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Pulp Adventure Generator

By Gareth-Michael Skarka

Introduction

The pages that follow feature a series of tables which can be used by a GM to randomly generate the outline of an adventure, from plot, to locations, to action scenes, and more. It is based on a Master Plot Formula that was used by Lester Dent, the creator of Doc Savage. The italicized sections are quotations directly from Dent's formula.

Dent advocated the division of a pulp story into four sections, which we'll call Acts. He then broke each Act down into the elements that he felt were necessary to feature within that section. Our random adventure generator will work the same way. For each section, there will be a number of variables which a GM can determine via the tables presented, and when completed, the generator will create a full outline of the adventure, ready to be fleshed out with stat'd NPCs, and waiting for victims....er...I mean eager players.

About the Author

Gareth-Michael Skarka has been working in the adventure games industry since 1988. He is the designer of several role-playing games, including *Hong Kong Action Theatre!*, *UnderWorld* and *Skull & Bones*. His design imprint, **Adamant Entertainment**, produces the pulp d20 line *Thrilling Tales*, and more.



About THRILLING TALES

Thrilling Tales is Adamant Entertainment's line of pulp-genre gaming products for using with Modern D20. The line currently features Advanced Classes representing the major pulp hero archetypes, a Gamemaster's Guide (including a random pulp adventure generator), and adventures.

This issue of the Modern Dispatch is an excerpt from the *Gamemaster's Guide to Pulp Adventure*, a supplement in the *Thrilling Tales* line.

Here's how it starts:

1. A DIFFERENT MURDER METHOD FOR VILLAIN TO USE
2. A DIFFERENT THING FOR VILLAIN TO BE SEEKING
3. A DIFFERENT LOCALE
4. A MENACE WHICH IS TO HANG LIKE A CLOUD OVER HERO

One of these DIFFERENT things would be nice, two better, three swell.

We'll combine these suggestions into three elements, which are determined before you start laying out the adventure itself. The three elements are:

- 1) The Villain (who is it?)
- 2) The Fiendish Plot (what is the Villain doing?)
- 3) The main Location. (Where does this occur?)

Each element is arrived at by rolling on the appropriate tables. Explanations for the results can be found below.

Gangster: One of the many members of organized crime gangs that plagued the period.

Occultist: A villain with an interest or skill in Occult matters (whether magic is real or fake is up to the GM).

Murderer: Someone who has killed another person--this individual may not have been a "Villain" prior to this event, and may not fit the classical villain modes--best used in murder mystery adventures.

Supernatural Threat: A ghost, a mummy, a vampire, etc. (The GM will have to determine whether

Table 1: The Villain

D% Roll	Result
01-04	Gangster
05-09	Occultist
10-13	Murderer
14-17	Supernatural Threat
18-21	Communist
22-25	Cult Leader
26-29	Ruler of Lost Civilization
30-33	Mad Scientist
34-37	Wicked Foreigner
38-41	Thief
42-45	Assassin
46-49	Femme Fatale
50-53	Crooked Cop
54-57	Dictator
58-61	Nazi
62-65	Business Magnate
66-69	Crime Lord
70-73	Pirate
74-77	Anarchist
78-81	Society Swell
82-85	Crooked Politician
86-88	Alien Invader
89-93	Mastermind
94-97	Nemesis
98-00	Roll Twice and Combine

or not the supernatural exists, or whether this is a "scooby doo" mystery)

Communist: Used almost interchangeably with Nazis in latter pulps. An evil member of the International Communist Conspiracy, looking to subvert and conquer freedom-loving countries.

Cult Leader: The mad leader of a group of fanatics.

Ruler of Lost Civilization: Anything ranging from a descendant of Genghis Khan trying to re-assert the Mongol Horde, to a Witch Doctor who rules a hidden African Tribe.

Mad Scientist: "They called me Mad at the Univer-

sity!" They were right.

Wicked Foreigner: Historically speaking, these were almost always Oriental (q.v. *Fu Manchu*), but any foreign culture will do.

Thief: A villain who specializes in burglary and other forms of theft.

Assassin: An individual whose business is killing. Not a simple murderer, but a professional.

Femme Fatale: You knew she was trouble when you got a look at those gams....

Crooked Cop: A man who has turned his back on his oath to uphold the law.

Dictator: The power-hungry despotic ruler of a nation.

Nazi: Evil Fascist. The classic pulp villain. I hate these guys.

Business Magnate: Capitalist gone wrong.

Crime Lord: The ruler of a vast criminal empire, not necessarily connected to "classical" organized crime.

Pirate: One who steals from (and using) vehicles, whether on sea, land, or in the air.

Anarchist: Madman dedicated to the overthrow of civilization.

Society Swell: A member of the upper class, including the rich and famous.

Crooked Politician: Power-mad and sticking it to the little guy.

Alien Invader: Either the actual invaders themselves, or their earth-bound servant trying to bring about the invasion.

Mastermind: The pinnacle of the criminal class.

Nemesis: If the main hero (or team if there is no main hero) has a nemesis, they re-appear. If none exists, create one--a dark reflection of the the hero, Moriarty to Holmes...The Joker to Batman.

Roll Twice and Combine: GMs can either combine both rolls in a single villain, or feature more than one villain.

Table 2: The Fiendish Plot, Part 1

D% Roll	Result
01-04	Manipulate
05-09	Sell
10-13	Acquire
14-17	Kill
18-21	Control
22-25	Steal
26-29	Create
30-33	Hunt
34-37	Terrorize
38-41	Infiltrate
42-45	Overthrow
46-49	Obliterate
50-53	Ransom
54-57	Blackmail
58-61	Hijack
62-65	Bomb
66-69	Smuggle
70-73	Murder
74-77	Rob
78-81	Attack
82-85	Rule
86-88	Take
89-93	Destroy
94-97	Extort
98-00	Roll Twice and Combine

To determine the Fiendish Plot, roll once on Table 2 and once on Table 3, and combine the results. A result of 98-00 on either table can be interpreted as either a second roll on both tables, or just one, as the GM sees fit.

For example: A roll of 16 and 44 would yield the result: “Kill The Hero.” The villain has decided that his plans would work much better without the hero in the way. A roll of 48 and 67 would generate: “Obliterate A Lost World.” The villain has de-

Table 3: The Fiendish Plot, Part 2

D% Roll	Result
01-04	Monster
05-09	Building
10-13	People
14-17	A Country
18-21	Treasure
22-25	An Enemy
26-29	An Object
30-33	An Invention
34-37	A Woman
38-41	A Man
42-45	The Hero (or team)
46-49	Money
50-53	A City
54-57	The World
58-61	A Vehicle
62-65	A Business
66-69	A Lost World
70-73	Jewels
74-77	A Ruler
78-81	Someone famous
82-85	A rival
86-88	The Law
89-93	Innocent Victims
94-97	Hero’s Friends or Family
98-00	Roll Twice and Combine

cided to destroy a hidden island or secret city. Why?

On occasion, the rolls may not make sense. (“Bomb Jewels,” for example) The GM is encouraged to think the result through anyway. The pulps, after all, were known for bizarre stories. Perhaps the villain plans to build a bomb using diamonds, the hardest substance known to man? What for?

The assumption made on the Main Location table is that the GM is playing a generic Hero Pulp campaign,

Table 4: Main Location

D% Roll	Result
01-04	City: The Docks
05-09	Far-off Jungle
10-13	Asian Country
14-17	European Country
18-21	Third-World Country
22-25	City: slums
26-29	City: Chinatown
30-33	Desert
34-37	At Sea
38-41	Lost City
42-45	Secret Base
46-49	City: Entertainment District
50-53	City: Warehouses
54-57	In the Air
58-61	City: Tenderloin District
62-65	Farmland
66-69	Forest
70-73	Another City
74-77	Cross-country (train, etc)
78-81	City: University
82-85	City: Government
86-88	City: Museums
89-93	City: Skyscrapers
94-97	Arctic/Antarctic
98-00	Roll Twice and Combine

where the PCs are based in a big city (usually New York). Pulp campaigns set elsewhere (Lost Worlds, etc.) should have locations determined by the GM.

EXAMPLE OF ADVENTURE SET-UP:

Rolling for all three elements, I get:

63: Business Magnate
87, 16: Take A Country
38: Lost City.

Thinking about it for a moment, I come up with an idea for a William Randolph Hearst-style tycoon, who is trying to take over a small, oil-rich desert nation, looking for an artifact in a Lost City in the desert sands to do it! He's looking for the fabled Scimitar of Al-Azif, and if he finds it, he will have a legitimate claim to the throne of Qurania! If he gains control over the country, its people are doomed to a life of slavery...can the heroes stop him?

ANOTHER EXAMPLE:

Rolling for all three elements, I get:

00: Roll Twice and Combine. I get a 85, 22, which gives me Crooked Politician and Cult Leader, which I decide to combine into a single villain.
63, 81: Bomb Someone Famous
47: City: Entertainment District

Wow--this is a juicy one! This one unfolds in my mind, giving me the idea of a District Attorney who is secretly the head of a Cult called the Red Hand. The Red Hand has decided that America's troubles are due to their worship of false idols, and so have decided to plant a bomb at the gala premiere of a movie--which will wipe out most of the screen stars of the time, who will be in attendance.

The First Act:

Now that you've got the set-up, we move to the first act of the adventure. Let's see what Lester Dent has to say about the first act:

First line, or as near thereto as possible, introduce the hero and swat him with a fistful of trouble.

We'll call this the hook--what gets the PCs involved. We'll have a table for that.

Introduce ALL the other characters as soon as possible. Bring them on in action.

For this, we'll move to another table which will give us the supporting characters that will feature in the adventure.

Hero's endeavours land him in an actual physical conflict

Now we get to the good stuff. We'll create the first action sequence, using a table designed specifically for that.

Near the end of first 1500 words, there is a complete surprise twist in the plot development.

And to mark the end of the act, we add a twist in the plot which spins us into the second act. You guessed it, we've got a plot twist table.

Table 5: The Hook

D% Roll	Result
01-11	Solicitation
12-20	Dead Body
21-30	Disaster
31-42	Attack
43-56	Bizarre Occurance
57-65	News
66-77	Friend in Need
78-90	Up To Our Necks
91-96	Roll Twice
97-00	Other

Solicitation: The simplest of plot hooks--an NPC (unknown to the characters) comes to the characters and asks for their help.

Dead Body: The characters encounter a corpse, which has some clue on it regarding the Fiendish Plot.

Disaster: A horrible disaster occurs, somehow related to the Fiendish Plot, and draws the character's attention.

Attack: An attack occurs (on someone other than the characters), somehow related to the Fiendish Plot.

Bizarre Occurance: A strange, inexplicable event happens, somehow related to the Fiendish Plot. In the tradition of the pulps, the more outlandish and bizarre, the better---an early test of the Villain's new ray cannon, for example, turns the sky over the city a brilliant green for 10 minutes at Noon.

News: The characters read a story in the paper, or hear a story on the radio, that is related to the Fiendish Plot.

Friend in Need: Similar to the Solicitation hook, except that the NPC is a friend of the characters. The NPC comes to the characters for help.

Up To Our Necks: In media res: The characters are involved in the plot from the starting gun. They are attacked, or implicated in a crime, or the victim of a theft, or somehow made to suffer in a manner that is directly related to the Fiendish Plot.

Roll Twice: Roll twice on the Hook Table, and combine the results.

Other: A Hook not represented on this table, created by the GM.

Table 6: Supporting Characters

D% Roll	Descriptor	Descriptor	Type
01-04	Big	Neat	Entertainer
05-09	Ugly	Unlucky	Pilot
10-13	Shifty	Menacing	Soldier
14-17	Secretive	Weak-willed	Politician
18-21	Strong	Foreign	Contact
22-25	Small	Rich	Business Owner
26-29	Trustworthy	Small-time	Guide
30-33	Helpless	Ambitious	Servant
34-37	Quirky	Skilled	Socialite
38-41	Troublesome	Helpful	Scientist
42-45	Smart	Feisty	Doctor
46-49	Charming	Wild	Criminal
50-53	Strong-willed	All-American	Investigator
54-57	Famous	Hard-boiled	Spouse
58-61	Sloppy	Distinctive	Expert
62-65	Dense	Professional	Informant
66-69	Cold	Young	Vehicle Operator
70-73	Impulsive	Violent	Thug
74-77	Clumsy	Urban	Fanatic
78-81	Lucky	Amateur	Academician
82-85	Dangerous	Old	Assistant
86-88	Agile	Native	Worker
89-93	Beautiful	Evil	Henchman
94-97	Weak	Odd	Occultist
98-00	Talented	Ordinary	Kid

The above table gives you the featured supporting characters for the adventure. Note that unless otherwise specified, featured characters are always Heroic characters, rather than Ordinary.

First roll 2d4 for the number of featured supporting characters that will appear in the adventure. Then, for each character, roll three times on Table 6. This will give you two descriptors and a type, which will give you a concept for the NPC. Then, using the standard modern D20 rules, generate the NPC's stats.

EXAMPLES:

I need the featured supporting characters for an adventure. I roll for the number of supporting characters and get a 3.

For the first Supporting Character, I roll three percentile rolls, and get: 58, 94, 61, which gives me a "Sloppy, Odd Expert." I envision an unkempt inventor of strange devices...someone who can help the characters, if they can get past his strangeness.

For the second Supporting Character, I roll a 00, 72, and 06, which gives me a "Talented, Violent Pilot." Even though this does not specify that this character is the villain's henchman, I decide that the idea of a bloodthirsty air ace is just too perfect a henchman to ignore.

For the last Supporting Character, I roll a 18, 52, and 66, which results in a "Strong, All-American Vehicle Operator," who I decide will be a pilot and owner of a small cargo airline, who is being victimized by the villain and his henchman.



Table 7: Action Sequence Type

D20 Roll	Result
1-4	Chase, foot or mount
5-10	Chase, vehicle
11-14	Fight, unarmed
15-20	Fight, Armed

Table 8: Action Sequence Participants

D20 Roll	Result
1-6	Few (1-2 per PC)
7-15	Some (3-4 per PC)
16-20	Lots (5+ per PC)

Table 9: Action Sequence Setting

D20 Roll	Result
1	Nautical setting (ship, docks, etc.)
2	Natural Setting (park, jungle, etc.)
3	Rooftops
4	City Street
5	Residential Setting
6	Entertainment Setting (theatre, stadium, nightclub, etc.)
7	Church/temple/other religious
8	Business Setting (office, factory, warehouse, street market, etc.)
9	Transportational Setting (airport, train station, or even on trains or planes)
10	Educational (museum, college, etc.)
11	Civic setting (post office, city hall)
12	Slum or Rough neighborhood
13	"Middle of Nowhere"
14	Secret/hidden location
15	Headquarters (PCs or others)
16	Military setting (base, etc.)
17	Restaurant
18	Laboratory
19	Landmark
20	Unusual setting (underwater, in space, underground, etc.)

Table 10: Action Sequence Complications

D20 Roll	Result
1-5	Bystanders
6-10	Environment
11-15	Props
16-20	New Sequence

Every action sequence is comprised of four elements: Type, Participants, Setting, and Complications. Using the provided tables, roll a d20, check the result, and assemble your action sequence!

The results are fairly self-explanatory, with the exception of the Complications:

Bystanders: The action sequence will feature non-participants who will get in the way.

Environment: The environment in which the sequence occurs causes difficulties (examples include rain, dangerous surroundings, hazardous conditions). All combatants should be taking penalties on their actions due to this.

Props: The sequence features elements of the setting which can be used by the participants during the



sequence (examples would include metal rods at a foundry, or trash cans in a street chase, etc.).

New Sequence: The original action sequence will lead immediately into another sequence--re-roll this new sequence from the beginning. It is possible to have a linked chain of multiple sequences!

EXAMPLES:

Rolling on the Action Sequence Tables, I get: 9, 15, 13, 13. This gives me "Chase, vehicle", "Some Participants," "Middle of Nowhere" and "Props." Mulling it over, I decide that the characters are going to be chased by three carloads of the villain's minions along deserted back-country roads. There are numerous obstacles which will appear during the chase, which can be used to try to force the other drivers into crashing (fallen trees, slow-moving wagons, etc.).

Giving it another try, I roll 17, 6, 18, 10: "Fight, armed," "Few Participants," "Laboratory" and "Environment." I decide that the PCs are going to be attacked by the Henchman and a handful of minions, while in an inventor's lab. The place is filled with sparking electrical machinery, which will cause electrical damage to anyone falling into it!

For our last example, I roll 15, 17, 15, 20: "Fight, armed," "Lots of Participants," "Headquarters" and "New Sequence." Rolling for the new sequence, I get 3, 7, 3, 6: "Chase, foot or mounted," "Some participants," "Rooftops" and "Environment." This one looks like a corker! How about this: A horde of the villain's minions attach the PC's own headquarters, eventually leading to a rain-slicked rooftop chase as either the minions or the PCs are trying to beat a hasty retreat!

Table 4: Plot Twist

D20 Roll	Result
1-2	Betrayal!
3-9	New Location
10	Greater Villain
11-13	Hidden Plot
14-15	Reversal!
16-18	Bizarre Occurance
19	Deus Ex Machina
20	Other

Betrayal!: An NPC changes his or her allegiance in a dramatic fashion.

New Location: Roll again on the Location Table (Table 4). The plot will move to that location at the beginning of the next act.

Greater Villain: The villain of the adventure is actually a henchman of an even greater villain. Re-roll on Table 1 to reveal the new threat.

Hidden Plot: The supposed plot is actually a smoke-screen for the villain's true purpose. Re-roll the Fiendish Plot on tables 2 and 3.

Reversal!: Events shift, leading to a direct reversal of the PC's fortunes. If they are working with the police, they suddenly become implicated in the crime. If they are following clues, the trail goes cold. This works both ways, however. If they are losing, they suddenly start to win.

Bizarre Occurance: Similar to the Hook of the same name. Something weird happens, without apparent explanation.

Deus Ex Machina: Help comes from some improbable source, not hinted at all previously. This can apply to the villain as well--he just happens to have a

underwater breathing invention when he's apparently drowned, etc.

Other: Any twist that the GM's evil little mind can come up with.

The Second Act:

Once you've generated the First Act, it's time to move on to the second. Here's what Lester Dent says about it:

Hero, being heroic, struggles, and his struggles lead up to another physical conflict, and a surprising plot twist.

Using the previously provided tables, generate another action sequence and another plot twist.

The Third Act:

Same as the above. As Lester Dent says:

Hero makes some headway, and corners the villain or somebody in physical conflict.

A surprising plot twist, in which the hero preferably gets it in the neck bad, to end the act.

The difference here is that the action sequence should directly involve the Villain, and the plot twist generated at the end of the Act should negatively affect the PCs.

The Fourth Act:

Now you're ready for the climax. There's really nothing left to do at this point that can be generated by random rolls. Everything at this point is up to the actions of the PCs.

In Dent's words:

The hero extricates himself using HIS OWN SKILL, training or brawn.

The mysteries remaining--one big one held over to this point will help grip interest--are cleared up in course of final conflict as hero takes the situation in hand.

That's it you should have a rough outline now for a pulp adventure. Just generate the NPCs, and off you go!

Turn the page for an example adventure outline created with this system.



EXAMPLE ADVENTURE OUTLINE

Villain: (59) Nazi

Fiendish Plot: (13, 18) Acquire Treasure

Location:(07) Far-off Jungle

Act 1:

The Hook: (90) Up To Our Necks

Supporting Characters: Three of them: (00,04,33) Talented Neat Servant, (42,38,03) Smart Helpful Entertainer, (23,92, 40) Small Evil Scientist, (62, 85,67) Dense Old Vehicle Operator.

Action Sequence (18,15,6,4) Fight, armed, Some participants, Nightclub, Bystanders

Plot Twist: (7) New Location (given the nightclub fight, I decide to have the adventure start in the PC's home city, and then shift to the previously-rolled jungle location here).

Act 2:

Action Sequence (15,13,1,11)Fight, armed, Some participants, Nautical Setting, Props.

Plot Twist: (7) New Location (European Country)

Act 3:

Action Sequence (19,20, 18,10) Fight, armed, Lots of participants, Laboratory, Environment.

Plot Twist: (2) Betrayal!

Act 4: Climax.

So, looking at the results, here's what I come up with: The Nazi's are looking for a legendary artifact. No, not the headpiece to the Staff of Ra. The Jewel of Zinj, which is said to be a phenomenal source of power. However, it is said to be located in the temple at the center of the Lost City of Zinj.

The PCs are at a nightclub, watching the beautiful singer, Elaine Nightengale, perform. Suddenly shots ring out as a group of Nazi secret agents attack, led by a hideous dwarf! The PCs fight them off, with the help of Carstairs, Elaine's fastidious ex-army servant, but not before they snatch a necklace from around Elaine's neck! Elaine says that the necklace was a gift from her dead father, who was an archeologist. The medallion was supposedly a map to the Lost City of Zinj! Elaine is able to recreate the map from memory, and the PCs (with Elaine and Carstairs in tow) head off to the jungle nation of Mubullah.

In Mubullah, the PCs are taken upriver by a senile old river boat captain. Along the way, they come under attack by hostile natives, trying to prevent them from reaching Zinj. They finally reach the lost city, only to discover the jewel missing (I'll probably throw another action sequence in here, too...lots of Indiana Jones-style traps and such). They find a dead Nazi (killed by the natives), who has a telegram on him, revealing that the dwarf is a scientist working for the Nazis, and will be experimenting on the jewel at his lab in Berlin!

The PCs then travel to the heart of the Third Reich, and assault the laboratory of Herr Doktor Liebenohne...a deformed dwarf spared by the Nazis purely because of his brilliance, which is as twisted as his body. The fight takes place in Liebenohne's laboratory, filled with experimental weapons and other inventions. Suddenly, just as things are reaching a climax, Carstairs betrays the PCs! He was a Nazi agent all along!



Can the PC's defeat Carstairs and Liebenohne, get the Jewel of Zinj, and get out of Berlin with Elaine before the Gestapo closes in?

Gosh, I sure hope so....