Dispatches from the Raven Crowking V.5: Creative Techniques

Daniel J. Bishop

COMPATIBLE WITH DCC RPG

Contents

Introduction

I was recently part of a discussion around this question: Should players be allowed to read the GM section of RPG rulebooks?

Allowed? Obviously.

Encouraged? That's a different question, because you can't unlearn what you see....and, regardless of being "really outdated and obsolete", the opportunity for true discovery of the fictional milieu can be removed by knowledge. This is analogous to film spoilers, in a way.

Which is how you get a game like *Dungeon Crawl Classics*, which actively encourages the GM to make new monsters, has no standard magic items, and even suggests that the GM make campaign locations where the forces of magic work....differently.

If you can remember that magic when you first played, when you were facing some skeleton or goblin or whatever, and you didn't know what it could do.....or when the magic thingamabob you discovered really seemed special, it was because of the information disparity between you and the GM. The GM knew the skeleton was beatable; you did not. The GM knew the blunt mace was going to work better than your spear; you did not. The GM knew what the thingamabob did; you did not.

For some of us, that sense of discovery is actually what the game is about.

At some point, through experience or through reading the monster and GM books, you learned the ropes. The game shifted. It became about how the pieces were used, rather than discovering what the pieces were. That information disparity was about the current (and extended) situation - the particulars of this encounter or that adventure. Rather like most fantasy fiction itself, the process of discovery narrowed from not even knowing what a word like "goblin" was going to mean in the context of the fictive world to wondering how common tropes are going to be combined this time out.

I run *Dungeon Crawl Classics* because you can read the book cover-to-cover and that magic will still be there. There is no monster book to memo-

rize. There is nothing to un-know.

That is the focus of this volume – helping you run the best, most creative, game that you can. I am assuming that you own, or at least have read, the first four volumes in the series. If you do, you will note (perhaps without surprise) that some of the themes are recurrent. Hopefully, this volume will help you build off the others, encourage your GMing – at home or in a public setting – and give you a few pushes to increase your personal creativity.

If you are interested in how I set up and run a game (as I assure you, it is not the One True Way), then read on. If not, then don't.

As always, I can (and do!) make claims about what I have seen work, and what I have seen fail, and how often. But where my experience is at variance with your experience, you should take whatever I say with a big grain of salt. It is my expectation that, if you are reading this, you are smart enough to "get" what I am saying here. I don't need to preface everything with "in my opinion" or end it with "your mileage may vary"!

A Note on Terms

The discerning reader will note that I sometimes use "GM", and at other times I use "judge". A GM is the Game Master of any role-playing game, and when I use the term I mean to imply that the comment or advice is (nearly) universal. When I use the term "judge", however, I am specifically referring to the GM of a *Dungeon Crawl Classics* or *Mutant Crawl Classics* game. My observations here are less broadly applicable.

Plotlines, Railroading, and Sandbox Games

Yes, I know. Volume 3 of this series was all about sandbox gaming, and here I am again, ready to expound upon the topic once more. I have never been one to use two words where twenty will suffice, but, even so, sometimes I may fail to explain an idea thoroughly enough.

So, here's the thing. You've decided to run a sandbox game, but you've been told that the sandbox should (or must) remain static until the players interact with it. If you follow my advice, you will disregard any such notion. A sandbox game is at its best when the game milieu is in constant motion. This motion affects the context of the players' decisions, and in turn is affected by the outcome (or consequences) of those decisions.

Plots and Plotlines

There are two types of plots that are of interest to the GM of a sandbox game. The first is the machinations of various NPCs as they struggle to achieve their goals. The second is a sequence of events in the fictional milieu that affects the context of that milieu. To make things simpler, I am going to call the first a plot, and the second a plotline.

There is obviously some potential overlap. I.e., "King Baddaz wants to annex the neighbouring Duchy of Wheatfields, which causes him to hire mercenaries; when the mercenaries are later disbanded, some take to robbery" contains elements of both.

It is important that a plotline be logically connected, cause-to-effect, if the players are to have a chance of unravelling it. This is especially true of complex plotlines. Remembering that the more information the players can gain, the more context they have for their choices, the prospective GM will want to make these things possible to unravel. See Volume 1 of this series for more information on the interactions of choice, context, and consequences.

Other plotlines might be far simpler: Princess Zelda is captured by a dragon. If not rescued by the new moon, the dragon will eat her.

When I refer to a major plotline, it is a plotline that either (1) has a large effect on the context of the setting (i.e., a zombie apocalypse) or (2) is focused on by the players (i.e., if the PC's favourite innkeep has money troubles, and the players care, it can become a major plotline simply because it influences them in play, and thus has contextual meaning to the players which is much greater than its influence on the game milieu as a whole).

Why Plots and Plotlines?

Because without them, the characters are operating in a vacuum.

It is possible to imagine a world in which nothing ever happens except that which is initiated by the PCs, but it is difficult, for me at least, to imagine why one would want to engage in such a world. A living, breathing world – or any world which is to feel like one – requires motion. And that motion cannot always be the result of player activity, unless the goal is to feel stale and artificial.

To some degree, plots and plotlines are just "what's going on". When the PCs stop at the Green Dragon in Bywater to share a pint with Sam Gamgee and Ted Sandyman, they can hear talk of folk crossing the Shire, of walking trees seen in the Northfarthing, and of elves going West. Why? Because it is good for the game. It gives the players context in which to make decisions. It increases verisimilitude.

At the same time, Saruman is watching the Shire, as are the Rangers of the North. Saruman hopes to get the Ring. He has stationed agents in Bree. He has begun to establish trade with the South Farthing. Why is this important? Because it increases context, and it increases consequences. It gives the players something to worry about……or to think about if they storm Orthanc before discovering Saruman's purchase of Longbottom Leaf in any other way. It increases the feeling that the world is a vibrant place. Failing to pay attention to what is going on might have consequences….just as it does in the real world.

What if the players capture those goblins instead of slaughtering them all? Again, if the GM has prepared plots and plotlines, he has at his fingertips all kinds of information to reveal through the captives. All the GM need determine is what the goblins could reasonably know.

How many times have you heard a GM complain that his players simply wade through the opposition, never bothering to talk or take captives? That happens because either (1) the cost of taking captives is too high, or (2) the cost of not taking captives is too low (i.e., nothing is lost by not talking to folks). The median, where a captive might know something of importance, and might not immediately cause terrible woe to the PCs, is far more interesting, as it raises a real choice for the players.

How to Set Up Plots and Plotlines

This is actually pretty simple. First off, when setting up your NPCs, take a second to think about what they want (or want to avoid) and what steps they are taking to make it so. Not all of them. Just some of them. Bigwigs. A few non-bigwigs. Enough to make things interesting.

Remember, for each hour of design, you want a minimum of two hours of play. If it takes five minutes to figure out what Lord Haggard wants, make sure that you include 10 minutes in play that relate to the same – bar rumours, related encounters, whatever. Your time is valuable.

Second off, determine some events for your milieu. If you have access to the 1st Edition Advanced Dungeons & Dragons *Oriental Adventures* tome, there are some wonderful tables in the back for randomly seeding weekly, monthly, and annual events. These can be a great spur to your imagination, even if you are not running an Asian-themed game.

There is another benefit to using random tables: You don't always get the result you would have picked. Just as it is worthwhile to use other's maps (so it appears that there is more than one architect in your world) and other's adventures (to increase the diversity in style and presentation, and by so doing expand the game world), so it is worthwhile to have events occur which surprise even you.

The events listed in *Oriental Adventures* are rather vague, and need to be adjusted to meet the needs of your campaign milieu. I strongly urge you to consider using random events to confound (or make difficult) NPC plots, because doing so gives more opportunity for the players to get involved. If the Lord of Swamp Castle wants to gain more land by marrying his son to Princess Lucky, and you roll "Death of an Important Person", consider having either the prince or the princess be the person who dies.

Likewise, while "Princess Zelda is captured by a dragon. If not rescued by the new moon, the dragon will eat her." is a good example of a simple plotline, it is by no means the only plotline that can occur starting with Princess Zelda being captured by a dragon.

Why can't the dragon fall in love with the princess, or the princess escape, or another band of NPC adventurers swoop in to rescue her at the last moment? Well, obviously, all of those things can occur. The GM controls the world. The plotlines that the GM sets, barring PC involvement, resolve themselves as the GM dictates. The GM may dictate how they are resolved ahead of time, during game play, by GM fiat, or by random methods.

Does it matter?

Well, it might. If the GM consistently resolves matters in the same way, or consistently chooses resolutions that screw the PCs, either verisimilitude or player confidence in the GM might be damaged. If the GM attempts to extrapolate reasonably from the set-up of the game milieu, though, it doesn't really matter. If the GM also takes into account how PC activity might have altered planned developments, then it really does not matter.

Either way the GM is making decisions for the NPCs, and/or further developing the web of context, choice, and consequence which is the game milieu.

The Dreaded Railroad

The problem, in some cases, with attempting to run plots and plotlines in the world is that players feel railroaded. Fair enough. There is a positive dearth of advice for GMs on the inclusion of plotlines without railroading players.

In order to offer some advice in this regard, I would like to make use of a well-known example: *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Anyone who has read the very funny web comic, *DM of the Rings*, knows the expected pitfalls of running a game in Middle Earth.

For the purposes of this discussion, I am going to pretend that these novels are an independent creation of the GM. This is not because it affects railroading, but because I do not want to deal with the obvious question of the players "gaming the novels". I.e., if the players know where Bilbo will be with the Ring on such-and-such a day, they could presumably use that knowledge to kill Bilbo and take the Ring. Unless you are actually running a game where the fictional timeline can be known to your players ahead of time, this is simply not going to occur.

Because there are a few circumstances where this might be relevant to the average GM, I will revisit "Gaming the Plotline" below.

Well Met in Bree

Imagine that, as a perspective GM, I have access to *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion*, from which I am going to devise the background of a campaign milieu. Because there is the best information available during the Third Age, I decide to set my campaign during that period. After all, I have an exacting timeline of events from around the period of The Hobbit to far past the War of the Ring.

The first thing that I want to avoid is having the PCs be anyone depicted in the novels. Why? ***Because plotlines are what happens without the PCs' actions being taken into account.*** The PCs actions cannot and must not be scripted beforehand.

The second thing I must avoid is believing that anything that occurs in the novels must happen. The novels are nothing more than a guide as to what may happen if the PCs take no action. If the PCs act upon the world, even in ways that do not directly impact the events in the novels, things may change.

For instance, imagine what would happen if a dwarf PC became involved in aiding the Elfking of Mirkwood to reclaim a section of the forest from the spiders. Do the dwarves and Bilbo then receive the same cold welcome they did in **The Hobbit**? And, if friendship is fostered here, what happens after the dragon is slain? Without the "barrel-rider" events and comment, does Smaug even destroy Esgaroth?

Remembering that a role-playing game hinges on a cycle of context-choice-consequence, where the consequences create the new context for further choices, the discerning GM will consider carefully how the PCs' choices affect the entire milieu. The goal is not to limit the consequences of those choices, so as to remain true to a predetermined storyline. Rather, the goal is to highlight the effects that player choices have on the game milieu. Therefore, nothing in the novels is sacred, and the GM can and should feel free to make any changes that accentuate the PCs' impact on the setting.

If you recall earlier, how I suggested the GM attempt to gain 2 hours of play out of every hour's work, it will make sense that you limit how far into the future you extend any plotlines – the odds increase exponentially with time that campaign events will render your work inapplicable. If there is a choice to be made between that work, though, and allowing the natural consequences of the players' choices to occur, always go with the natural consequences. These are fairly easy rules of thumb.

Does this mean that the PCs can try to take the Ring and set themselves up as the new rulers of Middle Earth? Yes. Does this mean that they can curry Sauron's favour by seeking the Ring for him? Yes. Does this mean that they can defeat the Necromancer soundly, thus pushing Sauron's return into the unknown future? Yes. Can they kill Aragorn? Yes. Can they explore Far Harad? Yes. Can they ignore the War of the Ring, and seek to adventure in the North while great events, of which they hear only rumour, occur in the South? Yes.

Does this mean that the focus of the game may be completely different than the focus of the novels? No. It means that the focus of the game **will be** completely different. There is no "may" about it.

This is a good thing.

Gaming the Plotline

In some cases, the PCs may be travelling into a well-known fictional world as a form of planar travel. In some cases, the PCs may even be aware of this world as fiction. Anyone familiar with the Harold Shea stories will know what I mean here. What to do then?

I recommend that you take the Harold Shea stories as your inspiration. Not only was Harold Shea able to alter events in those stories, but he was able to use his knowledge of the natural progression of events in the story worlds he visited to his advantage. Side trips like this can be very cool and very fun – but they are probably best in small doses. Dipping into a fictional world for a single adventure, and then getting out.

Nor do these fictional worlds need to be exactly like their real-world fictional counterparts. Good examples of "almost" copies are found in ***Dungeonland*** and ***The Land Beyond the Magic Mirror***, which are 1st edition AD&D modules loosely based on ***Alice in Wonderland*** and ***Through the Looking Glass***.

Historical Games

Using real historical periods for your games? I would suggest that the same rules apply.

If the game is not about time travel, then you might as well assume that your milieu occupies a parallel reality from Game Day 1. From now on, things may or may not proceed according to historical precedent.

If the game is about time travel, then you have two fun options to choose from, both of which are worth using in the same campaign:

(1) History Resists Alteration: As the PCs deal with known historical events, actually changing history is an adventure in itself, and the players must work through the puzzle of how to overcome this resistance. It needs to be clear that PC choices matter – the game is about determining which choices allow you to reach a desired goal.

(2) The More Things Change: Changing known historical events changes the rest of the universe to conform to the new reality. Only the PCs (and

maybe some time-sensitive NPCs) know both timelines exist. In some cases, the changes really are for the better. In other cases, not, and the game may well become about attempts to undo previous changes.

The important thing is to understand the interplay between context, choice, and consequence, and then to allow PC choices to matter. A PC choice that does not matter has no consequence, and does not impact the context of future choices. In a word, it is boring. In two words, it is a false choice.

Some GMs pride themselves on their ability to present "an illusion of choice" while only presenting false choices. I think that these illusions are often not as successful as the GM imagines, and that it is only decades of consuming other passive entertainments that make these "games" playable. But that's just me. Your mileage may vary.

Caring About Characters and Plot

So, how do you get the players to care about your plot? The simple answer is: You don't. The longer answer: You can't make them care by simply demanding that they do.

If the baddies have important information, and the PCs slaughter them, let the PCs find that out the hard way. Now the characters have a problem of their own creation to deal with, and the GM should absolutely not be helping them out. What he should be doing is letting them know that "John the Knife knew, but he was slain by adventurers some time back" or whatever is appropriate. Let them know they made the problem. And then let them solve it.

Here's another potential consequence: The PCs cannot always go through the baddies like a hot knife through butter. What if the GM occasionally includes baddies that can beat the PCs? Or can be so costly to beat, in terms of resources, that the fight is more of a loss even if the PCs win? There is no reason for the players to try diplomacy if the sword always works.

If you want the PCs to talk to your villains, you need to make sure they see, early on, that powerful foes are willing to talk to them, rather than simply wiping the floor with them. You also need to let the players see that this works....rather than stripping the PCs naked and taking all of their stuff, a powerful monster will let them go for information. And, perhaps, that power-

ful monster offers them some information if the PCs are reasonably polite.

Nor do the PCs always have to meet the baddies in a bleak dungeon with no one else around. Why not during a masked ball, a church service, at a wedding or a funeral, etc.? There are all kinds of circumstances where swords and spells are simply unacceptable.

You get players to care about their characters by making them work for what they get. You get players to care about your plot by making understanding your plot integral to that work.

When players have to work to make their characters what they want, not only is there an actual history to the character, which the player can take pride in, but the character represents the effort of the player. And you can be certain that players value their own effort!

That said, if your game depends upon the players making a particular choice, you've got a problem, because players will often make some other choice...and they should be able to do so.

Conclusion

Plots and plotlines are important to create a world that seems to live and breathe on its own. They are important to allow the GM to have information to impart from the world's innkeepers, barmaids, and enemy prisoners. They are important to keep the world from feeling static, or driven by the PCs only. They are part of the context of the game milieu.

On the other hand, there is a limit to their importance. The interplay of context-choice-consequence trumps the importance of any future events. The world can turn on a dime. The world must be able to turn on a dime, or there is no game.

Another way to say this is that plotlines exist to serve the game, not the other way around. If you ever find yourself limiting the impact of the PCs on the world to preserve a plotline – you are wrong. Stop what you are doing. Glory in the PCs' impact. Treasure it. Use it as a springboard to your own imagination, and draw new plotlines that follow rationally from the new context.

It really is that simple.

Care and Feeding of NPCs

Almost every game is going to need NPCs. In fact, unless the PCs are the only living intelligent beings around, your game will need some. Even if there is no one to interact with directly, the presence of other people will probably be felt, like with the found documents and riddles in the first version of Myst. I am going to assume, therefore, that everyone reading this understands the basic concept. Likewise, most of this post applies to any role-playing game, and is not limited to *Dungeon Crawl Classics*.

Basically, this is just a collection of ideas and observations arising from decades of play using various systems.

Non-Player Characters (or), "The last monster we talked to ate half of the party!"

"Remember the good old days, when adventures were underground, NPCs were there to be killed, and the finale of every dungeon was the dragon on the 20th level? Those days are back. *Dungeon Crawl Classics* adventures doesn't waste your time with long-winded speeches, weird campaign settings, or NPCs who aren't meant to be killed. Each adventure is 100% good, solid dungeon crawl, with the monsters you know, the traps you remember, and the secret doors you know are there somewhere."

If you are reading this, you probably know that quote as the tagline of the *Dungeon Crawl Classics* series of modules, starting from 3rd Edition days, and published by Goodman Games. I am going to suggest that you replace "NPCs who aren't meant to be killed" with "NPCs who aren't meant to survive" in your thinking. The first implies that the NPCs in question should die at the hands of the PCs, but the tagline is actually a reaction against modules where NPCs are given plot protection to make an adventure run as intended by its author.

In the parlance of TSR-era Dungeons & Dragons, it is important to note that all NPCs were considered monsters, although not all monsters are NPCs. This meant that it is always okay to consider them as the opposition, to be met with violence – or even just simply as a target to be murdered and

despoiled. On the other hand, as with many thinking monsters, talking to an NPC is often rewarded. In the 1st Edition ***Player's Handbook***, Gary Gygax advises players to talk to creatures they encounter when it is possible.
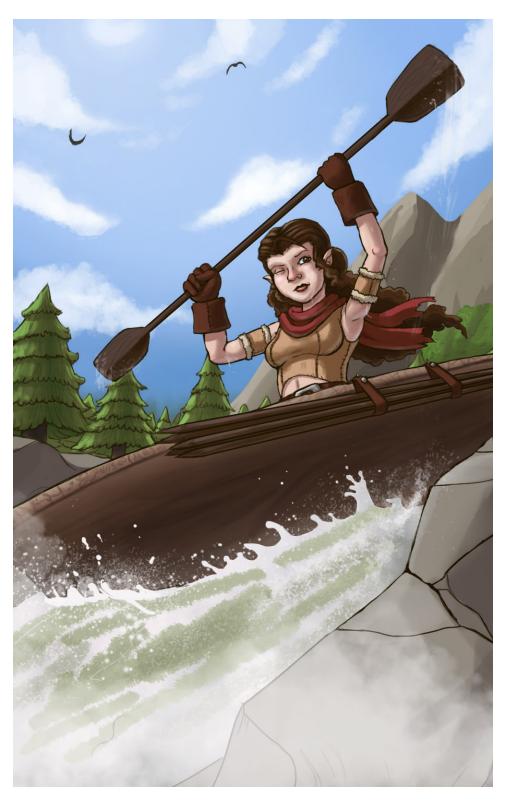
One of the upsides of this is that NPCs are NOT and should not be "DM PCs". They do not have plot protection. They are not favoured. If the PCs kill them, they die. Or, if they do not die, there is some reason why they do not which makes sense within the milieu and tone of the game.

Some of the potential uses of NPCs are:

Colour: There are people walking around in the marketplace. Someone is drinking in the inn. A server brings you your clichéd bowl of stew. Pilgrims are encountered on the road. Kids roll a barrel hoop down a muddy street. The Duke has hired people to repair the bridge. Etc., etc. The world around your PCs is filled with people. Many of them are just there because the world would feel barren without them.

Concealment: The king disguised as a beggar, scruffy urchin, or the pick-pocket, are going to stand out like sore thumbs if the PCs never encounter non-king beggars and non-pickpocket urchins. Don't let that be your game. A vibrant population means that the assassin, the thief, and the would-be duelist don't necessarily stand out initially. Determining who is important among the multitudes is a result of play, although some characters obviously stand out due to position (the Duke, the King, the old witch in the swamp) or circumstances (the weapon seller, the drunkards you are brawling with, the old witch in the swamp).

Change of Pace: Talking to things provides a change of pace from fighting them. Especially if talking can lead to fighting, or vice versa, if the encounter is handled poorly or well.

Function (or),
"What the heck is this guy doing here anyway?"

Beyond the general notes above, major (and even relatively minor) NPCs can serve a function within game play itself. There are two general rules to keep in mind here:

(1) If the players are interested in an NPC, that NPC has just become elevated in the hierarchy of campaign importance. That doesn't mean that he or she has become more important in the milieu. Rather, it means that the player's interest makes them important in the game itself.

(2) No NPC should ever serve only one purpose if they can serve two or more. People are complex. The NPCs we focus on should also be complex, not necessarily in the way they are played (more on this later), but certainly on the way they impact game play.

Here are some functions NPCs can fulfill. Note that, while some of these are similar to each other, they are listed separately to encourage the GM to consider all of these functions.

Ally: Someone who is capable of giving substantial help to the PCs, but isn't an adventurer (or, at least, not part of the PCs' party). The viscount who offers them men and equipment, the priest who provides sanctuary, the senator who smuggles them out of the city when the political winds blow against them. In fiction, Elrond is an ally who provides rest and sanctuary in both The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings.

Foil: A foil is an enemy, but not a combat-related enemy. Or, if a combat-related enemy, someone that the PCs don't necessarily want to kill. A foil exists to complicate the PCs' lives, causing irritations minor or major that cannot simply be solved with sword or spell. Tyrian Lannister, in A Game of Thrones, plays the foil to many other characters…in the early seasons, anyway. Even a character like Belloq in ***Raiders of the Lost Ark*** is a foil that gets his eventual comeuppance.

The thing that the discerning judge must remember about a foil is this: If you don't want the PCs to kill your foil, you need to supply reasons why they should not. Something must offset the irritation of having the character survive, be it fear of her power, his superior position each time they meet, or

even a grudging admiration due to aid received from the foil in the past.

And if the PCs do succeed in killing your foil, let the PCs succeed. Never, ever make your adventure rely upon the survival of a single NPC!

This doesn't mean that consequences should not apply. The king looks unkindly on those who destroy his agents, for instance, no matter how annoying those agents might be!

Information Source: The NPC knows something the PCs need or want to know, and can convey that information to the PCs. Gollum knows a secret way into Mordor. Elrond can read the runes on Glamdring and Orcrist. A long-deceased NPC's diary gives clues about an adventure location. A scarecrow can give directions to the Emerald City. And so on.

One of the nice things about an information source, as mentioned, is that the NPC need not ever be met in person, and need not even be alive. Some information sources are manipulators, which attempt to give misleading or false information to cause the PCs to act as their instruments. Other information sources are well-meaning but wrong. The players should always be aware that no NPC is the "Voice of the DM" telling them what they must do, but rather all information sources should be taken with a grain of salt.

In a game like ***Dungeon Crawl Classics***, where "Quest For It" is the beating heart of play, information sources are especially valuable. How does one Quest For a particular spell, if there is no one who can say where such a spell might be found? These do not always have to be NPCs, but they must be something the PCs can interact with. Examples of information sources, living or otherwise, can be found in ***The Black Goat***, ***The Giggling Deep***, and ***The Seven Deadly Skills of Sir Amoral the Misbegotten***, among other places.

Instrument: The NPC is a tool that the PCs may use…an extension of their own powers, as it were. Rhadagast the Brown is an instrument of Saruman when he goes to fetch Gandalf from the borders of the Shire. Tyrion Lannister uses Bronn as a physical instrument in ***A Game of Thrones***, and is later himself the instrument of Daenerys Targaryen. A PC who hires an assassin to remove a foe has made use of an instrument. Unlike a support character, the PC does not generally supervise an instrument.

Love Interest/Friend: The NPC is simply so likable that the players want to hitch their characters to him or her. When I wrote ***The Dread God Al-Khazadar***, I created rules to encourage this sort of relationship. You can find rules in ***Drongo: Ruins of the Witch Kingdom*** that do the same. You don't have to play out any part of the romance at the table, especially if it makes you or others uncomfortable, to establish that it is there. But having it there means that you have the option of creating PC dynasties in long-lasting campaigns, where the children of your adventurers grow up be heathen slayers themselves. Edgar Rice Burroughs certainly did this, giving strong love interests and full grown sons to both Tarzan and John Carter.

There will certainly be a temptation to place friends, loved ones, and family in harm's way. This does happen often enough in Burroughs' novels, for instance, and even Conan's temporary romances often find themselves in need of his rescue. Yet, Conan and Tarzan are going to get recompense for their chivalry which, frankly, you are unlikely to want to play out at the table. And, even if you did, rolling dice is not the same as canoodling for real. What happens in games is that players quickly learn to avoid emotional entanglements with their characters. There is no real benefit to the player, but it does give the PC a vulnerability that the judge (and therefore his imaginary enemies) can exploit.

You overcome this in two ways:

(1) Provide a benefit. The NPC might have information, or provide support. The PC may get a mechanical game benefit, such as extra hit points. Something within the game itself offsets the vulnerability that the player is accepting. Another example: Princess Annegret in ***Creeping Beauties of the Wood*** comes with a chest full of gold and a dukedom once her father dies.

(2) Limit your exploitation of the vulnerability. Simply put, if you place your PCs' significant others in danger regularly, your PCs will choose not to have significant others. In ***The Portsmouth Mermaid***, the aforementioned Princess Annegret is never placed in danger, although she is often used as a foil to spur the PCs towards taking action in the situations they encounter. There is one scenario in ***Three Nights in Portsmouth*** where the princess might be placed in danger, but even that doesn't require the judge to target her specifically. This is not accidental.

Family may be included in this category as well.

Opportunity: The NPC is a mark. Your thieves have to do something to earn the name, right? Here is someone whose jangling purse demands to be taken by stealth or force. Or someone whose home is in desperate need of burgling. Or who is ripe for a con. If you have thieves in your game (or rogues, depending upon what you are playing), let them act the part. Provide some opportunities.

This doesn't mean that all opportunities turn out the way that the PCs expect them to. I would highly recommend Jack Vance's ***The Eyes of the Overworld*** for a number of great examples of how a clever and observational fellow may attempt to scam the world around him, both to his weal and his woe.

Opposition: Some NPCs are out to kill you. They are more interesting if they also partake of another potential NPC function. Darth Vader was compelling as a villain; he was exponentially more compelling as Luke Skywalker's father. The initial appearance of the Master in ***Doctor Who*** was fantastic; the Master as an ongoing foil to the Doctor is better. But be warned – a little of this goes a very long way. Few and far between should be the opponents who were old school chums, family members, and so on. Once in a while is spice. Too much spice destroys the dish.

Patron: Possibly, but not necessarily, in the general ***Dungeon Crawl Classics*** magical sense, a patron is any NPC who sends the PCs on missions in exchange for something else (money, freedom, information, magical power, etc.). Again, the players should always be aware that no NPC is the "Voice of the DM" telling them what they must do, but rather all patrons should be taken with a grain of salt. But also, again, most patrons should be (relatively) level with the PCs, or the PCs will soon no longer desire the patronage of anyone.

Riddle: The NPC presents a challenge to the players. If they can figure out what he wants/how to treat her, then they can get some benefit from the relationship. If not, they might face some danger. More likely, they just won't gain the benefit. For example:

(1) Determining how to deal with Gollum allows Frodo and Sam to get across the Dead Marshes, and then make use of a secret way into Mordor.

(2) Sam Tarly in ***A Game of Thrones*** is mostly cowardly, but by treating him well and giving him something worth fighting for, Jon Snow gains a useful

ally.

(3) Sherlock Holmes, attempting to find out where a goose was raised in T*he Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle*, makes a recalcitrant vendor more forthcoming by pretending to be a gambler who stands to lose a tidy sum if the vendor talks.

Note that these sorts of things should reward the player's ingenuity rather than the character's build, wherever possible. Even if the game is very build-centric, you can offer bonuses for how the players approach the problem…. or even use their build as an excuse to present the problem more completely, while leaving the solution up to the players.

Support: The NPC is literally going on adventures with the characters, and might be used as a replacement PC if there is a death. These characters – known in Ye Days of Olde as henchmen and hirelings – should have their own personalities, but are often left mostly to the players to order about and control. Note that familiars and intelligent magic items are often NPCs of this sort.

Reward: The NPC is, or is the means to, some form of reward. The reward might be some esoteric knowledge, the start of a relationship, or even simply access to another NPC (directly or via letter of introduction). A familiar, a henchman, a lover, a friend, or a new patron are all potential rewards for successfully completing an adventure.

Service Provider: The innkeeper who sells you ale, the farrier who shoes your mighty steed, and even the cleric or chirurgeon who heals your wounds are all service providers. So is the person who runs the baths or mends your armour. In general, they provide a given service in exchange for coin.

Threat: The NPC provides a threat by which the PCs' options are delimited. This can be relatively benign (the queen supplies the threat her tax collectors wield) or downright hostile (Sauron will send more orcs and Nazgûl, and probably obtain the One Ring, thus covering Middle Earth in darkness, should the Fellowship not proceed with care). A threat is an NPC who is largely offstage, encountered only through the actions of his own servants and/or reputation during actual play. Another good example of a threat is Ernst Stavro Blowfeld until near the end of *You Only Live Twice*. Likewise, the shadowy Quantum organization is a major threat in *Casino Royal* and

Quantum of Solace, only to be downplayed in 2015's *Spectre*.

The important thing for the GM to remember about a threat is that, while it delimits the PCs' options, the threat should not be used to railroad the PCs into a given course of action. The threat acts as context for the PCs' choices, and can certainly lead to consequences, but a large part of the game is the players figuring out how to beat the limitations imposed by the threat – just as James Bond does when faced by the threat of Blofeld, or the Fellowship does when faced by the threat of Sauron's dominion.

Even if a threat is initially portrayed as all-encompassing, in should not be. There should always be a way – not necessarily an easy one – for the PCs to come out on top! And, importantly, if the players can come up with a reasonable way for doing so, it should have a commensurately reasonable chance to work!

What's In a Name?

William Shakespeare may argue that "That which we call a rose/By any other word would smell as sweet", but in a role-playing game, the names that you give your NPCs is going to shape (in part) how your players see them. It is pretty easy to see that Sauron, although portrayed exactly the same way in *The Lord of the Rings*, would have been less imposing if he were named "Chester" by Professor Tolkien.

Likewise, if your game is set in a pseudo-Roman area, calling the local tavern keeper "Bob" is going to take your players right out of the setting. Names need to feel like they fit. No one can spend the time – or, for that matter, has the organizational memory – to name every stray character that might be met in the average marketplace. It is a good idea to keep a list of 10 or so male and female names common to the area, so that if the PCs take an unexpected interest in the local greengrocer you can give him a name that makes sense for where he is, and what his social position is.

I personally own half a dozen baby name books. A good book of this nature includes older versions of names, and tells you what the name means. The Internet contains dozens of similar websites, many of which break down names by culture and gender. These are excellent sources when devising such a list!

"Special" NPCs – those you want or expect the players to pay attention to –

should have names assigned to them already. Truly special characters should have unique names….Vos the Spell-Thief rather than Linda, for instance. If you are playing **Dungeon Crawl Classics**, Appendix S provides a treasure trove of ideas for names and titles.

If you look at the uses of NPCs which I listed, above, you will note that "overshadowing the PCs" is not on that list. NPCs should not overshadow the PCs, but some NPCs should seem to temporarily do so if they are intended, for instance, as a foil or a credible threat. That list might also give you an idea whether or not to give an NPC a common local name or a unique one. A service provider or an instrument doesn't need a cool name. A patron, though, is someone whose name you want the PCs to remember.

You can also assume that any reasonably good author has named their characters using similar principles. This means that you can mine an author's work for names – possibly altering them somewhat, and certainly avoiding obvious ones like Conan or Gandalf – to populate an area or adventure reminiscent of the author's work. The names in **Prince Charming, Reanimator**, for instance, owe much to those in H.P. Lovecraft's **Herbert West, Reanimator**. Likewise, the names in **The Arwich Grinder** come from Lovecraft, with only a slight amount of shuffling.

Reputation
In **Star Trek: The Wrath of Khan**, Chekov's reaction to discovering The *Botany Bay* comes before Khan appears on the screen. Throughout the movie, even when he is not on-camera, the other characters spend quite a bit of time talking about him….enough that the character can be meaningfully rewritten for **Star Trek: Into Darkness**, and the name means something as soon as you hear it.

Likewise, in **The Lord of the Rings**, Sauron is never "seen" until Frodo, Sam, and Gollum are on the precipice of Mount Doom. Instead, Sauron is felt throughout the narrative.

It is quite possible to have an NPC be effective in a setting even if the PCs never meet her. For instance, in one campaign there was a notable and mysterious thief called Jack of Roses. Jack of Roses always left a rose at the site of his high-class robberies, and he was terribly mysterious. No one knew his identity, and the PCs never found out who he was. This didn't prevent the

NPC from lending important colour to the urban setting. Nor did it prevent the NPC from being a reasonable riddle/foil – one of the PCs was actually mistaken for the "true identity" of the Jack of Roses.

(In fact, Jack of Roses was a young noblewoman that the PCs had met in her normal guise, and who could have been tapped for a wide variety of NPC functions within the setting. This is a case where using a relatively common name for her "civilian" persona disguised the fact that she was also the much more romantically named Jack of Roses.)

The point here is: How other NPCs react to your NPC when your NPC is off-screen is as important as how the NPC acts when he is present. You can create a credible threat by having everyone speak of "William Hornsby, the Moneylender" in hushed and fearful tones, even if the Moneylender seems cultured and polite in person. When a character's reputation and actions do not seem to mesh, the resultant mystery highlights the character's reputation – and importance to the setting.

Actions Speak Louder Than Words…..

What an NPC does in a setting is often far more important than what an NPC says. If you want the players to know Lord Voldemort is a serious threat, sooner or later Lord Voldemort is going to have to actually kill someone. If, instead, Lord Voldemort is repeatedly beaten by school children who escape unscathed from their escapades, Lord Voldemort becomes a joke. If you want to know why the Harry Potter series became so much darker as it went on, the answer is "Because it had to".

….But Words Are Important Too!

On the other hand, important characters can be given a unique "voice". This doesn't mean that you literally have to "do voices" (not all of us are good at that), but that the character can have idiosyncratic ways of speaking. A nobleman and a ditch digger don't sound the same. Education, philosophy, and dialect/slang (including terms related to an NPC's trade) affect how a character speaks.

I once ran the Caves of Chaos from *The Keep on the Borderlands*, adapted to 3rd Edition rules. When the PCs entered the evil temple, they got into an argument about the ethics of sacrificing people with one of the clerics they captured there. It lasted about half an hour of real time before one of the

players (my son, in this case) realized that I was using Christian theology to justify human sacrifice, including that of babies. It was, perhaps, the highlight of the session. Another highlight occurred when a group of orcs were so impressed by another PC that they shifted from his opposition to his followers.

For important NPCs, where you know or expect that there will be role-playing, it is often useful to have made a cheat sheet of dialogue snippets that you can throw into the conversation. Otherwise, the best thing you can do is try to develop and maintain good improvisational skills. See below for more on this.

Recognition Handles

This is an idea that I stole from FASA's **Star Trek** and **Doctor Who** role-playing games. Simply put, it is choosing something that is unique to that character, which you can use as a "hook" to make the players tell which character they are encountering. It helps players to remember your various characters, and it helps you to portray them consistently. For instance:

* Spock raises an eyebrow and talks about whether or not things are "logical".
* The 4th Doctor has a really long scarf and offers you jelly babies.
* Harry Potter has a lightning bolt scar.
* James Bond has his martinis shaken, not stirred.
* Zorro carves his trademark Z into walls and people.
* Superman and Batman literally wear logos on their chests.
* Many cartoon characters (including Sylvester and Tweetie, Donald Duck, and Daffy Duck) have speech impediments.

Steal, Steal, and Steal Again!

Further to this, you don't have to make everything up yourself. You can pretend that various characters in the game are being played by chosen actors. You can take ideas from movies, television, or fiction … just file off any obvious serial numbers and you are ready to go! You can use your best Batman voice for the Captain of the Guard, and play the greengrocer with a Tom Baker flair. Unless you are a very, very good actor, it is unlikely that your players will know.

It is even less likely if you mix & match. That nobleman is basically Spock, but instead of saying "logical", he also womanizes like Kirk. If you watched

the excellent medical mystery drama, House, you might not have noticed that House combines traits of Sherlock Holmes (analytical mind, drug problem, off-putting personality) with Watson (has a limp, medical doctor).

The goal with stealing is to not make it obvious. You can have that dwarf act as though played by Sylvester Stallone, but avoid making him yell "Yo! Adrian!" You can play a riff off of Sauron, but don't make him a world threat, and don't make him manifest as a giant disembodied Eye in great need of Visine.

Use and Abuse of Stereotypes

Maybe the dwarves in your campaign world seem like they could come directly from The Hobbit. The elves have more than a nod to those in Poul Anderson's The Broken Sword. The halflings would be at home anywhere in the Four Farthings or Bree.

Boring, you say? Maybe. But also easily graspable by the people who sit down to play the game. Don't believe me? Give a listen to the Glowburn Podcast when they start talking about Manimals and Plantients. Trying to figure out examples of the same from literature or other media is part of the discussion. It helps to get a mental picture of what a particular character type is about.

The general rule is that using stereotypes as a shorthand is okay. Focusing on stereotypes is not. So, the strong smith whose back is bent from years of working the forge, or the Butterbur-like innkeeper is fine. In fact, using stereotypes is rather like using common names. They give you something to contrast the unusual types against. And they give you something to help hide the unusual types if they are meant to be a riddle.

The thing is, all of us have some expectations about what it means to be a cleric, a wizard, a warrior, or a dwarf. Whether these expectations are conscious or subconscious, they are going to creep into your depictions of NPCs. You might as well embrace them, and make use of them knowingly.

This doesn't give you carte blanche to use harmful stereotypes about real-world groups of people, though. Know your audience, and try to avoid hurting people. If your players walk away from your game the better for having played it, that is excellent. If they walk away from your table with a head full of bias because of the way you depict real people, that is not so good. Try to work well with others.

All Shapes and Sizes

Which leads us to this – when populating your world, try to take real people into account. The NPC tables in the 1st Edition **Dungeon Masters Guide** are actually excellent for this, and I highly recommend using them sporadically. Another thing that works quite well is to characterize some NPCs as people whom you have met (although not people at the table).

Pay attention to the people around you. It is good for you as a GM. It is also good for you as a person.

If you can, watch **Breaking Bad** and look at the background characters whose names you never learn. They all seem to fit seamlessly into the setting. **Breaking Bad** is actually a masterpiece in terms of examining how secondary characters fill out a setting, and in terms of how they can interact with the primary characters (including shifts in function over time).

NPCs change over time. Let them get married, fall ill, have children, move, fall on hard times, gain windfalls, and die of sickness, old age, or misadventure. The goal is to have a dynamic setting, not a static one.

And, for the sake of Crom, if one of your players tells you that his character is a gay male Ferengi who is attracted to Klingons, make use of it. That means Klingons who are not interested, and who can therefore act as foils, threats, etc., but it also means that, at some point, the player would like to Quest For the love of his character's life. Make it so!

Creating NPCs (or),
"All Work and No Play Makes Jack a Dull Boy."

Finally, after all this consideration, we get to talk about game statistics. This is actually the part where I have the least advice to offer, because statting out NPCs really isn't that difficult.

NPCs on the Fly

Have a page of NPCs available to use if you need someone unique right now.

When you are reading an Appendix N novel or story, keep a notebook nearby. Stat out some of the people you meet in the story. Now you have some premade NPCs.

Average Characters Don't Require Unique Stat-blocks

Literally, use the statblock of another NPC. Your players will never know.

In the event of a truly average character, AC 10, 2 hp, no bonus to attack, damage, initiative, or saves. There you go. You're welcome.
Many NPCs don't need stats at all. Your PCs are unlikely to murder the local greengrocer. If they do, AC 10 and 2hp. Published adventures often include statistics for NPCs you would never need to stat out for home games. Unless you are publishing, you probably need to stat less than half of the NPCs in an average module. Fewer, if the module is *The Village of Hommlet*.

If you are playing *Dungeon Crawl Classics*, there are statblocks in the core rulebook for various types of people the PCs might typically encounter. Use them. Modify them to meet your needs, if you can, so you don't have to start from whole cloth.

That said, stat out anything and anyone you feel like statting out, or feel the need to have a statblock for. As with all prepwork, do what you need to do first, and then do whatever you feel like doing afterwards. You don't need to "create a mystery" for every NPC that you introduce, or even for every major NPC. What you may wish to do, though, is create a list of interesting things to learn about an NPC, and then link them to NPCs as the need arises in play.

Crafted Characters

The Purple Sorcerer tools are a wonderful means for making crafted characters. Want a 5th level thief? You can have 10 options with the click of a button.

Remember when you were jotting out stats for those Appendix N characters? Change their names, modify them as needed, and supply a new recognition handle to differentiate them from their source. Now you have some specially crafted NPCs.

NPCs Don't Follow the Rules. You don't have to figure out a "rules legal" way to give your wizard a special power that you want, or give your thief lightning reflexes that grant him a bonus to Reflex saves and Initiative rolls. Just modify his stats, and be thankful that you are not playing a game where you have to

get the math right. And, if you are playing a game where you have to get the math right, just modify her stats and treat it the same as if you went through the effort of doing the math. At the end of the day, the outcome is the same.

Death Throes are not just for monsters.

Steal, Steal, Steal, and Steal Again!

Every NPC in every module you own has a statblock that you can reuse, or modify and reuse, or convert to your current system and reuse. Unless you make it obvious, the odds are that your players will never notice.

Conclusion (or),
"The End Has Come. But the Moment Has Been Prepared For."

Remember that the goal is always to get at least two hours play for every hour of prep work. If an NPC is only going to see play for 30 seconds, you shouldn't be spending more than 15 seconds on him. If an NPC is going to see many hours of play over many sessions, it still shouldn't take more than half an hour (at the very most) to create her.

Recycle, reduce, and reuse.

Practice your improv.

Most of all, have fun. That is why you are gaming in the first place!

Making Monsters for Dungeon Crawl Classics

This article is the result of a request for more information on designing ***Dungeon Crawl Classics*** monsters. While I would argue that this process is more of an art than a science, it is an art which, like all arts, is informed by rational principles. I'm going to break down the statblock first, and then talk about general design principles. Well, that's the theory. As you will see, some general design principles are embedded in the statblock itself.

The Statblock

Init: Generally, human values run from -3 to +3. The easiest thing to do is to have an Init of +0. That way, when you roll the die in front of the players, what they see is what they get. However, if you have a monster which is known for speed, such as a cobra, increase the value to reflect that. For slower monsters, decrease the value. You are allowed to say "always first" or "always last".

Remember, slower monsters are less likely to get attacks in before they are ganged up on by the PCs, but a slower monster with good defenses, or that is likely to get a surprise round, can be terrifying!

Atk: This is an easy one. List the kinds of attacks the creature can do, and then give them damage values. Weapon ranges for damage are a pretty good starting point when determining what damage you should assign. Give bonuses (or penalties) for Strength as seems appropriate to you.

You will note a tendency to give the best attack bonuses to the attacks that do the most damage, at least when you examine creatures in the core rules. If you are going to do that, consider upping the creature's Action Dice so that the secondary attack(s) get used. Another way to go is to make the less damaging attack more likely to hit, or to include some special effect, so that the judge (playing the monster) has a real decision to make about which attack(s) to use.

Ranged attacks make a creature far more dangerous, if it can choose a loca-

tion that takes advantage of them!

Attack bonuses also have a synergy with Action Dice to define a creature. More on that later.

AC: How hard is it to hit this creature? ***Dungeon Crawl Classics*** uses static AC bonuses for various types of armor, starting with a base AC of 10. This should make choosing an AC simple. Equal to leather armor? That is AC 12. Full plate? AC 18.

AC can also be affected by things like size (small things are harder to hit, but big things might be harder to hit in a meaningful way if they are big enough), ability to dodge, and special qualities like being semi-corporeal. Make these factors clear in your monster description, if you can. That way, the players know why they are missing, and might be able to Mighty Deed or use a spell to alter the situation.

HD: You have two decisions to make here – how many Hit Dice, and what type of die. These decisions actually matter, because Hit Dice are ties to both hit points and critical hits. They may also interact with spells that affect creatures on the basis of their Hit Dice.

Imagine that you want a 26 hp creature. You could make this creature have 9d6 HD, for instance, or 1d50. The first creature's critical hits will be far more devastating than those of the second creature. One is M/d14, the other M/d6. The creature with 1d50 HD is also far more susceptible to spells which specify how many Hit Dice of creatures they affect.

You are strongly encouraged not to bloat the hit points of various creatures unnecessarily. DCC combat is fast and loose; don't make every combat a slog!

But see also Action Dice, below, because there is a strong synergy between Action Dice and Hit Dice.

MV: An unarmored human moves at 30', a dwarf or Halfling at 20', and a horse at 60'. Gauge your monster's speed by these benchmarks. It may also have one or more unusual movement speeds: fly, climb, swim, burrow, etc.

If converting from a game where the average human speed is 120', divide by 4 and round to the nearest 5'.

Act: Here we get into some of the niftiest ways to play with DCC monster design. They don't apply to every monster, but when they do, they are useful. The basics for Action Dice are 1d20, with a critical hit occurring on a natural 20.

- **Multiple Dice:** If you have more than one attack method, you can use multiple Action Dice to ensure that weaker attacks also get used. Action Dice can be used for movement as well, so a creature which is designed to move-attack-move could have two Action Dice. The description should tell the judge what behavior is expected.
- **Larger Dice:** If you want a creature to get criticals a lot more often, consider using d24 Action Dice, with criticals occurring on a 20-24. This is how giants work. Even with a low (or non-existent) bonus to attack rolls, the creature can be horrendously effective.
- **Smaller Action Dice:** A Halfling using two weapons gets a critical hit on a natural 16. That is not a normal thing. By dropping a creature's Action Dice to 1d16 or lower, you can prevent it from gaining critical hits at all. This allows a cool synergy with attack bonuses – a creature with Act 1d16 but an attack bonus of +8 is going to hit almost every time, but it is never going to do more than its normal damage because of a lucky swing. This is a good option for small creatures where, in general, critical hits are unlikely to happen.
- **Synergy With Attacks:** By shifting the Action Die up or down, one can alter the attack bonus to make hits more or less likely to succeed. What this really does is adjust the chance of a critical hit….from very likely to impossible, as you see fit.
- **Synergy With Spells:** As with dragons, you can have an additional Action Die that can only be used for spells. This allows you to determine how likely the spell is to go off, and how powerful it will be when it does. Casting bonus is also important, obviously, but even with a high bonus, the chance of a natural "1" becomes increasingly greater the smaller the Action Die. You can have a creature which casts 1st level spells, for instance, using 1d3 with a +9 bonus. The spell goes off, weakly, 1/3rd of the time, is lost 1/3rd of the time, and has serious potential problems 1/3rd of the time.
- **Synergy With Hit Dice:** Remember that number of Hit Dice determines what size of die is rolled when a critical hit occurs, while size of Action Die determines how likely a critical hit is to occur. If you want a monster that has horrendous criticals, consider "HD 10d3; hp 15" as a real possibility. That same monster is just harder to defeat with color spray if it

has 1d16 for Action Dice, and is extremely likely to cause a critical hit if it has 1d24.

SP: Special abilities include infravision, bonuses to specific checks, and just about anything the judge can think of. A number of things that come up in General Design Principles, below, deal with special abilities. Did you give your creature some cool "Death Throes"? If so, include it here so that you don't forget when you run the encounter.

SV: Saving throws. You can use a general law of averages, and divide up (say) 3 points of bonus per Hit Die, but that is rather boring. The better way, in my opinion, is to consider that an average gong farmer has +0 to each save, and then consider how much better (or worse) your creature is from that. You can also say that the creature should save like a 6th level warrior and look up those saves.

What do you want your creature to be susceptible to? What makes the most sense? Remembering that Will saves are tied to morale in DCC, it is completely okay to make a creature immune to mind-affecting magic as a special ability, but give it a penalty to Will saves because it is also cowardly.

AL: Weird Lovecraftian monsters, and things that disrupt the natural order are typically Chaotic. Things that are well organized tend to be Lawful. If you can't decide, the odds are that it can't either – Neutral is your friend.

General Design Principles

Really, this is nothing more than asking "How do I come up with cool ideas for new creatures?"

First off, there are tables in the ***Dungeon Crawl Classics*** core rulebook for making monsters mysterious – use them! That bit about "Death Throes" in the core rulebook? That is gold – use it!

Secondly, if you don't have a copy yet of ***The Random Esoteric Creature Generator*** – buy one! Spend an afternoon or three just rolling up random creatures. You are not turning them into DCC monsters yet, and you are not deciding how to use them. You are just filling a few pages in a notebook.

And then, when you have done that, start deciding how to put the pieces

together. Again, you are not devising encounters yet. You are just making a stable of interesting beings – some of which may not even be monsters in the traditional sense – to spur your creativity.

Other books I have found useful in this context include *The Metamorphica* and *The Monster Alphabet*.

Third, when you are reading some fantasy or science fiction novel (in Appendix N or otherwise), keep a notebook by your side. Jot down quick stats for the creatures you encounter. Some of these you might want to revise later for your own adventures. If you encounter an interesting idea, write it down! The very act of doing so will make it more likely to come to mind when you are stuck for ideas.

Finally, here are three things to keep in mind:

What's The Worst That Can Happen?

Really consider that question. And then make it happen…or, at least, make it possible that it can happen, and make sure the players realize that it is possible even if it never actually occurs. My first published DCC work (Bone Hoard of the Dancing Horror) includes a monster that can pull the skeleton out of your body while leaving you alive. Give some honest thought about what would terrify you. Make it possible.

Target Something Other Than Hit Points.

Hit points exist as a buffer protecting your PC from harm. Not every attack should target hit points. A 1st level and a 10th level character are not that far apart when Agility damage slowly turns you to stone.

And the thing being targeted doesn't have to be a statistic within the ruleset. You don't have a stat for having your brain stolen by mermaids from Yuggoth, but that doesn't mean it can't happen.

Monsters Don't Play By The Rules.

In some ways, rules mastery can be a hindrance to creating cool critters. Instead of thinking "Here is a great idea. How can I make it work within these rules?" the poor designer ends up thinking "What can I design with these rules?"

Putting the rules before the design is a serious mistake. All it can do is limit your creativity.

You can get around this kind of thinking by taking creatures from very different games and converting them to **Dungeon Crawl Classics**. The less direct rules conversion you are doing, the better. Your goal here is to allow the idea of the monster to take precedence over the game statistics. Then, and only then, do you consider how that idea interacts with the game mechanics that you are using.

For instance, imagine that you are converting a creature from a game system with mana-based magic, and that this creature consumes the mana of spell casters. That idea – that it is consuming not only magical energy, but the magical energy that fuels spells – is the important thing to keep in mind. DCC wizards don't use mana, but they do use Action Dice to cast spells. Perhaps a successful attack from this creature should reduce the die used to cast spells? And perhaps this loss takes time to heal – the die increases by +1d per night of rest until it is its normal value?

This doesn't mean that you shouldn't use the rules in a cool way if you think of one. It just means that you shouldn't let the rules get in your way!

Conclusions

I would be remiss if I didn't point out the tools on People Them With Monsters, or the excellent Monster Extractor series by Inner Ham. More example monsters than you can shake a stick at can be found at Appendix M or on my own blog.

Dungeon Crawl Classics gives you a surprising number of dials for the creation of monsters, as examination of the statblock shows, but those dials are almost all fairly intuitive. It is by trying to imagine the monster as a whole, outside the rules, where truly unique creatures begin to appear.

Not Everything is Unique!

A is for Animals

When devising a setting for a role-playing game, some people might think considering local animals unimportant.

I do not.

I try to remember that the mundane is as important as the mysterious. For instance, I will mention animal scat, deer tracks, flights of birds, bird calls, etc., while on a wilderness trek. Why? First off, I want to ensure that the world feels "alive" -- things are where they should be. There are mice in the ruins, birds in the fields, and a fox in the henhouse.

Secondly, this allows for some quick action within the game. On a river-boat, a stag is sighted on shore. A quick bet is made on whose shot can bring it down, and there will be venison for dinner. Hearing wolves howl in the distance need not presage an instant attack -- the PCs will travel this wild area again. Without the foreshadowing, though, an encounter with wolves can seem rather "out of the blue". Likewise, a partially-eaten deer carcass can indicate the presence of wolves to wilderness-minded sorts, like rangers and druids.

Finally, including animals on a regular basis prevents "ringers" from being obvious. If you never mention ravens, then that raven is obviously a familiar or spy. If you never mention rabbits, that you do so now means there's a wolf-in-sheep's-clothing lurking nearby. That you never mention wolves is a sure sign that the one you are encountering now is more than half likely to be a werewolf.

Some games/Game Masters take this even farther. Why have horses, when you can have firehooved scalehorses? Why have bears when you can have hardgrapple biteybears?

The answers are the same – unless there is something "normal" in the world (as the world defines "normal"), immersion is damaged. If everything you encounter is monstrous, you will respond to everything as though it were a monster.

Sorry, but No Thank You.

My game still has room for lions, and tigers, and bears. And songbirds. And mice.

The Warrior, The Wizard, The Elf

It has been suggested that the PCs be the focus not only of the narrative in play, but of the fictive milieu itself. Rather than the cleric being **a** cleric, she is **The** Cleric. Again, sorry, but No Thank You.

Player Characters are always agents of change, and I can completely support the idea that the arrival of the party is going to shake up the status quo. If you can't change the world through game play, what is the point of playing? *Dungeon Crawl Classics*, both in its core rules and in its adventures, exemplifies this concept. Adventuring changes the characters, and changes the world around the characters.

However, the importance of the characters to the narrative in play does not imply that they are the only agents of change, or that they are the only characters of their class in the world...or even in the immediate area.

The rules for character classes are designed to allow players to have a somewhat structured means to interact with the game milieu. They do not imply that every NPC is created the same way - indeed, it is explicit that they are not. NPCs do not need to follow the rules, in the same way that monsters do not need to follow the rules, but that is not the same thing as saying that they cannot follow the rules.

It is definitely true that, when Jake the Gongfarmer comes back to his home village filled with divine power after *Sailors on the Starless Sea*, his fellow villagers have never seen a real cleric before. Likewise, the ex-ostler is probably the only wizard the villagers have ever seen. The PCs are the focus of awe and terror in their little settlement.

Sooner or later, though, those same PCs meet the wider world. And that can include encounters with fighting-men, spellslingers, thieves, and divine servants more powerful than they. It is part of the nature of the game that the PCs should not assume they are the most dangerous people in the world. Conan might always win in the end, but he doesn't always come out on top

in every battle. Conan has been captured, he has been forced to flee, and he has faced opponents who were nearly his equal. Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser are not necessarily the two best thieves in Lankhmar.

Most importantly, the roster of characters is likely to change. If **The** Warrior dies, and the player is allowed to bring in another warrior, I guess **The** Warrior wasn't as special as he seemed. What if two players run clerics? **The** cleri**cs**? And if two more players join, also running clerics? What if a player is **The** Wizard? Should he never get to join in a spellduel because there are no other wizards around?

How would you run *Enter the Dagon*?

Every Monster is Unique

Unique monsters are great, and there is every reason to run a game where every monster has the potential to have unexpected properties. But should the game world be one in which there is, for instance, only one Dragon. **The** Dragon.

This is an idea that I have written about once or twice before. Note that I don't think that this is a good idea.

You can read the earlier blog posts (and I encourage you to do so), but the short version is this: Appendix N fiction, like the real world, has a large number of persistent creatures within the milieus presented. The lemutes of *Hiero's Journey* are not one-off creatures, nor are the orcs of Mordor, the banths of Barsoom, or the shoggoths of the Cthulhu Mythos.

This is not to say that unique creatures do not exist in those literary milieus. The Dweller and House in *Hiero's Journey* are unique, for instance, as is the Watcher before the gates of Moria in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. If these unique creatures had appeared in a setting where every creature is encountered was unique, they would certainly have had less of an impact.

I am going to put it another way: Imagine *Peril on the Purple Planet* with only one Kith, only one Death Orm, and only one Strekleon. Now imagine *Journey to the Center of Áereth* without a consistent ecology that you could learn, and profit from your understanding of, once you got there.

The persistence of certain creatures makes the uniqueness of other creatures stand out.

You can certainly play up how much better they are than the average gong-farmer, but PCs are agents of change because of player choices, not because they are **The** Cleric and **The** Warrior.

Some Thoughts About Patrons in Dungeon Crawl Classics

This is a follow-up to the article, Using Patrons in the **Dungeon Crawl Classics** Roleplaying Game, in the first volume of this series.

Patrons, Gods, and Demi-Patrons

Patrons are (usually) supernatural entities who are willing to aid a mortal being (especially a wizard or elf) in return for services rendered. The full write-up for a patron in the **Dungeon Crawl Classics** role-playing game officially consists of a table for invoke patron results, a table for spellburn, a table for patron taint, and three unique spells – one 1st level, one 2nd level, and one 3rd level.

A *god* is a powerful supernatural being who grants powers to clerics, and can demand that the cleric perform (or refrain from performing) certain actions in order to retain this power. There is some overlap between gods and patrons. A god may be, but need not be, a patron. A patron may be, but need not be, a god.

Non-deity patrons may include arch-liches, ghosts, faeries, ultra-powerful wizards, alien beings, and so on. If you read Appendix N literature, you will see ancient AIs, angel-like beings, demons, wizards, and more acting very much as patrons do in DCC. To the average peasant, though, there is little difference between a patron and a god. Both can exert enormous influence for or against the common folk.

A demi-patron is a less powerful patron. This might be a creature that can offer spellburn, or who can be invoked, but who doesn't offer spells. The idea was introduced in this author's adventure, **Silent Nightfall**, but it is implicit in the structure of Appendix N fiction that such creatures must exist. Likewise, this author's **The Crimson Void** offers a system for ranking deities and other supernatural powers that can be used to determine what happens when they come into conflict.

Invoke Patron, Spellburn, & Patron Taint

When devising these tables, you can use published examples of patrons to give you a rough power gauge for appropriate effects. Remember, though, that you need to consider your patron as a whole. If a patron's "patron taint" effects are particularly nasty, you might wish to give the patron a little extra oomph in terms of his invoke patron table. If your patron offers only the worst sorts of spellburn, you may wish to counteract that with another benefit.

It has been suggested that patron taint should be both permanent and bad for the PC obtaining it. I would like to take a moment to disagree with that.

First off, not all of the patron taints in the core rules are permanent. The Three Fates, in particular, has patron taints that can be "resolved", allowing the wizard bound to the Fates to get on with her life. I would argue that, if an event is both flavourful and meaningful within the context of the patron, it can serve as a patron taint. Anyone familiar with my work in *Angels, Daemons, & Beings Between*, or in the pages of several Purple Duck modules, will see what I mean.

Secondly, I don't agree that all patron taint should be bad. The player has no control over rolling a "1" on a spell check, and has very little control (apart from spending Luck) as to what patron taint is obtained once the die is cast. Again, depending upon the patron overall, a "good" patron taint can even out a less powerful invoke patron chart…or even other, nastier, patron taints.

> *I would contend that the best purpose of patron taint is to strengthen the thematic bond between wizard and patron, and that you should consider any taint that does this well, even if it is not permanent, and even if it is good for the wizard.*

I would also suggest that the prospective judge consider the type of game he or she wishes to run. A hideous patron taint table can turn your PCs away from the Ghost-God of Cannibal Child-Eaters if you don't want to repeatedly play through scenes where the point-of-view characters are engaged in heinous acts involving children, while still allowing for NPCs who do the same.

Similarly, if you specifically want the PCs to consider a patron, you can build in some bennies to make that patron more attractive. I did this with Doctor Chapman for the *Faerie Tales From Unlit Shores* series – Doctor Chapman

has fewer than average taints, and one grants a bonus when dealing with fey. This is not an accident. The adventure series is, simply put, better the more Doctor Chapman is involved with the PCs…so I gave the players reason to seek involvement with Doctor Chapman.

Spells

If you take a look at the spells in **Dungeon Crawl Classics**, you will see that many of them, depending upon the spell check result, contain the effects of a whole group of D&D-type spells. This is a good thing for the game as a whole, but it makes coming up with three unique spells for every patron rather difficult.

I went a different route with Doctor Chapman, and also with **The Black Goat**. If you are determined to make other spells available, consider allowing a wizard to cast a cleric spell (I did this in **The Crimson Void**) or invest

in some sources of new spells – **Liber Arcanum**, **Tales of the Fallen Empire**, and the **Gong Farmer's Almanac** are good places to start. Another thing you might consider is converting materials from other systems.

Some patrons may have more than three spells – Paul Wolfe has a patron like this in **Angels, Daemons, & Beings Between**. As always, you should consider what seems right for your patron first, and then try to figure out how to define it within the rules.

Other Benefits and Drawbacks

Finally, you may wish to consider adding benefits and drawbacks to your patrons and demi-patrons which do not rely upon the roll of the dice. For an example of what I mean, see Ulibex, the Neutral fungous Lord of Mushrooms, Molds, Mildews, and Yeasts, in **Silent Nightfall**. There is no reason not to give the PC who bonds with a strange creature some immediate consequence, for good or for ill. In fact, there are a lot of good reasons to do so:

- It's fun.
- It's surprising.
- If good, it makes the players more apt to try their luck the next time some equally foolish venture presents itself.
- It brings the unique nature of a patron directly and immediately to the table.
- It gives the bonded PC some unique trait that is the direct result of play, rather than of buying feats during character generation.

For more fun, consider using a table of unique effects, so that if another PC jumps on the bandwagon, the patron might react in a different manner!

Running Convention Games

I am relatively new to running convention games, although I have run games in public venues going back to the 80s. My conventions are, thus far, limited to OSRCon in Toronto, Gary Con, Odyssey Con in 2017, and Nexus Game Fair in 2016. There are many folks with more experience in convention games than I have, but if you are looking for a relative newbie's insights, read on.

Choose Your Own Adventure

When planning convention slots, choose adventures that you know well. Obviously, you also want something that will fit into your time slot(s). If you run an adventure that normally takes six four-hour sessions to run, and plan to run it in a three-hour slot, you'll have to prune ruthlessly. You might consider another adventure. Or a longer slot. Or both.

The adventure should be one with a sense of completeness as a short story. It might also be useful as a chapter of a larger tale, but if it doesn't come to a satisfying conclusion you've missed the mark. That conclusion need not be fun. It can be horrifying. Entire worlds can be saved or lost. It just has to be a definite end, which shows some motion from where the session started.

There are a lot of great *Dungeon Crawl Classics* adventures to choose from. But I am going to suggest that you branch out – convert your favorite non-DCC adventure. Write your own! One of the best things about Appendix N fiction is the wide range of authorial voices – add your own authorial voice to the games you run!

(And if you don't want to do that, anything written by Daniel J. Bishop or published by Purple Duck Games should be given preference…Kidding. Kind of.)

The Play's the Thing

It doesn't matter if you flub a rule. It doesn't matter if you forget that there was something the PCs should have encountered, or a condition that would have made it easier or tougher for them. If you forget a rule, you can ask the table. Maybe someone knows. If not, just make a ruling and keep the game

moving. If it takes more than a minute of flipping through the book, don't. There are four things that can help you here:

- **The Dice Chain:** Use it. If you need to give a bonus or a penalty, and you don't have time to look the "by the book" modifier up, just use the Dice Chain.
- **Luck:** If you aren't certain, use a Luck check. You can modify it with the Dice Chain, where smaller dice are more likely to succeed and larger dice are less likely. Can't decide which target the monster attacks? Ask who has a lower Luck.
- **Ready Reference Books:** They are free, if you print them out yourself, but the Lulu printed ones are beautiful. Every judge should have one.
- **Purple Sorcerer Free Tools:** Make PCs easily. Print out their spells. Print out your NPC's spells. It will save you time in the game, and keep the action flowing. At the start of the game, don't make the players pay for what they want to carry. Just tell them: If you want specific equipment, write it on your sheet now. Unless they are zero-levels, they can probably afford it. If they are zero-levels, skip this step.

Setting up the Table

The first year I ran games at Gary Con, my son accompanied me but did not preregister for games. He noted that there were many games seeking players, but no way to guess what was being played without going up and talking to anyone. Because of this, I now print out cardstock signs that identify game and system. I have picked up a metal table stand, not unlike those used for the "Table Full"/"Players Needed" signs for this purpose.

For my second Gary Con, I had a scale version of the DCC Tournament Gong arch 3D printed. I assembled it at each game, to help make it seem more like an event. Whatever you can do to stand out is a good thing.

I have also picked up a bag of plastic "gold" coins to use as Fleeting Luck tokens.

My dice bag includes black d20s of various sizes, including one which is fist-sized. I use it for dramatic effects.

During the Game

I like to walk around the table, in part to give people a chance to hear me,

and in part for effect.

Reward player creativity, but don't assume that every crazy idea will work. If every crazy idea works, all you end up with is a collection of crazy ideas. Select the crazy ideas that seem possible to you, rather than the crazy ideas that seem unlikely methods to bypass engagement with the game. When in doubt, call for Luck checks.

Reward engagement. Help the quieter players engage by addressing them directly.

Your style of running games? When in doubt, that's what you should do.

Disagree with anything I wrote here? You should include your own ideas in the comments, for others to benefit from. And you should do whatever you think best. I'm just some guy with my own ideas. They are in your game. They signed up to play your game. Give them the best version of your game that you can.

A Few Other Important Considerations

Make sure that, when you schedule your games, you give yourself time to hang out with others and enjoy the convention.

If the opportunity arises to play in a game run by Doug Kovacs, do it.

The odds are good that, sooner or later, you will get a chance to play in a game run by Brendan LaSalle. Do it. If you can buy Brendan LaSalle an after-game beer and just shoot the breeze, do it!

At the time of this writing, I have yet to get into a Brinkman, Stroh, or Curtis game. Pity me…but, if you get the chance, make sure you take it. At the very least, you can rub my face in your good fortune!

Finally, when you are a player, jump into the weirdness. Play your character(s) with gusto. Have fun, and help to make if fun for everyone. Encourage others to do the same. You aren't playing with gusto to dominate the table, but to draw everyone else out.

If you happen to be at a convention where I am running games (most likely Gary Con), please stop by and say Hello!

How I Roll

I have utilized several methods of rolling dice over the years. When I started the game, polyhedral dice were not even widely available, and chits were used. Eventually, cheap plastic dice appeared. You had to colour these in yourself to make the numbers legible. The 20-sider was numbered 1-0 twice, so that you coloured one side one colour, and the other side another colour. Say, red indicated 11-20, while white indicated 1-10.

Nowadays, I have a huge collection of dice, and have multiples of everything in the ***Dungeon Crawl Classics*** dice chain several times over. But the tools don't matter as much as what you do with them. So here is how I roll.

(1) Almost everything is rolled in the open. In the ***DCC core rulebook***, Joseph Goodman gives the advice to roll the dice in the open, and I second it. You can have players who believe you are not fudging the dice without doing so, but when they see the dice fall, they know it to be true. Die rolls in the open are way more exciting than dice rolled behind a screen.

(2) Some things are still rolled behind the screen. Attempts to find traps. Attempts to locate secret doors. Basically, if the players should not know the result, the dice remain hidden.

The goal here is to create the same level of uncertainty in the players that their characters should experience. Is there a trap that we just failed to find? Perhaps we should still be cautious....

Some GMs prefer to allow the players to roll these checks, and then use a "control die", secretly rolled by the GM, to modify the player's roll, or to set the DC for the check. This gives the players an illusion of having some control over the result, but I find it unsatisfactory. First off, you are adding an extra roll for no good reason. Second, the illusion is pretty easily pierced.

(3) I let the players roll damage for the monsters. First off, this ensures that I will never fudge damage to save a PC. Secondly, it gives the players a clear understanding of their opponent's damage potential - part of that context thing I am always going on about. Finally, doing so really keeps the players involved. When the GM inflicts 24 points of damage on your beloved elf,

you might be tempted to blame the GM. When you are rolling the damage yourself, you begin to really hate your opponent.

Luck Checks

There are two basic types of Luck checks:

(1) Roll under your Luck score. I usually say "equal to or under". This type of check can be modified by changing the die used along the dice chain - the larger the die, the less likely the roll is to succeed. The smaller the die, the more likely.

(2) Try to meet a target DC. In this case, the check can be modified by the die changing along the dice chain (with larger dice being better). The DC can also be shifted.

Why bother with two methods?

Using method (1), a PC with an 18 Luck succeeds 90% of the time. Using method (2), and a DC of 10, the same PC succeeds by rolling a 7 or better, or 70% of the time. Setting the DC to 15 reduces this to success on a 12 or better, or 45% of the time.

For method (1), the character's actual Luck score matters, so as Luck is used, the odds of success go down immediately. For method (2), only the attribute modifier matters, so while Luck use does affect chance of success, it does so in a more graduated manner.

Each of these has its uses.

Wait, why don't we use both methods with, say, Strength checks?

Good question. Why don't you?

Difficulty: Not Just For Players

A lot has been written about the difficulty GMs experience away from the table – after all, designing a scenario has its own types of difficulty. Designing a scenario well may be one of the largest challenges facing a role-playing game enthusiast. One might even say that, the better you design your scenario away from the table, the less difficulty you will experience at the table. But there is no getting away from difficulty at the table entirely, and the way you handle it says much about the kind of Game Master you are.

To some degree, role-playing games are built upon a fundamental tension between the people playing the game and the person running it. The person running the game has done some heavy lifting in the design department, or spent money for a module, and wants that investment to pay off in terms of the players going along with the scenario the GM wishes to present. The players, for their part, want to have fun, have their characters survive, and have their characters prosper.

The experienced GM knows that players have the most fun when they overcome adversity. Yet the experienced GM also knows that the player goals of "survive and prosper" run counter to "meet adversity" where the outcome of that meeting is not known ahead of time. Players want to "play smart"; the GM wants to lure them into situations where the outcome is uncertain. Both players and GM are trying to meet the goal of making the game as fun as possible.

Trying to keep the players "on track" is trying to keep play in the zone "where the fun is". This is a potentially laudable goal, if the players are of the same mind as to what "the fun is". In this event, the GM need merely provide more context to the players in which to make their choices, and the result is good for everyone. Sometimes, though, the GM is trying to protect his investment, and the interests of the players is not taken into account as strongly as they should be. In such a situation, the players cannot "play smart" – they are not allowed to. Dungeons move, die rolls are fudged, and events conspire to drive the players "where the fun is".

I am not a big fan of this sort of thing. When the party heads north even though they know that "the adventure" is to the south, chooses to avoid your carefully stocked dungeon, and runs like hell from your DM-PCs, maybe it is

time to re-evaluate how you are running your game.

Dealing with the unexpected actions of the players generates at-the-table difficulty for the Game Master. Want your players to deal well with the difficulties you put in their path? Now is the time to show them how, by dealing well with the difficulties they put in your path. Sooner or later, the players are going to diverge from the path you imagined. Tacking with the wind is an essential skill for good GMing.

Note that this does not mean that there has to be "an adventure" anywhere the PCs go. It does not mean that everywhere need be equally interesting. But it does mean that there should be options and that, when it makes sense within the context of the world, going away from the expected route should be rewarded.

Why rewarded? Doesn't that train the players to ignore adventure hooks?

Well, it does to some degree, but it also teaches the players that their choices matter. It teaches them that the world is not just the GM telling them where to go and what to do; when they end up in difficulties, it is not because the GM forced them into it. If a character dies because of those difficulties, it is not because the GM forced them into it. If there is a TPK because of those difficulties, it is not because the GM forced them into it. By being allowed to make these kinds of choices, players become responsible for the choices that they make.

If the GM really wants the group to explore the Death Trap of Deadly Von Lich, don't force it on them. Entice them. Let them know something about the treasure that might be found there. Give them reasons to make going there a goal that they choose. Have dangers issue from there. Dare them. Indeed, warning them away from the dungeon is the strongest lure to it for some players. In other words, supply some context that motivates your particular group. Create hooks between various locations in your game milieu, to remind players of areas yet unexplored, to pull them back to old areas, and to entice them into new. That's just part of good scenario design and presentation.

The GM has vast powers within the context of the game. When things don't go the way you planned, it is tempting – and all too easy – to merely force things back on track. Just like experiencing difficulty makes things better for

the players, doing the difficult thing, and letting the players go where they will, can make things better for you.

Remember how the players having to change tactics denotes difficulty for them? Well, so does the GM having to change tactics denote difficulty for you. Have fun with it. Keep a couple of minor lairs ready to place where you will. Roll for wandering encounters. Make shit up. Keep in mind what is nearby, and important, and keep throwing hooks to those areas – towns, dungeons, castles, or whatever. Let the PCs encounter a wandering circus.

Although it may seem strange, I have found that the more you allow the players to take their characters wherever they will, the more attention they pay to the hooks you hand out. After all, now it is incumbent on them to figure out where "the adventure is"! The more choices the players feel they have, the less likely they are to avoid following your lead on principle.

Most of the difficulty the Game Master experiences is away from the table, in scenario design, selection, and/or comprehension. There is always difficulty at the table, though, unless you demand your players to run their characters in lock-step with your wishes. Accepting difficulty in play is less frequent for the GM than the players, but, if anything, it is more important that the GM be willing to experience difficulty for the game to be its best.

A Few House Rules
for Your Use

These are some house rules I use when running *Dungeon Crawl Classics* campaigns. Use them if you wish. Fold, spindle, or mutilate them until they meet your needs, or discard them if they do not.

The Golden Lion Rule (Named for Jad-Bal-Ja, the Golden Lion, in the Tarzan series): For important pets and animal companions, each time the owner levels, the creature gains a new hit die of the same type. For example, if Girt the 0-lvl herdsman reaches 1st level, Giant his herd dog gains 1d6 hit points as well.

(I used the wolf stats to determine Giant's stats, same hit die, dropped the attack bonus by 1 and the damage die by 1 step.)

Note that the Judge has final say as to what is a significant animal, but it generally revolves around whether or not the creature is participatory in the game.

The Nobody Rule: A 0-level character is nobody in the grand scheme of things, and the player need not choose an alignment for every character in a 0-level funnel. Rather, the occurrences in play should aid the player in choosing an alignment for survivors, and these characters must be aligned prior to (or at the point of) attaining 1st level.

For example, Joe the Butcher need not be aligned, but until Joe has chosen to serve Law, Neutrality, or Chaos, he cannot progress to 1st level. Joe can put off that choice until gaining 10 experience points and choosing his starting class....but no later.

A character who has not yet chosen an alignment is considered Neutral in any instance where alignment matters.

Three Strikes: The judge may declare any skill attempt to be unable to succeed after a single failure (in some instances), and normally after three failures. There is a reason that characters usually only gain three chances to

succeed at a particular task — it prevents the game from becoming stale.

In some SRD-derived games, a character can keep making checks until she succeeds. This means that, unless there is some penalty for failure, when the GM sets the DC, he automatically knows the end result. Skills become a binary on/off switch, where either an eventual roll of "20" (or less) will succeed, or it will not. It is desirable that an achievable DC can be set without dictating the outcome.

Three chances still allows characters to take two wild stabs at a task before burning Luck to increase the chance of success. Each check takes time, of course, and other consequences of failure or time spent may occur.

Backstab: A Backstab is intended to be a strike from surprise, where the Thief manages to get behind an individual or to make an attack against an individual who does not know he is there. It is not intended to allow a Thief to make more Critical Hits in combat than a Warrior.

A Thief cannot normally Backstab a creature once that creature is aware of him (as, for example, usually occurs once the Thief has Backstabbed another opponent in the same combat). It is normally insufficient for the Thief to simply make a Hide in Shadows or Sneak Silently attempt once in combat.

A Warrior or a Dwarf can perform a Mighty Deed to distract an opponent, giving the Thief a chance to make a DC 20 Sneak Silently attempt to get the drop on an opponent (and thus, a potential Backstab). For every point the Deed Die is over 3, the Thief gains a +1 bonus to the stealth attempt.

If opponents are outnumbered, three or more Thieves can manoeuvre around a single opponent so that one is behind the opponent and has the potential to Backstab.

Daggers to Finish Fallen Foes: When used on a fallen foe, a dagger can automatically critical with each successful attack. On an unsuccessful attack, the dagger does 1d10 damage. This reflects the wieldiness of a dagger for precision work.

From Mercury to Yuggoth, and All Points Between

There came a point, when I was soaking myself in the delightful text that is the **Dungeon Crawl Classics** role-playing game, that I decided to go back and read the Appendix N fiction. I mean, I had read quite a few authors and novels on the list, but there were also many that I did not know, and works of fiction that had passed me by. If you don't understand what I mean by soaking myself in the DCC core rulebook, you either have not read it, or your appreciation for the genre is very different from mine. Because you are reading this blog, I am going to assume that you know what I mean.

Eventually, there came a point where I was not just reading the list; I was studying it. Whenever I worked on a new DCC project, it became integral to my thinking that no fewer than three homages to Appendix N sources should be intentionally included. I have tried to do this as consistently as I can…although I admit that I allow for a greater breadth in Appendix N sources than some others might. For instance, I do not stop at the Mars and Venus books of Edgar Rice Burroughs…nor do I even stop at Tarzan, **The Moon Maid**, and other adventure fiction. Works like **The Oakdale Affair** and **The Efficiency Expert** are fair game in my books.

Within the 1st Edition AD&D **Dungeon Master's Guide**, Gary Gygax mentions setting adventures on Jack Vance's Tschai and Burroughs' Barsoom. Conversion notes are given for **Boot Hill**, indicating that perhaps the westerns of E.R. Burroughs and the weird westerns of Robert E. Howard might also have fit into Gygax's vision of Appendix N. What is very clear, though, is that a lot of stories in Appendix N fiction take place on other worlds.

And why not? Who would not wish to adventure on the Mars of Edgar Rice Burroughs, Michael Moorcock, or C.L. Moore? Who would not want to quest across the solar system as envisioned by Leigh Brackett, or travelled to far worlds like Skaith and Tschai? Who would not want to be equal to – or even surpass! – Eric John Stark, John Carter, or Northwest Smith? The canopy is vast, and the characters loom enormously over the landscape of their worlds and of our dreams.

The pulp magazines were full of stories like these. John Carter could not adventure across Barsoom alone - he must also investigate one of its moons, and then travel as far as Jupiter. Seeking out strange new worlds is a driving passion of many of the Appendix N authors. These sort of stories even outnumber "lost world" stories, like those of the Pellucidar series, various survivals in Robert E. Howard stories, and the Caspak series that begins with **The Land That Time Forgot**. Alien princesses and Low Canal Dwellers outnumber even the dinosaurs.

Likewise, Manly Wade Welman was not content to merely write about Hok the Mighty - he also wrote of aliens coming to take over that primitive world.

One of the first adventures I converted to the **Dungeon Crawl Classics** system was from **Gamma World**, as part of a funnel adventure I ran for my home game. Fun, as far as it goes, but it does not go nearly as far as it should.

It has been suggested that the structure of the planes in AD&D was lifted from the works of Michael Moorcock. Reading through Appendix N, I do not believe that this is completely accurate. Moorcock's work was influential, yes, but he was neither the first nor the best at using multiple planes of existence. I tend to think that works like **The Carnelian Cube** and **The Fallible Fiend**, the Silver John stories of Manly Wade Wellman, and the writing of Philip Jose Farmer, Andre Norton, and Lord Dunsany, at the very least, were equally or more important.

In the DCC core rulebook, Joseph Goodman suggests using other worlds as destinations for adventures, exactly in the same way as various heavens, hells, and elemental planes are used in many fantasy role-playing games. I find this good advice, and I think that **Dungeon Crawl Classics** is admirably suited for such play. Sure, you need stats for laser guns, blasters, or similar weapons – possibly specific critical and fumble charts as well – and unique classes for the alien races you might meet. But those things are actually little more than local colour…the same sort of local colour, perhaps, that any fantasy world should be given. The system remains intact.

In fact, there are now several official Goodman Games modules that take you to other planets, **Crawljammer** has been joined by **Star Crawl**, and the Terra AD of **Mutant Crawl Classics** can easily be a world other than our own.

Consider the possibility that, running parallel to your regular DCC cam-

paign, you might devise a setting that intersects, which is pure science fantasy of the type epitomized by certain Appendix N authors. Not just a single world, such as Barsoom, Venus, or Ganymede, but an interconnected system of worlds. Something that would make C.L. Moore or Leigh Brackett feel right at home.

At the very least, the idea should get your creative juices flowing!

OPEN GAME LICENSE Version 1.0a