Be Awesome at Dungeon Design

Creighton Broadhurst

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How to Build Better Dungeons For Your Campaign

CREIGHTON J.E. BROADHURST

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Gaming is a huge part of my life.

Thank you to everyone who has endured one of my games. In particular, thanks to Andy Lewis, Tim Ayres, Christopher Broadhurst, Neil Wright, Alec Harvey, Martin Webb and Steve Hood for continuing to suffer through my games on a weekly basis and to Andy Hodges, Rob Wills, Pete Sims and Danny Dunning—you took it as long as you could!

And—obviously—thank you Dave and Gary.

Become familiar with this module, then make whatever additions or changes you feel are necessary for **your** campaign.

Gary Gygax, B2 Keep on the Borderlands

Just in case we fight the lich and his skeletal red dragon mount, I've made some new characters.

Christopher Broadhurst

(You've got to love his optimism.)

Preface

I love gaming and I love design. At heart—like most GMs—I am a frustrated worldbuilder. I also love dungeons. I love building them, running them and even—when I get the chance—exploring them.

Of course, any GM can design a basic dungeon. A dedicated GM takes the extra time to craft exciting, logical and challenging dungeons that are so much more than a series of rooms stuffed full of monsters and treasure.

Essentially, this book is a collection of design posts I've made over the last couple of years to my blog. I've tidied up the language, re-organised them and put them into a semblance of order. At this point, you might be thinking something along the lines of, "That's nice, but why should I listen to you?"

In short, I've been around the block.

I've been on both sides of the designer/publisher fence. In 1999, I started out as a hungry, wildly inexperienced and tremendously naive freelancer. Now, I'm a grizzled (nay veteran) publisher and

editor who has written, edited and developed well in excess of 1,000,000 words of gaming content.

I've written for big and small publishers alike and won an ENnie for *Madness at Gardmore Abbey* (2012 [Silver], Best Adventure). A partial list of my relevant design credits includes: Wizards of the Coast (*Monster Manual V, Exemplars of Evil, Madness at Gardmore Abbey*), Paizo Publishing (Dragon Magazine and Dungeon Magazine), Expeditious Retreat Press (*Legacy of Darkness, Plague*), Kobold Press (*Deep Magic*), Rite Pubishing (Pathways magazine, Adventure Quarterly) and Raging Swan Press (*Retribution*, *Shadowed Keep on the Borderlands, The Sunken Pyramid*).

During my early freelance days I was very lucky to have a mentor of sorts. Stephen Radney-MacFarland at the time was the RPGA's Big Cheese and my Living Greyhawk boss. During the course of the campaign, he gave me countless pointers and pieces of advice on how to commission, edit and develop modules. He gave me tremendous insights into the design process both in the campaign and at Wizards of the Coast. (Luckily, he also didn't strangle me despite serious provocation on several occasion). During my time on the campaign I worked on over 100 modules and wrote another 20 or so myself. I had a lot of time to learn from my mistakes.

In 2010, I founded Raging Swan Press and have built it into one of the most successful, prolific and recognised publishers of Pathfinder compatible products in the multiverse. I've worked closely with dozens of freelancers and to date and have released over 400 GM's Resources, adventures and game aids.

I want to share with you the insights and advice I've received over the years. I was lucky enough to have a mentor, but you might not. These days, I primarily play Pathfinder, but I've kept game mechanic speak to an absolute minimum in *Be Awesome at Dungeon Design*. The advice herein should be good for any dungeon in any system or edition.

Of course, all that said. I don't know you and I don't know your campaign and play style. As always, you should adapt and include in your own design process the things herein you agree with and ignore the rest. I hope that whether you are a new GM just starting out or a grizzled veteran there's something for you in *Be Awesome at Dungeon Design*.

Creighton
Torquay, August 2017

Acknowledgments

While the writing for *Be Awesome at Dungeon Design* is all mine, I can't draw to save my life (although my mapping skills are slowly getting better). Thank you to Dyson Logos, William McAusland, Bradley K. McDevitt, Matt Morrow, Claudio Pozas, Marc Radle, Tommi Salama, Dean Spencer and Maciej Zagorski whose artwork and/or maps appear in this book.

I'd also like to thank the readers of my blog. Sometimes they agree with me, and sometimes they don't, but the conversations—sometimes spirited—have been tremendously enjoyable and have helped me on my quest to have as much fun gaming as possible.

Thank you also to the heroic members of Raging Swan Press's Patreon campaign. Their support and encouragement has helped Raging Swan Press grow by leaps and bounds over the last few years.

And finally—and most importantly—thank you to my ever-patient wife and family who have supported me in my quest to turn my hobby into a business through Raging Swan Press. I'm sure at one point or another they all thought I was mad!

Dungeon Design

The quintessential adventure location, dungeons have been around as long as the hobby.

At its most basic, dungeon design is a doddle—simply sketch out a map and scatter some randomly determined monsters and their treasure throughout the complex. Of course, there is much more to it than that—particularly if you aspire to desire a truly great dungeon.

ONE

Dungeon Design Tips for Beginners

SOME DUNGEONS ARE AWESOME. Some are utter crap. For a new GM, designing a dungeon is a daunting prospect. If you follow the tips below, you'll be well on the way to making a fun, engaging dungeon for your friends! And fear not: I discuss many of the tips below in more detail in future chapters.

Remember, it's Meant to be Fun

Above all, dungeon delving should be fun. If your dungeon isn't fun to play (or run), redesign it.

Reward Attentive Play

Rewarding players for picking up on clues you scatter through the dungeon elevates the standard of game play. If the PCs can gain tactical advantages from their observations, it incentivises them to understand the dungeon. Of course, this can be taken to ludicrous levels when the PCs spend hours searching each room; avoid this wherever possible.

Feature a Mix of Challenges

A dungeon comprising nothing but traps is colossally boring for fighters and other warrior types, while one stuffed full of undead is great if you are a paladin or cleric but less great if you are a bard. Creating a diverse and exciting mix of encounters that make sense means everyone has a chance to shine.

Design the Dungeon's Ecology

Every dungeon has an ecology of sorts. While you don't need to spend vast amounts of time on this, having an idea how the residents interact with each other and how they (generally) source food and drink is design time well spent. Consider how the various dungeon denizens interact with each other; are they friendly, at war or unaware of each other's presence? If the dungeon inhabitants are not friendly with one another the complex will likely require many abandoned or empty areas to both serve as hunting grounds and a buffer between the various groups.

Decide the Dungeon's Purpose

Why was the dungeon built and who built it? Such decisions are crucial in building the overall look and feel of the place. This decision affects the size and scope of the dungeon as well as it's layout and physicality. A dungeon built by dwarves, for example, will feel completely different to one built by troglodytes or serpentfolk.

Include Wandering Monsters

Wandering monsters are an often overlooked–but crucial–part of dungeon design. Wandering monsters add a sense of uncertainty to explorations and help build a dungeon's verisimilitude.

Name the Dungeon

Only completely unknown dungeons will have no name. A dungeon's name builds atmosphere and (often) shows how others view the place. It can also provide important clues about a complex. For example, the Sepulchre of Gibbering Shadows is probably infested with undead; some might have madness or sonic-based attacks. Wise adventurers prepare for such challenges before entering.

Include Dungeon Dressing

No dungeon exists in a vacuum. Previous explorers, residents and so on all leave their mark on the dungeon. Including minor features of interest adds to the realism of the place and incentivises the PCs to learn more about the dungeon through their skills and observations. If you need help with dungeon dressing, consider checking out *GM's Miscellany: Dungeon Dressing* by Raging Swan Press.

Create Appropriate Challenges and Rewards

If a dungeon is too hard or too easy, it's not going to be fun. Of course, the PCs may encounter challenges they cannot defeat, but that should be the exception not the norm. Appropriate challenges and rewards are the cornerstone of successful, long-lived games.

TWO

The Dungeon's Name

CAMPAIGN WORLDS NEED DEEP DUNGEONS, lost dwarven holds, crumbling castles, ebon caverns and dusty necropolises for the PCs to explore. Such locales need suitably evocative names.

Whether designing a dungeon, a small self-contained complex or an entire megadungeon, a decent name is vital for setting the theme and style of the complex. An evocative name also builds the players'

expectations and may even give them helpful hints about what might lurk within.

The tools herein can be used to name small and large dungeon complexes as well as distinct portions or levels within a complex.

Naming Styles

Obviously each dungeon must have a unique name, but beyond that the naming convention of most dungeons can take many forms. Each name, however, comprises one or more distinct parts. These parts are:

- **Complex**: All dungeons take one of several forms. Dungeons, castles, catacombs, caves and so on can all serve as a dungeon.
- **Descriptor**: Many dungeons have a descriptor that describes the general condition or perception of the locale. Dungeons can be cursed, fallen, ruined, shadowed and so on. In addition, if a dungeon is named for a specific person, group or kingdom it may have a second descriptor that describes that subject.
- **Subject**: Many dungeons also have a featured subject. A dungeon associated with a magic throne, for example, might include that feature in its name.
- **Proper Name**: Sometimes a dungeon is named for a specific individual—perhaps a powerful wizard who once dwelled therein or a famous adventurer who died within. Occasionally, locales are also named for the tribe that claims the place.

Random Dungeon Name Generator

To randomly determine the structure of a dungeon's name, choose one of the naming formats below:

- The [descriptor] [complex] of [proper name]
- The [descriptor] [complex]
- The [descriptor] [complex] of the [descriptor] [subject]
- The [descriptor] [complex] of [tribe name]
- The [complex] of [descriptor]
- [proper name]
- The [complex] of [descriptor] the [descriptor]
- The [descriptor] [complex]

Example Names

For example, using the above formats, a GM can generate names such as:

- The Gate of Sorrow
- Borath's Hold
- The Forsaken Citadel
- Arak-Zol
- Shadowed Vault of the Forsaken Goblins

More dungeon names (along with dungeon level names) appear in Appendix 1.

Questions & Legends

The great thing about creating a name for a dungeon is that it inevitably poses questions which are not only fun to answer but also add depth, verisimilitude and flavour to the campaign world. For example:

- What powers does the pillar hidden in the Catacombs of the Sundered Pillar have and why was it sundered?
- What lurks in the darkness of the Trackless Reaches of the Ebon Cavern?
- Who or what lies in the Sepulchre of Tor Baroth? Is Tor Baroth its most famed "resident," its guardian or the name of a fallen kingdom?

THREE

The Dungeon's Purpose

A DUNGEON NEEDS to be so much more than a hole in the ground stuffed full of monsters and treasures. A dungeon without a purpose is a poor dungeon indeed.

In almost all cases, someone at some point made the decision to build the dungeon. An undertaking of such magnitude is unlikely to be done on a whim. Whoever built the dungeon did so for a specific purpose. That purpose shapes the layout and feel of the place.

It's also important to remember a dungeon might not still serve its original purpose. New inhabitants may use it for their own purposes.

If this is the case, the new inhabitants will modify the dungeon to suit their own needs.

There are several types of dungeon:

Cellar

Originally built as a cellar to an above ground building such as a castle or church, the dungeon has survived the destruction of the above structure.

Colony or Community

Some communities choose to live underground. Such locations are often extensive and ramble over several levels. They contain everything needed for underground life.

Fortress or Refuge

Built as a place to withstand a natural disaster or one's enemies the dungeon is heavily fortified. Entry is difficult and likely individual levels, sub-levels or places of importance will feature additional defensive points.

Lair or Home

Some villains feel safer underground and live there with their minions. Such a location will have everything the villains needs for long-term living. A villain's personal quarters will be the most defensible location.

Mine

Built to find minerals, metals or gems a mine is likely a long, rambling affair. It lacks many of the features of a normal dungeon and may or may not be still active.

Sewer

Built to carry waste away from a settlement, a sewer is a filthy, loathsome place.

Temple

Built to venerate a deity (or possibly a whole pantheon) a dungeon designed as a temple was likely built to worship a power of darkness or death. Alternatively, a temple dedicated to a good deity may have been built to ward approaches to an entry to the Ebon Realm or other place of fell aspect.

Tomb, Crypt or Sepulchre

Built to house the earthly remains of some great personage, a tomb, crypt or sepulchre is likely to have undead within. It is also likely to have many shrines. It could house one body, or thousands.

FOUR

The Dungeon's Design

DUNGEONS THAT ARE nothing more than a series of rooms containing a random assortment of monsters and treasures and that have no real reason for existing are the result of sloppy, lazy design.

To create memorable dungeons, a GM should consider many more factors than simply what to stick in its rooms. When designing a dungeon, consider the following factors:

Original Purpose of the Dungeon

A dungeon designed as a gigantic tomb is going to look and feel completely different to one that was once a grand temple. In either case, the builders construct different kinds of rooms, chambers and corridors based on what they needed the dungeon to do.

Who Built the Dungeon

The dungeon's builder inevitably leaves his mark on the dungeon. From grandiose statues of himself to particular room features the PCs can detect even a long-dead builder's influence on the dungeon.

Current Purpose of the Dungeon

Even if the dungeon was originally conceived as the tomb of an powerful mage, the orc tribe that now lurks within will adapt and change portions of it to suit their needs.

Dungeon Inhabitants

The dungeon's past and present inhabitants leave their mark on the dungeon. They may have altered the original structure, decorated it in distinctive fashions and so on.

History of the Dungeon

A dungeon's history inevitably affects its disposition when the PCs delve within. If an earthquake struck the dungeon, for example, evidence of the damage it inflicted is likely all around. A dungeon's age also affects the conditions of many of its features. Wooden doors rot, metal portcullises rust and so on.

Fame of the Dungeon

Some dungeons become famous (perhaps for the dangers or treasures within); such locations attract more than their fair share of adventures. Settlements may even spring up nearby to service the many adventurers trying their luck in the dungeon.

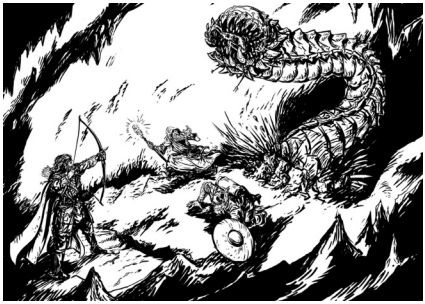
Upcoming Events

Upcoming events can affect the dungeon. For example, a dungeon hosting a battle of annihilation between duergar and troglodytes will have signs of not just the current conflict but upcoming battles (which might include traps, fortification and so on). An evil mastermind planning to subjugate the surrounding countryside will have many troops (and the equipment and provisions to sustain them) in his dungeon.

FIVE

The Dungeon's Ecology

DESIGNING A DUNGEON BADLY IS A DODDLE—JUST sketch some rooms out and randomly stock them with monsters and treasure. Taking a little extra time to consider the basics, though, is time well spent.



I've previously talked about the big picture when it comes to dungeon design. Just as important, though, as questions about who built the dungeon and why are more mundane details. The devil is in the detail, after all. Ignoring the basic characteristics of a dungeon and its inhabitants can shatter the players' suspension of disbelief.

The Basics

- **Food & Water**: Of course, some dungeon denizens—elementals and undead to name but two—normally don't need to eat or drink. Most others, however, require sustenance to survive. If the means to acquire food and drink do not exist in the dungeon they must be acquired elsewhere (preferably from somewhere close by).
- **Access**: Pretty much every denizen needs to move about. Creatures need to gather food and water, at the most basic level. They may also trade or work with their neighbours, creep forth to raid the surface lands and so on. To do this they need to have access to a means of entering and exiting the dungeon. The classic example of this done badly is the monster living in a room that is only accessed through the lair of another. Sure, the two might be allied, but would you really live in a place in which you were totally beholden to your neighbour for everything?
- **Conflict & Alliances**: It is very unlikely the denizens of a dungeon exist in a bubble of isolation, not interacting with each other. As in any community, alliances, rivalries and conflicts will be present among the dungeon denizens. Clever explorers can learn of these and exploit them to their advantage.
- **Why Are They There?** Consider why the denizens are actually living in the dungeon. Have the chosen to be there? Are they trapped? Are they here because they are searching for something? Shockingly, most monsters don't just hang around in a room and wait to be slaughtered by rampaging adventurers.
- **Light**: While most won't, some dungeon denizens need light. If they do need it, they must have a means of providing light practically continually.

Unoccupied Rooms

Empty rooms are a vital part of dungeon design that have fallen out of fashion in recent years through the tyranny of falling page counts and increased space given over to the crunchy bits of modules.

Unoccupied rooms can contain furniture, hidden secrets, interesting dungeon features and even treasure! Skilled players can learn a lot about a dungeon by poking around empty rooms.

Dungeons need empty rooms because:

- **They Provide a Change of Pace**: They provide a break from the constant grind of combat that often occurs in dungeon delving and allow players to catch their breath.
- **They Enable Skill Checks**: Such locations practically beg to be investigated. Perception checks, Knowledge checks and so on can all be used to learn more about the location. Canny players can use this information to their advantage. If, for example, the party explore an unoccupied barracks and note there are 20 bunk beds in the room, they get a good idea of the size of the garrison. That could be very useful information to have.
- **They are a Place to Rest**: If the party are in need of rest, an empty room is the perfect place to hunker down for the night. An easily defensible, empty room or one that is remote from the main complex is even better!
- **They Enable Verisimilitude**: Not every room in a dungeon should be stuffed full of villains waiting to be slain. Some rooms are used for storage, meeting, sleeping or ceremonial purposes. They won't be all occupied all the time. If every room is occupied by foes it is very hard for the PCs to move through the dungeon without every denizen charging to the aid of their companions. Such a situation usually ends up in

a very large, bloody and long-winded fight the PCs have no real chance of winning (and is probably crushingly boring).

- **They Have Dressing:** Empty rooms can be interesting places to poke about. They can contain interesting odds and ends that although not intrinsically valuable build on the flavour and style of the dungeon.

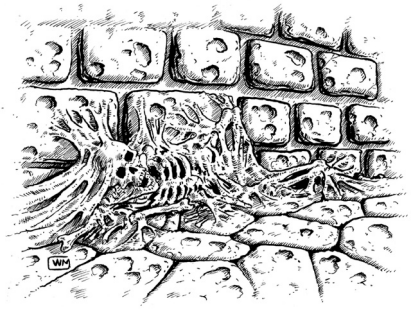
The Ultimate in Bad Design

I discuss this further in Chapter 13, but I felt compelled to mention this here. “It's magic” is the ultimate rationale for lazy design. "It's magic" can sweep away almost any logical inconsistency. All it says to me, though, is that either the designer doesn't care about creating a plausible dungeon or he doesn't know he's failed horribly. (Of course, some extra-planar dungeons or the lair of a powerful wizard could prove the exception to this rule, but such examples are few and far between).

SIX

The Dungeon's Dressing

MUSTY DUNGEON CORRIDORS set with uneven flagstones whose walls are daubed in goblin graffiti are infinitely more interesting than "a dungeon corridor."



Dungeon dressing is one of the most important things a GM can do to bring his dungeon (and campaign) alive. Sadly, because it's not a crucial aspect of dungeon design—it's not as important as stat blocks or treasure hoards, for example—most GMs don't have time to dress

their dungeons. That's a shame as there are many great reasons to dress a dungeon:

World Building

If you waffle on about the ancient style of dwarven mining or the fascinating intricacies of goblin art the players will likely switch off and go to sleep. If you casually mention the intricate locking mechanism of a stone door, the players immediately want to know more.

Verisimilitude

Dungeons are not sterile, unchanging environments; explorers and inhabitants all leave signs of their presence within. Crude graffiti daubed on the walls, skeletal remains, carven pillars and more all add a sense of realism to the place which helps players maintain their suspension of disbelief.

Story Telling

What happened in the dungeon before the PCs got there? Dungeon dressing can give the players some of the answer. Were the orcs slaughtered by something large and obviously powerful or are the signs of flooding, earthquake or other calamity everywhere?

Foreshadowing

Are the dungeon denizens working toward some evil scheme? If they are, no doubt, the PCs will be able to find signs of their work throughout the dungeon. Does the dungeon periodically flood? If so, signs will be evident throughout the complex and give canny players a warning that something bad might be about to happen.

Final Thought

When dressing a room (or entire dungeon), don't go mad with detail. Adding too much detail creates confusion and eventual apathy in players; in effect, they don't see the wood for the trees. Instead, concentrate on a couple of interesting features in each area.

For handy dungeon dressing tables, check out Appendix 1. If after that you are hungry for even more dungeon dressing, I (self sacrificingly) highly recommend Raging Swan Press's own *GM's Miscellany: Dungeon Dressing*.

SEVEN

The Dungeon's Entrance(s)

IT'S a sad fact of life, but most commercially available dungeons only seem to have one—or at the most two—entrances.

Depending on the dungeon's size, this can be somewhat limiting, a little bit unimaginative or unrealistic (or all three). After all, when was the last time you lived or worked somewhere with only one way in or out? Obviously, most dungeons don't have windows but most structures (and apartment buildings, schools or businesses) have

more than one door. (At Raging Swan Press Global HQ we are posh; we've got three external doors!)

In terms of game play, only having one way in or out immediately limits the party's options and gives them no meaningful choice (or reward for clever play if they find a secret or hidden way in). When I ran *Shadowed Keep on the Borderlands* in my Borderland of Adventure campaign, for example, the adventurers found the stream tunnel leading from the donjon to the dungeons below the main keep, which allowed them to surprise the Blood Moon goblins dwelling therein. This made them happy—they pulled one over on the goblins—and led to some fun memorable play instead of them just plodding down the stairs into the goblins' guardroom.

In terms of realism and verisimilitude, if there is only one way in or out it will clearly be one of the busiest parts of the dungeon. This somewhat reduces the party's tactical options and makes it far easier for organised inhabitants to watch for (and defend against) intruders. (It also makes it easy for the dungeon denizens to be trapped in their home, something I'm sure they'd be keen to avoid).

It also massively restricts the dungeon's denizens. In a dungeon hosting more than one faction, the one controlling the entrance controls the dungeon (or is constantly skirmishing with the other dungeon denizens). After all, who wouldn't want to control such a valuable piece of territory—even if only to deny it to one's rivals or enemies?

Different Dungeon Entrances

Good news: not all dungeon entrances must be of the typical variety.

While there's nothing wrong with more than one "normal" entrance—dungeons can have more than one obvious entrance—sometimes it's fun to have at least one other unexpected or atypical entrance. Such entrances could include:

- A natural chimney or fissure in the rock.
- A flooded (or partially flooded) tunnel leading from a lake, pool or river into the dungeon.
- A tunnel created by the actions of a burrowing or tunnelling creature. Many creatures—ankhegs, purple worms and bulettes to name three—can easily create a tunnel intersecting the dungeon.
- A magic portal. In campaign worlds with a high level of magic, a magic portal could easily provide an alternative way into a dungeon.
- A secret passage. A standard part of many dungeons, secret passages provide emergency escape routes, sally ports and more for dungeon dwellers. Normally their exit is well hidden—perhaps in a dense grove of trees, abandoned building or the like, making them challenging (and rewarding) to find.

Remember, some or all of the dungeon inhabitants may—or may not—know of this other entrance. It could be heavily trapped and guarded or it could be wholly unknown to the residents—who will likely be stunned or surprised when intruders emerge from an unexpected direction. Additionally, such additional entrances might not be permanent or even original. In the case of flooded passageways, sometimes they might be more accessible than other times as the water level within rises and falls.

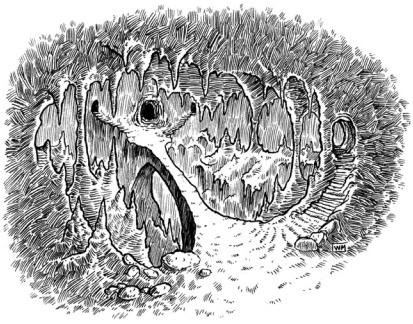
And as a final aside, remember these thoughts can be applied just as easily to dungeon levels and sub-levels. When I designed Gloamhold's overall layout, I deliberately included multiple connections between the levels, so the PCs aren't forced down one set path.

When designing all but the smallest dungeon, giving the PCs meaningful choice (without killing them with choice) is what it's all about!

EIGHT

The Dungeon's Physicality

A GOOD DUNGEON forces explorers to interact with its terrain features. Dungeons with nothing but smooth floors, featureless walls and plain ceilings realise only a fraction of their potential.



A superior dungeon gives the PCs a chance to interact with its physicality. During a delve, combat should not be the only physical challenge explorers face. No matter the game system you use for dungeon delving, it likely features rules for dealing with physical challenges such as climbing, swimming and jumping.

GMs should consider the physicality of their dungeons for several reasons:

Problem Solving

A deep chasm presents a challenge wholly different to a tricky fight and forces explorers to problem solve if they want to overcome the challenge. Such challenges promote team work, lateral thinking and clever play.

Change of Pace

Dungeons featuring nothing but battles can get boring quickly. Dungeons with significant physical challenges not only promote a change of pace, but also enable the PCs to use other, non-combat related skills and powers.

Interesting Fights

Battles fought upon a slippery stair or on the brink of a pit are inherently more exciting than those fought in a normal, featureless corridor and provide combatants with different tactical options. Similarly, smaller features such as statues, rubble and so on shape the battlefield and provide smaller game-related benefits for clever combatants.

Segment the Dungeon

Large terrain features—lakes, chasms, raging rivers and so on—can segment the dungeon and provide an excellent reason for areas of different flavour. They can act as barriers to exploration or obvious "signposts" the PCs are entering a different level, sub-level or area.

Flavour & Verisimilitude

To a reasonable degree, flavour and verisimilitude are good things. They make the dungeon more believable and real. Providing this backdrop differentiates the dungeon from other similar complexes and makes it more memorable for the players.

NINE

Creating the Illusion of Detail

IN A LARGE DUNGEON or megadungeon a GM can never be perfectly prepared. No one has the time—or I suspect the patience—to prepare hundreds of different encounter areas.

When the PCs are in danger of wandering out of the area the GM has fleshed out, disaster looms. At this point, an inexperienced, tired or stressed GM can panic and either the session comes to a juddering

halt or the quality of GMing plummets dramatically. Neither situation is ideal.

I've found the following tactics handy in providing the illusion of detail without flogging myself to death preparing countless areas and encounters (some of which inevitably will never be used).

Random Encounters

The wise GM has a small pool of detailed random encounters to hand. Such encounters enable him to slow down a party's progress, if they are heading in a direction he has not yet detailed. These encounters don't have to be particularly deadly, they just have to slow the players down. Dungeon wanderers (gelatinous cubes, darkmantles and so on) or even other bands of adventurers make great add-in encounters. Chance encounters with other adventurers don't even have to end in combat! Padding out a session with pre-designed random encounters gives a GM breathing space to prepare the section of dungeon ahead of the PCs.

Blockages

The actions of burrowing monsters, the side effects of powerful spells or even just earth tremors and earthquakes can temporarily block off access to part of a dungeon. If it's rained recently, flooding can also create an area of all but impassable terrain for lower level characters. Once the GM has prepared the relevant dungeon sections, he can remove the blockage—the flood waters subside, the powerful spell effect wears off, the dungeon denizens clear the blockage themselves and so on.

Powerful Monsters

As effective as a blockage, placing a monster or pack of monsters the party know they can't defeat in their path is a great way of diverting a rampaging band of adventurers. Use this tactic carefully. If the PCs don't realise how powerful the monsters are, things can go horribly wrong.

Sub-Levels and Side Complexes

Dropping in a small side complex of rooms, or an access point to a self-contained sub-level can divert the party long enough to give the GM time to prepare the upcoming area. These small "mini-dungeons" don't need to be fully fleshed out. The GM just has to have enough details to wing it. The players will likely never know as long as the monsters and treasure make sense in relation to the rest of the module.

Cry for Help

In a similar vein to Random Encounters, the party might encounter someone who desperately needs their help. Perhaps, they encounter an escaped prisoner or slave who needs to be escorted to the surface. Alternatively, they could come across a lone adventurer searching for his companions who just happened to go missing in the part of the dungeon the GM has prepared. If you use this strategy, be sure to reward the PCs for their aid. The NPC might even become a regular fixture in the campaign!

Dungeon Dressing

I love dungeon dressing. I love it so much Raging Swan Press released a 300+ page book (*GM's Miscellany: Dungeon Dressing*) devoted to the subject. In the context of the illusion of detail, dungeon dressing

fulfils two important roles: it both slows down the PCs (as they investigate the mutilated body, strange graffiti daubed in blood or whatever) and helps the GM to add depth and verisimilitude to the dungeon.

Final Thought

When using these tactics, don't use only one or two. A clever GM mixes things up a bit so the PCs don't realise what he is doing. Using a mix of the above tactics helps the GM maintain the players' suspension of disbelief and keeps the session running smoothly.

TEN

Dungeons with a Difference

THE ICONIC VIEW of a dungeon is of a constructed underground complex stuffed full of monsters and loot. There are other kinds of dungeon, though, ripe for adventure.

Dungeons are perhaps the iconic location of many fantasy role-playing games. These deep subterranean complexes have rooms, corridors, doors and other familiar features. This isn't the only kind of dungeon, though. Other dungeon-like venues for adventure exist.

A few examples of alternate locales for a dungeon adventure include:

Buildings

Castles, cathedrals, haunted manor houses or even particularly capacious warehouses could all make a great dungeon locale. With windows, roofs and possibly battlements, such locations would undoubtedly have many more access points than a normal dungeon. Such a "dungeon" could even be set in the middle of a town or city!

Caves

Networks of natural caves can serve as excellent dungeons in their own rights. In all likelihood, the denizens will make some effort to make them more comfortable—levelling the floor and so on—and such locales could extend for miles. Because nature has done much of the construction work, these locations are particularly attractive. They are probably the second most commonly encountered dungeon type. Even the caves themselves can be atypical. Networks of ice caves, sunken cave systems hidden deep beneath the ocean's waves and even the warrens of gigantic insects could all make excellent adventure sites.

Sewers

Terrific venues for a dungeon adventure, sewers are rife with noisome denizens and disease. Their proximity to the streets above provides explorers with easy access and a safe place to retreat to after a foray. Because sewers are often as extensive as the settlement which they serve, they can be particularly expansive.

Mines

Often of dwarven construction, mines differ from a standard dungeon in terms of function and form. The layout and architecture of the place will be different and it will in all likelihood lack many of

the traditional rooms such as throne room, prisons, torture chambers and so on.

Huge Trees

A fixture in ancient forests and elven domains, the trunks and branches of huge trees can be large enough to contain a dungeon. Either the dungeon could be built among the tree's branches, or it could be carved into the its trunk.

Demi-Planes

These are perhaps the most fantastical of all dungeons. Created by powerful folk such as archmages and demi-gods, demi-planes are an excellent venue for a dungeon. Here time may flow differently, magic may be subtly (or unsubtly) altered and even the laws of physics may be different.

Extra-dimensional spaces also fall into this category. Both can be as large or small as a GM desires.

Gigantic Spider Web

Vast colonies of spiders—or several huge spiders—could conceivably create an incredibly vast web with rooms and corridors on many different levels.

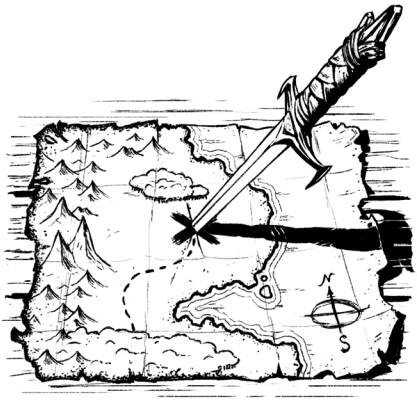
Dense Vegetation

Where vegetation is particularly dense—perhaps in primal forests, —trails become corridors and clearings become rooms. Such locales could be the demesne of fey creatures or even a cabal of druids.

ELEVEN

The Surrounding Wilderness

GOOD DUNGEONS NEED MANY THINGS: a purpose for existing, an evocative name, an ecology that actually (vaguely) works, interesting features, a decent range of dungeon dressing and more. What they also need, however, is a decent swath of wilderness in which to lurk.



Consider these examples:

- The castle in *I7 Ravenloft* is surrounded by wilderness rich in minor adventuring sites.
- The ruined monastery and the dungeons below in *B5 Horror on the Hill* (an overlooked classic) can only be reached after a gruelling trek through the monster-infested wilderness.
- The Tower of Heavens (from *UK5 When a Star Falls* which is another overlooked classic) stands at the centre of a great swath of hills and mountains.
- Sakatha's tomb hosts the climax of *I2 Tomb of the Lizard King*, one of my all-time favourite modules. It squats amid a noisome swamp, and just reaching the place is an achievement.

Would any of them have been as good adventures if the wilderness portions were removed? Hell, no.

That said, some modules are undeniably marvellous even without a well detailed surrounding wilderness (but would have been much better with one added). For example,

- The Moathouse from *T1 The Village of Hommlett* is perhaps one of the greatest—if not the greatest—low-level dungeon crawl ever written. (The village is awesome as well). Sure, it's not fancy and it's not sophisticated, but it's brilliant nonetheless. How much better could it have been, though, if Gary had fleshed out the surrounding countryside?
- The Caves of Chaos from *B2 The Keep on the Borderland* is a classic adventure site. Literally millions of heroic adventurers have fought the foul creatures dwelling therein. Sure, the area around the caves does receive a little bit of design attention in the module, but it could have been so much more.

What's So Great About the Wilderness, Anyway?

Adding an area of surrounding wilderness to a dungeon does several things:

- It creates separation (or perhaps a buffer) from civilisation. Often this gives the storylines of the dungeon more realism; after all if the orc tribe lives next to the town why hasn't war come to the region? Similarly, if a ruined temple is to remain unexplored (and unlooted) it's much better located far away from prying eyes.
- It creates different challenges. Rangers, druids and the like often shine in the wilderness, but sometimes struggle to bring all their abilities to play in a dungeon. Providing an area of wilderness gives those characters somewhere to be in the spotlight. It also enables a GM to use different kinds of monsters—monsters that probably wouldn't make sense in the dungeon—and different kinds of challenges.
- It creates a transition zone. Often jumping immediately from a tavern's comfy common room into a deadly adventure can be jarring and disconcerting. A wilderness area provides an environment in which the players can "warm up" to the adventure.
- It creates somewhere to tell the story. If the dungeon is stuffed full of orcs, undead or whatever, a surrounding wilderness gives the GM somewhere to tell a little bit more about the story. If bandits lair in the ruined castle, the party might find the nearby roads mysteriously empty of traffic or merchants only travelling under heavy guard. They may even find slain merchants, abandoned wagons and so on. Such details build flavour and may even give the party important clues about what lies ahead.
- It creates the possibility of sanctuary. Even the harshest wilderness has pockets of safety. Canny PCs can retreat to

these areas—hidden caves, fortified homesteads of brave settlers and so on—to rest and recuperate without having to retreat all the way back to town. Sometimes, the PCs may even be able to get significant help at these sanctuaries.

Putting it into Practice?

All this has got me thinking about a module I wrote several years ago: *The Shadowed Keep on the Borderlands*. I designed it as a homage to the Moathouse in T1 and to date it's been rather well received. (It's also Raging Swan Press's best selling product).

However, I'm beginning to think the module would have been much better if it also had a richly detailed surrounding wilderness area. (It could also do with a nearby town for the PCs to retreat to, and some expanded cavern levels, but that's the subject for another day!)

I talk more about the Shadowed Keep's design in a later chapter.

TWELVE

Things You Need to Know About a Dungeon

PCS ARE AN INQUISITIVE LOT. Irritatingly the more successful ones don't just charge into the nearest dungeon in search of loot and glory. They ask questions. Lots of questions.

A wise man once said that knowledge is power. One of the principles of successful adventuring is reconnaissance. Knowing what the party is going to face before they face it enables them to purchase the right equipment, memorise the proper spells and even hire appropriate henchfolk and hirelings. Clever and wise PCs start their reconnaissance before they even enter the dungeon!

A prepared GM should be able to answer these important questions about the dungeon:

- Who built the dungeon?
- Why was the dungeon built?
- What major events have occurred in the dungeon?
- What is the dungeon called? Why?

- Why would the party want to explore the dungeon?

- What legends and rumours are associated with the dungeon?
- Does the dungeon have more than one entrance?
- Does the dungeon have any particularly well known features or locations?
- What secret(s) does the dungeon conceal?
- What general perils lurk in the dungeon?

Having this kind of information prepared enables a GM to provide the appropriate information at the appropriate time. (Instead of revealing too much or making hasty choices that lead to confusion later on). Of course, not all the information the PCs gather will be true and accurate. Sources can be deliberately wrong or merely mislead. Others can provide correct information, but from their own perspective. For example, a lowly man-at-arms who sees a wizard cast a *fireball* might describe that worthy personage as an archmage.

Sources of Information

But from where will the clever PCs gain this information?

- Sages and other scholarly folk
- Adventurers who have already been in the dungeon
- Escaped slaves and prisoners
- Ancient and not so ancient documents (journals, diaries, maps and so on)
- Current rumours
- Legends
- Talkative (or easily bribed) dungeon denizens
- Skills
- Divination spells

So those are the general kind of questions PCs will (or more accu-

rately should) ask about a dungeon before they delve into its depths. Having the answers ready rewards the players' clever play. It also ensures the GM does not accidentally reveal some important secret he wanted to keep secret until later.

THIRTEEN

Things to Not Include in a Dungeon

I'VE PREVIOUSLY WRITTEN about good dungeon design. However, I haven't thus far listed the things you absolutely should not include in your dungeons. Here—in no particular order—are three things you should avoid in your dungeon design.

Unavoidable, Unkillable Monsters

There's nothing wrong with having unavoidable encounters in a dungeon. (Often the "boss" encounters falls into this category). I'm also not particularly fussed about the inclusion of unkillable or virtually unkillable opponents (balance isn't all its cracked up to be, after all and there is always someone tougher than yourself).

However, unavoidable, unkillable encounters are terrible design.

Designing encounters the party cannot win and cannot avoid is a spectacularly bad idea. (Particularly if you are deliberately designing the encounter to kill characters; some GMs do this for “story reasons”—sob).

Such encounters degrade the players' ability to make meaningful choices and lead to frustration and anger. Normally in such encounters, the party are wiped out or only survive through the GM's clumsy intervention. (Perhaps the GM has an NPC in the party who saves the day or the monsters inexplicably stop attacking because the GM is merciful).

Players love to win against the odds. Some of my most memorable gaming encounters come from clever tactics or heroic sacrifices. None of my most favourite gaming memories come from the GM saving the day.

"It's Just Magic"

Areas that make no logical sense—except in very narrowly defined situations such as in the lair of a mad archmage—are normally a bit pants (that's a technical phrase meaning bad design).

You should have a rational explanation for notable effects or strange locations in your dungeon. The PCs might not always figure out the details (and that's fine). But, if the effect doesn't make sense to you, describing it accurately and engagingly becomes that much harder. The rationale that "it's caused by magic" can also crush the players' suspension of disbelief which is—obviously—a bad thing.

Linear Layout

Sure—of course—sometimes small sections of a dungeon are linear. Perhaps the dungeon entrance leads to a guardroom or you have to go through the torture chamber to get to the cells. That's all well and good.

Some dungeons, though, are so linear they remove all meaningful choice from the players. This is terrible design. If there is only one

way to go, that's the way you'll go. Too much of this can get incredibly frustrating, for players.

A well-designed dungeon provides the players with meaningful choices. Badly designed dungeons don't.

FOURTEEN

Things Modern Dungeons Don't Have Enough of Anymore

DUNGEON DESIGN HAS EVOLVED over the years, as gaming fashion has changed and various games and editions have risen and fallen. Dungeons designed decades ago are noticeably different to those created today. Dungeon design philosophy has clearly changed.

Some aspects of this change are good. However, I've been growing a little bit dissatisfied with the design of recent dungeons and how these changes affect the party's explorations and the general flow of the game.

No Upcoming Events

In the main, today's designers are great at telling you what has happen prior to the party reaching an encounter area and they often provide a tremendous sense of the various NPCs' motivations. However, we rarely get any information about what happens if the party attack and retreat or simply take a long time to reach certain areas. Thus—at least to me—the dungeon doesn't seem a very dynamic place. Of course, I can decide what happens myself—I'm

not a complete idiot—but it would be nice to have some guidance from the designer.

No Wandering Monsters

Gah! I love wandering monsters. I do, I do, I do (as long as they make sense in the overall context of the dungeon).

I find it baffling that few denizens of modern dungeon's ever seem to move around. Surely, the more organised groups occasionally move about, go foraging for food or whatever. Don't they get bored just sitting around? Apparently not. Dungeons—and most of their inhabitants—are passive, which allows the party to dictate the pace of their exploration.

While I can understand this from a publisher's point of view—wandering monsters take up valuable page space and don't add much to the story—they do add a tremendous amount to the feeling of verisimilitude to the dungeon. They also make it feel so much more dynamic and "lived in."

No Empty Space

Again, from a publisher's point of view I understand the lack of empty space in dungeons. By empty space, I mean unoccupied rooms that may—or may not—contain anything interesting. Describing empty space takes up space (how ironic is that?) which leaves less space and word count for challenges and the overall storyline.

That said, empty space is very important in a dungeon.

- It gives the various factions and groups in the dungeon breathing space and a way to move about without being constantly in conflict with one another.
- It increases the amount of ground the party covers between

fights (and rests). This adds to their sense of accomplishment when they look at the map. That might sound really trivial, but it's an important factor often overlooked.
- It provides a good change of pace as it allows the party to use other skills, slow down and so on.
- It provides somewhere for the party to rest/hide.

Basically, these days it seems, every time the party enter a new area they trigger a fight or walk into a trap. There's not a lot of surprise or suspense to that formula. Door, fight, loot, door, fight, loot etc. It also means that on the map their process looks pitifully slow, which is a bit disheartening.

No Level Inappropriate Encounters

With very few exceptions, all encounters in modern dungeons seem level appropriate. Of course, I'm not bemoaning the fact I haven't been slaughtering whole parties on a weekly basis, but sometimes it's fun for the party to deal with very hard or very easy encounters.

Running away is always a useful skill to cultivate while crushing weak foes is fun! And again—of course—it builds a sense of verisimilitude into the dungeon.

And, of course, having level inappropriate encounters adds to the sense of tension. While as a GM, I would never just spring a CR+5 encounter on a group, clever groups can pick up on the "subtle" signs (perhaps scorched and splintered bodies, great gouges out of the walls and so on) that something rather tough lurks ahead. If, after that, they chose to rush ahead that's their problem.

FIFTEEN

Wandering Monsters

THE PCS SHOULD NOT BE the only things to creep through the dark of the dungeon in search of loot and/or prey. Other things lurk in the ebon shadows of the underworld waiting for foolhardy adventurers to wander by...

Wandering monsters are something that has seemingly fallen out of fashion in recent years. In the Good Old Days, every module had a

table of random encounters. Sometimes for dungeons with several levels, you got several different random tables! Designed to simulate the movement of monsters around the dungeon, they were a fun facet of the game.

Nowadays, however, they seem to be somewhat less common. That's a shame as they are a vital part of any well designed dungeon and despite popular misconception, they don't always end in pointless combat. Clever PCs can gain great advantage from random encounters.

Types of Wandering Monster

There are three basic types of wandering monster:

- **Denizens**: The PCs encounter denizens of the dungeon. Combat (or a hasty parley) often ensues. Occasionally, the party might encounter slaves or an escaped prisoner. Such encounters often yield valuable intelligence about the layout of the dungeon and its inhabitants.
- **Explorers**: The PCs encounter another adventuring group. The other party could be friendly (or not).
- **Scavengers**: Some monsters are nothing more than scavengers. They may be tolerated by the other dungeon denizens, feared or actively hunted. Scavengers rarely carry appreciable treasure with them.

Wandering Monsters: What's the Point?

For the GM, wandering monsters fulfil several important functions:

- **They Keep Things Random**: In a game where very few or no monster wander the dungeon (or other adventuring locale) the PCs can stride the halls with relative impunity. After all

they are in no danger as all the monsters are in their rooms. A party that doesn't have to worry about wandering monsters enjoys a significant advantage over those that must consider such things.

- **They Build Verisimilitude**: In almost every dungeon, castle or other adventuring location its denizens move about. To have groups of monsters simply lurking in rooms waiting to be killed is ludicrous (and dare I say it unrealistic). Food and water must be procured, guards changed and so on. It stands to reason the party will encounter denizens going about their daily lives.
- **They Consume Resources**: Wandering monsters inevitably consume resources. Thus, they act as an incentive to move quickly and carefully. If the party spends an inordinate amount of time wandering about a dungeon or routinely spends hours searching every area they discover it stands to reason they should encounter more wandering monsters.
- **They Provide Vital Resources**: Wandering monsters enable the GM to provide the party with vital resources—such as a scroll or other magic item—they currently lack which they don't know they need. For example, if the party must traverse a flooded section of dungeon giving them a *scroll of water breathing* could enable them to continue and save the session from coming to a abrupt halt.
- **They Slow or Divert the Party**: Wandering monsters are a great way of slowing down or diverting the party (either for their own good or because they are wandering into a part of the dungeon you have not yet designed).
- **They Provide "Bonus" XP**: Wandering monsters are a good way of "topping up" the party's XP. If they really should level up before fighting the dungeon's boss a couple of random encounters are a great way to provide this XP without being too obvious.

The Final Word

Remember when designing a random encounter on the fly, randomly encountered monsters:

- Are doing something when encountered; they are rarely just hanging around waiting to be killed
- Are not always aware of the PCs before the PCs become aware of them
- Don't always want to fight
- Might want to ally themselves with the PCs

SIXTEEN

Wandering Monsters: What Are They Actually Doing?

TO AVOID boring and bland wandering monster encounters that make no real sense you need to think about a couple of things.

Principally, beyond determining what kind of monsters the party encounters, you should consider:

Beyond wandering, what are the wandering monsters actually doing?

That's a pretty important question. The answer has a huge influence on the encounter set-up. For example—obviously—a gelatinous cube is unlikely to be setting up camp for the night. Other wanderers, however, have more complex motivations and reasons for their actions. In a troglodyte tribal den, for example, wandering troglodytes might be:

- Fetching water
- Carrying away rubbish
- Watching for intruders
- Doing anything else troglodytes do in their lairs

Whatever the troglodytes are doing, they are unlikely to be hanging around doing nothing (except those darn lazy teenage troglodytes, that is).

There are three basic types of wandering monster. Each type gets up to different things in the dungeon. Use the lists below, to determine what a randomly encountered monster is doing. Remember, some results may make no sense when paired with the wanderers in question; modify the results as appropriate.

Organised Dungeon Denizens

These wanderers belong to the group controlling the dungeon (or this part of the dungeon). When encountered, the dungeon denizens are:

1. Patrolling their lair
2. Shirking their duties (drinking, gambling, sleeping etc.)
3. Carrying water
4. Disposing of rubbish
5. Escorting a prisoner
6. Watching for intruders

7. Chasing an escaped slave or prisoner
8. Repairing something such as a door, piece of furniture etc.
9. Moving foodstuffs or other heavy items about the lair
10. Loitering
11. Decorating something with graffiti
12. Arguing
13. Baiting a prisoner or small animal
14. Eating
15. Failing to watch for intruders (they could be asleep, drunk etc.)
16. Preparing to go on a scouting mission
17. Brawling with each other
18. Plotting against their chieftain or leader
19. Nefariously sneaking about
20. Making a lot of noise—perhaps shouting or singing

As well as the dungeon's denizens, the party might instead encounter their slaves or an escaped prisoner. Such encounters will likely result in role-playing rather than combat and could even serve as a useful source of intelligence.

Explorers

The PCs encounter another adventuring group or members of a group working against the dungeon's denizens. The other party could be friendly (or not). When encountered, the explorers or interlopers are:

1. Sneaking towards their enemies
2. Returning from a raid with a prisoner
3. Resting
4. Setting up camp
5. Breaking camp
6. Setting a trap

7. Waiting to spring an ambush
8. Wandering about lost
9. Spying on their enemies
10. Searching for something hidden (a secret door, trap or treasure niche)

Scavengers

Some monsters are nothing more than mindless or near-mindless scavengers, driven by their base, atavistic influences. Rats, giant spiders and gelatinous cubes all fall into this category. The other dungeon denizens may tolerate, fear or hunt these scavengers. Scavengers rarely deliberately carry treasure with them. When encountered, the scavengers are:

1. Sleeping
2. Resting
3. Eating
4. Hiding
5. Waiting to pounce
6. Creating a new nest or lair
7. Dragging or carrying something (probably prey) back to their lair
8. Chasing prey

Megadungeon Design

Designing a megadungeon is hard. If you don't get the dungeon's metaphorical foundations right, you are wasting your time.

Over the last forty years, countless dungeons and hundreds of megadungeons have graced GM's campaigns all over the world. Detailing such a locale is a gigantic undertaking. While all the principles of designing “normal” dungeons apply, successful megadungeon designers, also keep the criteria on the following pages in mind.

At the end of this section, I also provide an overview of my own megadungeon—Gloamhold.

SEVENTEEN

The Basics

Name

THE MEGADUNGEON SHOULD HAVE A COOL, flavoursome name.

Multiple Entrances

There should be several different ways of getting into the dungeon. While all might not be obvious (secret entrances are cool) most should be easy to find by all but the most blinkered explorer. Entrances set in the midpoint of the dungeon provide access to dungeon levels both above and below the entranceway.

Players should have Meaningful Choices

This doesn't mean the party get to choose which door to use to get to the villain's throne room. Rather, the complex's layout enables the PCs to pursue multiple paths through the dungeon, exploring different areas, sub-levels and levels as they choose. Wherever possi-

ble, the PCs should enjoy freedom of movement through the dungeon and not be forced down a set path.

Each Level (or sub-Level) has a Distinctive Flavour

This flavour shouldn't be unnecessarily odd just for the sake of flavour. For example, a sub-level of twisted natural passageways home to degenerate and feral derro seeking a way down to a deeper level is an example of good flavour. A level dominated by a mad alchemist who has no connection or relevance to the greater dungeon is bad flavour.

Sub-Levels

Smaller, self-contained areas, sub-levels enable the GM to inject different kinds of flavour or monsters into the dungeon. Sub-levels may only be accessible from one normal dungeon level. Some may be secret while others may provide a relatively safe haven for explorers.

Multiple Connections Between Levels and Sub-Levels

The PCs should have freedom of choice to decide which parts of the megadungeon they explore. Access points between levels often serve as choke points. The more access points there are, the easier it is for dungeon denizens to move about and the more choices the players have. Some connections should be hidden or secret. Not all should proceed only to the next level; some may provide access to multiple levels or may miss one or two levels out (for example a connection might exist between levels 1 and 4).

Secret & Remarkable Connections

Not all connections between levels and sublevels should be a standard staircase. A dried up well shaft, flooded passage or chasm are all good examples of other connections.

The Deeper You Go, the More Dangerous it is and the Greater the Rewards

This is a tradition of dungeon design. However, it is better restated as the further from the main entrance you go, the greater the danger and greater the rewards. Some dungeons may go up not down or could run for miles and miles at roughly the same depth.

Links to the Deepest Dungeon of all

The megadungeon should have one or more links to the Ebon Realm. This link provides tremendous design freedom to include strange, ancient monsters crawling up from the lightless depths in search of prey. It essentially answers loads of tricky questions about how and why certain monsters came to be in the dungeon.

It Should Make Sense (to a Certain Extent)

Realism is good to a certain extent, but realism for realism's sake is pointless. Worrying about the minutia of dungeon design is time spent not crafting exciting encounters and flavoursome dungeon levels and encounters. Enough information should be present for a GM to answer most basic questions about the dungeon, and no more. For example, deciding where the dungeon's denizens get their drinking water is important. Worrying about the minutia of the dungeon food chain is not.

Minor Elevation Shifts

Dungeon levels should rarely be flat. Minor shifts in elevation can confuse explorers. Are they on the same level or are they not?

Extra-Dimensional Spaces

Used sparingly, extra-dimensional spaces provide an interesting change of pace.

Level Size

The dungeon levels should be of various sizes. Not all should fit on a single piece of graph paper. Some especially large levels may use a larger scale per square.

EIGHTEEN

History & Minutia

Details, Details, Details (But Not Too Many Details)

EMPTY ROOMS ARE BORING. Standard corridors are boring. Dungeon dressing is an excellent cure for boring areas. Are the flagstones broken and cracked? Does dried blood splatter the wall in an otherwise empty room? Such details build verisimilitude and give the feeling the dungeon is a live setting.

The Megadungeon Needs a Decent Reason for Existing

The megadungeon must have or have had a reason to exist. Did an ancient race use it as their lair, or did a wizard retreat underground to continue his strange (and undoubtedly dangerous) research? Whatever the reason, it will have left its mark on the dungeon's layout, architecture and style.

There Should be Secrets to Uncover

Be it secret doors, lost treasures or shocking discoveries about the dungeon itself, the complex should have secrets. The PCs should be able to uncover these as a result of good, attentive play.

Relevant and Discoverable Back Story

The dungeon must have a relevant and discoverable back story. The greatest back story in the world is pointless if the PCs never get to interact with, discover and understand it. Knowledge of the dungeon's history shouldn't be automatic—they should have to work for it. Having knowledge of some or all of the complex's history should provide insights into the dungeon (and perhaps even in-game advantages).

Denizens & Challenge

- **Wheels within wheels**: The megadungeon should have an overall boss or super villain. This individual doesn't need to be in charge of everyone in the dungeon, but he should be the most powerful and influential figure therein. He will have many sub-leaders or vassals; many of these will command their own level or sub-level.
- **Away with the 15-minute adventuring day**. If every room contains a life or death struggle in which one or more PCs end up unconscious or dead the dungeon turns into an unending grind. The PCs do a room or two and then retreat to rest. That's boring game play. Instead, the dungeon's design should promote long-term delving. Parties should be able to explore at least a dozen rooms before resting. Easier fights, unoccupied rooms and easily if dealt with properly battles are all excellent tools to prolong the adventuring day.

- **Wandering Monsters:** Monsters don't just sit in their chambers waiting to be slaughtered. Some move about–either because they are scavengers or because they have things to do. Random encounters adds both an extra level of uncertainty to exploration and to the realistic feel of the place.

Nearby

- **Settlements:** One or more settlements should lie within relatively easy reach of the dungeon. This provides explorers somewhere to retreat to between forays. Here they can rest, recruit help, buy and sell magic items and so on.

NINETEEN

Why Explore a Megadungeon?

A FRIEND of mine posed a very basic question, while I was designing Gloamhold. It was such a basic question, I hadn't even considered it before because the answered seemed—on the face of it—obvious. Simply put, why would the PCs enter a megdungeon in the first place?

By virtue of their setup and style, megadungeon play tends to be more player driven than a normal campaign. In a normal campaign, the GM—to a certain extent—railroads the PCs through a set sequence of adventures. In a megadungeon, the PCs have more freedom to explore as they choose. Particularly, if they discover a means of accessing many different levels they can go literally anywhere.

For a megadungeon campaign it's a good idea to consider the actual location as a potential personal adventure hook for the PCs. Of course, the party will likely decide on tactical, short-term goals such as "find stairs to the second levels" or "eradicate the goblins living in the Warrens." These goals, though, develop during play and don't address the basic question: why would the PC enter the megadun-

geon in the first place? (And possibly—and more crucially—why would he keep going back?)

Beyond the standard reasons for adventuring a PC could be exploring the megadungeon for one these reasons:

To Boldly Go

There's nothing wrong with wanting to explore a megadungeon just because it is there. If the PC grew up with stories of heroic feats of daring do deep in the megadungeon's bowels, he might dream of someday visiting the places in the stories. Similarly, if no one has returned from a foray into the Obsidian Temple or mapped what lies beyond the Bridge of Sorrows fame and glory await the person who first achieves these feats.

It's a Family Tradition

Other family members have explored the megadungeon in the past and the PC is following the family tradition. He may want to emulate or beat the deeds of his relative or to overcome a challenge his relative failed to defeat. The family may have an obsession with a fragment of a treasure map purporting to show a section of the dungeon. They still search for the area (and the treasure said to be hidden there).

It's a Family Tradition and Something Went Wrong

Exploring the megadungeon is a family tradition, but in this instance something went wrong. Perhaps, a relative died during a delve and their body was not recovered. Alternatively, the relative could have simply disappeared—fate unknown—or have lost a heirloom in the dungeon. Discovering the truth and/or recovering what was lost are powerful personal motivators for an adventurer.

Revenge

Someone betrayed the PC's family in some way. Perhaps they murdered his parents, stole a priceless family relic or enacted some other horrible betrayal on the PC's nearest and dearest. Whatever they did, they then fled to the depths of the megadungeon. The only way to have revenge is to enter the dungeon, track down the malefactor and slay him.

TWENTY

Two Unusual Ways to Use a Megadungeon

MEGADUNGEONS ARE a staple of many campaign worlds. Traditionally, they are the setting for a long campaign of exploration and delving. There's absolutely nothing wrong with using a megadungeon in this way, but that's not the only way they can be used.

As part of designing Gloamhold, I pondered how GMs use megadungeons in their campaigns. Designing the history and layout of the megadungeon itself seems relatively simply. Keeping the play experience fresh and engaging, however, is the trick. When designing a megadungeon, a GM should always keep in mind why the PCs are there in the first place. A good hook is crucial.

With that in mind, here are two different ways to use a megadungeon in your campaign. However, note both of the options below will likely entail extra preparation on the GM's part as few—if any—megadungeons are set up with these uses in mind.

We Must Get Out

The PCs are trapped deep in the megadungeon, for some reason. Perhaps they were captured by slavers who sold them to the megadungeon's master. He in turn transports them to one of the deepest levels and plans to sacrifice them to his dark patron.

The party escape before the ceremony and, trapped deep underground, they must work together to once again reach the surface. A twist on this hook could involve the PCs escaping from the villain's clutches while still close to the surface. Their escape is thus relatively easy, but their experiences and lust for revenge serves as a hook to pull them back into the megadungeon.

Alternatively, the party appear in the bowels of the megadungeon through a one-way portal and cannot escape by returning the way they came. Thus, they must fight their way to freedom (but at least they have all their equipment!)

We Live Here

The PCs live in the megadungeon. They could be dwarves (and/or their allies) living in the remnants of an ancient dwarven hold besieged by goblins, orcs or the like. War is a constant feature of life for the PCs as they fight to defend their home. Their adventures could focus on them trying to reach the surface to find allies or on attacks on their enemy's lairs.

Alternatively, the PCs could be the descendants of the servants of the mad archmage who built the place. This option allows for a greater variety in player races, and could act as a good reason to allow aberrant, odd or mutated PCs of a variety of racial types.

In either event, they live deep inside the dungeon and ferocious monsters dominate the surrounding levels and sub-levels. Just

reaching the surface is difficult and dangerous; perhaps no one has done so in years. Something has happened to break the status quo in either the dungeon or the PCs' home and the PCs must strive to reach the surface or clear large portions of the dungeon for some reason.

TWENTY-ONE

Six Sample Megadungeons

SOME DUNGEON RISE above their fellows to become legendary locations famed throughout the world. Perhaps by virtue of their dangers or denizens, the treasures said to be hidden within or even some unique physical characteristics these dungeons are a cut above the norm.

Such places could form the basis of legends and epic stories circulating throughout your campaign world. They could even form the basis of a long-running series of adventures. Alternatively, they could be nothing but depth and flavour—the kind of locations the party hear of while listening to a bard entertaining a tavern's raucous patrons

Ashen Fane of the Whispering Cult

A cult of secrets, assassination and lurking madness the Whispering Cult are much feared throughout civilised lands. They are said to lurk in a hidden temple dedicated to the god of secrets. Here they maintain extensive records of the secrets they uncover. Many lords and

other powerful folk would give much to peruse these records, for in their pages lurk great power and influence.

Spire of Certain Oblivion

Rising from the waves 100 miles from the shore, the Spire of Certain Oblivion is aptly named. No vessel is known to have successfully docked at the spire and no reliable reports of what lies within have ever reached civilised lands. The spire itself is an immense structure said to comprise not rock, but some form of super-hard metal seemingly impervious to the remorseless waves bursting against its flanks.

Catacombs of the Sundered Pillar

These huge catacombs, arranged over four "wings" each aligned with a cardinal compass point, is arrayed about a single massive chamber. An immense pillar covered with sigils, glyphs and pictographs dominates the chamber. A century ago, something strange happened to the pillar. Now a huge crack runs through its body and the top one-third has shifted southwards by about one foot, giving the pillar the appearance of a jagged tooth.

Trackless Warrens of Dol Naroth

This huge underground maze sprawls over several miles. Torturously designed to baffle the direction sense of even the canniest dwarf, the warrens have thus far resisted all attempts at comprehensive mapping. Rumours confidently assert the warrens were designed to protect the final resting place of the legendary wizard Dol Naroth who was rumoured to have mastered death itself. The warrens attract a constant stream of treasure hunters determined to locate the wizard's tomb (and the plunder it no doubt holds).

Sepulchre of Tor Baroth

Here lie the heroic dead of a long fallen kingdom of dark character and sinister origin. The heroes—a score of warriors, wizards and clerics—of the blackest hearts lie amid the faded, dusty glory of a forgotten time. Interred as the honour guard destined to attend the kingdom's demonic lord when he emerges from the Abyss, the dungeon is a focus of many quests by ardent young paladins and other aspiring heroes. Thus far, its location remains a mystery.

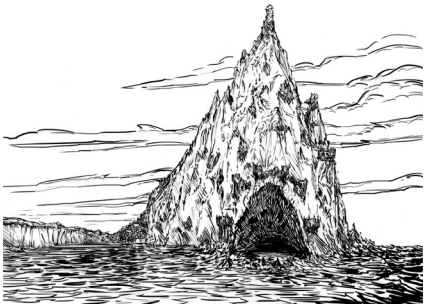
Ziggurat of Sorrow

Hidden in a deep cavern far from the world of men, the Ziggurat of Sorrow was raised millennia ago by troglodytes worshipping their ancient, demonic overlords. Buried within its steep sides lie countless chambers, passageways and pits. At the lowest level, a great ceremonial hall girdles an unknowably deep sinkhole dropping thousands feet into the unknown.

TWENTY-TWO

Gloamhold

GLOWERING amid dark rumours and terrible stories of desperate adventure, death, betrayal and glimmering treasures squat the unutterably ancient halls of Gloamhold.



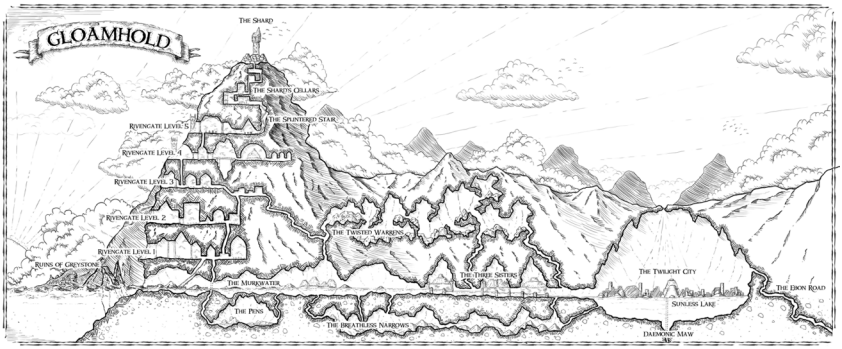
This crumbling, benighted, haunted dungeon complex of unknown, but undeniably vast, extent is buried deep within the grim and brooding spray-drenched headland of the Mottled Spire. It is a place of legends, madness and death.

Even reaching Gloamhold is difficult. By land, adventurers must negotiate miles of trackless, jagged crags and sullen, dark gorges,

chasms and valleys. Those approaching by sea have it no better. They must brave over a mile of savage, foam-flecked waves. Tides about the headland are notoriously treacherous; wrecks of ships large and small driven to destruction on the rocks litter the seabed. Winter storms render Gloamhold all but inaccessible by sea for several months every year.

A harsh chunk of limestone rearing hundreds of feet into the perpetually cloudy sky the Mottled Spire looms over the turbulent waters of Hard Bay like a malevolent giant. Attempts to colonise the barren headland have all ended in failure and death. Surrounded by crumbled outbuildings, a now ruined lighthouse—now colloquially known as simply "The Shard"— stands atop the promontory's highest, most wind lashed bluff. Elsewhere, on the spire's landward side, languish the weed choked, tumbled ruins of Greystone—a fishing village abandoned decades ago. Occasionally, redoubtable bands of adventurers poke around both sets of ruins. Some return, while others simply disappear—perhaps finding certain secret connections rumoured to lead into the upper levels of Rivengate and from thence deeper into Gloamhold's lightless depths.

Although much of Gloamhold remains unknown—nothing more than the subject of wild whispers and rumours—knowledge of a few locations has come to light through the explorations of brave (or foolhardy) adventurers.



Rivengate

Of dark and forbidding aspect, the lower portions of once mighty Rivengate collapsed into the sea long ago. Built by unknown hands remnants of the citadel yet cling to the cliffs. The Splintered Stair links Rivengate to the cellars buried below the Shard.

The Murkwater

Only skilled or lucky captains dare to sail into the gloom of Rivengate's gaping maw. Within flows the dark and treacherous Murkwater; the seething, foam-flecked waters below Rivengate are particularly hazardous because of the jagged rocks fallen from above.

The Twisted Warrens

Honeycombing the rock above the Murkwater, the Twisted Warrens are a confused and convoluted network of natural caverns and passageways inhabited by derro, troglodytes, dark creepers and worse.

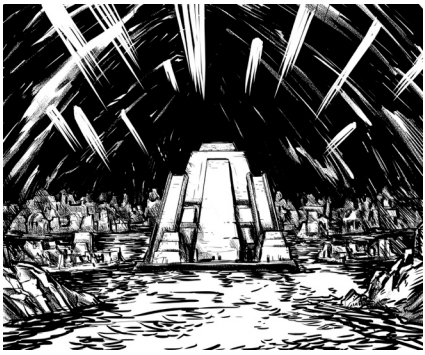
The Breathless Narrows

A network of flooded, fractured caverns radiate outwards from beneath the Murkwater. The water therein is only fractionally above freezing and explorers need magic to survive for any length of time in this airless, lightless world.

The Twilight City

Buried in an immense cavern, the Twilight City sprawls across a series of low islands struggling above the cold, dark waters of the Sunless Lake. An ancient place of stone ziggurats, fetid and twisted

canals and cyclopean architecture, troglodytes fleeing the ruin of their ancient mighty empire built the city aeons ago. At the city's heart stands the titanic Whispering Fane built about the Daemonic Maw. A wide passageway—The Ebon Road—links Gloamhold to the Ebon Realm.



Dungeon Design Case Study

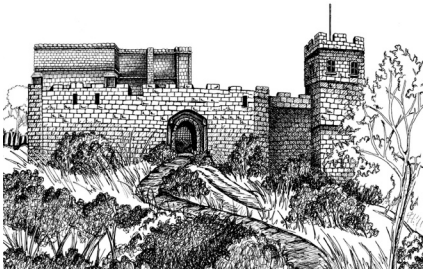
In this section of *Be Awesome at Dungeon Design*, I show how I designed the *Shadowed Keep on the Borderlands*.

Keep in mind, I designed *Shadowed keep on the Borderlands* to be compatible with the Pathfinder Roleplaying Game. Thus—occasionally—I touch on game mechanics, but such minor references are easily ignored.

TWENTY-THREE

Design Principles

THE MOATHOUSE from *T1-4 The Temple of Elemental Evil* is one of my all-time favourite modules. I think it's a great example of genius dungeon design and I've always wanted to design a similar location. Check out Chapter 44 for more on my thoughts on the dungeon itself.



When I saw the above image by jolly talented artist Marc Radle I immediately knew that I'd found "my Moathouse." Eventually, I called it the *Shadowed Keep on the Borderlands*.

I'm one of these people that likes to plan something before I get

started; I find it very hard just to dive in and get cracking (as previous experience has taught me doing so inevitably wastes time and the result is normally inferior).

Once I'd decided to write a homage to the Moathouse, I spent a lot of time thinking about why I liked the Moathouse so much and how I could emulate that adventure experience. To me, the Moathouse had several essential elements:

- **Verisimilitude**: It made sense; it reeked of a decent amount of realism without sacrificing game play.
- **Zoned**: It had different zones: some parts of the upper ruins were inhabited by various monstrous inhabitants while bandits lived in another part. Below ground, the evil cleric Lareth held sway. Different zones required different skill sets and tactics which kept play fresh.
- **Conflict**: There was minor grade conflict between some of these groups. This could be exploited through clever play.
- **Detailed**: There were loads of detail in the Moathouse that, if you paid attention, provided clues about its past. In this way players got rewarded for poking about and investigating stuff instead of just blindly whacking everything in sight.
- **Expandable**: While the original module didn't go into great detail, the Moathouse was part of a larger adventure—you could go on from there to explore other locales that led directly from what was discovered therein.

I knew *Shadowed Keep on the Borderland* had to have these elements. Along with Raging Swan's basic design principles that underpin every product we put out, I added these additional criteria:

- **Detailed**: The module locale should be richly detailed so the players can immerse themselves in the ruins.
- **Story**: There had to be a good story behind the ruins (and

PCs should be able to discover that story; the best story in the world is pointless if the players don't learn it.)

- **Generic**: The module had to be generic enough that almost any GM could add it to their campaign with minimal effort.
- **Rewarding**: Players should be rewarded for being clever and paying attention.
- **Choice**: No railroading; players should have meaningful choices about the order in which they explore the ruin and how they deal with the challenges therein.
- **Variety**: Provide areas for different classes to shine. So for example, I needed to include undead for clerics to blow up, physical challenges and traps for rogues to disarm (and so on).

Like the Moathouse, *Shadowed Keep on the Borderlands* had to be a "starter dungeon" in that it would be suitable for 1st-level characters.

Once I'd decided what I wanted to achieve with the module, I started to flesh out the basic details of the site.

TWENTY-FOUR

Zoning

IN THE LAST CHAPTER, I talked about how I set my design goals for *Shadowed Keep on the Borderlands* before I started any actual design. This chapter deals with how I started to flesh out the basic details of the place.

The first thing to think of was exactly how big an adventure I wanted. After some thought, I settled on having four distinctive zones within the ruins. To me, four zones enables a decent amount of variety without having to make design concessions or come up with an increasingly bizarre backstory to justify everything within the ruins.

Each zone had to have its own flavour otherwise the ruins would be boring (and therefore not very fun to design, prepare or play). So before I started proper design, I decided on the absolute basic theme for each area. Now obviously *Shadowed Keep on the Borderlands* was a homage to the Moathouse from *The Temple of Elemental Evil* and so some of the choices were very obvious. Others, were driven by game design requirements to allow certain classes or races to shine.

After some thought, each zone's basic "headline" shook out like this:

Zone 1: The Watchtower

Watchtower claimed by bandits. As an organised force, the bandits compete with the goblins for control over the ruins. Heavily fortified but with several ways in (for clever PCs).

Zone 2: The Upper Ruins

Ruins inhabited by animals and vermin; the easiest of the zones. Access to a hidden sub-zone (the keep's treasure vault) the PCs will probably only find if they use their wits and diplomatic skills.

Zone 3: The Cellars

Underground dungeon level claimed by goblins and their allies. The goblins compete with the bandits for control of the ruins and are aided by several different types of allies; waves of identical goblins are very, very boring. Potential for further adventures.

Zone 4: the Undercrypt

Underground ruined dungeon level populated by undead and constructs. Potential for further adventures.

More Zoning Thoughts

Additionally, it became clear the module should not dictate to the players in what order they should tackle the ruins. As a player I loathe railroading with the fiery passion of a thousand burning suns and I saw no need to inflict it on anyone playing this module. The players should be able to make meaningful choices about their exploration from almost the first moment of the adventure.

There should also be multiple ways of accessing some of the levels

and the layout of the place should reward clever play. (For example, a secret entrance to the goblins' lair that they don't know about—and don't guard).

The adventure should also support further adventures so the GM can customise and add to it as he sees fit. I also knew I wanted to follow the old adage that the deeper you go the more dangerous it gets. It's one of the dungeon design concepts that's so universal everyone understands it instinctively. So, the further away from ground level the PCs get (either up the watchtower or down into the dungeons), the harder things get.

Finally, and this was a biggie, I wanted to build in ample opportunity for role-playing in the Shadowed Keep. It would be very easy to simply design a dungeon bash in which the PCs hack their way through increasingly dangerous opponents. While there's nothing wrong with that style of play, I felt it important to add in opportunities for the PCs to get around problems using their guile and charm.

Onto the Backstory!

So at this point, it was time to work out how to fit all these different themes into the keep's background. I'm a big fan of adventures having their own logical consistency. Why are the goblins there? Who built the keep? Why? These and lots more questions had to be answered and so I set about writing the adventure background.

TWENTY-FIVE

Backstory

IN THE LAST CHAPTER, I discussed the initial concepts of the *Shadowed Keep of the Borderland's* various "adventure zones." Coming up with the basic themes for each area was relatively simple. What was a bit tricky was designing a backstory that both made sense and that the PCs could discover during the course of the adventure.

My Backstory Bugbear

One of my bugbears about some adventures I've run is that the adventure (or sometimes even a specific encounter) has loads of cool backstory, but essentially there is no way for the PCs to discover that story. Sure, it's a great read for the GM, but essentially it's just wasted effort and page space. It can even lead to player frustration as they have no idea why the NPC was acting that way, why the monsters were there or whatever.

To me, a module which forces the GM to say "don't worry, it all makes sense" to the players has failed to create an engaging and believable experience. That's not to say a module shouldn't have mysteries. By

the end of the module, though, the PCs should have a decent chance to discover what was actually going on!

One of my key goals for the adventure was that the ruin should/could act as a potential springboard for further adventures. I thought eventually the PCs could return when they had grown in power and claim the place as their own. Repairing it and using it as a base to subdue the surrounding territory would spawn a whole new series of adventures. I thought a cool way of implanting the idea in the players' heads would be to have the keep the home of a semi-retired adventurer and (as it turned out later) his family.

Zone 1: Bandits

The presence of the bandits enabled me to add conflict into the current-day keep. Neither the goblins or the bandits would be happy with the presence of the other and so the two groups would be fighting over the keep when the PCs arrive. Clever PCs could discern this rivalry and possibly even use it to their own advantage.

Zone 2: Animals & Vermin

The main part of the keep has fallen into disrepair. No organised groups claims this area; instead animals, vermin and a ghost lurk in the shattered ruin of Valentin's home.

Zone 3: Goblins

Sadly for Valentin Ironwolf, of course, there had to be a reason for the PCs to explore the ruin and thus his demise was assured.

Conflict is at the heart of any good story and luckily the keep stands in a borderland area. Thus it was logical to assume Valentin had failed in his quest to establish a safe home for his family. Having decided one of the adventure zones would be inhabited by goblins, it

was obvious the tribe was responsible (at least in part) for the keep's fall. Thus, when the PCs eventually defeated the goblins they would be avenging the fallen Valentin.

Zone 4: Undead

Explaining the presence of the undead and constructs in Zone 4 would be trickier. I wanted to include such a zone for PC clerics and paladins to show off their specialised abilities, but having such a locale under the keep of a retired adventurer required an extra element of background. Of course, not all the elements of the background needed to flow from the adventurer and his family.

So I decided Valentin built a crypt to house his fallen retainers and that a later influence corrupted their remains. I also decided this level should be free of goblin taint, so it offered a completely different experience. Thus, I decided a minor earthquake struck the area after Valentin's death opening up a link to a deeply buried corruption.

The Backstory is the Adventure's Spine

The challenge of the module's design was to enable the PCs to discover as much of this background as possible. In the Pathfinder Roleplaying Game PCs can make knowledge checks to learn more about their environment—I just had to nudge them to make those checks. I was relatively certain any halfway competent group would try and learn as much about the keep as possible before setting out (and provided tables to handle that).

I also scattered "calls to learn" throughout the keep—tapestries, carvings, remnants of the keep's former occupants and a ghost who could provide much of the backstory.

In Zone 4 the very condition of the dungeon—cracked and damaged walls, sagging ceilings and damaged columns all hinted at some

titanic movement of the earth. The chill temperature—that got colder as one approached the closest part of the dungeon to the corruption below—also highlighted the reasons for the undead being present (and possibly provided an avenue for future adventure).

It was not my intention to beat the players over the head with the Background Stick. At the end of the day, some gamers play just to hit stuff and the adventure had to support that style of play. Including major encounters in which success hinged on knowing some key facet of the background were thus off the table—however, rewarding players who were paying attention to the various "calls to learn" was a Good Thing.

TWENTY-SIX

Encounter Design

DUNGEON DESIGN IS IMPORTANT. Encounter design is just as important. To talk about my general philosophy behind individual encounter design, sadly, I must first rant.

In my opinion, modules are getting harder. What I mean by this is that designers seem to be writing adventurers to challenge the super-optimised group—the kind of guys who tweak their characters to the nth degree. While there is absolutely nothing wrong with that style of play—in fact I do it myself on occasion—the problem is that writing

to challenge the toughest, best prepared players inevitably rogers senseless the less prepared, casual or, god-forbid, neophyte player just getting started with gaming.

When I was on Living Greyhawk's Circle of Six I witnessed a kind of bizarre, escalating arms race in which designers and players each strove to outdo one another with the toughest legal builds. I like a challenge as next as the next player—there is nothing better than crushing the evil villain and saving the day—but similarly I don't want every adventure or encounter I play to be balls-to-the-wall, crazy dangerous.

As the "arm's race" intensified, I got the impression some modules were nothing more than a series of rather tough fights—the background, plot, environment, NPCs and everything else that makes a great module seemed to be more and more pushed to the periphery of the design process.

This was not going to be the case in *Shadowed Keep on the Borderlands*. Don't get me wrong, there are challenging encounters in this adventure, but there are also very easy ones.

So with that rant out of the way, here are the principles (or "the spine") of my encounter design philosophy:

Meaningful Choices

I loath railroading modules with the fiery passion of a thousands burning suns and I believe most players feel that way. At almost every juncture, the players should have a choice about how they proceed. Do they try the tower or the donjon first? How do they get into the tower? Do they deal with the goblins or dare the undercrypts?

Reward Clever Play

Players who pay attention, come up with clever ideas, remain observant and so on should be rewarded. Skill use should be rewarded. I tend to break skills down into two basic, very broad categories: combat (things like Stealth, Acrobatics) and knowledge (Appraise, Knowledge, Diplomacy etc.) Both sets of skills should be useful in the adventure. After all, if a rogue takes Appraise or a wizard takes Knowledge (engineering) and never gets to use them, that sucks.

And finally, part of the dungeon should only be findable if the PCs are paying attention, but this part should not be an essential part.

Logically Consistent

Each encounter should be logically consistent with the history, background and current condition of the keep. What was the room once used for? What is it being used for now? Can the PCs make educated guesses based on the conditions, contents and decorations of the area?

Danger

Obviously, there will be danger in the Shadowed Keep, but this danger should grow greater the further away from ground level (in either direction) the PCs venture. So, for example, the upper levels of the bandit's tower and the upper level of the donjon are more dangerous than the floor beneath.

Avoid the 15-Minute Adventuring Day

I hate the 15-minute adventuring day. Such days normally come about because the challenges the PCs face are tough, forcing them to expend a lot of precious resources quickly. In Shadowed Keep,

encounters should generally be easier so the PCs can explore more areas without having to rest. This builds a sense of achievement and progression and leads to more "organic" forays where the PCs stop to rest after they have cleared a whole section rather than when they have run out of *cure light wounds* spells.

Stuff for Different Classes and Races to Do

All characters cannot be equally engaged in every encounter all the time. That said, some classes (clerics, rogues, paladins etc.) are particularly suited toward certain kinds of activity. They should be given their time in the spotlight. Similarly, are there places or environmental conditions that only Small characters can take advantage of?

Environment

Fights don't happen in featureless rooms. Furniture as well as unique features like rafters, chandeliers and so on can all be used by canny combatants to gain advantage. Include these where appropriate. Similarly, a decent amount of detail makes an encounter come alive. What do the tapestries depict? Is there graffiti on the walls? Are small, low-value treasures yet hidden within the keep that a good Perception check uncovers?

Diplomacy

Not all encounters should end with a fight. Where appropriate, allow PCs to use cunning, duplicity and even diplomacy to "win."

Varied Opponents

Particularly tricky to achieve in the goblin lair, as goblin tribes tend to be made up of basic warrior types. Do the goblins pay mercenaries?

Are they hosting emissaries from other tribes? Do different tribal warriors use different weapons or fighting styles?

Be Easy to Run

This is huge; the best module in the world can be a complete disaster if it is hard to understand, prepare or run. Encounter text should do as much of the work for a GM as possible so that preparation is quick and simple.

TWENTY-SEVEN

The Final Word

SOMETIMES GMS and designers suffer a "rush to design". We get so excited about an idea we stampede toward our office/study/kitchen table to start drawing maps, designing encounters and so on. We forget that to be successful you have to know one crucial thing: what you are trying to achieve.

I find pre-design work is time well spent. For me, it's the foundation of a successful project. If you build good foundations, the rest of the structure is much more likely to be sound.

Alternatively, you could look at "pre-design" work as designing the project's roadmap. It shows you where you need to go to reach your destination (i.e. the completed project).

Before you begin "proper" design, know your design principles and stick to them. Remember, good design is invisible—the players won't know you had design principles and probably won't care; all they care about is having a cracking dungeon adventure.

Final, Final Word

I hope you enjoyed this look behind the designer's curtain and that it's inspired you to take the time to plot and scheme about your project before putting pen to paper. I know the anacronym SMART is somewhat overused these days, but designing SMART pays dividends when it comes to designing adventures. It leads to better, more focused adventures and reduces the amount of time wasted designing things that don't make it into the final draft.

If you are interested in how the Shadowed Keep ended up, I have a free version of the module available everywhere you can buy the PDF.

The free version of the adventure has the adventure background, random encounters for the surrounding area and other front matter as well as the chapter describing the bandit's watchtower. (And if you do download it, please take a minute to leave a review and let me know what you think).

Appendix 1: Dungeon Dressing

Dungeon dressing is awesome.

It is one of the things that can elevate a so-so dungeon to a flavourful, memorable locale. The tables on the following pages are just the start; use them to spark ideas and your own creativity.

TWENTY-EIGHT

10 Signs of Previous Exploration

IN ALL LIKELIHOOD, the PCs are not the first adventurers to explore the dungeon. Others will have come before them and they'll have left their mark on the dungeon.

The signs of their explorations can serve to highlight the dungeon's history and to add a sense of verisimilitude and depth to the complex.

1. A smear of charcoal on the cavern wall shows where a previous explorer extinguished a torch.
2. Signs of cold camp—empty waterskins and discarded,

mouldy food—give mute testimony to where previous explorers rested.

3. A large chalk cross decorates the wall next to the entrance to a passageway from which a strange odour emanates.
4. The muddy, booted tracks of a small group of humanoids lead down the passageway before eventually petering out.
5. A discarded torch lies on the floor near a scorched and burnt bright red cloak.
6. The faint smell of smoke reaches the party's nostrils.
7. Rubbish fills the natural depression in the cavern floor. Digging through the trash reveals food wrappers, dirty clothes and long splinters of polished wood.
8. Someone has dug several pits in the muddy floor of this cavern. Each hole is about 3 ft. deep, but seems to fulfil no purpose. Small mounds of mud stand next to each hole. Some have begun to fill with muddy water.
9. A shredded backpack hangs from a natural protrusion in the wall. Water drips onto the backpack, which is soaked and covered in mould.
10. A small pool of clear water fills a natural depression in one wall at about waist height. Several gold coins—perhaps left as an offering to some god or power—glint invitingly in the water.

TWENTY-NINE

10 Signs of Violence

IN ALL LIKELIHOOD, the PCs are not the first adventurers to explore the dungeon. Others will have come before them and—sadly—some of them will have suffered grievous, perhaps even fatal, injuries.

Serious injuries and excessive violence leave their mark on a dungeon. Not only does this serve as dungeon dressing, but it give the party warning of lurking dangers ahead.

1. A (now dry) spray of arterial blood decorates the wall.
2. A broken arrow shaft lies discarded on the floor. Blood is smeared across the shaft near the jagged, broken end. Of the tip, there is no sign.
3. A hacked and splintered large wooden shield lies on the floor, surrounded by shards of wood. Nearby, a broken spear lies against the wall.
4. The decomposing body of a human has been shoved against one wall. Blood smears on the floor shows the body has been dragged here. Everything of value has already been looted.
5. Rusting caltrops cover the floor. Several have dried blood upon their tips.
6. A small wad of bloody bandages lies discarded in a corner.
7. Rubble from a field of broken stalagmites lies on the floor; water drips down from above onto its jagged stumps. The shredded and sodden remains of a net are draped over a stalagmite.
8. The decapitated, decomposing body of a goblin leans against the wall. Someone has placed its severed head in its lap; its dead eyes stare up at explorers.
9. A wide pool of blood coats a decent proportion of the cavern floor. It has pooled in the many small depressions in the floor and is only partially dry. There is so much blood here, it is virtually certain whatever was injured died.
10. The hilt and jagged stump of a greatsword lie on the floor surrounded by splinters of the blade. A jagged gouge from the cavern walls provides a clue as to the sword's fate.

THIRTY

10 Suspicious Dungeon Smells

WISE ADVENTURERS USE all five senses while exploring a dungeon. Paying attention to your surroundings is one of the key skills an adventurer needs to cultivate if they wish to retire old, wealthy and healthy.

Therefore, it stands to reason a skilled GM engages all of the PCs' senses during their dungeon delve.

1. The rank stench of sweat mixed with a hint of ozone hangs in the air.
2. The pungent smell of burning hangs in the air, although no smoke is evident. A fine layer of ash on the floor, however, betrays the presence of a recent fire.
3. The almost imperceptible fragrance of rose blossom fills the air near a doorway or other chokepoint. The fragrance is subtle and is reminiscent of a lady's perfume.
4. A small patch of dying mushrooms clusters along one wall. The mushrooms are mottled black and grey and the smell of rot and decay is heavy in the surrounding area.

5. Part of the wall has collapsed, spilling rubble into the corridor or room. A small slide of thick, wet soil covers the rubble and the heavy smell of mud pervades the area.
6. From a thin crack in the wall issues a strange, heady scent redolent with the promise of a hot, warm clime. How it comes to be here—or where the narrow crack leads—is unknown.
7. This area smells strongly of excrement and manure. Dried mottled brown patches on the floor are the probable source of the smell. One of the largest patches features a single footprint.
8. The putrid stench of rotting vegetation fills this area. Strange root-like fronds grow from the ceiling and end in large, dropping flowers. A small pile of rotting petals lies below these strange plants.
9. The heavy scent of chemicals hangs in the air. While most are unidentifiable, all are acrid and unpleasant. The smell is worse, closer to the floor. Short characters such as halflings and gnomes are particularly effected; their eyes and noses run uncontrollably while they are in this area.
10. Pockmarks and burn marks pit the floor and the lower portions of some of the walls. The smell of acid hangs in the air; if the PCs linger here those of frail constitution start to feel giddy and weak.

THIRTY-ONE

10 Suspiciously Detailed Dungeon Ceiling

WISE ADVENTURERS PAY careful attention to their surroundings. Very wise adventurers look up before entering a room.

Use the table below, to generate details of atypical sections of ceilings the PCs encounter during their dungeon exploration. The GM can use these descriptions as nothing more than window dressing or they could form the basis of a trap or provide a hint as to an upcoming encounter.

1. Riven with cracks this section of ceiling looks unstable even to the untrained eye. Occasionally, dust sifts down from above. A fine covering of gravel and grit covers the floor and indistinct tracks cross through the area.
2. A dried blood stain mars the ceiling. It seems something sprayed blood across a section of ceiling before being dragged off to a nearby shadowy recess. Blood splatter on the floor mirrors the bloody drag marks on the ceiling.
3. Spider webs cover the ceiling, being particularly dense over the mouth of a natural chimney leading upwards. Dust

covers the cobwebs—they've clearly been here for some time—and several darker clumps hint at creatures entombed within.

4. Strange, slender pale white stalactites festoon the ceiling. Delicate in the extreme, many of these growths glisten with moisture in the party's lights. The atmosphere in the air is damp.
5. Cracks mar the ceiling; from these a faint breeze issues, redolent with moisture and the fetid stench of rot.
6. Soot stains the ceiling. The staining is worse above one corner where the charred remnants of several unidentifiable chunks of wood lie half hidden among a large pile of ash.
7. Roots from some form of unknown plant grow down through the much-cracked ceiling. A faint breeze also issues from the cracks, making the roots sway gently. The roots grow thickly and reach almost to the floor; explorers must push through them—or crawl under them—to continue.
8. The ceiling appears normal in all regards, but as the party traverses the area, perceptive PCs hear the rock seemingly groan.
9. Someone—or something—has daubed a sigil of sinister character—a riven skull—upon the ceiling. They appear to have used blood—now dried—for their "art".
10. Mottled black and brown mould grows thickly upon the ceiling and down one wall. The air is heavy with the smell of rot and discoloured water drips down from the ceiling and through the mould. Puddles cover the floor.

THIRTY-TWO

10 Suspiciously Detailed Dungeon Doors

ADVENTURERS ARE OFTEN SO EXCITED to see what or who lurks behind a dungeon door that they forget about the actual door itself.

Not all doors are created equal, however. A door's condition and appearance can give the PCs hints and clues as to what lies beyond.

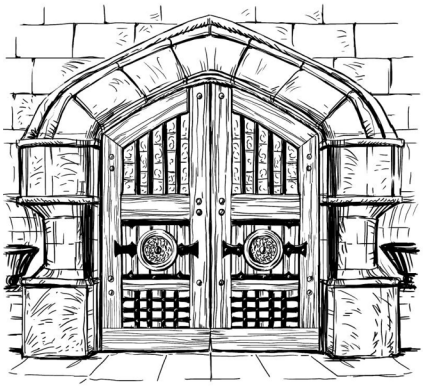
1. One of the planks making up this sturdy wooden door has recently been replaced. The wood looks fresh and the heads of the nails holding it in place are still bright and shiny.

2. The door is a terrible fit for the doorway; gaps about one inch wide at the top and bottom provide mute testimony to the carpenter's craftsmanship—and a handy way to spy what lurks beyond.
3. While the door itself seems in relatively good condition, the hinges are old and rather rusty. Opening the door creates a loud screeching sound sure to alert anyone in the vicinity.
4. Gouges in the wood of this door show where someone has tried (and failed) to dig out one of the hinges.
5. This door isn't installed properly; it is merely propped in place. Anyone trying to open the door normally is in for a shock as it topples backwards onto them. Observant PCs notice the door's hinges are not actually attached to the wall (like normal).
6. Water drips down from the ceiling onto the floor in front of the door. Consequently, the bottom of the door has swelled somewhat, making it harder to open than normal.
7. Nails of various shapes and sizes have been driven into the surface of this door in the general shape of an esoteric sigil representing danger.
8. A crude representation of a flame has been daubed this door with red paint. The work is amateurish and faded.
9. The wood of this door is clearly rotten. Mould grows on the door's surface and the pungent smell of damp wood and rot fills the immediate vicinity.
10. This iron door perfectly fills the doorway. A small grilled view port pierces the door at male human head height. Several smaller ports—hidden from casual inspection—at waist height serve as arrow slits of sorts and allow defenders to jab spears and suchlike at those in front of the portal.

THIRTY-THREE

10 Suspiciously Detailed Double Doors

DOUBLE DOORS ARE NORMALLY a sign that something good (or particularly dangerous) lies beyond.



Double doors normally lead to notable locations in a dungeon—temples, throne rooms, audience chambers and the like. Most adventurers—at least those planning a long career—would be wise to investigate a double door before just flinging it open!

1. Scorch marks mar these stout wooden doors. Some of the planking at the base of the doors seems particularly blackened.
2. These fine double doors stand snuggly in the doorway. Small carvings of writhing serpents decorate the door's hinges.
3. A small shuttered viewing port—protected by an ornate iron grill—pierces the left-hand side door at roughly human head height.
4. Torch sconces flank this pair of iron-banded double doors. Each contains a fresh, unburnt torch. The beaten iron bands run horizontally across the door. A keyhole pierces one of the iron bands on the right hand door, but bizarrely it is set at shoulder height.
5. The wood of these doors is so old it is practically black and its thick hinges are red with rust. The door's lock, however, is clearly new; no rust mars its surface.
6. These double doors have an ornate over-sized iron knocker in the shape of a glowering man's face. The man's face looks out at the person in front of the door.
7. This double door's hinges are nested—hidden in the wall—allowing the door to open inwards or outwards. The door itself is of stout oaken planks bound with thick iron bands for strength.
8. These wide, but squat, double doors are of carefully carved stone. Intricate carvings of a mountain range decorate the doors themselves. The doors are incredibly heavy, but fit the gap perfectly.
9. The iron bands of these double doors are rusty and pitted. In several places, the iron nails used to secure them in place are missing.
10. A heavy iron portcullis stands immediately in front of these plain, but obviously sturdy, double doors. Scraps of metal—fragments of armour, shards from blades and so on—are tied

to the portcullis (perhaps in decoration). If the portcullis is raised the clattering of metal alerts everyone and everything in the vicinity.

THIRTY-FOUR

10 Suspiciously Detailed Dungeon Fountains

IN THE MINDS OF ADVENTURERS, fountains set in dungeons fill the same niche as pools. Their waters could have magic qualities or —at the least—treasure might lie within!

Dungeons often feature fountains—their inhabitants must drink,

after all. Some pools surrounding such fountains might even have magic powers! At the least, something interesting might lie in the pool.

In my own Borderland of Adventure campaign, such interesting features are often the catalyst for a veritable tidal wave of skill checks and experimental drinking.

1. A smattering of coins—mainly silver and copper—lie at the bottom of the pool. They glint invitingly in the party's lights.
2. A school of tiny fish dart about the fountain's pool. The fish are brightly coloured, and hard to catch; they live under the fountain itself in a series of small niches and flee therein if anything large enters the pool's waters.
3. The bottom of the pool is suspicious pristine—as it if had been recently cleaned.
4. A single sodden leather boot lies at the bottom of the pool.
5. Dried blood mars the fountain's low, decorative wall. Perceptive characters spot several oversized teeth at the bottom of the pool.
6. The water in the pool is lower than normal, and is draining out through a crack at the bottom of the pool. A large chunk of masonry fallen from above lies over part of the crack—and hints at its origin!
7. The fountain has fallen into the pool. Water no longer flows here, and the pool is stagnant. Bright green and yellow mould clings to the damaged fountain, in thick clumps.
8. A single skull grins up at the party from the bottom of the pool.
9. Fronds of some kind of aquatic plant, swaying in the current, grows in the pool. Their thick growth obscures sight of several platinum pieces dropped here long ago as an offering to the goddess of luck.

10. The fountain is set to only spurt water when someone approaches the pool. Thus, the fountain starts jetting forth water moments after the party arrive in the area. Paranoid adventurers may suspect a trap.

THIRTY-FIVE

10 Suspiciously Detailed Dungeon Lights

DUNGEONS ARE PREDOMINANTLY DARK PLACES; here the natural warming light of the sun does not reach and the darkness is so thick explorers cannot even see their own hands in front of their faces.

Most dungeon dwellers don't need light—their senses have developed to allow them to see in the dark. Some, however, require light—

or the heat that light invariably brings—and so occasionally adventurers will come across pockets of light. Most light comes from standard sources—bonfires, lanterns and torches. Other sources of light are more esoteric in origin.

1. Motes of multi-coloured sparkling light hang in the air, flooding the area with a soft light reminiscent of candle light.
2. A dense fog clings to the floor (or ceiling) of the area and glows with a constant pale green radiance. The fog is thick enough to obscure vision and undulates in a fashion reminiscent to water if someone or something moves through it.
3. The whole ceiling radiates a faint pale light. When someone enters the area, the light level increases to that of broad daylight.
4. A large metal ball the size of a man's head hangs from the ceiling from a long slender chain. Heatless flames writhe over the ball's surface providing illumination as a torch.
5. Holes have been carved in the floor here and filled with burning oil. Flames dance atop the oil and the temperature in the immediate vicinity is sweltering.
6. A pillar of concentrated sunlight shines down through a circular hole cut into the ceiling. The hole is only three-foot wide and the light is directed here through a cleverly positioned series of mirrors.
7. The rock in the wall is of a special, quasi-magical type. When light is brought here, the rocks absorb and store it. After the light source has been removed, the rocks glow dimly for several hours.
8. A small pool fills a depression in the centre of the floor. Luminescent water fills the pool and glows dimly. Small multi-coloured glowing fish dart about its depths.
9. A line of candles stands upright against one wall in a veritable pool of dried and drying wax. The candles are of a

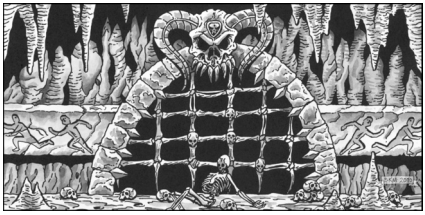
variety of colours and sizes. Some are lit while others are not; there seems to be no appreciable pattern to which candles are lit (or their placement).

10. A carved niche in one wall above the entrance contains a skeleton laid out as at rest. Luminescent insects crawl about and through the skeleton providing a lurid, shifting display of light and shadow on the ceiling.

THIRTY-SIX

10 Suspiciously Detailed Dungeon Portcullises

PORTCULLISES OFTEN APPEAR when a dungeon builder really, really wants to keep intruders out of a certain location. To the greedy adventurer seeking gold, a portcullis is often seen as a sign of great wealth nearby.



After all, a treasure vault, crypt or even the personal chambers of some august individual could all lie beyond.

1. Of black wrought iron, this portcullis is particularly heavy. Unfortunately, it has been badly installed; when raised or lowered it makes a loud screeching sound audible throughout the surrounding corridors and chambers. It also

feels cold to the touch.

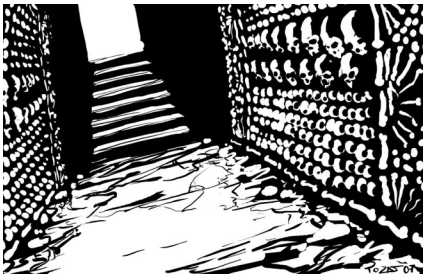
2. This portcullis has several shields tied to it; each is battered and splintered—several bear faded devices of little-known (and now dead) warriors. The shields clank against the portcullis' bars when it is raised or lowered.
3. Some of this portcullis' lower bars show signs of acid damage. Although not badly damaged, they show minor signs of melting.
4. A work of art, this portcullis' bars are forged to depict snakes coiled about one another. The snakes are incredibly detailed, although they don't appear to represent any particular species of known snake.
5. The scrollwork in the archway around this portcullis is intricately carved to look like a pile of grey bones. Here and there in shallow niches, actual bleached skulls glare down at intruders. Many bear obvious signs of violence.
6. A few of this portcullis's bars have been bent aside. The resultant gap provides just enough space for a halfling or similarly-sized creature to squeeze through. In other regards the portcullis seems in good repair.
7. Currently down, it appears this rusty portcullis has not been raised for some time—particularly if the condition of the mouldering corpses impaled beneath it is anything to go by.
8. Scraps of brightly coloured cloth festoon this down portcullis. Seemingly every inch of its bars are covered by the material. Close inspection reveals the tightly woven strips of cloth are tightly tied to the bars and most contain something small—mouldering foodstuffs, a lock of hair and so on. Perhaps they are offerings left for whatever dwells beyond.
9. This irregularly forged white-hued portcullis appears at first glance to have been crafted from bones. A close inspection reveals the "bones" are actually forged metal designed to impart a macabre aspect to the portcullis.

10. This portcullis is half down—or half-up depending on your perspective. A crude ladder leans against the nearby wall and a scattering of tool lie about. Of the workman, there is no sign.

THIRTY-SEVEN

10 Suspiciously Detailed Dungeon Staircases

PCS ARE a suspicious and paranoid bunch. And with good reasons. In the depths of a dungeon, it's not necessarily only the monsters that can kill them.



Wise adventurers pay careful attention to their surroundings. Sights, sounds and smells can all provide a hint—or warning—about what lies beyond.

1. A central groove—perhaps from the tread of many feet or the action of flowing water—has been worn in the riser of

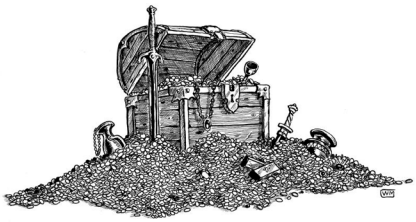
each of these old stone steps. The groove is slippery and makes the stair harder to traverse safely.

2. One of the steps roughly halfway down the staircase is pitted and crumbling. A crude repair involving a thick wooden plank and four pitons hammered into the walls stop it from disintegrating completely.
3. Water drips down the walls, creating small puddles on the stairs around which cluster small growths of mushrooms and fungi. It is colder than normal on the staircase.
4. The ceiling of this staircase is particularly low in several places forcing anyone over 5 ft. high to duck or smash their head on the unyielding stone.
5. The steps comprising this stair are narrow forcing most folk to walk down them practically sideways.
6. This staircase is almost precipitously steep and narrow. Crude handholds are carved into the wall in spots where the stair is particularly steep. These handholds have been worn smooth from use. Some are surprisingly deep—anything could lurk within their shadowy depths.
7. A large white chalk arrow has been drawn on the ceiling over the stairs. The arrow points downward, but its tip has been rubbed out.
8. The steps comprising this stair are of unequal height, making a swift traverse of the stair—in either direction—all but impossible.
9. A discarded torch lies on one of the steps. On the wall nearby, a smudge of charcoal shows where it was hurriedly stubbed out.
10. Drops of dried blood mar some of the stairs. From the drop's shape—and the distance between them—it looks like whoever was bleeding was rushing up the stairs.

THIRTY-EIGHT

10 Suspiciously Detailed Dungeon Treasure Chests

THERE ARE few things adventurers like finding more than a treasure chest. Most such chests are—of course—locked. Many are trapped. The most commonly trapped kind of treasure chest is one that has a detailed description.



Of course, not all detailed treasure chests are trapped. Sometimes, the room itself is trapped while other times the owner simply doesn't have the time, skills or resources to trap every chest in his lair. No matter, while discovering a treasure chest is a matter of intense joy for most adventurers, the wise adventurer is also cautious.

1. This iron-bound chest is secured with a large, prominent padlock hanging from an iron hasp forged to look like a jagged tooth.
2. Three heavy iron chains are wrapped around this otherwise unremarkable chest. Each is secured by a padlock hidden behind the chest. The padlocks are hard to reach, without moving the chest.
3. The faint smell of ozone hangs in the air, in the immediate vicinity of the chest.
4. This chest is clearly old. Its iron bands are worn and rusted. In places, the chest's wood is slightly splintered as if someone has tried to smash it.
5. Sitting on a slightly raised plinth, this iron chest looks particularly heavy. No lock is obvious, but a riot of engraved flowers decorates its lid.
6. The wall directly behind this chest is scorched as if it had been caught in an intense, fiery explosion. The chest itself seems in excellent condition.
7. Sitting directly opposite its twin, this chest is made of highly polished oak. The chest doesn't appear to have an external lock, but a large and unbroken waxen seal covers up something just below the chest's lid.
8. This chest's lid bears several deep gouges, as if someone had used an axe or other heavy weapon to try and break in. Behind the chest, perceptive PCs spot a smear of dried blood low down on the wall.
9. A dagger pins a piece of parchment over the chest's lock. From a distance, the parchment seems to have nothing written on it but meaningless squiggles and geometric shapes.
10. Drag marks on the floor show this chest has been moved. Curious PCs tracking the drag marks back across the room discover a small area of melted and pitted stone.

And—of course—a final note. The chests presented above don't have to be untrapped. A cunning GM could use the descriptions as the basis for a cunning trap!

THIRTY-NINE

10 Things Dumped at the Dungeon Entrance

AHEAD, yawns the shadow-cloaked depths of the dungeon's entrance. Within lurks untold danger and perhaps glimmering treasures. But what of the entrance itself? What can inquisitive adventurers find there?

Dungeon entrances are often overlooked as a great place to set the scene. Obviously, this is (probably) a high-traffic area and so there is

bound to be a certain amount of rubbish and discarded equipment lying about.

1. A hacked and broken large wooden shield. Red and blue splinters of wood lie all about and it is impossible to make out the heraldic device on the shield's shattered remains.
2. An empty waterskin; dried blood covers the skin's mouth.
3. A haphazardly arranged pile of freshly cut wood stands near the dungeon entrance. The inhabitants (or adventurers) may have cut the wood for fuel or it may be a defensive measure by the dungeon's denizens. (In this case, the wood is soaked with oil and will be ignited by the defenders when the PCs attack).
4. A sporadic trail of copper and silver coins leads away from the dungeon. Eventually, the trail terminates in a leather sack with a hole ripped in the bottom. Sadly, the sack is empty except for a single gold coin caught in a fold.
5. Several wooden holy symbols hang from a skeletal tree growing near the dungeon's entrance. All the symbols have been slashed or scorched. Several have clearly had precious stones pried from their settings. The symbols clack against one another in the wind, creating a mournful sound.
6. Blood splatter and a confused miss mash of tracks bear witness to a recent skirmish.
7. Two broken arrows stand proudly from the ground. Nearby, a wisp of red fabric flutters from a branch on which it is snagged. Investigation reveals the fabric is velvet and probably came from an expensive robe or cloak.
8. The hacked and bloody decomposing corpse of a humanoid lies in a jumble against a boulder. The creature (of a type appropriate for the dungeon) had clearly been tortured, but it is unclear by whom.
9. A shredded backpack with a huge rent in the back. One of the pack's straps has been ripped off. The pack's contents—a

blanket, three days of rations and a coil of hemp rope—are all mouldy; they've clearly been here some time.

10. A single leather boot stands—incongruously—in the very shadow of the dungeon's entrance. It seems of high quality and in good condition. The boot is part of a trap set to alert those guarding the entrance; it is attached by a length of twine hidden in the dirt to a precariously balanced metal shield. If the boot is disturbed, the shield falls over with a crash.

FORTY

20 Dungeon Corridor Descriptions

MANY CORRIDORS ARE featureless areas of little or no interest. Other times, a corridor serves as the location of a random encounter or the scene of a trap. Remember to modify the descriptions below to suit the PCs' explorations.

Much of the descriptions below are designed to be read aloud to the players. Information inside brackets can be gleaned through investigation.

1. A noticeable groove in the floor—perhaps worn by the tread of countless feet—runs down the centre of this ten-foot wide corridor. Without deviation, it leads directly away from the party.
2. Water oozes down one wall before betraying a slight gradient and flowing away down the corridor. The floor is slick and wet and tracking through the area is all but impossible. Beyond rendering the floor slippery, the sheet of water isn't deep enough to hinder explorers' progress.
3. The corridor's ceiling is arched and about 12-foot high above

the centre of the floor. Every 20-foot or so, a three-inch diameter hole pierces alternating walls. (The holes are angled downwards at about 45 degrees, well-constructed and about one-foot deep.)

4. An archway pierces one wall of this corridor. Runes once adorned the arch, but these have been hacked and smashed and are virtually unreadable. A crudely mortared wall of mismatched stone fills the archway. The work is obviously different to the surrounding style.
5. A heap of mouldering wood and thick rotting rope partially blocks the corridor. The wood and rope smell of mould and decay. The sodden wood looks so soft almost anyone could crush it in their hand. (The rope—while thick—breaks if used to support any weight greater than 100 lbs. There is 120 ft. of rope, but it weighs three times as much as normal.)
6. Partway along the corridor, a steep set of steps descends for about five-feet. Fifteen-foot further on, an identical set returns the corridor to its normal level. Above the sunken section, the ceiling—unworked stone—drops by a similar amount. Thus, explorers cannot see what lies beyond.
7. A doorway pierces one wall of the corridor. The stone around the doorway is scorched and blackened. Close to the door, some of the stone even seems to have melted.
8. The corridor doubles in width and the ceiling climbs to 15-foot high. Slender columns, carved to depict questing tentacles emerging from the floor, hold the ceiling aloft and partially obscure explorers' vision.
9. A plain five-foot wide shaft pierces the ceiling and floor. A strong breeze blows up the shaft, making the area of corridor in its immediate vicinity noticeably colder. (Explorers looking up or down the shaft discovers it extends as far as their vision. At certain points, it seems to intersect other open spaces.)
10. A cave-in blocks the corridor. Dust and grit covers the floor.

Haphazardly piled stones nearby suggest someone tried to clear the blockage, but quickly gave up.

11. Half-way down the corridor a small forest of long slender stone spikes has burst from the floor. Half the skeleton of a humanoid lies sprawled nearby. The unfortunate's legs remain upright, impaled on several spikes.
12. Six staggered doorways pierce the walls of this corridor. Two have closed stone doors, while the other four stand open.
13. The bas-relief carving of a hideous, man-sized winged and be-tentacled demon leers at explorers from a plinth set in a recessed niche at the end of the corridor. Its three crimson eyes glimmer menacingly.
14. A stone channel cut into the floor by one wall holds sluggishly flowing water. The discoloured water carries much grit and silt, and is unlikely to be drinkable without treatment. Faded chalk writing above the stream comprises one word: "safe".
15. This corridor is double the width of the previous area. Bizarrely, the floor is of two heights; one five-foot above the other. A slender, unadorned stone railing separates the two sections of corridor. The ceiling is uniformly 20-foot high.
16. A short flight of cracked, shallow steps drop the corridor's level by a few feet. A broken crossbow bolt lies discarded on the bottom step.
17. A narrow opening in one wall leads to a tight spiral staircase. (It turns twice before reaching a stone door that opens to reveal long gallery. Small cunningly hidden slits cut into the wall provide a commanding view of the corridor below.)
18. The corridor opens into a 30-foot long, 20-foot wide space. The corridor continues onwards through an archway in the far wall. An immense iron brazier—easily five-foot wide and ten-foot tall stands in the centre of the area. The brazier has a small door on one side. Burnt and blackened bones half fill

the brazier and the ceiling above is thickly blackened by soot.

19. Niches pierce one wall of this corridor. Each holds a three-foot high plinth. Upon each plinth stands the statue of a snarling warrior holding a spear angled out into the corridor. Each statue depicts a short, muscular reptilian humanoid with a lizard-like head. (Explorers can easily walk beneath the spears).
20. A wide stream channel cuts the corridor in half. A gently arched stone bridge crosses the stream. The bridge has no parapet or handrail, but is only 15-foot long.

FORTY-ONE

20 Dungeon Room Descriptions

TO MAINTAIN the illusion of detail, utilise the descriptions below to describe chambers the party reach which you have not yet designed. Remember to modify the descriptions below to suit PCs' explorations.

These areas can be nothing more than an empty chamber to explore or rest in or the scene of a random—or planned—encounter. The descriptions below are designed to be read aloud to the players.

1. A large arched niche pierces one wall of this chamber. Filled with rotting wood and rubble, the niche appears to be a dumping ground of sorts. Elsewhere in the room, several sections of floor are cracked and pitted.
2. This irregularly-shaped room has an uneven floor. Several small puddles fill in the deeper depressions. Elsewhere, small pieces of rubble litter the floor.
3. This chamber's arched ceiling rises to a height of 20 ft. in the centre of the room, but is barely man-high where it meets the walls. The arches holding the ceiling aloft are carved to

represent writhing tentacles; a few have been defaced but their upper portions remain untouched.

4. A jagged, one-foot crack runs across this chamber's floor. Beyond, two archways lead into narrow corridors.
5. A pile of rotting wood, rubbish and other detritus partially obscures one wall of this chamber. The stench of decay and rot hangs heavily in the air.
6. A low mortared wall of dressed stone surrounds a shaft piercing this room's floor. Two broken buckets, one still attached to a short length of rope, lie discarded nearby. The ceiling is of natural unworked stone—as if the chamber had not been finished. Four archways—one in each wall—lead elsewhere.
7. This large chamber was the scene of an ancient battle. Skeletal remains of at least a dozen humanoids lie scattered about the room where they fell. Several broken rusting spears and shattered, rotting shields lie among the fallen.
8. Part of one wall of this room has collapsed, revealing the natural rock behind the dressed stone wall. The rubble has been moved to create a breastwork across one of the room's exits. Splatters of old, dried blood decorate the top of the breastwork.
9. The remains of a cold camp are evident here. A tattered cloak—sized for a gnome or halfling—along with two empty wineskins and the stripped bones of a chicken and crusts of mouldy bread bear testimony to an explorer's rest.
10. Scorch marks on two of the room's walls and the floor bear mute testimony to—surely—fire magic being used here. The ceiling remains untouched, but the burnt, cracked bones of some unfortunate humanoid mars the centre of the scorched area.
11. Twin niches pierce the wall on either side of this room's archway. Each niche is about five-foot deep and features a wide shelf about two-foot above the floor. Scuff marks and a

slight worn sheen to the floor show where many people have crossed the chamber.

12. The chamber seems to be a nexus of sorts. Six archways pierce its walls. A narrow strip of carven runes surround each archway, perhaps providing a clue as to what once lay beyond.
13. This room features a dual-height floor and ceiling. Toward one end of the room, the floor and ceiling, is five-foot higher than the rest. Shallow steps divide the room and link the two areas together.
14. Two lines of pillars run down the sides of this chamber, holding the ceiling aloft. The domed ceiling is 30-foot high at its highest point. Two of the pillars show signs of damage; each appears to have been struck repeatedly with a heavy object.
15. A raised dais dominates the centre of this chamber. Upon the dais, stands a beautifully carved fountain surrounded by a sunken pool. The fountain has been crafted to depict a trio of thick tentacles bursting forth from the pool's centre. No water now flows here and the pool is dry and full of rubbish, refuse and dust.
16. This wide chamber narrows as it approaches a ten-foot wide archway dominating the end wall. The carven stone faces of three hideous humanoids glare down from above the archway.
17. Four pillars once held the ceiling aloft, here. Three yet stand, but one has fallen scattering rubble about the area. One of the other pillars obviously once held a secret for a small one-foot square niche at its base stands open and (sadly) empty.
18. A gaping open pit in one of this chamber's doorways blocks access to the area beyond. Two skeletons, pierced by dozens of tiny stone spikes, lie in the pit. The chamber boasts a stone plinth and altar set in a semi-circular niche. The

chamber's other doorway—twice the width of the trapped one—appears unprotected.

19. Water oozes down one of this chamber's walls. A mottled black and brown mould covers the wall and is slowly growing outwards across the floor. The faint scent of decay hangs in the air. Amid the mould lies a discarded warhammer; thick mould and small mushrooms cover its rotting wooden haft.
20. The once smooth floor of this chamber has been hacked and smashed. Nine small holes, only about a half-foot deep mar the floor. Near each stands a small pile of rubble.

FORTY-TWO

20 Dungeon Names

1. Ashen Fane of the Whispering Cult
2. Haunt of the Merciless Shadow Lord
3. Labyrinth of Torment
4. The Exalted Tower
5. Sunken Citadel
6. Spire of Certain Oblivion
7. Unknown Caverns
8. Ruins of Gloom
9. Catacombs of the Sundered Pillar
10. Trackless Warrens of Dol Naroth
11. Shadow Hold
12. Sepulchre of Tor Baroth
13. Maze of Bones
14. Warrens of the Forbidden Idol
15. Gates of Sorrow
16. Barrow of the Fallen
17. Drowned Catacombs of the Doomed Mistress
18. Dreaded Treasure Vault of Mor Darrel

19. Orc Delve
20. Ziggurat of Sorrow

FORTY-THREE

20 Dungeon Level Names

1. Starless Laboratory
2. Cistern of Unknown Depths
3. Cave of Echoes
4. Ashen Realm of Soth-Amon
5. Howling Chasm
6. Slender Span
7. Lightless Vault
8. Forbidden Chasm
9. Wondrous Grotto
10. Lair of the Forsaken Ones
11. Road of the Damned
12. Chamber of Fell Conjuration
13. Crypt of Torment
14. Cells of Bone
15. Smoking Cavern of Nol-Zoth
16. Myrmidons' Gallery
17. Cursed Necropolis
18. Vault of the Unknown One

19. Archive of Forgotten Ages
20. Catacomb of the Baleful Dark

Appendix 2: Two Awesome Dungeons

Since the inception of the hobby, countless dungeons have been designed by designers and GMs alike. Some are great, and some are crap. In this section, I talk about two dungeons I think are particularly great.

You might agree or disagree with my sentiments. Whatever your view of the two dungeons in question, think about dungeons you think are particularly great and answer these two questions:

1. Why are they particularly great?
2. How can you implement the facets of their design you think are awesome into your own dungeons?

FORTY-FOUR

The Moathouse

VERY FEW ADVENTURES can be played in any edition of D&D and still be awesome. The Moathouse, from *T1 The Village of Hommlet*, is one of those dungeons. In my opinion, I think it is a perfect (or near-perfect) example of a low-level dungeon.

(And yes, while writing this I was wearing my *+5 rose-tinted spectacles of Gygax appreciation*. I think they might be cursed; I can't seem to remove them...)

So What's Good?

Over five pages and 35 encounter areas, Gary packs an incredible amount of detail into the module. Like so many of his adventures, he gives you just enough to be going on with, and leaves you—the GM—with the design space to make the dungeon your own. Here's the five reasons I think it's great:

- **It's Self-Contained**: The Moathouse is wholly self-contained. If the party doesn't want to progress onwards to

the Temple of Elemental Evil, they aren't forced to do so. They can simply loot the ruins and move on. While this is unlikely—most GMs will run the Moathouse as part of the greater Temple of Elemental Evil campaign—the locale can still be easily used as a standalone adventure site. It's generic enough to be be set almost anywhere in a "normal" campaign world.

- **It's Linked to Greater Adventures:** While the Moathouse is self-contained, it has links to further adventures. This is great, if the PCs decide to explore the nearby Temple of Elemental Evil. Linking the two adventures takes zero effort on behalf of the GM. Even better, if the PCs don't want to visit the temple, the temple might force the matter. If Lareth is slain—and the party identified as the perpetrators—the heroes may be the target of an assassination attempt (which could propel them into the greater adventure).
- **It's Got Different Zones:** The Moathouse doesn't just contain one basic type of foe; it's got several. The upper ruins host vermin and animals; elsewhere lurk bandits. In the lower level we've got undead, evil humanoids and cultists. This keeps what is essentially a slew of combats interesting and fresh and gives the heroes opportunities to use different tactics, spells and so on.
- **It's Got Verisimilitude:** The Moathouse reeks of realism (as far as is possible in a fantasy game); it feels like a place that could really exist. Its history, including recent events, is evident in the character and flavour of the place as well as those lurking within the ruin. The Moathouse has lots of cool details a GM can use to flesh out the place and reward attentive play.
- **It's Got a Mix of Challenges:** In some places, the party must simply batter their way through the opposition. In others, they must overcome or bypass environmental challenges such as a rotting drawbridge. Secret doors, lurking traps and

hidden treasures give something for the rogues to do while the undead provide a prime target for any clerics or paladins in the group. (And, of course, there's lots of things for fighters to whack).

So What's Bad?

The Moathouse is a fantastic adventure locale, but (sadly) it has a couple of flaws:

- **Nothing for Wizards:** While there is some treasure for wizards and their ilk, there's nothing special for such characters to do in the ruins beyond cast spells.
- **Not A Lot of Talking:** Most of the ruin's denizens aren't particularly pre-disposed to talk to the PCs. In most cases, combat is the inevitable (and immediate) result of encountering any given group. On the upper level, the bandits are the most likely—or only—group the party could speak with, and the text provides no guidance on the matter. In the lower level, there are a few more possibilities for roleplaying—some of the gnolls will desert if bribed and the PCs could speak with Lareth in the Chamber of the New Master. (However, this is almost certainly going to end in combat and/or betrayal).

Of course, these imperfections could be fixed by any half-competent GM but it's a shame they exist in the first place.

Is The Moathouse Awesome?

At its heart, the Moathouse is a simple two-level dungeon and that's part of its genius. It aims to be one thing, and it does it spectacularly well. Is it perfect? No; but it's damn close!

And even better than that, it stands the test of time superbly. I've run it repeatedly with multiple edition of D&D and we've had a blast every time. If you haven't run your current group through the Moathouse (and if they haven't visited Hommlet) stop reading this and go dust off your copy!

FORTY-FIVE

The Forge of Fury

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, in my Borderland of Adventure campaign, our band of heroes explored a fragment of the upper level of *The Forge of Fury*. Sadly, their exploration was cut short when their foray alerted a tribe of orcs in the upper level. In the ensuing battle, the party were forced to flee—and only escaped because of the heroic sacrifice of one of their number.

Not running the rest of the module is one of my biggest—recent—gaming regrets. However, at the time the campaign was much more a sandbox affair and the party chose to go elsewhere, instead of returning to the Forge's blood-soaked halls. Such is life.

Anyway, my thoughts have again returned to *The Forge of Fury* as part of my quest to analyse good—and bad—dungeon design.

I've always been impressed with the adventure; for my money it's one of WoTC's best 3rd Edition era modules. This feat is made even more impressive because it's one of the first 3rd edition modules and thus the designer—Richard Baker—was still grappling with new rules. Sure, the module doesn't really have a particularly clever or convo-

luted plot—in essence it's a fairly standard dungeon crawl—but complexity isn't always the be and end all. Often, simplicity is superior to complexity.

As a basic, flavoursome dungeon crawl I think *The Forge of Fury* is particularly well executed. Why? Read on!

Different Levels

Khundrukar—the dungeon setting—comprises five different levels. Even better, each level has its own feel:

- **The Mountain Door**: The entry level primarily comprises dwarven defences.
- **The Glitterhame**: A large series of natural caverns.
- **The Sinkhole**: Dark, dank caverns, forgotten dwarven storerooms and a subterranean river.
- **The Foundry**: Dwarven halls and chambers comprising a forge and other areas.
- **The Black Lake**: A large, winding cavern filled with water seeping down from the nearby Dark Mere.

And—as an aside—the levels are laid out so that the party can explore as the mood takes them. While they have to go through certain areas to progress to the Black Lake (the final level) they can explore the upper levels pretty much as they want. I love this feature of the dungeon's design. Current modules are much more linear—and poorer for it.

Different Challenges

For the most part, each of the five levels showcases different challenges and opponents for the PCs to overcome:

- **The Mountain Door**: An orc tribe led by Great Ulfe (their ogre chieftain) has claimed the Mountain Door.
- **The Glitterhame**: Troglodytes dwell in the Glitterhame. A few other scavengers and suchlike share the caverns.
- **The Sinkhole**: Mainly abandoned, this area is (probably) the most dangerous place in the dungeon for here lurks a roper! Unwary parties are likely doomed. (But, it is important to note, adventurers do not have to slay the roper to proceed.)
- **The Foundry**: Undead and perfectly working dwarven traps lurk in the foundry along with a handful of duergar who have begun to explore the forges.
- **The Black Lake**: The main—indeed only—foe here except the frigid waters of the Black Lake is a young black dragon. The combat is made harder by the fact she is very much at home in the lake's waters while the party could find themselves at a serious disadvantage.

Miscellaneous Features

The Forge of Fury also does some other things right:

- **Empty Space**: Unlike modern adventures, not every chamber or cavern in Khundrukar hosts a denizen or trap. Some places are empty or abandoned; nevertheless many are well described so the players can poke about and the GM can build the dungeon's (and level's) flavour into his game. That's a refreshing change to dungeons these days. (As an aside, I'm running a dungeon at the moment and virtually every room in the relatively linear dungeon has a monster or trap in it—which I'm finding less than exciting to run).
- **Hard (and Easy) Encounters**: Some of the foes lurking in Khundrukar are easy to overcome; others—notably the roper and a succubus—are spectacularly hard to defeat and could wipe out the party. Very hard and very easy encounters

are a feature of old-school play which has fallen out of favour in recent editions, but which I wish was more prevalent in Pathfinder. I've blogged before about our obsession with balance and I think the CR system—while well intentioned—is to blame for a lot of the angst around "unbalanced encounters".

- **Multiple Entrances**: There are several ways to get into the dungeon, although two are hardly obvious. That's good, though, because skilled players may find one or more of the hidden entrances, which—after all—rewards superior play.

What's Not to Like?

As a dungeon crawl, I think *Forge of Fury* does a lot of things right. However, it's not perfect.

- **Role-Playing**: Most of the encounters in *The Forge of Fury* can be solved with good old fashioned violence. While there's lots of scope for exploration, clever tactics and sandbox exploration, not many of the encounters are resolvable through role-playing. That's a shame as it doesn't leave a tremendous amount of things for bards and the like to do. Similarly, players who prefer role-playing will find few opportunities to practise the fine arts of diplomacy, flattery and betrayal.
- **Remote Location**: *The Forge of Fury* can be set virtually anywhere in a GM's campaign, but it "works particularly well if you pick a remote range of hugged hills or highland several days from the nearest town." While that's not necessarily a problem, it does mean the PCs are a decent distance from a safe base in which they can restock, rearm and rest. This might slow exploration of the dungeon down as the PCs trek backwards and forwards. This isn't a deal

breaker by any means for me, but it's something to consider when planning to run the adventure.

- **No Wandering Monsters:** The adventure has no wandering monster tables. I love wandering monsters—even though they have fallen out of favour in recent editions.
- **No Rumours:** I would have liked to see a "Whispers & Rumours" style table in the Introduction or Character Hooks sections. Most players are going to try and find out more about the place before they visit it—if only to be better prepared—and it would have been nice to have a handy table of such facts available for the GM. I love rumours, and I have fond memories of that great table in *B2 The Keep on the Borderlands*—and the players trying to work out which rumours were true and which were false!

Is the Forge of Fury Awesome?

At the end of the day, though, these are all pretty minor gripes, which any competent GM could easily fix. *The Forge of Fury* is a great low-level adventure I'd highly recommend to anyone who hasn't played it yet and who likes dungeon crawls.

Appendix 3: Sample Dungeon Maps

What book on dungeon design would be complete without some dungeon maps? If you are like me, your mapping skills have "development opportunities." (I *so* love this phrase; I first heard while I had a "proper" corporate job and I took it to mean the promotion being discussed was a disaster).

Anyway, I digress.

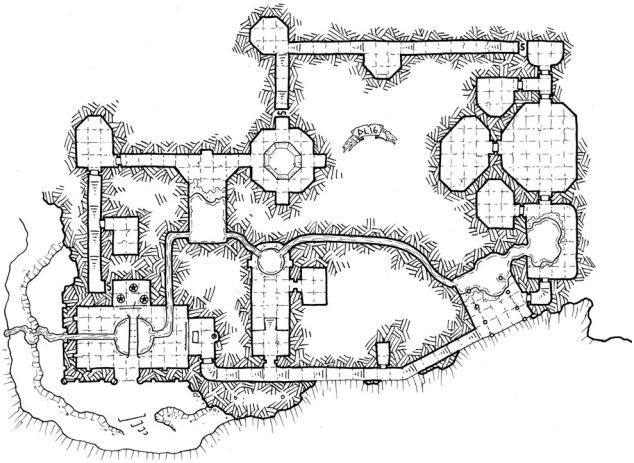
If this book has got you excited about dungeon design, you probably can't wait too hurl yourself into the fray. The following pages present six dungeon maps for you to use as you see fit. I've named them for your convenience, but—as always—feel free to ignore my suggestions.

All the maps are by Dyson Logos, whose old-school hand-drawn style I absolutely love. For more free dungeon maps, check out his blog.

Enjoy, and good luck.

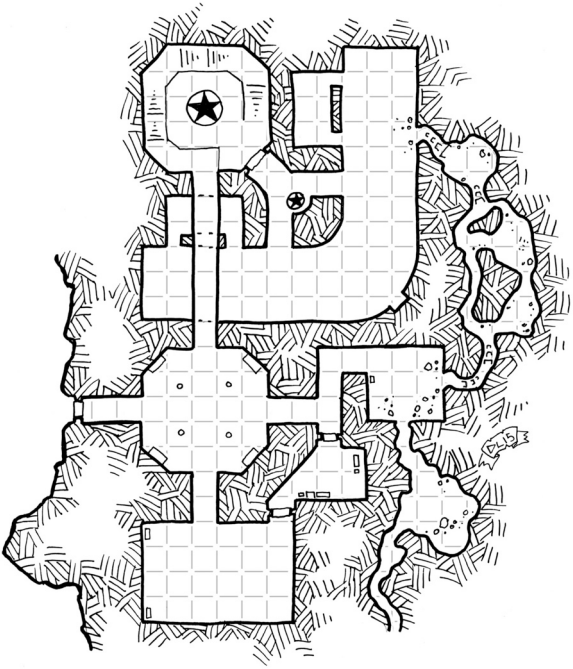
FORTY-SIX

Corrupted Fane of the Bleak Cliffs



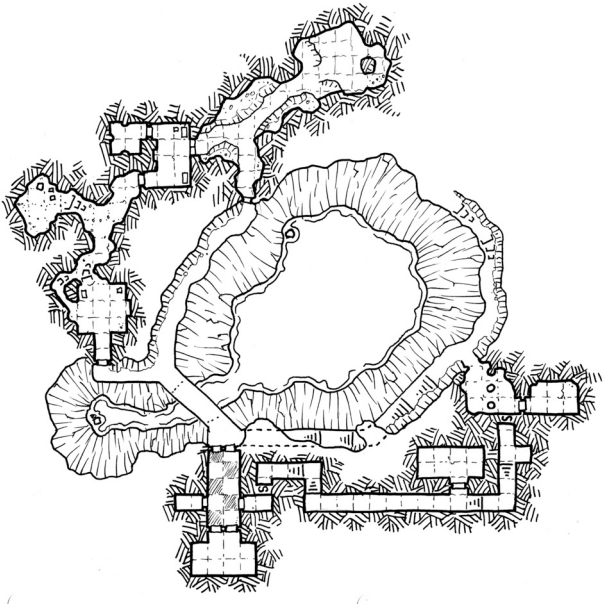
FORTY-SEVEN

Molreth's Hall



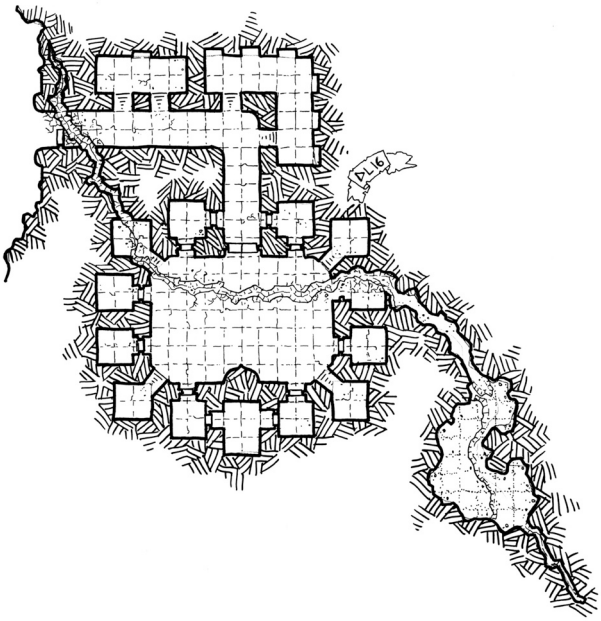
FORTY-EIGHT

Pool of Slumbering Madness



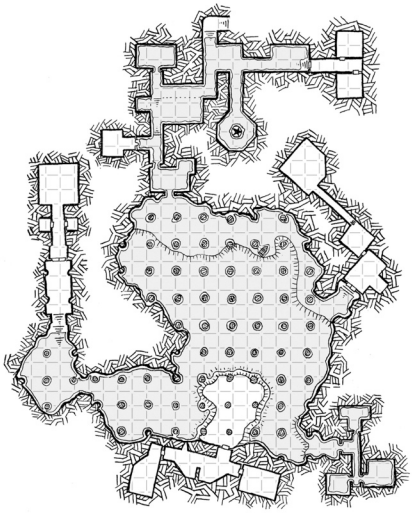
FORTY-NINE

Sundered Tomb of the Restless Dead



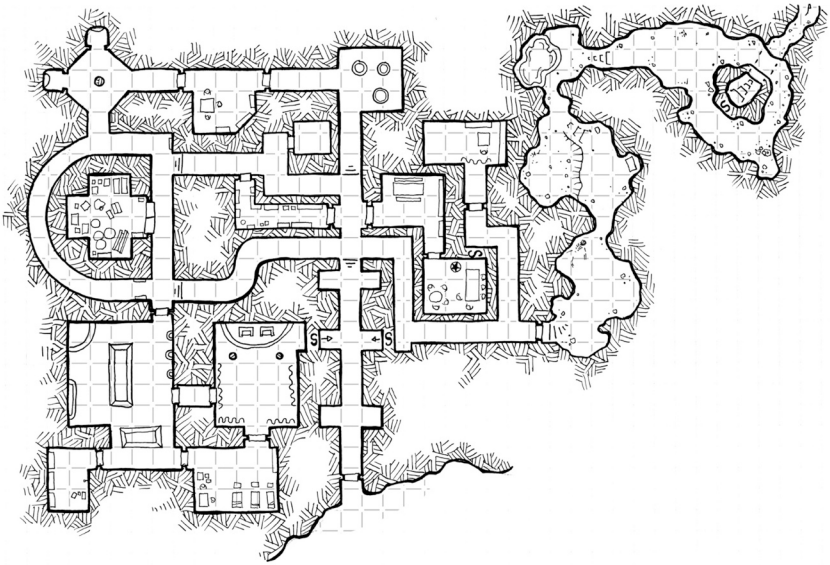
FIFTY

The Sunken Sepulchre



FIFTY-ONE

Rutrex's Retreat



Epilogue

AND THERE YOU HAVE IT. Hopefully, you've found this book informative, useful and fun. More importantly, I hope it will help you create better, more awesome dungeons for your campaign.

When designing your dungeon, keep in mind the goal is for everyone (including you) to have fun. Design a dungeon you **want** to run and that your players will **want** to explore/ransack/turn into a slaughterhouse. If you manage that feat, you have succeeded in designing an awesome dungeon.

Good luck.

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Check out *GM's Miscellany: Dungeon Dressing*!

About the Author

Creighton lives in Torquay, England where, apparently, the palm trees are plastic and the weather is warm. He shares a ramshackle old mansion with his two children ("Genghis" and "Khan") and his patient wife. Famed for his unending love affair with booze and pizza he is an enduring GREYHAWK fan.

An Ennie Award winning designer *(Madness At Gardmore Abbey)* Creighton has worked with Expeditious Retreat Press, Kobold Press, Paizo, Rite Publishing and Wizards of the Coast.

Publisher at Raging Swan Press, he believes in the Open Gaming License and is dedicated to making his games as fun and easy to enjoy as possible for all participants. Reducing or removing entry barriers, simplifying pre-game prep and easing the GM's workload are the key underpinning principles of the products he now releases through Raging Swan Press.

You can read his thoughts on game design at his blog.

www.creightonbroadhurst.com
creighton@ragingswan.com

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Gloamhold

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