Random Encounter Cards

Characters in fantasy role-playing campaigns are often on the road, traveling to the next town or tracking down an adventure. Most often, the trip is uneventful, handled in a few moments of GM description and then the PCs arrive at their destination. This is fine since it gets players to the action as quickly as possible and keeps the GM's plot moving.

However, I can't help but remember fondly those old AD&D modules where the landscape around a dungeon was as interesting (often more interesting) as the site itself. The land was detailed with encounters, mini-dungeons, random events and NPCs. Some of it may have had something to do with the "Plot At Hand", but much of it was simply an interesting diversion. Getting there was literally half the fun.

In retrospect, I suppose my fond memories of those "wilderness encounters" comes more from gaming nostalgia than actual love of the idea. Playing devil's advocate, I can also remember spending hours drawing detailed countryside maps and creating encounters only to have them missed entirely ("Are you sure you guys don't want to go northeast???"), or ignored by those silly players who had read too many "How to Succeed at RPGs" articles in the Dragon and decided to bypass my encounters so they would be fresh when they reached the "real goal." And, I saw my fair share of PCs whittled down by the wilderness outside the evil temple so that they could not continue on the adventure, grinding my main campaign plot to a halt.

I suppose some kind of middle ground is best. PC trips between towns **should** be eventful. The wilderness of a fantasy world has little in common with the easily traveled, sterile highways of our modern world. They should be dangerous places where getting to your destination is uncertain unless care is taken... and spending a night at a roadside inn is a welcome change. On the other hand, I do not want to spend too much time drawing detailed terrain maps and meticulously charting the PCs' location in the game world.

My proposed solution is to have the GM create a set of encounter cards with the following information on them:

- Encounter # (a unique number for each card)
- Encounter Name
- Encounter Type
- Monster
- NPC
- Minor Event
- Major Event
- Place
- Item
- Possible Locations
- Description and Effects

The GM will have to create a small bank of cards to start the campaign. About 20 or so ought to be a good start. Each week the GM ought to come up with a few new ideas and add these cards to the deck. I picture these cards as containing encounters ranging from the common random creature encounter, to an encounter with a merchant, to a mundane event like their wagon breaking down (or beast of burden getting sick), to the finding of a unique site or item, or even just a surprise thunderstorm. During a trip, a stay in town or sea-journey, the GM would draw a number of cards (one ought to be sufficient, but some GMs might want 2 or 3 for long journeys, or may want to pick a few cards and choose one that he thinks would be interesting). At some point in the trip, he springs the encounter on the players.

Though at first, these cards seem to be nothing more than a glorified random encounter table, I think they are better for a number of reasons.

First and foremost, random encounter tables are generally only appropriate for specific areas. When the players move on, then new tables must be generated. If the GM constructs the cards properly, they can be reused over and over in a campaign.

Second, encounter tables are often static. Once you create them, it is often a hassle to add or delete items. The encounter deck is a dynamic entity. Each week the GM adds a few new ideas. As cards are drawn, they can be discarded from the deck (or kept in the deck if that is more appropriate).

Third, the deck can be a wonderful randomizer for a campaign. Most encounter tables are very creature/NPC heavy and have few events. I think it would be nice if occasionally the PCs had to deal with some of the difficulties of travel. Wagons break, oxen and horses get ill, roads are washed out by storms. Though you do not want these things to happen too often, a small dose of these "mundane" problems can provide good problem-solving and role-playing opportunities.

Sample Cards

Sample cards are provided below, along with a page of blank cards and card backs if you with to print (or copy) on both sides.

The cards may be printed or copied onto standard Avery business card paper (10 cards per sheet). Or you may use regular cardstock and cut them apart using the crop marks provided.

1 Merchant Train

The PCs encounter a group of merchants who are stopped for a rest on this road. They will generally be friendly to the PCs and will have a number of mundane goods to sell. Examples include furs, metal tools and utensils, a few weapons and pieces of armor, spices and foodstuffs. The merchants could be carrying a few odd items that might interest the purchase.

NPC — Road / Town

2 Transportation Breakdown

The method of transportation the PCs are using has a breakdown of some sort. If the PCs are on riding beasts, then those beasts get ill or run away. If they are on a wagon, then the wheel breaks.

Event — Road / Wilderness

3 Gaunt Attack

The PCs are attacked by a group of gaunt. They will number about 1 or 2 less than the PC group. They will swoop down from any available high perch, trying to knock down and embrace as many characters as possible on the first round or so of combat. Their lair may be close by, so the group will be attacked again if they spend a great deal of time in the area.

Creature — Hills / Mountain

4 Misplaced Item

Oops! One of the PCs will misplace a random, small item. This item will not be something too critical, but should be something they will notice and miss. The circumstances of this loss will depend on the GM and the situation. If the PCs are in a town, perhaps a pickpocket has stolen it. In the wilderness, a worn strap on a pack may have come loose.

Event — Any

5 Tollbooth

The local lord has placed a tollbooth on the road the PCs are currently using. They will be required to either pay the toll (coming to 4 bits/person + a 5 penny tax on each weapon they are carrying), or try to avoid the booth by traveling through the wilderness. If the PCs go through the booth, and are fairly polite to the toll collector, he may have heard some rumors or information as to what lies ahead.

Place — Road

6 Ill

One of the PCs takes ill. Unless the PCs have recently passed through an area suffering from disease, it is a minor illness that will last for 1-6 days. It gives the PC a -1 to all actions and associated sneezing, coughing, stuffy head and so on.

Event — Any

7 Abandoned Guardhouse

This small building and tower have long since been abandoned and forgotten. If the PCs are on a road, this post will be in some harsh terrain overlooking the road. If the PCs are traversing the wilderness, this building can be anywhere. The GM can make this guardpost as interesting (or mundane) as he likes.

Place — Wilderness

8 Howling Wolves

One night, as the PCs camp, they hear the baying of a wolf pack. Depending on where the PCs are, these could be normal wolves, winter wolves, mountain wolves, or any combination. The wolves are nearby, but it is up to the GM if the PCs will meet up with any of them, or not.

Event — Woods / Mountains

9 Lemon

One of the items a PC has just recently purchased turns out to be a dud. A backpack's straps or lantern's handle will break. A potion turns out to do nothing, or something annoying like turn the PC's mouth and tongue bright blue. A gem is flawed... Whatever.

Event — Any

10 Corpse

The PCs come across a corpse hidden (not so well) along their path of travel. Depending on where the PCs are when they come across the body, it could be a beggar who died of disease, an unlucky adventurer, a goblin scout or just about anything else. The GM will have to make up the details of the body.

Event — Any

11   Wedding

As the PCs approach, or pass by, the village, they spot a party going on. If they bother to investigate, they will be told that the party is for the wedding of the lord's reeve to the daughter of a local farming family. The entire village is here and there is food, drink and dance. Everyone is in such a good mood, that the normal fear of strangers is overcome by good will and the PCs are invited to join in the festivities.

Event   **Near a Village**

12   Funeral

As the PCs are walking, they come across a solemn funeral service. The GM will have to create a few details such as who died and how. More than likely, the PCs will keep moving, but if they do bother to investigate, they will meet a sad, but talkative aunt who will fill them in. If the deceased died in some unnatural fashion, perhaps this encounter can lead to an adventure.

Event   **Village / City**

13   Great Campsite

The PCs come across a campsite that provides shelter and is near a good source of water and berry bushes, or a game trail. This is a great place to rest and camp.

Place   **Road / Wilderness**

14   Rellen Balkandor

The PCs come across this NPC who is either traveling, or resting from his travels. Rellen is a warrior who is on a quest of some sort. Once the PCs meet Rellen, his card can be recycled and each time it comes up, Rellen makes an appearance. For Rellen's quest, I would choose some item or enemy from the campaign world and have the warrior looking for this. Rellen is a warrior of similar power to the purchase.

NPC   **Road / Wilderness / Town**

15   Goblin Patrol

The PCs come across a patrol of goblins. The exact numbers are up to the GM and should be based on the strength of the PC party and whether the GM wants this to potentially turn into a combat situation or not. Also, what they are doing here is anyone's guess. If you are near goblin lands, this could be a routine patrol. If not, then this event will be odd and disturbing to the local authorities.

Event / Monster   **Road / Wilderness**

16   How did they find me?

If any PC has a Hunted limitation, or a recurring enemy from their background or past adventures, then that hunted appears. He could be here to make the PCs' lives miserable, or minding his own business.

Event   **Any**

17   Sword in the Stone

The PCs discover a finely made sword embedded in a stone. The nature of the sword and the circumstances of its being in the stone are up to the GM.

Place   **Road / Wilderness**

18   Wonderful Day

The weather is great and the PCs will be able to travel with relative ease, covering about 1.25 times the distance they would normally cover.

Event   **Road / Wilderness**

19   What's all this about?

The PCs come across two parties in the throws of a heated argument. The details of this argument and the parties involved are left to the GM. The two could be business partners or bitter rivals. They could be husband and wife.

Event   **Town**

20   Ghost

A spirit visits one of the characters. If the group has recently lost a comrade, or vanquished an enemy, then these make good candidates for this event. The ghost will bless or curse the character with something that is appropriate for the dead person in question. Alternately, if the GM likes visions and prophecies in the game, he can have the ghost speak a prediction of the upcoming adventures.

Event / Creature   **Any**

21 — Old Aquaintance

An old friend or acquaintance of one of the PC's is in town. They might be here on other business or possibly even looking for the PC with news or a request for help with some endeavor.

NPC   Town

22 — Wrecked Caravan

As the PCs are walking, they come across a the wreckage or a caravan. The caravan was attacked sometime in the last week by bandits. There may be some valuables hidden in the wreckage, or even a survivor with a tale to tell.

Event   Road

23 — Hedge Woman

The PC's meet an old hedge woman who can provide healing herbs, medical and perhaps even some ritual magic advice. She will also sell lucky charms.

NPC   Town

24 — Great Deal

Someone is selling trade goods at well below their normal market value. Perhaps even as low as ½ price. They will not answer any questions about the origins of the goods. There is a 1 in 6 chance the goods are stolen and someone is looking for them.

Event   Town

25 — Magic Item

One of the PC's inherits a moderately powerful magic item from a relative. For some reason, they need to keep the existence of this item a secret. This could be to protect the item from theft, or due to some unfortunate side effect.

Character Secret   Any

26 — Knight's Tomb

The PC's stumble across a small irregular stone building covered in mud and vines. This is a tomb for a knight of some ancient sect. T consists of 3 to 4 rooms and perhaps a small trap or two. Perhaps a creature has taken residence or someone else is looking for the tomb.

Place   Wilderness

27 — Storm

Over the horizon a large black wall of clouds rolls towards the party... Jagged strokes of lightning cut the sky. This is a very nasty storm. High winds, lightning, hail and so on. The PC's will have to take shelter and wait for the storm to pass.

Place   Road / Wilderness

28 — Mudslide / Rockslide

The road ahead is blocked, the PC's will probably have to find another way around. If they try to go over the blocked area, the PC's will need to climb over and through the treacherous ground. There is a possibility of injury and even becoming trapped in the mud.

Event   Road

29 — Jay Everet Garret

Jay Everet Garret is a slaver. To make his business even somewhat legitimate he deals mostly in goblins. "Some kill them. I, at least, offer them life and work." He runs a carnival of sorts to show them off to stunned farmers. He is arrogant, business and just generally nasty. Many goblin tribes have bounties on his head and his business is frowned upon (if not actively persecuted by the Bostonian authorities.

NPC   Road

30 — Tracks

One of the PC's spots the tracks of some very large and possibly unknown creature crossing their trail. This could lead to an encounter or serve only to heighten tension during their travels.

Event   Wilderness

31   DISEASED CAMP

Some distance up the trail, the PC's spot a camp consisting of many small huts and lean-to's. Smoke rises from a large fire in the center of the camp. The smell of death fills the air. These refugees are diseased. They have been driven from a nearby community and have settled where they could. There is a good chance that several priestesses will be here to help.

Event   Road / Wilderness

32   BOAR ATTACK

Without provocation, a wild boar attacks the party. This can be simply a mundane encounter, or the boar could have been driven from it's home for some other reason.

Monster   Wilderness

33   THUGS

The party finds themselves surrounded by young ruffians. This can be an obvious "hold up" sequence, or there can be another purpose. Perhaps the thugs were hired by an enemy to harass / kill one of the PC's. The thugs should be equal in number to the party, but not quite as skilled. This should be an easy fight.

Event   Road / Town

34   GOBLIN TRADERS

A small caravan of traders is traveling along the road towards the party. The unmistakable grunts of the Goblin tongue can be heard. The goblins are defensive, but are not hostile and will be quite eager to trade. One of the goblins speaks passable Bostonian and will deal with the party members if they are willing.

Event   Road

35   FORTUNE TELLER

A small group of wagons lies up ahead. Exotic music plays and some men and women are dancing around a fire. This small traveling band has with it a fortune teller. The band's reaction to the PC's may be varied. They may be entertainers, thieves or whatnot. The fortune teller could have some magical ability or simply be a charlatan.

NPC   Road / Wilderness

36   TAX

Several men in the colors of the local Baron are stopping people along the road. For some reason, the Baron has decided to levy a tax on travelers through the area. The GM will need to determine a reason for this tax.

Event   Road

37   OLD HOUSE

The PC's stumble across an old house of ancient design. The house contains some small treasures such as knives that don't rust, coins, a boar pelt and an odd shell collection. There may be beasts here, such as fiddler bugs, a giant beetle or spider but no intelligent beings.

Place   Wilderness

38   PIT TRAP

The PC's come across a hidden pit trap. If they are unperceptive enough, one could fall in. It is deep but the fall causes only minor damage. However, the PC will be unable to climb out without assistance. The trap was dug quite recently. It is up to the GM to decide who dug the trap and for what purpose.

Event   Wilderness

39   BAD OMEN

One of the PC's (choose one of the more superstitious) receives what they consider to be a bad omen. This could be a black bird circling overhead, a lucky charm becoming lost or broken, or any other suitable event. It is up to the GM to determine the actual consequences (if any) of this omen.

Event   Any

40   ITEM

One otherwise mundane item owned by one of the PC's becomes the major focus of events for the day. The exact details are left to the GM but some examples include a personal item the PC is accused of having stolen, a lost luck charm, a normal weapon mistaken for a powerful artifact, etc...

Event   Any

Name

Type Location

Name

Type Location

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Type Location

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