The Pointy Hat Method of Dungeon Creation

An Introduction

Welcome! This guide is designed to help you through the process of creating a dungeon. This guide has been designed to be system agnostic, which means it can be used for any game that features dungeons as part of its gameplay, but it has been written with the framework of 5e in mind.

This dungeon won't go into detail on the length of your dungeon, how many rooms it should have, how strong the creatures within should be, but rather on how to build a thematically compelling and satisfying dungeon.

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Step I: Theme

Selecting the theme of the dungeon is the most important step. All other steps will be influenced by the theme you select for your dungeon. Themes are generally defined with one word, and it's good to keep it that brief to stop you from making themes that are convoluted. A theme is a clear idea that sets the mood for the dungeon. From your theme, you can derive your setting: where the dungeon is located, what exactly this dungeon is, how it came to be, etc.
Let's look at some examples:

Examples of Themes:
- The theme of the dungeon is lies. The dungeon is a carnival, with each encounter being a different attraction where the players are confronted with lies, artifice, and falsehoods.
- The theme of the dungeon is healing. The dungeon is an abandoned hospital, where different rooms correspond to different treatments that patients underwent when the hospital was in operation.
- The theme of the dungeon is death. The dungeon is a mausoleum that leads to an old crypt where the bodies of a particular noble family are kept.

Your Dungeon's Theme:
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Step II: Mechanics

A mechanic is a set of rules used in a game. This method seeks to express the theme of the dungeon not just with setting and flavor text, but with mechanics. The goal is for the players to feel the theme you chose not just through your descriptions, but through the way they interact with the game, conveying the theme in a clear and for most players novel way.
Think of the mechanics in the game, and see which ones could express the theme of your dungeon, the ones you can tweak, change, or use to reinforce the theme of your dungeon.
Let's look at some examples:

Examples of Mechanics:
- The theme of the dungeon is lies. The mechanics we can use to convey this theme are illusory magic, enchantment magic, and perception and insight checks, among others.
- The theme of the dungeon is healing. The mechanics we can use to convey this theme are hit point regeneration, short and long rests, hit dice, healing magic, and healing potions, among others

- The theme of the dungeon is death. The mechanics we can use to convey this theme are necromancy magic, death saving throws, and undead enemies, among others.

Your Dungeon's Mechanics:

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Step III: Goal

You must select a goal that your players have when entering the dungeon. The goal can be as varied as the dungeon itself, and reaching that goal means they've gone through the dungeon successfully. Do players need to reach a specific room to collect an object? Do players need to defeat a particular creature that is inside the dungeon? Do players need to escort someone through this dungeon? Try to vary the goals of your dungeon within an ongoing campaign to keep your players engaged.
Let's look at some examples:

Examples of Goals:
- The theme of the dungeon is lies. The goal of the dungeon is to retrieve an NPC that wandered into the carnival and never came out.
- The theme of the dungeon is healing. The goal is to find a particular recipe for a healing potion that was developed in this hospital, as it can apparently heal not just the body, but also the soul of a mortal.
- The theme of the dungeon is death. The goal is to defeat the undead patriarch that has made the mausoleum his lair, from which he routinely sends the reanimated bodies of his dead descendants upon the town.

Your Dungeon's Goal:

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Step IV: Encounters

An encounter is any planned event that happens while in your dungeon. Encounters are divided in three categories: combat encounters, puzzle/trap encounters, and roleplay encounters. Encounters are opportunities for you to use mechanics to convey your dungeon's theme. If you have enough mechanics, you can find ways to introduce them in different types of encounters, some in combat, some as puzzles or traps, and some in roleplay encounters. Varying your encounter types allows you to give a better pacing to your dungeon and to explore the theme of your dungeon in its entirety.

Let's look at some examples:

Examples of Encounters:

- The theme of the dungeon is lies. An example of an encounter could be a combat encounter that takes place in a hall of mirrors.
- The theme of the dungeon is healing. An example of an encounter could be a roleplay encounter where the ghost of a patient is convinced they still need treatment, and must be made to see that they are dead in order for them to cooperate with the party and give them the information they need.
- The theme of the dungeon is death. An example of an encounter could be a puzzle encounter where only a person that is currently making death saving throws can see the true path to take to go into the last room of the crypt.

Your Dungeon's Encounters:

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Step V: Ending

The ending of your dungeon is the climax of the micro story you have been telling through theming, mechanics, and encounters. It's your chance to culminate all the excitement of going through your dungeon into one final encounter that is an expression of all previous steps. A good way to make an ending is to take all the different ways you have conveyed your theme to your players and use them during the ending encounter.
Let's look at some examples:

Examples of Encounters:

- The theme of the dungeon is lies. The NPC the players were after refuses to leave as they've been put under an enchantment. The players must lie to the NPC and convince them to go through the different attractions with them in order to take them out of the dungeon.
- The theme of the dungeon is healing. The players face off against a creature who gets stronger the more damage is inflicted upon it. In order to defeat it, the players must heal the creature rather than damage it for a certain number of hit points.
- The theme of the dungeon is death. The players face off against the undead patriarch, who cannot be killed unless a player who is currently rolling death saving throws slays the patriarch in the realm of the dead.

Your Dungeon's Ending:

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