

Fractal Adventure Design (FAD) is a technique for improving flexibility and pacing of roleplaying games by focusing on answering the big questions and letting the details sort themselves out. It recognizes that every challenge in the game, from the most basic up to the highest level, can be answered with a simple die roll, and the reason we don't simply roll *Luck of the Hobbits* vs. *The Dark Lord's Will* and narrate the result of the roll is for reasons of pacing, player agency, and exploration of the setting. Players want to spend some time in the world and they want to see their impact on it.

Lets imagine an adventure in which there is a dungeon crawl. The whole thing is painstakingly mapped out and the encounters are all interesting and creative - and instead of wading in, your players flood the whole thing with toxic gas and walk in to pick the place clean. FAD gives you the flexibility to handle the situation any way you want, including simply saying yes. What big questions does the dungeon ask? Will the goblin lord be killed, and will the barkeep be rescued? The toxin answers both of those questions. Now the players have to deal with the stakes that have been won and lost and can move on to the next leg of the story. Answers the big questions and let the details tend to themselves.

Or we can imagine the same adventure going differently. The characters walk into the dungeon and face the traps and foes within, and all goes well for a couple of hours when you start to notice the players checking their watches and texting. Awesome as the dungeon is, folks are ready for a change of pace and they are only halfway through it. FAD allows us to handwave everything in the dungeon except the questions it poses. "You continue slaughtering your way through the dungeon until you find yourself outside the chamber of the Goblin Lord. A haggard man hangs in a cage above a massive fire. He is rocking the cage to keep from cooking, but you can see he is growing tired." The pace of the adventure has been adjusted for the needs of the players.

FAD is about starting with the most fundamental question of the adventure or story arc. What is this about? What are the stakes? Positive or negative outcome is based on a series of more specific questions. The outcomes of which are based on yet more specific questions. Until you reach a point where a question is resolved through simple yes or no (because only one answer is interesting or satisfying), a skill check, or an extended contest (which is really just a set of smaller questions). Can this ninja scale a wall? Yes - she's a freaking ninja. Can that note be retrieved from the fire before it is illegible? Roll. Can I put an end to the warlord's rampage? Fight it out. Can that hobbit destroy the one ring? Time to dive deeper into the fractal. Note: it is perfectly alright to allow the *players* to craft fundamental questions for their characters. Will I reconcile with my father? Will I sit on the throne? Will I avenge my son? These questions can have their own fractals interwoven with any extrinsic motivation the GM supplies.

Not every question has to be asked at the outset of the adventure, but the ones that are likely to be asked during a given play session should be. The important thing is that how the questions are answered from both narrative and mechanical standpoints are irrelevant. The warlord's reign of terror can be ended by his death or by a peace treaty. I can be resolved through a single roll or an epic quest. If the warlord is ended in the first scene by a lucky arrow to the heart, then the question around the warlord has been resolved and any fractal beneath him is rendered moot. Hopefully that wasn't the fundamental question of the story.

FAD is also performed on-the-fly. If the players decide to steal into the armory to outfit themselves for free, the questions are can the characters avoid being captured and can they get away with the gear they want. Each of those suggests a series of questions. Can the characters get in? (Yes.) Can they avoid detection? (Roll stealth.) Can they defeat any opposition? (Enter combat.) Can they penetrate the vault? (Depends, can they pick the lock? Can they avoid the automated defenses? Can they get the gear back out?) By taking just a couple of minutes to figure out these questions and desired pacing, you can figure out which mechanics to use. Do we want to spend the entire night raiding the stockpile? Lets get some very detailed questions and challenges. Do we just want to spend a few minutes on this before getting to the meat of the adventure? Lets have a few yeses and noes and a couple of skill checks and allow the possibility of a quick fight. And if they invent a teleportation device that lets them bypass all these questions, let them. Let them reduce it to a single skill check because they shown you that is all the interest they have.

If you react defensively when your players “shortcut” huge parts of your plans, or you find that some things drag on longer than anyone is interested, give this technique a try. I think you’ll find it allows the players to feel far more in control and far more excitement at the table.