time. The wizards want the scroll in the cave. So do the priests, working in opposition to the wizards as bare knuckle rivals. No, bare knuckle rivals is not enough, they want them

to PAY. And the mayor, who wants the scroll to bring back his dead child. And the local lord's representative, who wants to keep a lid on change, the type of change that has the wizards, priests, and mayor creating trouble for stability.

Rooms can have more than one thing going on in them. A creature. A puzzle. A secret. And, more than that, strive to create situations rather than encounters. An encounter is simple. Jump over the creek. But a situation add depth. Refugees - with injuries and personalities,, torrential rains, slippery rocks, high winds, the opposing force barrelling down. No longer a simple skill check, or infinite amounts of time but a situation to be overcome.

Note the relationship to faction play: having a lot going on in faction play is an aspect of this. Now the adventure is no longer flat. Now instead of a simple "stab stab stab get the scroll" there is intrigue, talking, and choices to be made. Good interactivity.

## Rewarding Off the Beaten Path

It is almost a trope that latrines will have a treasure at the bottom of them, or that the chasm, with a rope bridge across it, will have some bodies at the bottom with nice loot. These are examples of placing treasure off the beaten path.

Look for ways to reward a party that ventures off the beaten path. I recall an adventure that had a great underground waterfall. The party came in at the base of it and it was clear that the path forward was to the east and NOT up the waterfall. But, near the top of the waterfall, the designer had placed a treasure. If the party investigated then they found it. The chasm, with or without rope bridge, is another example of this. The bottom is obviously NOT the way forward, but a party that goes out of their way to explore finds something worthwhile. The party is rewarded for their non-linear thinking.

These sorts of things are classic examples of rewarding players who look off the beaten path and think outside the box. Not someone who exhaustively searches every crate, but someone who looks UP. Look for ways, on your very interesting map and in your social encounters, to reward those who think outside the box.

### Off The Beaten Path 1

The Tomb of Harven Half Skull, by Joseph Bloch and published by BRW Games, is a small cave system dungeon of around twenty rooms. Putting a water feature in a room is not only common in upscale homes from DWEL magazine but in dungeons also. In this case there's a great cavern fed by a river with a pirate ship floating in it. In another chamber you can find the river flowing through it, on the way to the pirate ship chamber, with a stone bridge over the river.

Two interesting things happen here. First, there is a key hanging UNDER the bridge. It's obvious. OF COURSE there's something under the bridge. But, it's only obvious AFTER the

fact. How many parties will just travel over the bridge and never look under it, to find the hidden key?

Further, the river exits this chamber through a hole in the wall, running completely underground for about sixty feet before reaching the pirate ship chamber. While the ship chamber is reachable through other, dry, tunnels, if a party takes the time to explore the underground river they will find a small side chamber, partially above the waterline. Lying there, in the shallow air pocket, is a skeleton ... wearing a magic ring. Well, I mean, there's are giant crabs back there also, but, hey, have you seen the price of genuine Alaskan King Crab Legs?

Joking aside, these are excellent examples of placing an object in a non-intuitive location. It's not just hidden under a loose stone with a low percentage to discover. Both are in places that, when the party discovers them, they will say "Of course!"

## Off The Beaten Path 2

Wizards Mutants Laser Pistols is a zine that features the Beneath the Ruins dungeon by Alex Fotinakes. Issue three, in particular, features two interesting examples. The first is the classic waterfall. A sandy beach runs alongside an underground river. Following it upstream the party sees a 3 foot hole in the wall with water crashing out of it into a pool at the bottom ... the source of the underground river. Climbing up to investigate the hole the water is rushing out of could loosen a stone ... revealing a hidden area behind the waterfall where a chest rusts away. Phat L00T for those curious enough to look further!

In another area the party enters an empty room. There's another exit on another wall. But ... a party that searches will find that there are two other doors in the room, covered by illusions. They are immediately apparent to anyone running their hand along the walls. They lead to an entirely hidden subsection of the dungeon, with treasure, hell gnomes, and the Pyramid of Hate!

## Neutral Environment Include Good Effects

Adventures thrive on interactivity. Without it, games become uninteresting. Imagine if you will a game in which every time you read a book you die. The players will quite quickly have their characters not read books anymore. Or imagine a game in which every NPC you meet in a dungeon backstabs you. The players will quickly learn to no longer interact with NPCs. Entire realms of emergent play are shut down because every time a character does X then a bad thing happens. The players need some motivation to continue having their characters interact with the game world. In short, not everything in the adventure should be negative.

When writing an adventure it's important to remember that you are not challenging the players or their characters. You're creating an environment in which something is going on,

an environment that is oriented towards actual play without being simulationist. It's important for the environment to be neutral towards the characters; some things they interact with being positive and some things being negative. If the baddies can control the laser pillar then the players should be able to also, at least through clever play. If the tree has poison fruit on it then it, or another tree, should also have some stat boosting fruit. The Evil Sword should also be usable by the good guys. It doesn't have to be consequence-free, it doesn't have to be easy, but it should be possible, or even probable with clever play, that the party can take advantage of the elements in the environment.

Note the direct relationship to design that is independent and not adversarial. The situation could be adversarial, but some situations don't have to be. If you don't want the party to get their hands on the powerful sword that the baddie is using then the answer is not to make it unusable by the party, but rather to just bump the baddie's stats in some way. Otherwise it's adversarial.

As a corollary, it can be easy to fall into the trap of punishing the characters for exploring. When every potion is poison and every button is a deathtrap then the party has little reason to explore and interact with their environment. Why should they stay? Why not just go somewhere else? There is a balance of risk vs reward and there has to be enough reward that the party is willing to engage in the risks.

## Don't embed style

There is not a right way to play an adventure. The vast majority of designers embed assumptions about what is The Correct Way To Play into their adventure; about what they expect or want the party to do. Sometimes it's just plot elements, sometimes it's morality related. Some get away with it and still have a decent product. The very best don't embed assumptions in their adventures. This can range from the adventure site, to motivations, to choices made during the adventure.

Imagine there's a hole in the ground outside your house. Inside is a monster, a bag of gold, yours for the keeping if you can acquire it. Now, go figure out 30 ways to get it! That's the kind of thing we're looking for with our characters and their adventures. Divert the river and flood out the orcs? Ok. Smoke 'em out? Ok. Hiring an army of peasants to dig out the top of the hill? It's not that these should succeed, or be easy, but these sorts of solutions should be possible. This means making something of a (and I hesitate to use this word ...) realistic environment. You don't need to kill yourself in making a realistic environment, but you do need to ensure you're not shutting off all avenues other than the one you, the designer, intend. If the party has to fight every monster then you may want to open up the space a bit. If it's a bland environment you may want to steal an actual cave map, or the topo map for an actual place. The key is not to think of all possible solutions to shut them out, or to think of all possible solutions and include something for them. The idea is to create a neutral

environment that the characters and creatures can interact in. Don't railroad your adventure through the tyranny of the map.

Or, it needs to be said, through your preconceived notions that the characters are Good. They might just be after treasure. Or mucking about. Or any of 1000 other motivations. "If the characters do X then force an alignment check." That's specific advice for the designer's game and their chosen style of play. These sorts of enforced morality positions don't need to be included. They clog up the text and can be included by the DM on the fly if their game skews in that direction.

It should go without saying, also, that you should not force the party into morally repugnant situations. This is not fun. There may be a place for it in some small press rpgs, but not in a mainstream product. Don't be an edgelord. You can have some hard situations. You can have no right choices. You can have some grey areas. You can put in a swamp hag that sells potions and a necromancer who raises the dead. But requiring the party to work with these people, making their child sacrifice obvious AND making the party work with them to achieve their goals requires a degree of nuance that is beyond most designers.

Simulationist design also falls into this trap. Good adventures are not simulationist. You don't get points, or craft a better adventure, if it's more realistic. I'm not a follower of Saint Gygax, but the word 'verisimilitude' comes to mind. The purpose of the adventure is to be fun at the table, not to be realistic. You need the trappings of realism and belief in order to get the players engaged in the adventure, but you don't need so much that it becomes tedium.

## Hamstringing the Characters is usually bad

Not all RPG systems are suitable for all adventure types at all levels. It can be tempting to design an adventure, especially for a high-level or well-equipped party, and place artificial restrictions on the party in order to make the adventure "work." This is to be avoided if at all possible. The characters, and their players, have earned their abilities and equipment and they should not be removed without a great deal of reflection. (I don't care about your juxtaposition)

Fantasy wizards, at mid to high levels, have an amazing slew of abilities at their disposal. They can detect alignment. They can read minds. They can pass through walls. Imagine attempting to design a dungeon to handle someone like this, someone who can dissolve stone in order to tunnel between rooms, avoiding all of those hallway traps you placed. Or an investigation adventure in which the party can read minds, talk to the dead, and detect alignments and deceit. It can be tempting to limit these powers. Amulets of Immunity to Detection. Wish spells cast on the dungeon walls to prevent tunnelling through them. I'm sure the analogues in other adventures are obvious, such as spaceships with hulls that

sensors can't scan, or Yet Another Computer Malfunction. These are among the hallmarks of a poorly designed adventure.

Generally this means the adventure has been designed for the wrong power levels. If you want to keep the fantasy party from dissolving the walls through magic then the adventure should be written for a level range in which the party doesn't have access to that spell, or perhaps only one or so of that spell. Likewise, investigation adventures. If you don't want the wizard running around casting speak with dead then write it for a level that speak with dead is not available or limited. Turning to techniques such as "the spirit hasn't completed its travel to the afterlife" or other mechanisms to limit the spells, does nothing except communicate to the now eye-rolling party that their hard work was useless and can arbitrarily be taken away at any time on a whim. This breaks the DM/Player contract.

There are other techniques to turn to in order to solve these problems. Writing an adventure for a lower-level party, or a party without as much equipment, is one technique. Another technique is to leverage the social element. The party COULD [speak with the dead, nuke the site from orbit, read minds, etc] but what are the social implications of that? Care must be taken to not punish the players for these actions, but rather have some natural follow-ons to nuking the natives of planet Cestus-9. Thus the players get to make a choice: limit themselves or accept the Easy button in return for some consequences later.

An analogous problem is with items used by the opposition. There's a tendency to create super-powered items that can only be used by the other side. A sword that kills you in a week, or can only be used by EVIL, or a rifle that attunes itself to only one person. These are all attempts to give the baddie a boost while preventing the party from getting their hands on the powerful object. Don't do that. Just boost the baddies stats if you must.

And no, you can't give your skeletons amulets that make it harder for the party priest to command them to leave. Just because Gygax jumped off a bridge doesn't mean you should also.

Falling in to this category as well are things like taking the characters prisoner, removing all of their equipment and such. As a natural occurrence in the game this can be fine. As a pretext/hook for an adventure it generally is not. The players hate it when you take away what they've worked so hard for. There may be exceptions for a "First Adventure" when a campaign or arc is being set up; the slate is clean, so to speak, but beyond that There Be Dragons.

## Take Care Railroading Cool Moments

"At the moment of sacrifice let no blood be spilled!" screams the berobed cult leader, as he prepares to shove the hapless villager into the chasm of lava. The party burst in from behind the towering statue, toppling it on to the cult leader, running down the statue's massive arm, using it as a ramp to pour their troops into the lair, in a giant James Bond volcano assault set piece!



That's pretty cool. It would be nifty if that's what happened. As a designer you can add in elements: lava chasm, towering wobbly statue, cult leader, village of followers, etc. What you CAN'T do is try to force this outcome by putting the design on rails.

It can be very tempting as a designer to want to insert these cool moments into the game. Wouldn't it be cool if the party arrived just in time? Or toppled the statue? Yes, totally. And you can add elements to the game to make that a possible outcome. But you can't try to force these outcomes. You can't write cool moments and try to force them into a game. This isn't a movie. There's not a climax in the writing. There may be a timeline at which the cult will sacrifice. The party might even arrive at that point in time. Or maybe they won't. To elaborate on the example, you can't tell the DM to force the party to delay, or speed them up, in order to have them arrive right at the moment of the sacrifice.

This is a kind of forced dramatism, and it always comes off as such. Remember, the party is in charge. They are determining the flow of activities, as interpreted by the DM. As the designer you are setting up situations but not necessarily outcomes. That's for the party. The adventure is not a fictional novel or a movie script. Those are linear, with pre-ordained outcomes and full of Mary Sue's. The adventure designer though is writing for possibilities ... with perhaps a nudge in the right direction.

## Mary Sue NPCs

Most of us have had the misfortune, at one point or another in our RPG lives, or experiencing the horrors of the DM's pet NPC. The NPC that is uber-powerful, can do no wrong, is sometimes the DM's own character, and is an all-around insufferable bad ass. The designer is capable of doing the same thing.

Any time an adventure contains an NPC that accompanies the party, I raise my eyebrows a bit; my DM pet-NPC trauma is very real. Care should be taken to avoid using special NPC party members in an adventure. This could be an NPC that needs to be escorted, a NPC that helps the party through heals and the like, or other types. Ultimately, these NPC's rob the party of interactivity and tend to be signs that the adventure is written to be played a certain way ... which is almost never good.

It can be tempting to add an NPC to help the party turn undead, heal, fulfill their destiny by slaying the Demon Prince, or other uses. When this happens the story is no longer the parties, but the NPC's ... which in reality means the designer's. But, the designer is not telling a story; they are just creating a situation in which the party is creating a story. Instead consider why the NPC is being added. If it's to help the party then perhaps the adventure level range is incorrect? If it's more for a story purpose then why isn't that the party's story instead of the NPC & GM's story? Don't steal the focus away from the party. Giovanni Chronicles was a real thing. Don't do that.

## Mary Sue 1

Mary Sue hires your, quite experienced, characters to escort her to find her family's sword. As you near a pass she orders you to get rid of the horses; they might attract monsters. Every read aloud has the designers pet NPC telling the party what is going on and what to do/not to do. You don't get to things in the dungeon, Mary Sue says it's her family crypt. The Bod Bad Boss Vampire dude kills everyone, unless Mary Sue is there to kill him. This begs the inevitable question, is this the party's adventures or Mary Sue's?

## Design for the Correct Level/Power Range

A dastardly plot! Through subtle machinations, devious ploys, and outright murder, the lowly courtier has ingratiated himself with the queen. A dose of poison later and the king lies dead. His son, suspicious, summons his old friends to investigate. "Welcome to our son's friends, back from school ..." says the courtier, now king, at the banquet of welcome, "we want you to know ... " "I cast detect evil", says one player, interrupting the coming monologue. "Uh, yeah, he glows" says the DM. Stab stab stab, stab stab stab, the investigation is over and something is no longer rotten in Denmark. Except the bodies.

Some apes are more equal than others and some games are more suited to one type of gameplay than others. D&D, in particular, has a particular bend towards dungeon exploration. The spell lists reflect this. Detect Evil is low level, and now you can memorize it and not worry about that princess you just rescued being a doppelganger. It also forces the player to choose: combat spell or "don't get stabbed in my sleep by the fake princess" spell. There are a lot of spells like this in D&D, from Detecting Evil, to Detecting Lies, and Speaking with the Dead. All of these make investigation adventures difficult.

There is a tendency to place restraints on these spells. "The medusa that just turned you to stone wasn't evil enough to detect as evil" I recall, as I died in one adventure. Uh huh. Or the villain has the ever-popular ring of mind-shielding, or pants of unknowable alignment, or casting spells is frowned upon at court, or any of a host of reasons. Please, don't do this.

If these are worries then perhaps rewrite the adventure for a lower level. That way the party won't have access to as much magic. Or, consider the tradeoffs explicitly. IF they memorize and cast the Detect spell, then they don't have access to the KNOCK spell to open a critical door, or some mass sleep spell to knock out the minions. It's all a trade-off. Recognize it as such. Don't bend and twist and contort the villain, and their two dozen magic items that give them immunity to certain spells, just to make the adventure for a certain level. Just re-home it.

Likewise, if the adventure is underwater, then maybe it's not a first level adventure? I'm not the biggest fan of realism in RPGs, but, at a certain point, suspension of disbelief begins to impact the enjoyment of the game, and Mayor McPoory Poor giving the party a dozen water breathing magic items just so they can go on the adventure underwater at level one is

stretching things. Maybe THAT'S your high level adventure that you wanted the investigation to be?

## Investigations 1

Gygax himself started this mess, with The Keep on the Borderlands having skeletons wearing amulets that make them harder to turn. Both gimping the players AND suffering from the sin of explaining WHY something is the way it is.

Let us move to a more typical example. "An adventure for levels 10-15" states the cover. A dungeon, with a dragon at the end of it! A dungeon, in which all of the walls are lined with lead that prevent all forms of scrying, from psionics to magic spells to magic items. The adventure also states, of course, the lead lined walls block transformation spells like rock to mud, stone shape, and passwall. The designer REALLY wants the party to walk down the hallway so his traps can be sprung on them. Oh, yes, the dungeon walls also have the blood of magical creatures mixed in to them to prevent ethereal movement through the wall. And, there's a super duper spell that prevents and/or gives off false readings to all detect spells ... no detecting evil, magic or traps in this dungeon. Also, the thieves ability to find traps with their eyeballs is lowered by half, because of the same spell.

It's clear what the designer had in mind. You will walk down the hallway and experience every trap and encounter. You will not skip encounters. You will not use your skill as a player, or the powers your character has earned, to skip things or better of the creatures. You will make saving throws and you will fight the creatures one on one.

It's clear that this adventure should have been written for a lower level group is the designer was so concerned about the party experiencing the dungeon one room at a time, just as they had written it. Either lower the level or let the party do what they will ... every passwall spell used is one lightning bolt that the wizard can't toss. This is the balance inherent in almost every RPG: you can use cheat mode on the current situation ... but at the expense of having less resources deeper in to the adventure.

## Investigation 2

And Fifth Edition Adventure for four Seventh level PC's, says the cover. Imagine a cliff, a thousand feet high. Clinging to the front of it is a set of stairs, alternating back and forth via landings until the top is reached. The party must get to the top of the cliff. As the party climbs the stairs they will have various encounters from the creatures that live on and around the stairs. The adventure is the stairs. Therefore, the designer has decreed that there will be no wall-climbing, flying, levitation, or grav boots allowed! For there are traps all up and down the cliff that detect if someone is passing them by and go off. The traps, of course, don't go off if you use the stairs. You will experience the adventure the way the

designer intended you to ... with none of those pesky abilities the party earned getting in the way!

It should be obvious by now how this relates to adversarial design and railroading. Generally the DM wants the party to be engaged and thinking creatively. "The answer is not on the character sheet", as they say. Except, of course, when the designer of the adventure has decreed the answer to be on the character sheet. This adventure was designed for too high a level. Or, the designer could have integrated an environment in which, while the party could fly/climb/levitate/grav-boot, there were other more natural reasons while they would choose not to.

### Investigation 3

Congratulations, you completed your last mission! As a reward, your patron is taking you out on his boat, along with some of his friends, to celebrate. During a three hour tour on a pleasure boat with a ton of guests, one of the guests on the ship is ... MURDERED! Duh Dhh DUH! Adventure calls! Quick! To the Poirot-mobile! An adventure for level 4 of 5th edition.

The designer in this adventure specifically calls out, in a sidebar, the issue with magic in D&D and how it clashes with murder mysteries. He notes, specifically, that Speaking with the Dead shouldn't be an issue since it's too high a level, and even if they could, the first two victims didn't see who did it. Not bad! Of course, the villain also has a ring of mind shielding and then also has a special ability that lets him automatically make his saves against anyone casting a detect lie spell.

At this point we have to ask ... why? At some point the designer breaks the social contract with the players. They understand that the game world has certain rules. By giving the villain sixteen different ways to avoid detection of his foul intent the designer is breaking that contract, no matter the level of the adventure and no matter how powerful the villain. The suspension of disbelief is gone, the buy in is gone, the players roll their eyes, sigh, and say "Whatever" and endure the adventure till its end.

### Plot Shields

I recall playing a video game once, some kind of open world FPS game. I had planned my assault on the base in meticulous detail. I used all of my resources creating traps and fall back escape routes. I stealthily approached, using my limited quantity of arrows and throwing knives. And then the game respawned everyone I had killed when I reached a certain checkpoint. All of my hard work was for nought. Any emotional investment or suspension of disbelief I had in the game experience was gone. Shattered.

This is what happens when these sorts of plot shield devices are used: they destroy any immersion that the players might have developed and can push the players towards not caring

or investing. What's the point if the DM/adventure is just going to pull the rug out from under me anyway? Why expend the spell or make the heroic sacrifice if the villain will get away?

NPC's, villains, or whoever should not get plot shields. This kills interactivity and immersion in an adventure. The villain getting away is a trope, to be sure, but it can't be to the extent that the player's interaction with their environment becomes meaningless. No matter how good a plan they make, no matter how good they roll, the villain gets away. This is not roleplaying. This is some kind of interactive movie in which the party is barely taking part. If they come up with a good plan, or roll well, then it happens. The adventure should NOT dictate, either explicitly or implicitly, these sorts of plot shield situations. "Explicit" meaning specific words to the DM to ensure the villain gets away, for example, or "implicit" meaning that the villain has so many escape plans that he might as well be a demi-god. I'm speaking specifically of "villain escapes", since they are the most common, but this also applies to NPC's who can't be killed and other situations. Again, an adventure is not a script.

What happens NEXT is still in doubt. How do the minions react? What happens in the power vacuum? This is a role for the DM to play. It could be that, in some situations, it is appropriate for the designer to give a few words of advice or suggestions to the DM for what might happen in such a case. But, overall, it is critical that the parties' choices be meaningful. And that can't happen with a plot shield in place.

## Evil NPC'S

The adventuring party has trust issues. It's a common attribute of adventurers. Be it through nature (Oh no! My family has been kidnapped again!) or nurture (Oh No! My new friend just betrayed me!)

Time and again an adventure will introduce an NPC, monster, or some such that makes an alliance with the party, hires them, or otherwise does something that does not include "Stabbing the party in the face right now." It has now become a trope that any alliance the characters make with an evil group or character will end with the party getting backstabbed by said NPC/creatures. Evil, it seems, is dumb.

This is boring. It limits the emergent play possibilities that make RPGs fun. This is not to say that the evil group can't have their own goals and motivations, but consider the play possibilities of NOT backstabbing the party. The roleplaying possibilities are substantially greater when the characters get to interact with evil NPC's and creatures. What's the line of what the party will accept? How obvious can the creature's evil actions be before the characters have had enough of them? What if the evil necromancer offers resurrections to the party for free? What if he's only an evil necromancer in name and not in the practical application? I mean, everyone KNOWS he's an evil necromancer, but he doesn't really show off. And, I mean, he does buy all the kids on the street ice cream on Sundays. How much will the characters then put up with? What if the friendly ogre is wearing The Ruby Crown Of

Ultimate Power. Who's the bad guy now when the party starts stabbing to get the crown the ogre will not willingly part with?

This is not to say that everyone the party meets from Team Evil needs to be friendly to them. And, yes, Evil can take advantage of weakness when they see it. That's all fine and fair. But mix it up a bit; they don't all need to be psychotic killers. Evil in name? Sure. Evil hinted at it? Sure! Add some nuance for the party to experience before ... they inevitably stab the NPC.

## Showing instead of Telling

### Avoid Exposition in Monologues, Soliloquies, Diaries

I recently read a post-apocalyptic novel that my son got me for Christmas. Fish out of water, protagonist goes on several harrowing adventures, etc. Then in the last 10% of the novel he finds a diary that explains that everything going on is a conspiracy and details the plot and who the bad guys are and why they are doing it and everything that has happened up to this point. Nice world building ... right up until that point. The diary was used to tell us what was going on instead of the action, the character development showing us what was going on. Rather than use the crutch of a diary entry explaining everything, the information should have been slowly revealed through the adventures the protagonist was having. Bit by bit, unraveling and being explained. Exposition drops are a bad crutch in writing precisely because they are telling instead of showing. The same holds for an adventure.

"Droning exposition" is a redundant phrase. Exposition is always droning. It obfuscates. Players stop paying attention. Note the relationship here to the three-sentence read-aloud rule. Players stop paying attention. Phones come out. But, perhaps more importantly, is the violation of the Rule of Explaining Why.

Do the motivations matter? The bad guy, good guy, neutral guy, whatever the context, does the reason WHY they did something matter? I mean, beyond a cursory sentence to add some play enhancement. Is this really a fiction element, or a backstory element that is not pertinent to the adventure? If it IS pertinent then why must it be conveyed in a diary entry or through a monologue or soliloquy? It's important to find other mechanisms, mechanisms that are not overused, to convey this information. Again, SHOW the players, don't TELL the players.

And, if this is being done for a "dramatic confrontation" moment then, well ... there are again better ways. At this point I think it's pretty common for players to have their characters interrupt all monologues and soliloquy with a well placed lazer rifle shot to the big bad face. Be it so the evil plan can't be put into motion or so that they don't have to listen to the

monologue is a topic for further discussion. Either way, better for them to simply state "Excellent. You've arrived." and set the evil plan in motion than it is to drone on. Villains should have manners and it is never appropriate for the host to dominate the conversation with their guests.

## Avoid Diaries and ... (etc examples needed)

Diaries, in contrast, generally perform two duties in adventures. They are either used to explain WHY someone is doing what they did, or to provide a clue. As a clue they are ok, if prone to being overused as fetch quest "find all the diary parts" adventuring. It's the WHY of something that is generally bad and it's in this context that diaries (letters, etc) are to generally be avoided. Again, referring to the commentary on monologues and soliloquies, why is it important to understand the background motivations? Things in adventures don't need to be explained. Or, rather, they only need to be explained if the players are expected to leverage that explanation in the course of play.

Similarly, if diaries, letters and the like are the only way you can communicate needed information, then you have a major problem with your adventure. You need to find a way to work the information into the adventure. Creatures surrender. Fire & torture work. One of the worst trends in adventure design are the fanatical creatures who fight to the death and reveal nothing. Not only is it boring, it also eliminates the possibility of communicating information. Would you rather get the location of the secret base from a diary entry or from interacting with a traitor or captured prisoner? Interactivity trumps exposition.

Exposition, be it through monologues or diaries, violates some of the core rules of writing for publication. Most critically, it removes the interactivity from the adventure. Players are being TOLD things instead of being SHOWN things. Learning information through the adventure, and the players discovering the reasons, is much more interactive. Plus, players love to discover things. Expositions also tend to violate the three sentence read-aloud rule, causing the players' attentions to drift; this break in immersion is seldom good. Finally, they violate the rule of Explaining Why. It's ok to leave room for mysteries. Not everything has, or needs, a reason spelled out. The wandering mind loves to fill in the details and that enhances the adventure rather than detracts from it.

## Hints the in the Read-Aloud

There is an art to a good read-aloud. It is the art of the tease. You want to reveal information, but not too much information. You want to hint at things going on, giving the party a reason to ask questions and investigate.

A dusty floor, in the read-aloud, may lead to more inquiries about it, which leads to cracks in the floor, which lead to figuring out that the floor is very weak and could collapse. Black walls might mean someone examines them and discovers they are greasy, almost ... soot-like ...which might mean a fire trap. A good read aloud will contain hints and clues in it for players who are paying attention to follow up on to discover more about the room.

## Rumors

The rumor table is a time-honored tradition in adventures. They can serve as springboards to the party's adventures, providing clues on where to get started, alternate theories and locations, local color and setting tone, and a host of other events to drive the play forward, be it on the correct tract or an alternative one.

Rumors should be specific and "in voice" when possible. Bad rumors are presented in an abstracted form. "Goblins are raiding the farmsteads." Good rumors offer a degree of interactivity. Two farmers, talking to each other at the feedlot, trying to decide if they should move because of the goblin raids, or how to better protect themselves, or how ol Jed and his family were raided and his oldest, JedSon, was killed. These present opportunities for interaction, a roleplaying element where the party gets to interact with the farmers and bond with them or pump them for more information. Notice the specificity. It's not a farmer and his son. It's ol Jed and his boy JedSon. These people, the villagers, they have an intimate relationship with each other. That specificity reveals a lived in world, one that feels more visceral to the party as they interact with it. The designer, by providing that specificity, helps the DM to ground the adventure and build off of the seed planted.

The purpose of the rumors is to drive the adventure forward. It's how the designer helps point the party toward interactivity. They could be truthful or they could be false, but they should lead to something, some sort of interactivity at some point that is at least secondarily related to the adventure. Even in the case of false rumors, there should be something present; meeting someone or some other clue to help put the party on the right path, for example. Or even, as with the famous "Bree Yark!", provide some anticipated delight during the actual adventure.

## Roll to Continue

Imagine, if you will, sitting down to play the new RPG adventure. In the tavern there is a blank wall. It contains a secret door. Behind the door is the adventure. There are not hints that the door is there. "Roll greater than a 15 on a d20 to find the secret door." How is the game to proceed? The party doesn't know the door is there. What if they all fail? No game tonight? And, yet, you must succeed on the roll to continue to play the game. Many



adventure contain these chokepoints, especially in the beginning, in which the party must succeed in some skill check or task in order to play the game tonight. And, invariable, the DM fridges the roll when everyone fails so that everyone can play tonight. But, why put the chokepoint behind a die roll? Sure, if they know the door is supposed to be there then the crowbars and sledgehammers can come out, but if they don't? If the wise old sage will only tell them about the Ring of Forevermore rumored location if they impress him when buying a book ... No one is playing the game tonight? Be careful of chokepoints where something must happen for the party to proceed.

This is not to say that there can't be secrets, or skill checks, in an adventure with more areas or treasures or something behind those rolls. But don't place the main adventure, the required parts of the adventure, behind a simple die roll that can be failed. No matter how easy the roll, figure out how to make the adventure proceed without a failure at the chokepoint.

## OTHER

### Concluding an Adventure

Once, my character intentionally killed a possessed child during an adventure, one that we were supposed to be saving. At the end of the adventure the DM let me know that my name was now a threat, like the bogeyman, in the village. "Do all your chores or Hermes will come out from under your bed at night and take you away!" and "On moonless night, if you stare into the old pond and say Hermes' name three times then he will appear behind you and snatch you!" It was DELIGHTFUL to encounter this in villages and towns for the rest of the game.

Continuity can make a game alive and feel immersive. The players get to see the results of their actions, both positive and negative, in a way that cements their actions. Just like publicity, this is always rewarding, even if the consequences are negative.

In the context of adventure design this can be thought of as the consequences of the parties actions during the adventure. Did they burn down the kingdom's only grain port? Or let The Evil One escape from his prison? There are some natural consequences to such things. By bringing in those consequences, through a small section at the end for the DM, the DM can then run a game with more continuity.

This doesn't have to be complex or involved. A simple paragraph at the end of the adventure, or a couple of bullet points, with the designer pointing out some potential follow ups, will suffice.

Perhaps emphasizing some famine conditions during future games, and price gouging, if they burned down the grain port. Or more refugees and doomsday cults, if they let The Evil One out to rebuild his ancient kingdom of evil. It could or could not have meaningful in-game consequences, but it should always be something that will directly interact with the party rather than abstracted like “a butterfly in China will flap its wings an extra time next year.” It could be fluff and flavor, as long as the characters actually get to see and/or experience it.

And on a related note, it was a staple of some older adventures to put bandit gangs outside of well known adventuring sites. They would hit the party as they exited the dungeon, under the belief that the party would be at their weakest then, robbing rather than killing them, so they could rob them again one day. One Dungeon magazine adventure went so far as to have an earthquake in the goblin lair, after the boss was killed, making the exit from the dungeon as memorable as the entry was, if not more so. The adventure doesn't necessarily end after The Goblet of King James is finally obtained. A couple of sentences for the DM at the end to riff on in the future is a wonderful way to ensure the play of the adventure pays dividends in to the future.

## Conclusions 1

The party has delved in to the cultists lair. It was a hard fight, but they got the sacred chalice back. Along the way they freed some cavemen from the cultists. The adventures gives us three things in the conclusions section: If any of the cult escaped then they are mad and, eventually, will hunt the party down. A little generic, but ok. If the party takes the chalice back to the Good Clerics in town they cleanse it but ... what was it used for and who created it and what will the priests do with it now? Meh, very open ended and not very colorful at all. Then, if the party helped the cavemen escape then they spread the story to others and, one day, when the party is most in need, a caveman warrior steps in and helps them out. Wow! That's a great one! It's specific. It's a real reward for the party being good guys. Not just a pat on the back or the feeling of doing good, but a real boon for the party, via a callback, when they are in need. That plays on many, many cultural stories and myths, where the people you've helped come to your aid when you're in need. That's a good conclusion!

## Conclusions 2

You did it! You've cleaned out Yet Another Cultist Lair! The adventure gives us three outcomes for the DM to sprinkle in. Having broken the back of the cult, the nearby town tracks down and kills any cultists they find. Not a bad thing! The party gets to see the tangible results of their actions ... both positively and negatively. One imagines the party seeing the local gallows in full swing, and even perhaps some false accusations? There's a lot to mine there for future window dressing and even adventure. Then, the party gets to seal the temple and the local townspeople pay them AND are available to help, being a grateful lot. The adventure gives the DM a few ideas and encourages them to let the party have fun with it. Finally, the towns mayor is a bit of a jerk and looks for excuses to punish the party for things like assaulting town guards ... even if they were cultists. But ... the local Count steps in and pardons the party, declaring them heroes!

But if this happens the town and mayor will be less than happy with the party, feeling their local authority usurped. Again, these are real things that impact the party, they can see the effects of their actions and are not just punished for them, or rewarded, but a much richer tapestry unfolds.

## Tropes

There is a kind of cultural memory we all share. References to a misty pond in a glade will all cause us to visualize something and give us either an eerie feeling or a natural beauty feeling, depending on our moods and the framing.

These can be extremely valuable to a designer. When a trope is used well you are leveraging not only the words you put on the paper but every word and visual image the DM, and players, have ever encountered related to that idea. This is very powerful. Secret doors behind bookcases and caves behind waterfalls, or idols on pedestals.

Or, it can be very tiresome. Yet Another Adventure In The Sewers. Another Mad Alchemist. More Cultists. Dour Dwarves Architecture. A Dream Sequence. A Race Against Time. Carnivals and Circuses. The Abandoned Space Station. In their worst forms a trope is just throwing away words. It's only using the word "sewers" and doing very little to make them actual sewers beyond some light theming. Don't jst slap in Cultists or Sewers. Do the work to theme the adventure. Bring those cultists alive and make us feel the sewer environment. More than a disease table or noxious odors or methane gas, make those cultists hideous in their fanaticism.

Tropes bring a two-edged sword to a table. When leveraged well they provide wonder beyond what's written. And when poorly implemented they become boring and tired overused tripe. If you're not going to put the effort in then tropes should be avoided. A half-hearted effort will show much more than one using a non-tropey idea.

## Production Design

### Previews

The vast majority of adventures these days are sold online. PDF is a great format and there are thousands upon thousands of adventures to choose from. In the midst of such abundance the question becomes: how does a consumer choose which adventure to purchase, particularly when you can't thumb through the adventure as you would when selecting a physical copy in person?

Enter the preview. Please: create a good preview of your adventure. The prospective purchaser can look at your preview and get an idea of the writing and layout style you've used, as thus if the adventure meets their needs and is worth purchasing ... on a basis of more than just the marketing blurb you wrote.

A good preview will show the DM some of the locations (scenes, etc) writing, the actual meat of the adventure that they will be referring to over and over again while running the game. Don't just show the first six pages. That tends to be the front cover, the title page, the contents page, a page of background/intro and so on. It's critical that you show the prospective buyer some of the actual content they will be using to run the adventure, by which I mean the core of the adventure encounters. Be it an actual preview, or a small sample copy, make something available for the prospective buyer to peruse so they can make an informed decision about the adventure before purchasing.

## Consider making it PWYW

I'm going to catch heat for this. I'm going to say it anyway. Consider making your adventure free, or Pay What You Want.

We all dream of doing something related to RPG's as a living. "I'm gonna make youtube videos and no longer work for the man!" or "I'm going to write adventures and make a living by selling them! Or at least pay off my bar tab and buy another case of Malort ..."

Assertion The First: What you are creating is not very good, probably. It could be. It will be one day. But, your first adventures are not going to be very good ... probably. Why are you charging people for them? Art? Layout? Editing? The people you hired? Maybe don't hire people and give your adventures away? Or just eat the cost as the price of improving your writing and adventures. The best way to improve your writing is to write more ... but ... you're also putting it out there for sale, and is it really ok for the rest of us to pay you \$10 a pop for you to learn how to write an adventure? What's the harm, except to our own egos, in releasing things for free until you get better at your craft?

Assertion B: Do you really need to monetize your hobby? Is it necessary for every single moment of every single day to be spent in pursuit of money? Can't we just write RPG adventures for fun and enjoy sharing them with other people? Maybe hire a layout or art person with your own money and give it away.

And no, the Harlan Ellison Pay The Writer monologue doesn't apply here. Harlan is talking about work for hire. If you hire someone to create art for your adventure then you should absolutely pay them. If someone hires you to write an adventure then they should pay you. But if YOU create an adventure then you can do whatever you want with it.

Yes, I'm aware I'm charging for this book. I also spent fifteen years writing three RPG adventure reviews a week in order to get better.

## Why do you have a back cover?

Electronic publishing has some holdover elements from physical publishing. Things that are hanging around without consideration of the new format.

Why do exclusively PDF adventures have a back cover? A back cover is for a prospective buyer to look at when they pick it up at the bookstore. "Hmmm, I wonder what this adventure is about ... let me read the back cover and find out!" A marketing blurb, a level range, all of these are lost in the era of PDF when it is no longer possible to look at the back cover. This role is now served by the product's marketing page.

If your product only exists as a PDF, then why do you have a back cover?

## Put the level range somewhere easy to find

There is nothing more frustrating than looking for an adventure to buy and not knowing the level range it is meant for.

Please remember to put the level range for your adventure somewhere in the product description. For electronic products, such as PDF's, then the little text marketing blurb on the product page is a good place to put the level range. Putting it on the cover is a poorer choice, but great for a print adventure that might be for sale in a bookstore/convention.

When I go looking for an adventure I am not looking for "a blah blah blah publishing house" adventure that I don't already own. I'm not looking for the new adventure Matt Smith. I'm looking for an adventure for characters level 2-3. Put the level range in the product description, please.

## Guy's tips

For those of you who are going it alone and need help with layout, I encourage you to look up Guy Fullerton's layout tips for RPG adventures. He goes through a whole host of layout and style tips that will make your product better. Things like "don't cross column boundaries with location descriptions" and so on. Guy is one of the smartest people in the RPG hobby and his advice, especially the layout advice, is worth checking out.

## Playtesting

Playtesting is an interesting subject. Ideally you playtest your adventure relatively early in your process. The goal is to see what works and what doesn't and get ideas for tweaking the product, explaining in some areas and dealing with the inevitable consequences of a Player Group Going Off The Rails, doing what you didn't expect them to do.

There is, also, substantial value in watching another group play the adventure, run by someone other than you. By watching another DM run the adventure you get a fresh set of eyes on the adventures. You get to see what they brought and, further, the parts they struggled with, the parts they took notes for or prepped ahead of time. Actually watching another DM run your adventure is invaluable for learning about all of those things that you, as the designer, assumed and that the other DM doesn't have the advantage of knowing, and therefore has to struggle with. Did they spend a lot of time struggling by looking up monster stats? Or fumbling with the map? Or taking long pauses to read a certain room? Watch another DM, record it if possible, make notes, and then ask the DM about the things you observed.

## Writing for Multiple Systems

There is a tendency to write adventures that can span systems. Pathfinder, D&D of various versions, and many OSR systems come to mind immediately. There are also many horror games and space games that may be similar enough to write for. You could publish various versions or you could include conversion notes in the adventure, or select another option. More than this, though, the best thing you can do is understand the assumptions you are writing for and note them specifically. Monster power levels can vary wildly from different versions of the same game, as can experience awards for those systems that use them. Noting that you wrote for 1 silver piece = 1 experience point will help a DM immensely.

Understand what you are writing for. If your system of choice makes something very easy or very hard and it's a core portion of the adventure then note that as well. The vibe. Polaris and AGON are going to require different moods than Tunnels & Trolls. If the system uses treasure as XP then did you put enough in? In some games Clerics can turn undead ... and that can differ from version to version and across power levels ... so ten ghouls isn't going to be much of a challenge for a Level 31 cleric. Did you mean to do that.

## Genre Specific Advice

## The Use of Randomness

It is practically a meme at this point that older adventures use randomness. Random tables for wandering monsters, or pool effects or what not. The take away from this is not that random generated things are good but rather that they were used to good effect in certain situations. One of those situations is NOT dungeon generation.

Procedural dungeon generation, on the fly, at the table, is not very good. If you are using the tables to create and inspire you to write a dungeon/encounter, etc, then that's a separate topic. In that case the booklet is not an adventure but rather an adventure toolkit, used to create an adventure. You make some rolls in your prep time, use them to inspire you and riff off of them to create something better than the sum of the parts.

However, this breaks down at the table. The party has entered a new room. Quick! Make four dice rolls, consult five tables and then string it all together and make it work together, and with the context of the surrounding rooms so far, in an amount of time that doesn't cause the players to pull out their phones! It's just not possible that such a thing can be better than a room rolled out beforehand and then crafted by a designer to work with itself and with the surrounding elements. Using randomness to create a room on the fly just can't produce as good a room as a designer crafting one.

The wandering monster table is another example. Older games used this as an explicit mechanism to force players into action. The more you hang around the dungeon the greater the chances you'll hit a wanderer ... who statistically doesn't have as much treasure as a lair monster and in a Gold=XP game you want that sweet sweet lair treasure. It's a "push your luck" mechanism.

But many modern games generally don't use Gold=XP. In those cases, what purpose does a wandering monster encounter have? None? Better, in these plot/quest based games to simply craft an encounter or two for the party to have on the way to the adventure site. Then you get all the benefits of a crafted encounter rather than a holdover relic of a procedural one from the annals of gaming history.

When considering using a random table anywhere in the adventure ask yourself why you're doing it and if it's not better for you to simply roll and design in the result.

### Randomness 1

The party is on their way to The Ruins Outside Of Town, and it's going to take two days to get there, says this adventure for fifth edition D&D. A short little wilderness map is provided. It has a scale, and the DM is told to check for random encounters twice each day and twice each night. What follow is a pretty standard wandering monster chart, level appropriate challenges, and even then they only appear on a roll of 1 on a d8; not much chance. As noted, it's just a table, a list of potential enemies to encounter. Except for one of the

encounters. You see, following the table is a list of monster stats for each of the enemies you could potentially encounter on the wandering monster table, one after the other, with no details. Except for that one encounter. It is magnificent, particularly in comparison to the other boring entries. A lost hermit on his way home, an injured foot, hints of divinity, a sly humor, an enigmatic riddle ... a wonderful little encounter, well write, terse, evocative, and interactive. That has a 1 in 20 chance of occurring, as long as the DM rolls a 1 first on a d8 for a wandering encounter to actually occur.

It's clear that the 5e designer in question, in emulating the style of an older type of D&D, thought that they needed to have a wandering monster table. But 5e is not B/X, and wandering monsters don't serve the same purpose in 5e that they did in B/X. There was no reason for a wandering monster table in the first place. If the designer wanted an encounter to break up the travel and make things more interesting then they just needed to do that, instead of relying on a trop of earlier edition play. Further, it's clear that the one interesting encounter was FAR more interesting than the rest, those just being the normal book list of potential monsters that could appear. The better choice here was to simply state that the party would have an encounter on the evening of the first night with that entity.

## Randomness 2

Welcome to the future! You're visiting the garbage dump planet of the universe. Literally, every planet dumps their waste here. They just fly over and let loose. You're doing salvage, looking for That Thing You Were Hired For. You land and see a lava tube like hole in the trash and enter it, beginning your explorations into the depths of Trash World!

Well, hang on. The DM has to roll to see what chamber you enter first. And then how big it is. And how many exits it has. And where those exits are. And what the decor/theme of the chamber is. Looks like melted plastic, according to the table. Hmmm, now, rolling for creatures, it looks like you'll be encountering mud men. The roll on the goal table says ... searching for their queen. Looks like the random treasure table says they have a staff, but lets turn that in to a sceptre, on the fly, to match the queen thing. Oh, the lighting is low, I guess maybe there's a curtain of plastic, like in a butchers shop freezer, over the entrance? "Sure, why not. Ok, yeah, so, you enter through some dark plastic sheeting to a room with melted plastic walls and a couple of exits and see a group of 1d6+2 squat slimy brown blobs with humanoid features. They are surrounding one them who holds a bumpy log in the air, about 2' long, with yellow bits in it. "

A procedurally generated dungeon is going to be VERY challenging, both for the designer and for the DM, to pull off at the table. As a tool to create your own adventure it can be great, but through the definitions of Adventure that this book uses .. it's not very good one. The environments it generates might be good to riff off of, but will always suffer from the lack of a guiding hand to unify them into a holistic purpose and therefore be little more than



random encounters that require more time than usual for the DM to respond back to the party with.

## Appendix 1 - Common Complaints

I've been writing reviews for a long time and in that time I've seen a great many replies to the design advice I review by. Some are thoughtful, but most generally fall into a set of common arguments that fail on further examination. These are the most common.

### “But I LIKE sixty seven pages of backstory for every room ...”

Some people like their steaks cooked to Well Done; a dry tough leathery consistency. Most people do not like their steaks well done. Most people believe there is more flavor when a steak is not well done. A chef, responding to a request to cook a steak well done, would probably shake their head in confusion as they respond to what the customer wants. It can generally be agreed that cooking a steak Well Done is not the correct way to do it. There may be a lot of people who like it medium rare, or medium, or even rare, but they can all agree that Well Done is wrong. The people who like them Well Done, though, well, they like what they like. Hence the saying: There's no accounting for taste.

There is room for someone to like what they like for no other reason than they like it. But, for us to have a discussion with each other we need to stake out positions. We need to be able to argue points for and against a topic. We must be able to describe why we like something if we are to have a discussion with someone about it, and perhaps, learn new truths. Otherwise we're just stomping our feet in a vacuum and ignoring what the other side has to say. But you do have to say something more than “Well, I like it that way.” In order to have a discussion, we have to be able to describe why we like it that way, and its benefits, so others can comment and reflect.

After reviewing so many adventures, I see a lot of the same mistakes over and over again. I see missed opportunities and patterns of mistakes. That's what these guidelines are all about: the most common mistakes and common ways to improve your adventures. I think it's that sweet spot that most people can agree on, community norms. My tastes are rather pedestrian and all I'm really doing here is compiling a lot of the observations that others have made and are generally agreed upon.

Again, this discussion is starting from the premise that an "Adventure" is meant to be run at the table. The guidelines all stem from that. Thus, to push back, in this case against a lot of backstory embedded in the text, you need to show why all of that backstory doesn't get in the way of running the adventure. There may, in some possible world, be a place for it, but if so then it has to be done in a way that doesn't interfere with running the adventure at the table.

**"Well, MY group had fun ..."**

But, you might say, my group had fun playing [some bad adventure.] That doesn't matter and is, in fact, looking at the wrong thing. We're not talking about "fun" in this book. I know, it sounds weird for me to explicitly say it also.

But, look at it this way. Many things affect fun at the table. The players and what mood they are in. The DM quality and their mood. The environment you're gaming in. Or, a well written adventure. All of these contribute to the fun you have at the table. The goal of this book, again, is not "a fun adventure" but, rather, to put in the hands of the DM all the tools they need in order to concentrate on the players and ENABLE fun at the table, that last point, the well written adventure. Thus, you may have had fun with an adventure IN SPITE of the adventure. This book endeavors to allow the DM to concentrate on the players, supporting the DM during play, allowing them to maximize the opportunities to have fun, but taking off the table the issues frequently encountered in adventure writing. If the DM doesn't have to fight the adventure publication then the chances that the players will have fun is greatly increased. The guidelines concentrate on just that last point, freeing the DM, hopefully, to concentrate on enabling fun.

**"That's just your opinion, man!"**

I have a song lyric that I'm fond of, itself a sample, that goes something like "Reality is the only word in the language that should always be used in quotes." Inasmuch as everything is just an opinion and there are very few objective facts in the universe, then, yes, these guidelines are just my opinion. Consider though ...

I've written over two thousand RPG adventure reviews. I've considered their details, what they do well and what they don't do well at. I've broken them down and organized them in my writings. I've done this in review after review, year, after year, over fifteen years and over three thousand reviews. I'm not suggesting that my word is law, but, rather, that perhaps you might want to give some consideration to my analysis and advice. I'm making well considered arguments that are, additionally, relatively mainstream. You're not seeing anything new in my statements. These ideas are, for the most part, the considered opinion of the hobby as a whole.

Also, why are you so defensive?

## Examples

The examples included were not easy decisions. I believe that seeing the examples, as they actually appeared in products, is quite beneficial. But, I also didn't want to embarrass the designers by referencing them. Further, many of the topics have a more holistic appearance in an adventure and including an example for, say, Too Much Background Text, wouldn't really do anyone any good.

All of the "bad" examples come from actual products I've reviewed, with their serial numbers filed off and the wording changed enough to obfuscate them in order to protect the designers. Let us not take an adventure's inclusion in the "bad" example, or its inclusion in the "good" section as either a condemnation of the adventure as a whole or a recommendation of it. I simply found that whatever I referenced was a good example for the topic at hand.

## Why we're in this mess to begin with

### Designer Familiarity

There's a difference between writing an adventure for your own usage and in writing for someone else. It has to do with familiarity. My own notes, for my home game, are minimal to an extreme. Room #11 might look like "Chasm. Rope bridge." If that were an encounter in an adventure I were reviewing I would, rightfully so, ding it pretty heavily for providing the bare minimum to the DM with absolutely no assistance at all. What does Chasm mean? How big? A rope bridge? New? Old? The description brings to mind nothing concrete. But for me, in my home game, I know what I meant when I wrote it down. A dark chasm, a frayed rope bridge that still looks sturdy. A slight cold breeze blowing up from the depths. At the edge of your vision, blinking red eyes on the other side ... all of these things I had in my head when I jotted down those notes. Thus the entry, for my home game, is just a

memory cue. Something to remind me what I meant so I can dredge it back up from the depths of my mind.

When writing for others, though, you have none of that at your disposal. The job of the designer is difficult. You have to get all that imagery out of your own head and down on paper in such a way that the core of your idea can be transferred to the reader, the DM, as they are using the adventure at the table. This is no small feat. You don't know what you don't know, as they say. Did you succeed in your writing? Are there implicit assumptions being made by you that you're not even aware of? Or, maybe even better, there are explicit assumptions being made and your writing is drawing on cultural memory of LotR movies and the bridge/balrog fight. The designer is always overly familiar with their work and the user is always at the opposite end of that spectrum. You have to watch for the issues that causes. So many adventures come out bland because the writing used by the designer doesn't match up to the vision of the situation in their head.

## Adventure as reading material

There's a rather infamous quote from a Paizo person (find the quote) that states that they know most of their adventures will only be read by the purchaser and never run. What a sad state of affairs! But consider, if you're in the business of making money, as Paizo is, and 90% of your adventure sales are to people who will never run them ... I wonder if perhaps that might affect the content of the adventures you publish? Might the content drift, along with the editing, to further support increased sales of "adventures to be read", since that's where you are making your money? Effort, put out, is concentrated on making them even better to read! To the detriment of play at the table.

If an adventure is created to be a good read and being useful to the DM at the table is only of secondary importance, then can it still be called an "adventure?" Not by my definition of "play at the table", but let's say that's true ... They can't CALL their products "a thing to be read that looks like an adventure", because then no one would buy it, the population of buyers, even readers, want actual adventures not "things to be read that kind of look like adventures". But, still, they have to focus their content and editing on Being Read, since that's where they make their money. And thus we end up in the situation we are in today. The major publishers pay little attention to being useful to the DM, instead making their products good reads, in order to maximize profits. In support of this statement I offer every adventure ever published by Paizo and the new WOTC. If they cared they would do better. It's not necessary for their adventures to be "successful", but if it happens then all the better.

And the horrors of Pay Per Word. "Lynch! I need 5,000 words by the 5pm deadline for the evening print run!" If you're being paid by the word then words you shall produce. Bad advice

you shall have, all wrapped up in a nice little package that allows for a nice paycheck. But well reasoned and implemented ideas? These are rarer.

And then the budding designer, you, comes along. You have a great idea and want to publish an adventure. But, the only examples you have, or at least the most common examples, are those from the major publishers ... which are written and edited to be good reads rather than useful at the table. But they are all you know, and thus you think this is the correct way to write an adventure. When, in fact, those adventures were rather cravenly [Ed: find a better word for profit] written to maximize profit rather than be useful to the DM. Further, they were written by people just like you who have had no training in how to write an adventure, being not born with the innate ability to do so. We all want to believe that the other person is an expert and they know what they are doing. Most of the time, they don't.

## Guidelines, not Concrete Rules

The advice herein generally are not hard rules. They are guidelines ... as are most things in life. Standing behind the guidelines are the principles of design that you need to be aware of.

My advice in this book is prescriptive and following it should allow you to create a good product, or, at a minimum, a better product than you would have without it. Some people will take exception with the advice, and note that there are circumstances in which one of the guidelines that is coming should not be followed. That is correct; the advice herein is for the most typical instances encountered in adventures designed for publication.

If you choose to NOT follow some of the advice in here then be intentional about it. Before you do it, know why you are not following the guideline. Make sure to continue to achieve the same impact that the guidelines provided for, understanding the principle behind it. If you simply MUST use a long section of italics in your text then what are you also going to do to mitigate the legibility issues that design deviation brings up?

This is not an invitation for designers to ignore the guidelines on purpose. You don't get the Edgy Designer award because your entire adventure was in a 6-point font in italics. James Joyce didn't have to follow the rules but let's not kid ourselves, none of us are James Joyce.

And this is not to say that every evil sword has to be usable by the party and that the party should be able to talk to all of the monsters. Sometimes evil is just evil and the monsters just want an evening meal.

# INDEX

Cross references to all NPC, magic, monsters, etc

gonzo vs ren

Gonzo implies a weird world that is unpredictable and YOU ARE NOT SAFE. MY GOD WHAT IS THAT THING! RenFaire pushes the setting trappings up to the Ren period and then typically mixes it with modern culture. Archeology museums. Friendly city guards. In gonzo you have a world on the edge while in RenFaire you have a highly functioning society. In one the PC's have room to breathe and in the other you are the guardians of order ... because there's not room for anything else.

## Further Reading

Call of the Toad By Markus Schauta, Gazer Press

This adventure generally does a good job with evocative writing. In my review I called out this sentence "Burial house with a bronze dome, discolored green by the centuries and knee-high nettles growing on the walls." Bronze doors. Discolored green. Knee-high nettles growing the walls. This is a terse sentence but does an excellent job of painting an evocative scene. Note the selection of the particular adjectives: Bronze, discolored, knee-high, and also the inclusion of the nettles growing on the wall as almost an aside. But it helps fully form the picture in the mind, giving life to something that may have not m=been mentioned. It help evoke the total image of an abandoned mausoleum, and thus all of the media ever consumed by that imagery also helps with the framing. And, of course, making the doors bronze and including the nettles both gives something to spice up the encounter through a heavier than usual door and a potential nuisance in the nettles. And if you love money then the bronze is worth some.