

# ARCHIVER



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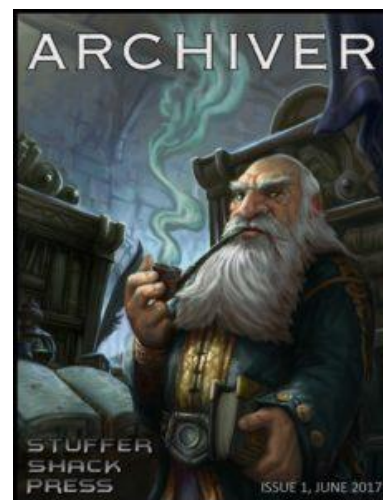
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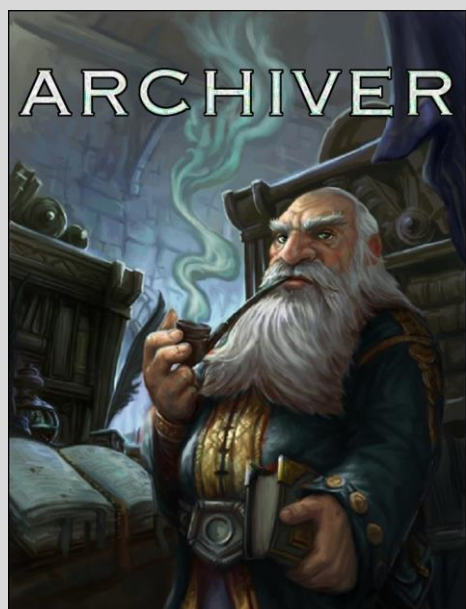


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## What is ARCHIVER, exactly?



A lot of RPG websites have a lot of old (but great) articles, but those articles can become forgotten... lost to time. Stuffer Shack is no different.

So, we're putting together a collection, an anthology that brings those lost articles back to life. It's a way for old content to be seen by new readers – not lost to time, but safely tucked away in the archives...



## Take the Challenge – Say yes

Originally [posted Septembr 10, 2010](#)

By Chris Stevens

**Imagine the scene:** You're playing the uber-cool DEATHWATCH... more specifically, larger-than-life ultra-high-tech space marines. You carry ultra-cool equipment, like bad-ass armor, a super-cool machine-gun, and jump-jets that help you run faster, leap over obstacles, and even fly. Oh, and don't forget about your ability to sustain your daily nutritional requirements from your built-in "Waste Recycling" system (yeah, you read that right). You're fighting hordes of Planetary Defense Forces – who you squash like bugs.

However, your team is under fire from all directions, including missile-fire from the top of a tower (ok, those kinda hurt). So, you decide to scam to the inside of the base of the tower, and plant a quick explosive. You set the timer to go off at the end of your next turn, and prepare to get the hell out of Dodge. Unfortunately, at that

moment, the tower gets surrounded by hordes, hampering your escape. What do you do?

Well, you could probably fight your way out through the horde. Or... you could ask your GM if you can use your jump-jets to shoot straight up through the tower floors, just as the explosive goes off. You'd be busting through the roof (and the guys shooting the missiles) as the tower crumbles, leaving you hovering 50 meters in the air, looking like the ***Angel of Mother Effing Destruction***. That, would be cool.

I don't care who you are, that would be cool (and in truth, it was). Sure, maybe the rules don't specifically support this action, but so what? It's still cool. However, let me tell you how it would *not* be cool:

- The GM says, "No."
- The GM says, "Let me check the rulebook." Or,
- The GM says, "Well, give me a hard Perception roll, a hard Agility roll, and a hard Toughness roll."



## Really?

If you're the GM here, how should you handle this? I'll tell you how. You say:

*"Abso-freaking-lutely. Just give me a Toughness roll to see how roughed up you get from busting through the tower floors."*

Because that's how it went down, making the game experience simply ultra-fun.

I know you've read articles before about how the GM should just say "yes." Maybe you agree, maybe not. All I can say is that the game is just that much more fun for most gamers when the GM tries to find a way to say "yes." I'm *not* saying that GMs should cater to the players at the expense of game and story balance. What I am saying is that story trumps mechanics, in any roleplaying game.

Miniature wargaming, on the other hand, is all about mechanics, so of course mechanics win that fight. But this article doesn't apply when playing Battletech or D&D Minis. By all means, play the mechanics in those games like there's no tomorrow.

Role playing games are simply about the GM and the players collectively telling a story. When the player asks to do something that the GM or the rules aren't immediately ready for, just go ahead and try to find a way to say yes. Skill challenges have this concept built right in. Most of them allow for the characters to succeed, even if they fail. They simply succeed in this manner by taking a detour of some kind, but still eventually achieving their goal.

Also, saying yes isn't just about the GM. Players, I'm talking to you here. When the GM introduces something that you feel affects your character in a negative way, don't always feel that you need to fight him on it. Chances are that he's doing it for the story. For instance, don't be afraid to

make your character a parent, one whose children would (of course) be kidnapped sometime in the future. Yeah, that would be cliché, but it makes for a better story than yet another character with no outside friends or family. Just say yes to his request – take the challenge. Or, perhaps the GM wants to put your character under a domination spell without any kind of rolls, because it would make the story better. Don't fight him on it – trust that he's trying to make a better story.

Saying "yes" can simply make a game more enjoyable. It helps make the game run smoothly, avoids annoying hiccups, and makes both players and GMs look forward to coming back. Take the challenge, just say "yes."

### Gamecraft 25 – On the Road

Originally [posted October 6, 2010](#)

By John Lewis

Last week, one of Stuffer Shack's premier writers, Dixon Trimline, asked for a list of encounters that take place On the Road. I was instantly inspired – recalling several of my most memorable gaming sessions that featured interesting events taking place while the heroes were en route between locations. So, without further ado, here's this week's Gamecraft 25.

1. The heroes pass through a (seemingly) abandoned village of no more than a dozen or so buildings. There is no sign of destruction or carnage, other than that of a smashed crypt door in a nearby cemetery.
2. A horse with a slumped-over rider races toward the heroes. The rider is mortally wounded and dies in the heroes' presence, uttering the cryptic words, "...the, bridge..." Were his final words a warning, clue, or something else entirely?

3. Just off the side of the road, folded neatly on a large, flat rock, is a set of fancy clothes.
4. Up ahead and out of sight, the heroes hear a titanic explosion. Around the bend they find a heavily scorched patch of road and small fires burning nearby. In the middle of the apparent blast zone is a small, undamaged item.
5. At a crossroads, there is a strange, young woman who dances atop a large circular stone. Rumors say that she never leaves the stone's surface, but that an offering which pleases her will grant the gift-giver the answer to one question.
6. The heroes come across a bridge that is missing the road-deck, and must cross the expanse using only the remaining bridge framework.
7. The heroes are approached by a group of well-armed children traveling along a seldom used road, one known as an extremely dangerous trek. They seem unconcerned about the danger – almost nonchalant.
8. The heroes' mounts suddenly start choking, and die. Foamy blood oozes from the animals' orifices as the group is left without transportation.
9. The group encounters a spectral caravan of religious pilgrims. The apparitions seem unaware of the living, but if followed, observers will watch a horrific scene play out as the ghostly caravan seems to be attacked and destroyed by unknown assailants before vanishing altogether.
10. The heroes happen across a statue dedicated to a god they know as evil. However, the shrine and statue depict what appears to be a benevolent deity. Stranger still, it appears as though offerings have been left recently.

11. An associate of the heroes is found hung from a tree near the road – a warning to the party has been pinned to the person's chest with a dagger.
12. The corpse of a mundane animal (one that isn't native to the region) is found along the road (perhaps a walrus along a desert trail or a boa constrictor high in a mountain pass).



13. The heroes are forbidden the use of a bridge by a religious sect that claims the avatar of their god will soon appear upon the bridge.
14. A pair of oxen pulls an ornate cart without any signs of driver or passengers. The oxen are adorned with strange brands that look more like arcane sigils and runes than typical brandings.



15. A low wall made from stacked stones crosses the road and extends as far as anyone can see in either direction. The trail passes through an unlocked, but closed, iron gate.
16. Near sunset, the heroes happen upon an encampment of other travelers stopping for the night. There is a festive atmosphere in the camp. The heroes share wine, women, and song with the strangers. When they awake, the travelers are gone, as if they had never been there (no trash, pits, burned out campfires, etc.).
17. As the heroes near a village, they see what appears to be most of the town's residents in the local cemetery on a nearby hill. They're probably just attending a funeral, right?
18. The heroes pass a roadside attraction, perhaps it's the World's Smallest Dragon (a captured kobold) or maybe a preserved medusa head (human head with sewn-on snakes).
19. An elderly couple tends their garden near the side of the road. Without warning, they are set upon by an exceptionally powerful foe (perhaps a demon). Before the heroes can react, the couple quickly dispatches the enemy and returns to their work.
20. As the heroes cross the border between peaceful kingdoms, they pass a watchtower under construction. Upon closer examination, they realize the workers are all skeletons and zombies going about their tasks without any sort of control or supervision.
21. The heroes happen upon an ornate bridge of incredible craftsmanship. The bridge spans a grassy meadow that appears as though it would be easy enough to cross on foot.
22. The road winds along the banks of a lake. Up ahead, the heroes spot what appears to be various crates and other

pieces of cargo washed up upon the shore.

23. The heroes encounter a group of gypsy-like travelers along the road who run a mobile brothel from their wagons and cater to a very "diverse" crowd.
24. Recent storms have made a mess of the road. Fallen trees, mudslides, and washed out bridges impede the heroes' progress.
25. A small unit of soldiers is traveling along the same road as the heroes. Several of them are wounded and they have some sort of creature imprisoned in a cage. They refuse to discuss anything with "civilians."

That's it for this week's 25, I hope you guys find it useful.

Until next time...

### Charisma – What is it good for?

Originally [posted September 8, 2010](#)

By Charisma Keller and Dixon Trimline



To quote an [article by Dixon Trimline](#) that I love very much (the article, not Dixon Trimline... ok, *and* Dixon Trimline), *"The power gamer is earnest in his approach to the game, in the same way that an evangelical is earnest about saving souls."*

Such a player will look at the stat for Charisma and ask, *"What good is it to me? If this stat isn't going to help me win the fight, it's **hello dump truck**."* I mentioned power gamers above, but really, this isn't exclusive to power gamers. It applies to anyone who doesn't want to be restricted in their roleplaying effort because of a number score.

I mean, really, what is it good for? How does the Charisma stat help the game? I have a ton of role-playing ability – I don't need a high Charisma

score to help me in social situations. Besides, who is going to judge if I'm true to my Charisma score? On what scale is that person basing that judgment on – a number scale of 3-18? I don't think so. With so many gamers having so many varying degrees of role-playing ability/comfort, who is going to say that my character would or wouldn't act *that* way?

And don't forget about filters:

*"Hey GM, disregard anything I say until the other players can filter it. My character has a high Charisma score, but we all know that I'm a social stink bug, so that's why everyone else will be my filters."*

I don't think so. If you want to play a charismatic character, then *role-play* the charismatic character. Don't hide behind the dice and your filters.

In my opinion, the dice are there for everything that can't be determined at a table – because we're **sitting at a table**. Yes, I can do the splits, and I can do a back flip, but I'm not going to do that at the table to show that my character's acrobatic stunt should be successful (well, not again anyway). That's what dice are for. What I *can do* at the table is role-play, and I don't need dice or stat scores for that.

Now, Mr. Dixon Trimline, what say you to that?



Yeow, what a great idea for an article! I love your point about the double standard between physical skills and social skills, where a player doesn't have to demonstrate his acrobatic skills to verify he deserves a 21 Dexterity.

Believe it or not, the difficult roleplaying decisions you have to make in a game don't actually impact your real life in any way. If you're willing to believe this, why not start stretching your roleplaying muscles, step outside your

comfort zone, and act up like a big old salty ham? Sure, we can all agree that you, personally, don't wield anything close to an 18 Charisma, but inside the game, your raging insecurities, awkward phrasing, and machinegun stammering all translate into one articulate, sexy, and irresistible bag of pure hotness.

This really is a great opportunity for you to act like the person you've always wanted to be, and it's a situation that can only be bolstered by your character's ability score when it comes to actually rolling the silly dice. I feel like all the successful and multi-dimensional games have to include some amount of social interaction, and hopefully it's quite a lot of it. Games that are wall-to-wall combat can be thrilling, but ultimately a little flat.

What's the point of slaying the dragon if you don't get to ride back to town to comfort all those terrified townspeople?

Sitting at the table, you may wind up sounding like this:

*"Um, hey, um, guys... um. I was going... it's like this... there was this dragon... hey, you know that dragon? It's like, totally dead."*

But in-game, your character with her 18 Charisma gets to sound like this:

*"Good people of Verbobonc, hear my voice! Your dark days are at an end. The dragon, the scourge of life and light, is no more! Rejoice!"*



[sigh] Alright, alright. You make a good point. When you put it that way, I have to concede. Thanks for being the pro to my con! And by the way, bonus points for *Verbobonc*.



Thanks for the opportunity to play along, Charisma! And I love the name. 😊

## Handling Oversized Parties

Originally [posted August 23, 2010](#)

By Brandon Hobgood

So, you're sitting there, squinting over your DM shield with dice in hand, your books, spells, and monsters pre-sorted – all to aid in the fabrication of the epic marvel of a session you have thought out for the last week to place before your fellow gamers. You glance up and are forced to a sudden reality. You realize that your party consists of the equivalent of a troupe of ADHD monkeys, hopped up on Pixie Stix and Cheeto's, halfway into a Mt.Dew induced coma, holding loaded fists full of pooh, with itchy trigger fingers.

### How will your story ever be told?!

Often, DM's find that they might be overwhelmed by the sheer personality differences existing within their group. It is even worse when the number of people in your party exceeds the norm. A DM should keep in mind that while there are a few passive wallflowers, the majority of their players will reflect alpha-male traits. Unlike a movie, where there will usually be one main character, a game of D&D will have several. Things get exponentially more complicated when you introduce more than a standard four-member party.

A few tips to handle this situation effectively might include the following:

1) **Don't force it!** The natural response to getting things under control would be to become more strict or heavy-handed with your DMing. Instead, loosen the reins. Give a broad spectrum goal alone, and let the story guide itself on the personalities that exist.

2) **Encourage everyone to talk only as their player character in all things.** This not only allows for the story to form more fluidly, it also incorporates all in attendance upon the task at

hand, and keeps the out-of-game distractions to a minimum. Such distractions from so many people can easily ruin a game session.

3) **Spread your attentions equally!** There will always be one glory hog in your party that simply requires more attention than everyone else in the campaign. Be sure to handle the situations as they come, but pay extra careful attention that you give everyone else their equal opportunity.

4) **Don't focus too much on the little things!** Keeping track of everything at once is hard enough – being forced to keep track of more than four people in your party can be overwhelming. Instead of keeping an exact count of certain details, loosen up your control. For instance, not all monsters need to have the exact average hit points. Choose to kill a monster when it's most dramatic. This helps speed up the rounds, encourages game-play, and further helps your story by allowing your party members the spotlight of a dramatic "bad ass" moment of glory.

Follow these few simple tips, and you too could become a successful ADHD Mt. Dew junkie monkey trainer, just like me!

## Death Metal Gaming, Part 1

Originally [posted October 11, 2010](#)

By Dixon Trimline

*\*This article will be presented in two parts, with Part 1 describing the construction of the adventure and Part 2 providing a report of how the adventure played out.\**

### PART 1

When three members of a death metal band come looking for a 4E Dungeons & Dragons game, you'd better be ready to deliver. Sure, one of them was my son, but that didn't leave me feeling any less intimidated, since they were each



several feet taller than me and could have easily moshed me into a chunky paste of flesh, blood, and dice. Their band, Orgy of the Damned, plays songs like *Feces Fiend*, *Awakening That Which is Dead*, and *Reanimator*, so I decided to build an adventure that was gritty, deadly, and hardcore, one that creaked and moaned and dripped with the darkest parts of the mortal spirit. Thus, I had to reluctantly discard my *Mr. Hoppy's Hopland* game.

Given the players' experience, I elected to create the characters myself and avoid wading through

dozens of races, classes, powers, and feats and fielding questions like, "Okay, tell me about this *Scions of Zarak Initiate* again." I decided the party would be soldiers who had deserted their military unit and were fleeing across the land, looking for a place to rest: a dwarf shock-priest of Abbathor, an elf ranger and sniper, and a warforged fighter inhabited by the ghost of a dead human commander. The dwarf and elf were easy picks, total fantasy standards, and the warforged would stand in as my human, since I find the concept just so ineffably cool.

For the game, I wanted to keep the complexity low but the action high to engage their attention, and also I wanted a situation that they would immediately comprehend. I found myself thinking about a village and about zombies. The village would be a classic medieval one: muddy roads, a cluster of tumble-down buildings, simple folk, little defense. And the zombies? They would come in the form of an apocalypse – mindless, bloody, and infectious. Additionally, I figured I'd set it at night and during a downpour, since many games take place under sunny blue skies.

My first question: Why would there be so many zombies? Generally speaking, a zombie apocalypse requires more than a couple dozen bodies. The village would need a graveyard, but not just a typical, modest one. No, it would have to be enormous to account for all the shambling dead. So why was this



particular graveyard so enormous? Because... there was a battle. Yeah, a battle, long ago, hundreds of years, there was a huge battle at this very spot, with thousands of lives lost, marking the place as a historic site. And because the party had a dwarf, an elf, and a kinda-sorta human, this long-ago battle would have been between an army of dwarves, elves, and humans against a faceless demonic horde.

And the second question: What caused the zombie apocalypse? Naturally, I thought of a shooting star event, as in “Night of the Comet.” I imagined this blue skyfire slamming into the historic graveyard north of the village, causing the villagers, led by their mayor, to come investigate. They would find something, this artifact – the Tear of Orcus! I saw it as a perfectly smooth, glowing blue sphere, three feet in diameter. The villagers screw around with it, just like they always do, and there’s this huge blast of necrotic energy that transforms the people around it and raises the long dead underneath it. This is what the characters walk into, staggering through a heavy, soaking rain to a dark and seemingly deserted village.

At this point, I had a story but not an adventure. Because I can only see a thing when I see it, I went online and hunted up (AKA stole) a village map which met my requirements, and then figured out six encounter set pieces based on several GameMastery Flip-Mats I had:

1. **Approaching.** Through the sheeting rain, the characters see a figure in the road, and they realize most of its head is missing. Other minions claw up from the mud around them and attack.
2. **Entering Village.** After entering the village, minions and a few brutes attack the party.
3. **Exploring Village.** A little while after that, minions, brutes, and an artillery zombie attack the party. The difficulty increases with this battle.

4. **Survivors.** Introduce a handful of uninfected villagers, hiding from the undead and fighting where they can. This scene can be used for exposition and an extended rest, and also provide a couple magic items for the heroes. Instead of wasting time and space writing up the NPCs, I named them and, for characterization, noted a person I knew from my life, from sports, or from celebrity. For example, I named one Aldua, and wrote “Mary Ann from Gilligan’s Island.”
5. **Tear of Orcus.** North of the village, the glowing Tear of Orcus rests in the middle of a ruined landscape, surrounded by undead minions. Upon examination, the party will find evidence of all the traffic here and also a teardrop shaped cavity in the sphere. When the mayor led the villagers here, he took a teardrop shaped piece of the sphere back to the meeting hall.
6. **Village Meeting Hall.** The town mayor, transformed into an undead controller, resides with several zombie guards inside the fortified meeting hall. The characters must get into the meeting hall, defeat the mayor, and return the teardrop piece to the sphere to lift the curse. Of course, when they put the piece in, the sphere dilates open into a pair of iron cobras that must be destroyed.

I wanted to keep the adventure freeform and sandboxy, allowing the players to move around and investigate as they wanted. It’s a fairly scary thing for me, since I tend to be an “on the rails” DM, but I thought I’d give this a try. I didn’t know if they’d just wander around obliterating zombies, try to solve the problem and lift the curse, or even say, “This village sucks,” and turn around and leave. As it happened, they dipped into all three options.

## Deck of Many Boons

Originally [posted August 9, 2010](#)

By Doc Tophat

Wouldn't it be cool if you could get some sort of benefit in-game for doing things that promote better gaming? I do. That's why I hand-crafted the Deck of Many Boons. It may look like an ordinary deck of cards, but this could not be further from the truth! You see, it took many decades of alchemy, wizardry, and drunken dumberly to create, no, to manifest this artifact!

*"Well what does it do" you ask?*

Thank you for asking! It's not what it does for you, but what you do for it!

Only if you are serious about gaming, may you unlock its treasures. Only if you make an effort to promote general good gamery, may you reap the rewards.

By the very nature of good and evil, yin and yang, dark and light, law and chaos, neutral and... neutral, the Deck of Many Boons will incite within you a systemic wave of karma – for the good you put into it, it gives good back to you.

### Behold! The Deck of Many Boons!

You shall draw one card from the Deck of Many Boons, should you perform the following:

- Arrive to the game session on time, ready to play

In addition, **every player** at the table shall draw one card from the Deck of Many Boons, should any of the players perform the following:

- Successfully perform an amazing, jaw-dropping task, one that your character should have failed horribly

- **Unsuccessfully** perform an easy task, one that only requires a skill check for spits and giggles, resulting in the utter humiliation of your character
- Pull out some unbelievable roleplaying or humor that utterly entertains and floors the entire group

These cards that you now possess in your possession are not to be hoarded! They are to be given back to the Deck of Many Boons! In doing so you are immediately gifted the gift of the card! Should the GM refuse to let you put a card back into the Deck of Many Boons, all players at the table shall draw another card!, from the Deck of Many Boons!

At the end of the nightly game session, which is at the end of the night, all outstanding, unused cards will shamefully be put back into the Deck of Many Boons, and the player will thusly be shamed. These are the unbreakable rules of the Deck of Many Boons, and shall not be broken!

### Behold! The cards from the Deck of Many Boons!

- 2** – make any enemy reroll an attack or skill check
- 3** – reroll a skill check
- 4** – reroll an attack
- 5** – turn a successful attack into a critical, or make another attack
- 6** – perform one additional, single action
- 7** – make an enemy/NPC look like a fool
- 8** – trump everyone in initiative (going first), as long as you don't roll lowest
- 9** – use a skill as if you were trained in it



**10** – use a feat/talent/special ability that you don't have, as long as you qualify for it. Lasts for one round.

**J** – improve your speed by 50% for the round

**Q** – make a minion or enemy of up to your level/ability flee

**K** – player fiat – railroad the GM with your lucky break (you find ammo, you find a friendly NPC/you know someone in town/you kick the broken engine and it starts, you find the trap door, etc.)

**A** – General Bad Ass, sir! For one round or scene, you come off as the ultimate bad ass. The GM will treat your character with the respect that they've earned. Bonuses and extra abilities are almost not needed, as you are the General Bad Ass. You may not railroad the game, but you may surely act like you are running it.

**Joker** – When your character fails at something, the GM may invoke the Joker. When this happens, not only will you fail at your task, but you will fail miserably,

entertaining everyone else at the table. All other players may draw a card from the Deck of Many Boons!

**Behold! The Deck of Many Boons! Behold!**

### **That is not a Real Person... It's a Stuntman**

*Originally [posted August 15, 2010](#)*

*By Chris Stevens*

Over the course of a few days you contemplated what race you'd play, what class, what build, what history. You thought about his purpose in the game, his personality, and his goals. You were creating a living, breathing hero, instead of filling out some stats on a character sheet. At least, you thought you were.

There he was, Rolen Darkmoor, a two-weapon fighting emo ranger (emo?), who had all of the makings of a fully-fleshed out character, complete with a one-page description of all things non-statistical. You've selected a specific set of dice to go along with this person (because really, he deserves it), and you've found the fan-made character sheet that best suits his style.



Yep. This ranger is ready to hit the range. This hero is ready to be heroic. This live character is ready to come to *life*.

And bring him to life you do. You've fought orcs, goblins, mystery warriors, and even a white dragon. You've roleplayed your inner conflict in staying loyal to the Assembly of Advisors, yet wanting to leave it all behind ranger-style. You've embraced the journey of finding out the secrets of your own mysterious past. Yes, this character has come to *life*.

Aaaaaand then you completely crush the realism of your character when you charge toward several hobgoblin archers (16 squares away) thinking you will get to them and engage them double-scimitar-style, only to get dropped by four arrows to the chest (two crits), now making death saves.

At that moment you took a fully-visioned real person... and turned him into stats on paper.

Sure, he's a hero, and he does heroic things. But why would you assume that you could charge after archers, and not get killed? It's because you stopped thinking about how a fantasy character would engage the archers, and started crunching numbers instead. *"Let's see, I have 54 hit points, my AC is 23, I can move 14 squares this round – I'll be ok."*

What you should have said was, *"Hmm, we need to move tactically against the archers. Perhaps I'll wait until after the fighter goes."*

Ok, you can't really put yourself into your character's shoes. You can't *really* know his combat capabilities. All you have to go on to fight the fight are his powers and stats. I get that. But still, sometimes you need take a step back and ask yourself, *"Mechanically, I should be able to pull this off, but is it realistic to try? Am I playing the character, or playing the numbers?"*

All right, Rolen Darkmoor wasn't your character; he was mine. You didn't try to pull off a stupid stunt because you thought the numbers added up; I did. You didn't stop playing a real person in favor of a stuntman; that was me.

When he fell, sure it was funny-haha, *"thunk-thunk-thunk-thunk, and down he goes!"* But it slapped me in the face. My fellow gamers get a laugh out of that one every once in a while, but all I get out of it was the memory of me betraying my character's *character*, and me betraying realism. Had I stopped to think, *"What is the best way to face these hobgoblin archers?"* instead of going number-strong into the fight, I would have stayed in-character, in the game, as a real-life person, and not stats on a piece of paper. I was playing a stuntman.

So, I challenge you to not make the mistake that I did. I challenge you to try as hard as you can to get into your character's shoes and stay there. I challenge you to make decisions as if you're actually there, instead of your character sheet. I think you'll find that playing the role, instead of playing the game, is much more rewarding.

Incidentally, the title of this article *"That is not a Real Person – It's a Stuntman"* comes from a quote in a movie. Bonus points to whoever figures out what movie the quote is from, and what movie the characters are watching when it is said.

### **Race, Role, Class, Build, Background, and Theme**

Originally [posted August 18, 2010](#)

By Greywulf

One of the biggest innovations in D&D 4e has been the broadening of character generation. Your character is no longer a simple Race and Class combo (though he can be just that, if that's what you want) but a multi-faceted being complete with backstory, previous occupation,

career path and social class, all in as much (or as little) detail as you choose.

And they've managed to do it without turning it into a stewing pile of power-gamery mess too. Way to go, WoTC! Let's take a look at each facet of your potential multi-dimensional character to see how it all fits together.

## Race

Your character's Race denotes the core of his (or her) being; it's who they are when stripped of everything else. Their race says most about your hero's appearance, and much about their culture, social upbringing and outlook on life. Unless they are shaped differently by the campaign setting or something particular to your hero's background, it's fair to expect that their overall attitude will be much the same as any member of their race. For example, the vast majority of Elves possess an affinity for the Natural world (forests in particular), but the campaign setting (such as Dark Sun) might change that radically, or this particular Elf have been brought up in an Urban environment.

That's not to say that all Elves are nature-loving, bow-wielding hippies (though Dwarves may say that's exactly what they all are), but that this cultural implication is present in their racial makeup. *How* that upbringing shapes the PC though, is entirely up to you. Maybe this particular Elf is thoroughly sick of the colour green, and never wants to see another living tree as long as she breathes. Hey, it could happen.

## Class

In 4e, a PC's Class is less about *who they are* and more about *how they fight*. Class describes where your character gets his combat training/kewl spells/prayers/psionic potential, but also how they use it when facing opposition. Both the Fighter and Rogue are Martial characters, though their fighting styles are very

different. One charges forward, while the other runs and hides. Draw your own conclusions there.

But Class is more than that. It helps explain how your character responds to a challenge both on and off the battlefield. Each Class opens up a list of Trained Skills from which your PC selects several, and these Skills say more about a character than their Class selection. For example, a Human Rogue is more likely to feel kinship with an Elven Ranger if they both have the Streetwise Skill than with another Human Rogue who lacks it; both the Ranger and the Rogue share a knowledge of urban life and respect for the seedier side of towns.

Class might also explain a hero's motivation. It's easy (if more than a little stereotypical) to create a sneaky Halfling Rogue or stoic Dwarven Cleric of Moradin, and no further explanation of their motivation is needed. I encourage players to move away from that and instead use Background Options to help explain your hero's motives. More on those in a mo'.

The selection of Class also chooses your hero's Power source. 4e D&D has taken a leaf out of the much loved Rolemaster's book with the implementation of Powers. Just as Rolemaster had the Realms of Essence, Channelling, Mentalism and Arms (non-combat), 4e has Arcane, Divine, Psionic and Martial, and add to that with Primal, Shadow and doubtless more to come. These control where the PC draws his powers from – Arcane gain power from the magical world around them, Divine from the Gods, Psionic from within themselves, Martial from their physical abilities, Primal from the untamed chaos of nature and Shadow from *freakin' Batman*. I'm looking forward to the 4e take on the Rolemaster Archmage who recognises that all Power sources are essentially the same and draws from *all of them*. Wicked!





Note to self: Write more contrasting Rolemaster with 4e D&D. Comparisons abound!

In some ways though, your 4E's hero choice of Class is the *least important* choice he has to make, even though it's the most mechanically complex. Choose **Eladrin** as Race and the Background Options **Noble & Criminal** and you've already got a compelling character. Making him a Paladin, Wizard or Warlord just adds another wrinkle to the pie. Do pies get wrinkled?

## Role

Wait-a-minute. Isn't a character's Role tied to his Class? I mean, all Wizards are Controllers, right?

Well yeah, but I've argued before that the two shouldn't be tied together, and it looks (with D&D Essentials) that this hard-and-fast rule is being loosened, and that's a great thing for the game.

Right now, if you want to play a Martial Defender (for example), you're playing a Fighter. But what if you want to play a Fighter who is more of a Striker (fewer hit points, more damage) or even a bow-wielding Controller (even fewer hit points, more foes)? How about a Wizard who specializes in Force Fields (Defender) or one who singles out individual enemies with fearsome emotion-controlling spells (Striker)? You could conceivably argue that Gandalf was an Arcane Leader rather than a Controller, and you wouldn't be wrong.

I foresee this as a direction 4e will increasingly take, and it's an exciting one. Separating Role from Class opens up a whole new vista for character generation, and I'm stoked!

## Build

Builds are a simple, shorthand way of saying "*if you take this, this, this and this, you will end up with this kind of character.*" They're entirely optional and provide a good newbie-friendly way to guide them through character generation.

Want to play a Tactical Warlord or a Great Weapon Fighter? Just follow this build advice, and you're good to go.

Despite their primary function as a guiding tool, the Builds can also serve as a role-playing jumping point. Your Tactical Warlord is likely to have a very different personality than an Inspiring Warlord, both in and out of combat. That's partially represented by the priority of the attributes (a higher Charisma usually denotes a more outgoing personality) but also with their outlook on life; in this example, a Tactical Warlord is more likely to be coldly clinical in their assessments, whereas an Inspiring Warlord knows that it's the hearts of men (or dwarves, or elves ...) that can truly win the day.

Unlike the other optional elements of character generation (Background Options and Themes) your hero gains *absolutely no mechanical bonus for following a Build* other than the satisfaction of having put together a nice, well-optimised character. Conversely, there's nothing to lose for not following a Build neither; you're entirely free to choose between the Class Features, Feats and Powers however you wish. While you might not end up with a character with the same single-path focused optimisation as one of the Build, your hero will be (and here's the important part) much more fun to play.

That's not to say that Builds don't have their place. They give us much more of an insight into the game designers' minds. The Build represent how they expect the Classes to be played and a solid foundation for your own tinkering with Class element and Feat selection. For example, you could take Great Weapon Fighter, but replace Power Attack with Potent Challenge. Minor changes to the Build like this help make your character that more unique.

So Builds are a great way to help get a handle on the Classes, and on the game as a whole. They're a great starting point for new players and oldies

alike who are trying out a new class for the first time. It pays to know when to follow a Build, when to tweak them and when to ignore them altogether. Let's save that for a blogpost for some other time, ok?

## Background Options

Now we're talking! Background Options are my favourite optional rule in 4e D&D – to the point where I don't consider it optional at all. Background Options are an *Essential* part of character generation as they serve to provide your PC with that all-important backstory. And that's pure gold for this GM.

Background Options also confer a minor (though significant) benefit in the form of a +2 to one skill, adding a Skill to your potential list of Trained Skills, granting a bonus language or some other special boon. That's a choice of five benefits. No, not four. Clearly you can't count.

See, here's how the choices break down:

1. Add a +2 to an Untrained skill. This gives a small bonus to a skill which you wouldn't normally have access to, or one which you don't want to spend Training on. This is a good choice if you choose a Background Option that offers Associated Skills that overlap with and Skill Bonuses from your Race. For example, an **Elf** with the Background Option **Geography: Forest** could be at +4 to either Nature or Perception without Training at all! That's perfect if you want to play a Class that lacks the Perception skill and is short on Training points. How about a keen eyed Elf Fighter who specializes in the Greataxe?!

2. Add +2 to a Trained skill. Back to that Elf. Make him a **Ranger** and (thanks to being an Elf and the Geography: Forest Background Option) he can be at +9 Perception even before stat bonus. That's one eagle-eyed Ranger! Choosing a Background Option that synergizes nicely with your Trained skills is a smart move though taking a Background

Option which just emphasizes something we already know (Elf + Geography: Forest) is laaaaaame ! Think about the more esoteric Background Options to make your character much more interesting. An Elf with **Occupation: Mariner** can still take that +2 Perception, but is a much more engaging character to play. Imagine an Elf with an ornately carved wooden leg.....

3. Add another skill to your list of Trained skills. Each Background Option offers two skills. Pick one to either gain a +2 (as above) or add it to your list of available Trained Skills choices. That's a +5 bonus, but the cost is that you have one less choice to spend on something else. This is a great choice if you want to create a character who has access to knowledge outside their Class' normal field of interest. A **Fighter** who is an **Arcane Refugee** would make a terrific character as his village was destroyed by magic (rather than orcs – unless they were Orc Wizards) and he could take Skill Training in Arcana, making for one highly knowledgeable warrior who hates spellcasters. This also gives him access to the **Ritual Caster** Feat, too, meaning he could sometimes be forced to use the very thing he hates. See what I mean about Background Options being GM gold?

4. Gain a bonus language. Booring, unless you really want to play a character who can speak both Goblin *and* Giant. For these kind of multi-lingual characters, it's better (imho) to use the Background Option to gain a Skill-related bonus and burn a Feat on the Linguist Feat.

5. Any other Boon. Some Background Options (particularly those from the Scales of War adventure path) offer more unusual benefits to the character. These tend to be more powerful and Feat-like in nature (such as the Assassin background which adds both Arcana and Stealth to your class list, and gives a +1 bonus in both). I try to steer my players away from these options, but allow them on a case-by-case basis,

depending on just how much of a hard time I can give the hero in-game 😊

Background Options cover a whole range of choices – from mysterious happenings during their birth to the geography of their homeland; from their pre-adventuring occupation to wealth level; from Early Life and Parentage to Recent Events. It's all there and more, in spades. You'll need the PH2 or a D&D Insider account to access them, but for my money, Background Options alone make it worth the price of entry.

Your hero isn't limited to a single Background Option, though he only gains the mechanical benefit from one of them. If you want your hero to be a Former Gladiator Scorned Noble Magic Scholar who is a Fugitive from a Vengeful Rival with a Missing Master, that's very all right by me!

Note to self: Use multiple Background Options and Risus notation? The character above could be Former Gladiator (3), Scorned Noble (2), Magic Scholar (1), Fugitive from a Vengeful Rival (4), Missing Master (5). Hmmm. Food for thought.

## Themes

So far, Themes are only present in the Dark Sun campaign setting as they provide just a little more oomph to your character. That's firmly in keeping with the setting as characters in prior editions were generated at a higher level than 1st from the start. Each theme grants an additional Encounter Power to the character, putting them kinda-almost at the same power level as a 3rd level character (only without the hit points, surges, utility power, feats or equipment – so really not like 3rd level at all). Every character takes one Theme, and only one. Extra goodies (feats, paragon paths and optional Powers) are unlocked at later levels, if you choose to follow the Theme's natural course.



Each Theme is a natural fit for one or more character classes (such as the Gladiator Theme for a Fighter), but the real fun comes from mixing things up. How about a Gladiator Monk, or a Dune Trader Warlord? More on that shortly...

I like Themes. They can tie the adventuring party together (*"You're all Gladiators!"*), but still give them plenty of flexibility (thanks to freedom of choice over Race, Class and Background Options) to make each character unique and memorable. Themes also help to tie the characters more closely to the campaign setting – you'll only find Dune Traders on Athas – in a way we've not seen before. That's definitely a win in my books! Despite the power creep, I expect to see setting-unique Themes to find their way across all the campaign settings in due course (perhaps requiring a Feat to gain them). That won't be a bad thing.

### Mixing it up

What's more fun? An Eladrin Paladin, or an Eladrin Paladin Merchant Prince Dune Trader? How about a Halfling Star Pact Warlock Monster Hunter Travelling Missionary? Or a Dwarf Gladiator Rogue who was Born on Another Plane?

Background Options and Themes come into their own when you play against expectations. As Elf with Geography: Forest might as well just be an Elf, whereas one with Geography: Wetlands has an interesting twist. Likewise, a Fighter with Occupation: Military isn't going to win any prizes, but make him a Wizard.....

There's no shortage of Background Options both in the books (regrettably, not in PHI though) and in the Character Builder, so make good use of them.

Your GM will thank you for it, I swear!

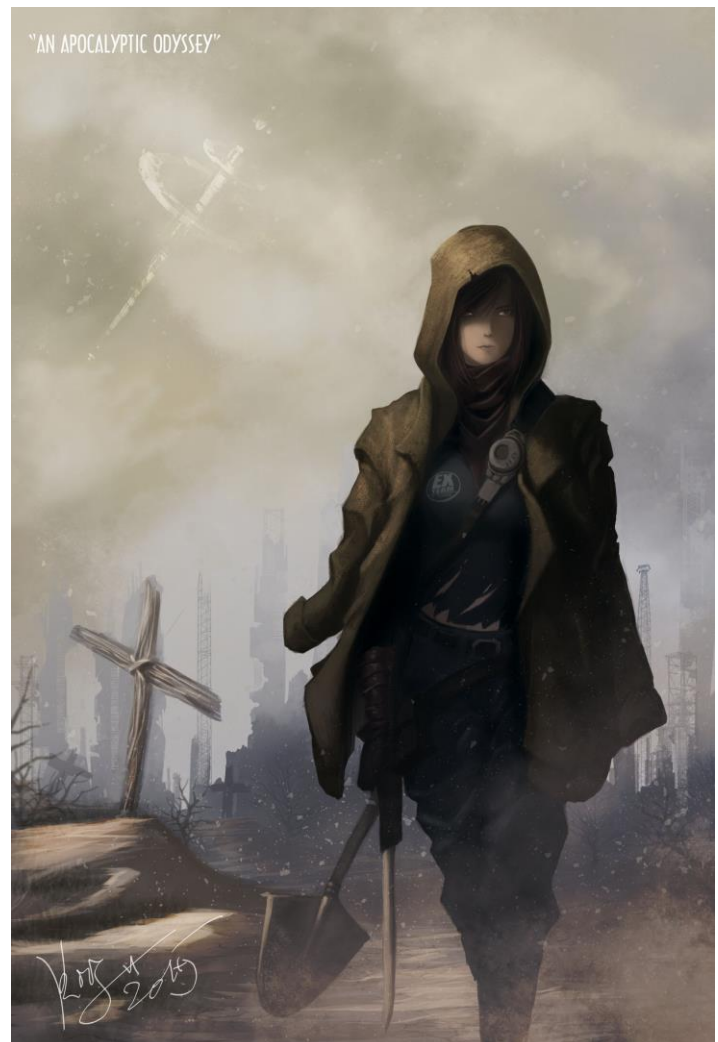
## Bauhaus NPC Design

Originally [posted September 15, 2010](#)

By Jade

### Form Follows Function

Often, you don't need to develop a whole, well-rounded NPC for your games. Most NPCs can get by with a minimal amount of information—just enough to do their job in the campaign. Gauge how much effort you need to put into creating an NPC by estimating how much contact the PCs will have with him. If all you need an NPC to do is deliver some tidbit of information to the PCs, you don't need to spend an hour detailing that NPC's goals, history, and dark secrets.



## Step By Step

1. Why do you need this NPC? What is she there to do? Every NPC in your game should have a purpose, even if it's just to help round out a town's population. Write down the character's purpose—usually just a sentence (two at max) is more than enough.

2. What abilities does your NPC need in order to fulfill that purpose? If your NPC is to be the king's bodyguard, then he's going to need fighting skills and probably some etiquette, as well. A high strength or dexterity skill would also help. List any stats, feats, skills, advantages/disadvantages, etc., that the NPC would need to successfully perform their function. In the interests of streamlining NPC creation, list only the abilities required; you can always go back and add more as your time and interest permits.

3. How will the PCs interact with this NPC? Are they just going to receive a message from her or will she actually accompany them, perhaps as a vehicle mechanic or some other support position? Is she the PCs' boss, or someone they'll pass in the street. Writing down what relation the NPC has to the PCs will also suggest abilities she may need.

4. How much "screen time" will this NPC have? Do the characters only speak to him once, or is he going to be a recurring character? The more time the PCs are going to encounter the NPC, the more developed he should be. Add something each time the PCs encounter him, but make sure these details fit together. Maybe the first time the PCs meet him, you point out that he has long fingernails; the second time they meet him, you can mention that he tends to look slightly over their heads when he talks to them. Both of these start to give the impression that this NPC may consider himself a gentleman, someone who feels he's above people who perform more manual labor (such as adventurers). This way, the

more the PCs interact with this character, the more fully developed he'll become.

5. What are the NPC's quirks? What makes him distinct? Jot down a quick quirk or two. It doesn't have to be big or even terribly noticeable. Just something that gives the PCs a sense that they're actually talking to real person. Maybe he bounces his knee up and down when sitting at a table, or maybe he tends to look at his hands rather than to the person he's talking to. Something small. You could even make a list of quirks to have on hand and choose one when you need to create an NPC on the fly.

That's all it takes. Save your fully-crafted, well-developed NPCs for your main characters. You can create a seemingly unique person with only a minimal amount of time and effort.

### Gamecraft 25: Distinctive Locations

*Originally [posted September 22, 2010](#)*

*By John Lewis*

I'm a list guy. I have shopping lists, to-do lists, and even gaming lists. One of the resources I use most as a GM, however, is my list of adventure ideas and components. Currently the list is about 15 pages long and divided into multiple categories such as Plot Twists, Memorable NPCs, and Unusual Circumstances. I thought I'd share parts of the list for you guys to look at and mine for ideas.

Today, we'll take a look at one of my favorite categories; Distinctive Locations, a quick list of 25 exciting and memorable places in which to craft a story and challenge your players.

1. A village set high up in the side of a cliff face in the style of the American Indians of the southwest.
2. A community elevated on stilts over a pond, marsh, or bog and connected by bridges and ropes. Maybe it's abandoned

- and sits over dry ground, why was it elevated in the first place?
3. An old dam with a connecting aqueduct system. Does it still hold back water or is it just a wall-like structure connecting two sides of a canyon?
  4. An orphanage haunted by the ghosts of former residents. Maybe they were tortured and abused? As a disturbing twist perhaps the children were part of an evil cult that killed the masters of the orphanage.
  8. A slave trading bazaar set in a secret location. Maybe the location is revealed by "invitation" only.
  9. A creepy backwoods village with residents that seem a little "odd". Think toothless banjo-playing bard.
  10. A lone cemetery set high in the mountains many miles from the nearest settlement. Dates on headstones seem to indicate people have been buried here as recently as last month.
  11. The ruins of an arcane college set upon a



5. A giant botanical garden or some sort of supernatural zoo. Could be the pride of the city, or maybe just an eclectic private collection.
6. A massive wrecked ship set in the middle of a dry lake bed. The hull may be partially embedded in the playa forming a makeshift "dungeon".
7. A lighthouse set upon a rocky outcropping overlooking a vast desert or savanna.
12. Some sort of colony or commune. The residents may share a common religion (monks) or disease (lepers), or may dwell together because of trade (artists) or background (criminals).
13. A set of sea caves beneath a sleepy seaside village. They may be prone to rapid flooding due to rising tides or sudden rainfall.
14. Inside an important monument. What is the monument dedicated to (a religion,



history, famous battle) and who built it (humans, dwarves, goblins, giants)?

15. A building dedicated to entertainment such as an arena, theater, or opera house. For added excitement maybe an event or production is underway.
16. Set aboard a large riverboat, ferry, or barge.
17. The burnt-out ruins of an inn set in the middle of an old forest. Maybe the heroes are hurt, tired, and were expecting to be able to recover at the inn.
18. A massive tree-top settlement constructed by an atypical race such as dwarves.
19. A plateau in the desert or badlands. Atop the plateau is a fertile and lush oasis.
20. An ongoing construction site for a major structure, perhaps a cathedral, castle, or ziggurat.
21. A prison or an asylum.
22. A long-forgotten abbey in a remote location. Everything about the abbey seems good and holy but evidence suggests that the original inhabitants were of a traditionally evil race.
23. An outpost on the very far edge of civilization.
24. A huge sewer system beneath a relatively small town. Is this the signs of an earlier settlement?
25. An abandoned location that was occupied and thriving the last time the heroes were there.

Hope you find at least a few ideas here for your next adventure. Until next time...

## Death Metal Gaming, Part 2

Originally [posted October 18, 2010](#)

By Dixon Trimline

*\*This article was presented in two parts, with Part 1 describing the construction of the*

*adventure and Part 2 providing a report of how the adventure played out.\**

## PART 2

Realizing the players were relatively new to the game, I spent some time during the introduction explaining to them their characters, the foundational rules of the game, how combat runs, which one is the 20-sided die, and lots and lots of other things. ...I should resist this urge.

The party (Thorkel, dwarf shock-priest of Abbathor; Skaag, warforged inhabited by the ghost of a dead commander; and Blackleaf, elf hunter and sniper) deserts their military unit and flees east across the land, looking for a place to rest and get out of the steady, soaking, drumming rain that shows no signs of letting up.

When they finally spy the little village ahead, it's the middle of the night, and there in the road, a figure shuffles towards them through the downpour, calling something they can't quite make out.

The party moves forward cautiously, and Blackleaf hears the person clearer than the other two, realizing it's not a voice but a deep, guttural groan. Blackleaf nocks an arrow in his greatbow and advances, sliding to his right, peering through the sheeting rain... and knows something is very wrong. Most of the figure's lower jaw is missing, having been raggedly torn away, and its tongue waggles free as it vocalizes its horrible call. It's a living corpse, the walking dead.

Blackleaf fires a pair of arrows, drilling the zombie through the throat, dropping it instantly. "Nice shot," Skaag says, and that's when the mass of undead claw their way from the sodden earth all around them. "Crap," Skaag says.

Using their own bows, the undead graze Thorkel with a pair of arrows and hit Skaag in an ankle joint, but the party easily handles the abominations – Blackleaf picking them off with his deadly aim, Thorkel pulping them with his craghammer and throwing hammers, and Skaag hacking them with his halberd.

The party continues on to the modest village, which is very dark and eerily quiet, except for the constant, maddening rain. They move through the village, the roadway turning into a stew of black mud, and they glance about at the small buildings, looking for signs of habitation.

Introducing a setting element like rain is an excellent idea, unless you constantly forget about it, which I always do. If you are going to do this, either staple a note to your eyeballs that says RAIN RAIN RAIN RAIN RAIN, or, less painfully, find and play a repeating audio clip reminder during the scene or adventure. Loud, noisy town? Play a clip of lots of people chattering, shouting, laughing. Monastery setting? Play a clip of bells and chanting. Constant rain? Play a clip of a downpour.

One house catches their attention, light flickering through its wooden slats, maybe from a guttering candle, and they head towards it. As they arrive, about to peek into a window, the silence is shattered by a hound's ragged baying, and undead surge from the buildings.

At first, the battle goes the party's way, Skaag slashing with his halberd, Thorkel swinging his hammer and calling upon the dark power of Abbathor, Blackleaf flashing out his paired scimitars, and they put down a tougher zombie with a paralyzing claw and a corpse-dog with a nasty, dripping bite. Unfortunately, the undead just keep coming, zombies crawling from every dark corner, including two that blaze with hellish flame and fling explosive fireballs.

Just as the battle becomes desperate, two men appear from a distant building, attacking the zombies from behind with sling bullets, and a woman clutching a silver symbol blasts apart one of the fiery zombies in a burst of holy light. The remaining zombies fall on her, tearing her to pieces, but the party and the men close quickly, destroying the undead.

I combined the second and third encounter into one, and even amped up the third encounter, since the characters turned out to be extremely effective and dangerous. When constructing encounters, I recommend using the Experience Point Buy method, but always BUY HIGH and scale down if necessary. Also, I'm going to jump on board with Dave Noonan and say there ain't no way minions should be worth 1/4 of the experience points of a standard monster. At most, minions should count towards 1/10, and I'm not just saying that because the math is easier.



The two men run up to the party, barking, *"Come with us, NOW!"* They lead the party across the village square and into an abandoned building. The larger man gives a little whistle, and a trapdoor pops open from the floor and a woman peers out, saying, *"Who are they?"*

The men say, *"Come on, come on, get in, get in,"* and they hurry through the opening, slamming the trapdoor behind them. The party finds space in the cramped basement, and then talk with the survivors as the village overhead fills with inhuman howls and hungry screams.

The two men introduce themselves as Seth and Ferris, and tell about the skyfire that fell around mealtime. Seth says it was a streak of light that crashed to the north of the village, and Ferris tells about the mayor calling the people together in the meeting hall, naming the skyfire as the **Tear of Orcus**, and saying that it foretold dark days.

The mayor took several volunteers to investigate the northern field. Nobody knows what the mayor's group found, but it was something terrible, something dark, and it spread through the village like a disease. Since then, these survivors have been running and hiding, killing the undead where they could. Ferris says, *"We wanted to go out to that northern field, but... not with all those creatures running around."*

One of the women objects to sharing the story with strangers, but Seth shakes her off, saying, *"Look at them. You've got an elf, a dwarf, and something that must have been a human once. They're straight out of the stories of Corrae. They have something to do with this, and I think it's something good."*

Thorkel and Blackleaf recognize the name Corrae, explaining that over two centuries ago, this was where an army of humans, elves, and dwarves waged war against a demonic host. Thousands were lost, but the host was destroyed. They realize that their undead enemy

today doesn't only include the transformed victims from the village, but also the countless fallen from the battle of Corrae.

When dealing with some kind of mystery or information-gathering game, you must dole out the information generously and repeatedly. Not because the players are moronic toddlers, but because... hmmm... No, seriously, they're not moronic toddlers. It's just that being in a life-or-death situation is very different from sitting at a table talking about being in the situation. Players forget. Players get distracted. Players will listen to all your exposition and then say, *"What was that? Could you repeat that? What were we supposed to do now?"*

They settle in for the night, Skaag taking motionless watch, the others finding fitful sleep full of nightmares. They rouse after six hours, and one of the women prods open the trapdoor and reports that morning never came. It's still as dark as midnight, and the rain continues to fall.

As the party discusses their options, Seth offers his father's enchanted greatbow and hide armor, which Blackleaf gladly accepts, and also distributes three healing elixirs. They decide to go north to investigate where the Tear of Orcus fell, asking Seth to lead them.

This was a stupid move on my part. When determining the treasure, I figured Blackleaf the archer would take the bow and someone else would take the hide armor. Only no one else could effectively use the hide armor, so Blackleaf got both magic items. Duh.

After confirming the village has quieted, Seth takes the party to the edge of the northern field, where they can detect a faint blue glow coming from the distant edge, almost like a sunrise glaze. Across the ravaged fields, blackened as though by fire, they see the source of the glow, a large partly-buried sphere, and jutting from the

mud are clusters of skeletal limbs, as though an army of dead had attempted to pull free from the earth but couldn't.

I decided to skip the undead battle here since it felt like it would just be more of the same. The party had already fought zombies and skeletons and knew what that was like. By setting the scene but skipping the battle, I got my atmosphere (after all, they didn't know something wasn't about to happen), and I could just let them do their investigation.

*"Go check it out,"* Thorkel tells Seth, who makes a terrified squeaky noise, and Skaag says, *"Don't listen to him. Blackleaf, do you see anything?"* Blackleaf notes the tracks of a large party that moved through this field, a directed march straight to the glowing sphere, though the tracks that came back from the sphere seem disorganized, shuffling, and unfocused. A unit marched to the sphere, but something not unified came back. Thorkel examines the skeletal limbs jutting from the ground, determining that they were recently animated and, based on the broken and gashed bones, had first died many years ago from combat wounds.

Whenever you introduce any interactive NPC, there's always the risk the players will want to employ him as cannon fodder. This is understandable, if a little anti-heroic. You'll have to remember that not everyone plays the game to realize his inner hero, and take appropriate steps. If it comes right down to it, you can tell the players, *"Hey, you guys are the heroes here, not them. You should go check it out."* In this case, it was another player who let my NPC off the hook.

Skaag thanks Seth for his help and sends him home, and then the party moves cautiously toward the sphere. They immediately note that the sphere is the source of the explosive devastation, that it must have struck the ground in a powerful blast. Also, the sphere looks

perfectly smooth, like a pearl, and doesn't appear to be any manufactured material, like glass or steel. Its glow is soft, almost lulling, consuming, and it gives off the faintest breath of cold, though Thorkel is pretty sure the chill isn't caused by a change of temperature, but rather a kind of absence.

Stepping forward, Skaag extends his halberd to lightly touch the sphere, which makes a soft, wavering chime. He tries to move, lift, or break the sphere, but can't, even with Thorkel's assistance. When called over, Blackleaf immediately spies a shallow tear-shaped cavity in the sphere's surface. Though unable to find the missing piece around the sphere, Blackleaf does notice signs that a large party stood nearby, and one of their number knelt beside the sphere, right where the cavity is located.

This may have worked well as a skill challenge, but I let it play out as pure investigation with Perception, Insight, and Religion skill checks here and there. The players were entirely engaged, examining the setting carefully and talking to each other about their options. They only turned to me when they had a question about one of their conclusions.

Blackleaf points out that while the movements of the large party became very random and disorderly at some point, the tracks of the person who knelt marched straight out of the field back to the village. Thorkel and Skaag exchange glances, saying simultaneously, *"The mayor... he must have taken the missing piece back to the meeting hall."*

I did not lead the players to this conclusion. It was one they came to on their own as they evaluated the evidence. It was one of those rare moments where you get to see the light come on in their eyes and they figure out exactly what's happening.



Despite the rain and darkness, Blackleaf easily follows the tracks to the meeting hall, Skaag and Thorkel close behind. The tracks march through the huge front doors, which are hanging open and unguarded.

The party circles around to the back of the hall, where Skaag hefts Blackleaf up on his shoulders to look over the 10' tall palisade. Blackleaf sees a large open area with smaller buildings, and there are several zombies shambling about through the rain. A wooden parapet runs along the inside of the wall, connecting the four corners of the hall.

Blackleaf grabs hold of the wall and slips up and over onto the parapet, slides his enchanted greatbow into his hand and begins picking off the zombies. The darkness is shattered by a horrific scream, and the battle is joined.

This turned out to be an extremely multi-dimensional battle, with lots of movement, strategy, and heroic moments. I felt like it translated easily into story, and there's absolutely no cheating here in the conversion. What you read is what happened.

Skaag helps Thorkel over the wall onto the parapet, and then climbs up after him, as zombies swarm from the buildings towards the ladders that lead up to the parapets. One hideous undead creature, a wight, bursts from one of the buildings, scrambles up onto the roof, leaps across to the parapet, and races towards the party.

Skaag calls, "*Blackleaf!*" and Thorkel shouts, "*Kill that one!*"

Blackleaf fires arrows at the wight from his position on the parapet, setting it on fire with his enchanted bow, while Thorkel runs toward it, taking a moment to smash one of the ladders before the zombies can climb up it. Skaag leaps

to the ground, attacking the zombies with his halberd.

The wight blasts Thorkel with sizzling black bolts, locking him into place, while zombies close from all directions, climbing up onto the parapet around Blackleaf and Thorkel.

Zombies claw into Thorkel, even as the wight unleashes a soul-searing howl, draining life force and summoning a pair of black mists with bright yellow eyes, foul residents from the Shadowfell. Thorkel's craghammer slips from nerveless fingers and the dwarf staggers and falls.

On the one hand, you want the drama to be through the roof, but on the other, when a character falls, there's very little for that player to do. It's a tough balancing act, which I rarely get right.

Blackleaf nocks an arrow, sighting down the shaft with perfect aim. Time grinds to a halt. He breathes in, breathes out, and then let fly, and the arrow streaks across the meeting hall and buries itself into the wight's left eye, blowing out the back of the creature's skull. The wight tumbles over backwards, dying for the last time.

An absolutely brilliant use of a daily, which just so happened to destroy the big bad. I love moments like these.

Enemies move to finish the fallen Thorkel. Blackleaf puts a couple arrows into a zombie but doesn't kill it. Skaag runs over, lunging with his halberd at one of the black mists, which blows apart with a whispery shriek. The zombie with Blackleaf's arrows jutting from it falls on Thorkel, clawing and biting. Blood pours from the dwarf's wounds, washed away by the falling rain.

The zombies and remaining black mist close in on Blackleaf, and he retreats, firing arrows at the

zombie feeding on Thorkel but missing. *"Come on!"* Skaag shouts. He dashes around a zombie, which turns and rakes a claw across his metal back, flooding him with necrotic energy that freezes him in place.

Skaag growls, *"No,"* and shakes off the icy hold, lunging at the zombie about to finish Thorkel... but misses. *"Hey ugly,"* Skaag says. *"Come and get me."* The zombie looks up from the dwarf, its jaws dripping with his blood, and scrambles off the parapet at Skaag.

This was my interpretation of the fighter's marking ability, as he drew an enemy away from a fallen ally who was just about to die. Thorkel was very close to negative bloodied, so it was nice not having to actually kill one of the PCs.

Surrounded by enemies, Blackleaf drops his greatbow and flashes his scimitars in a deadly arc, while Skaag hurls himself up onto the parapet and gives Thorkel his healing elixir. Thorkel's eyes pop open as his wounds close, and he stands, saying a healing prayer over Skaag, and then calls upon all the dark power of Abbathor to blast away the nearby zombies.

After finishing off the nearby zombies, Skaag and Thorkel move to help Blackleaf, who has already snatched up his greatbow and leapt from the parapet to the roof of one of the small buildings. Together, with hammer, halberd, and arrow, they party finish off the undead.

I had an opportunity to be a colossal jerk of a DM, since Blackleaf's player didn't explicitly state, *"I'll get my greatbow,"* before jumping to the building. Instead, I ruled, *"You wouldn't go without it,"* and simply let it happen. Players REALLY appreciate it when you give them the benefit of the doubt, and I say this as both a player and Dungeon Master.

With a quick search of the meeting hall, the party finds coins, gems, and jewelry, as well as discovering the wight has transformed back into a human, and is wearing a teardrop-shaped pendant on a chain around his neck. Hearing the undead begin to stir throughout the village again, the party rush back to the northern field and slip the teardrop pendant into its matching cavity in the glowing sphere.

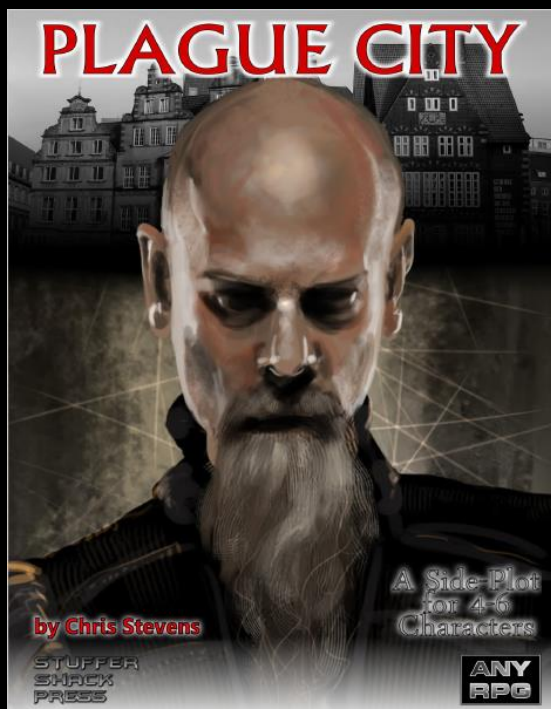
The sphere hums softly, spins open, and breaks apart into a thick, foul-smelling steam. As the steam spreads, the rain eases up, the darkness fades, and the sun finds its way through the heavy black clouds overhead. A peace settles on the village even as sunrise finally comes, and the mindless hungry howls are quickly replaced by shocked cries, despairing wails, and desperate prayers. The village is restored, but not without loss.

Considering all the characters had gone through up to this point, it seemed like dirty pool to spring the pair of iron cobras on them (plus it was something like 2:00 in the morning). I elected to skip the encounter, giving the players a feeling of success, but also making the victory a little bittersweet. The players succeeded, they did what had to be done, but there was a cost to it. It just felt right.



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