

# Principles of Adventure Design

When writing (or in some cases, rewriting) adventures, I have looked to adhere to the following principles of adventure design, which I offer here to inspire other budding adventure-writers.

## Make Choices Meaningful

If all of the characters' choices lead to the same inevitable conclusion, the players may feel that they have been little more than passive bystanders in your story.

- Write multiple endings for an adventure and allow for the possibility of failure.
- Write multiple routes through to each of the possible endings, allowing for a sliding scale of success and failure depending on the characters' actions.
- Do not expect players to explore everywhere, speak to everyone, or perform activities in the same order you imagine they will as you are writing the adventure.

Meaningful choices also mean providing some context around each choice the player makes. If the player must choose between turning right or left at an intersection, unless there is some context to this decision, some guessable

consequence for either choice, the player might just as well roll a die to choose which way to go. Consider:

- Using flavour text, NPC suggestions, Perception checks, et cetera, to provide some additional context to a decision a player has to make.
- Using more small combats, rather than fewer large combats, so the decision as to when to stop exploring is a meaningful one.

## Do Not Kill the Characters on the Roll of a Die

Traps can be deadly; enemies can get lucky; players can roll badly. It is important to foreshadow any difficult opponents/obstacles with clues to ensure the character can make adequate preparations. If a character still dies, at least the player might appreciate that it was poor decision-making that killed his character, not an arbitrary event.

## Only Write What Your Characters Can Discover

- So many adventures have rich backgrounds and contexts, but if the players can never discover this, it is a waste of writing.

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- Do not just hand your players information. Allow them to piece the clues together and achieve that sense of satisfaction at having discovered something, rather than just having been told something.
- Leave some questions unanswered. Being able to return to a loose thread in a later adventure can be a great way to keep players engaged with the overarching story you're trying to tell.

### Everything Should Make Sense

- Think about what the purpose of the area/dungeon/lair is before littering it with traps, treasures and creatures.
- Never place a secret door that you intend to be found.
- Never place a trap that you expect to be disarmed.
- Treasure should make sense in the context of its environment. Why hasn't the owner of this treasure spent/invested/used it already?
- Give some thought to how creatures will survive, how traps will reset, et cetera – put a monster that needs to eat in an environment without food and it will be long dead before the characters get there.

### Do Not be Afraid of Random Events and Encounters

Properly done, random encounters and events can prevent the players from feeling secure, escalate otherwise manageable situations, and remove the predictability from an otherwise run-of-the-mill exploratory adventure. With

random encounters, though, you still need to consider:

- Will this encounter make sense in the context of my adventure?
- If it is a wandering monster, where does it live, what does it eat, why has it not killed other denizens of your underworld (or itself been killed by something else before the characters reach it)?
- If it is a random event, like a cave-in, how many times has it happened before the characters arrived and/or why is it happening now?
- Can any of the random events interact with each other?
- Consider each of the random possibilities in each area in which they can occur – do they still make sense or do you need a more granular random encounter table?
- Do not overload an environment with random encounters – they should enhance, not overwhelm planned situational encounters.

Random encounters are often seen as lazy adventure-design – let the dice do the work – but they can actually be a great tool for stimulating a surprising evening's play!

### Make the GM's Life Easy

For this, I will explain by example. In *Hunter's Moon*, there is an encounter with a Spectre, the special abilities for which are not detailed in *Sleeping Gods*, but instead refer the GM to the *Bestiary*. In the *Bestiary*, some of the Spectre's special abilities are referred to as mimicing spells, for which the GM is

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referred to the main rulebook. To run this encounter properly, the GM needs to cross-refer between three books!

- Where an obscure rule is invoked, such as fear, madness, exhaustion, et cetera, summarise the mechanic in the scenario text with a reference to the more detailed source text.
- When using creatures with special powers, include the key game-effects and mechanics of each one in the encounter description.
- Where magickers are encountered, sketch out their spell-casting strategy.
- Where magic items are in play, summarise their effect.

None of the above removes the requirement to own the relevant supplement/rulebook, but it makes the adventure much easier to play if all the information the GM needs is in one place.

### A Few Final Don'ts

Don't:

- ...include any reference to how the characters feel in any set text. Only provide information on what their senses are telling them, and let the player interpret this for their character.
- ...start an adventure at the entrance to the underworld; let the characters engage in the world around them a bit first.
- ...force the players to go along with the adventure – it is OK if they walk away, so make sure you have something up your sleeve in case they do.
- ...be afraid to invent a new rule/mechanic. Think hard before doing so and try to reuse an existing mechanic, if possible, but the rules, by necessity, are broad and general. Sometimes specific circumstances require specific rules.
- ...be predictable. Not every combat should be toe-to-toe; not every trap should be triggered by a pressure-plate; not every guard should be bribable, et cetera. Make sure your players cannot rely on tired strategies to achieve victory. If there is a spell your magickers are not casting, use this as a challenge to create a situation in which it would be useful and see if they notice. If your players realise that they need to think about each encounter, they will be more engaged with the adventure.
- ...start too big. Grow the adventure in layers – sketch the main goal and the minimum obstacles to it, then work upward and outward from there. Flesh-out that skeleton with new opportunities and obstacles until it becomes a living, breathing adventure.
- ...skimp on the narrative. The flavour text is how you reach your players' imaginations. Paint every scene with colour, sound and scent to set the mood. It is OK to sit and read to your players for a minute or so when they enter a new environment.