

The Not-So-Lonely Road

FANTASY NARRATIVES OFTEN feature winding, lonely, crumbling roads through forgotten countrysides and forsaken ruins, giving the perception that outside major settlements the world is barren and dangerous. This is true in gaming as well—most pre-written scenarios provide perhaps a sentence or two about bandits along the path or a few random encounter tables to roll for enemies lurking in the woods. The reality of medieval byways however was quite different! Roads and highways in the 12th and 13th centuries were teeming with travelers.



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Renaissance and Enlightenment conceits about the Middle Ages linger and malign the prevalence of religion at the time, misrepresenting a diverse period of intermingling cultures as people journeyed for a variety of purposes. People migrated for better employment or education opportunities, and many travelers were ostensibly religious pilgrims looking for better prices on indulgences (forgiveness for sins), to view holy relics, and visit holy sites. Modern research suggests that even these folks may have been traveling simply to see more of the world, and literature of the time reveals a vibrant traveling culture (with Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* among the most eye-opening). There were even regularly scheduled cruises run by multiple companies that ferried customers around the Mediterranean Sea.

Imbuing elements of realism and historical accuracy into the fantasy genre can help players connect to the narrative the GM creates. A port full of ships makes no sense without regularly scheduled travel and trade; it's implausible for all river and ocean travel to be restricted to charter boats for heroes. A road named 'new road' stands out as incongruous if no travelers necessitated its construction. Trade is often implied in fantasy roleplaying, but rarely do PCs encounter evidence of commerce along the road. Even stables and pinhookers (horse trainers and traders) would be useless if only treasure-seekers took regular journeys. Painting a picture of a bustling, well-traveled society resonates with a gaming group and resolves these inconsistencies.

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One of the most effective uses of random non-combat encounters is to contrast well-traveled roads between major settlements and populated countrysides with forgotten and overgrown paths, bringing the context of civilization to the wilderness. Whether through a sudden and stark change or a gradual decrease in friendly travelers, foreshadowing danger lurking around every bend is more easily accomplished by segments of travel where danger is *not* lurking around every bend—then when traffic becomes scarce adventurers can be certain there is a reason why.

Non-combat encounters along the road are also rife with alternatives to the trope of a stranger waiting at a tavern to give a quest. Shopping at a roadside stand full of seeming junk and trinkets can unearth a peculiar diary with clues to a hidden evil or long lost treasure. A torrent of refugees fleeing a pitched battle can be a call to arms for the heroic, or an invitation to plunder for the nefarious. Surveyors and researchers may need keen investigators to explore unmapped areas. Fugitives insisting they were wrongfully accused create a moral conundrum for the PCs—should they uphold the law and return the escapees to custody, champion morality and attempt to clear the accused's name, or avoid legal entanglements altogether and help the criminal disappear?

The following tables allow GMs to quickly create civilian or non-hostile encounters that effortlessly bring the concept of the Not-So-Lonesome road to life. Not all tables are used for all encounter types (follow the instructions on Table: Encounter Types), and though care has been taken to avoid nonsensical rolls it may be necessary to roll again. GM should feel free to choose instead of roll, or to use these as inspirations to create more. Some NPCs listed do not have relevant statistics—in these cases use the most relevant rules. For example, a tour guide could be a **scout** with additional languages and lore proficiencies, and a religious pilgrim could be an **acolyte** with no spellcasting ability.

TABLE: ENCOUNTER TYPES

D100	ENCOUNTER
1–5	Fugitives fleeing the law (on an odd result this includes a fool).
6–10	Refugees (commoners) displaced by a nearby war or natural disaster. Method of travel is on foot. Multiply result on <i>Table: Group Size</i> by 5. Refugees carry news of whatever events forced them to flee.
11–15	Prisoner transport. Ignore results of solo on <i>Table: Group Size</i> .
16–20	Priests or acolytes bound for monasteries, churches, or missionary work.
21–25	Cartographers and surveyors mapping or surveying the countryside for the installation of new roads or structures.
26–30	Apprentices or students joining guilds or in search of other educational opportunities.
31–35	Nobles traveling to a summer home or conclave, or on a recreational hunting expedition.
36–45	Transport of goods or money (roll once on <i>Table: Items & Travelers</i> and <i>Table: Method of Travel</i>). Money transports carry 4d6 x 1,000 gp, travel on common mounts with one carriage, and are composed of a knight or veteran with enough brutes , guards , or scouts to equal a CR of 11–14.
46–55	Roadside stand or traveling artisan, baker, farmer, or merchant en route to sell or selling their handicrafts along the highway. Roll on <i>Table: Items & Travelers</i> to determine what is available for trade and skip subsequent tables (alternatively, the GM may choose to include a junk merchant).
56–65	Traveling market of 3d4 roadside stands set up together. Roll once on <i>Table: Items & Travelers</i> for each stand. Each stand has at least one merchant +2d6 additional laborers, guards, or customers.
66–75	Tour group or religious pilgrims heading to or coming from a famous leisure or spiritual location, being led by a tour guide.
76–80	Arcane, historic, or wilderness researchers investigating the local area.
81–85	Soldiers (use the statistics for veterans and a knight) on their way from or to a battle front, garrison, or police action. Multiply result on <i>Table: Group Size</i> by 5.
86–90	Courier carrying communiques. Solo or small groups carry encrypted messages and are evasive, guarded, or suspicious (skip <i>Table: Initial Mood</i>).
91–95	Strange old woman or man traveling solo (skip <i>Table: Group Size</i>).
96–100	Adventuring party similar in size and strength to the PCs (skip <i>Table: Group Size</i>), potentially competing for the same prize or headed to the same dungeon.

TABLE: ITEMS & TRAVELERS

3D6	TYPE OF ITEM
3	Survival gear (bedrolls, fishing tackle, rope)
4	Consumable Items (antitoxins, common spell components, maybe a potion)
5	Leather goods (bags, belts, light armors, pouches, and traveler's clothes)
6–8	Fresh or prepared foods (baked goods, fresh produce, salted fish or meats, soups and stews)
9–12	Staple goods (construction materials, grain, or textiles)
13–14	Ale and common wine
15	Salt or exotic spices
16	Stationery (inks and parchments with a 5% chance of finding a local map or book of local lore)
17	Luxury items (fine clothes or wine, glassware or intricate jewelry, perfumes, or clockworks)
18	Money (trunks of coins or treasured metals melted into bars)

TABLE: METHOD OF TRAVEL

D6	METHOD OF TRAVEL
1	On foot
2	On common mounts (usually draft horses or riding horses)
3	Common mounts + carts
4	On foot with hand carts
5	Common mounts + carriages
6	Rare mounts

TABLE: GROUP SIZE

2D6	SIZE OF GROUP
2	Solo
3–5	Half number of PCs
6–8	Same number as PCs
9–10	Number of PCs +1d4
11–12	Number of PCs +1d6

TABLE: INITIAL MOOD

2D6	INITIAL MOOD
2	Confrontational (not violently hostile)
3	Evasive
4	Suspicious
5	Guarded
6–8	Neutral
9	Cordial
10	Friendly
11	Welcoming
12	Seeking Aid

TABLE: RANDOM QUIRKS

D20	QUIRK
1	Traveler shares some key information with the PCs—a secret door, a trap, or an ambush
2–5	No quirk
6–7	Traveler takes a liking to one of the PCs
8–10	Traveler takes a sidekick-like admiration for one of the PCs
11–13	Traveler demands a favor of one of the PCs
14–15	Traveler is a sworn enemy of one of the PCs (who is unaware of the enmity)
16–19	No quirk
20	A spy for the PCs' enemy surreptitiously pumps them for information

Brute

Big and dumb, these folk are often used for manual labor but make reasonable guards as well. Some are even found performing feats of strength as entertainment in taverns or at traveling fairs.

BRUTE

MEDIUM HUMANOID (ANY), ANY ALIGNMENT

Armor Class 13 (studded leather)

Hit Points 37 (5d8+15)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
19 (+4)	13 (+1)	16 (+3)	9 (-1)	12 (+1)	8 (-1)

Saving Throws Str +6, Con +6, Wis +4

Skills Athletics +8, Intimidation +2

Senses passive Perception 11

Languages any one language (usually Common)

Challenge 2 (450 XP)

Grappler. The brute has advantage on attack rolls against any creature grappled by it.

Tangler. After a successful melee attack, the brute can use a bonus action to attempt to grapple its target.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The brute attacks twice.

Brutal Strike. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +6 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 7 (1d6+4) bludgeoning damage.

Fool

When a jester realizes they've stepped over the line or has become disillusioned with the court of an amoral master, they journey until they can locate a new place to ply their trade.

FOOL

MEDIUM HUMANOID (ANY), ANY ALIGNMENT
(USUALLY CHAOTIC)

Armor Class 16 (studded leather)

Hit Points 26 (4d8+8)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
11 (+0)	18 (+4)	15 (+2)	13 (+1)	10 (+0)	16 (+3)

Saving Throws Con +4, Int +3, Wis +2

Skills Acrobatics +8, Deception +5, Insight +2, Perception +2, Performance +7, Persuasion +5, Sleight of Hand +8

Senses passive Perception 12

Languages any one language (usually Common)

Challenge 3 (700 XP)

Innate Spellcasting. The fool's innate spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 13, +5 to hit with spell attacks). The fool can innately cast the following spells, requiring no material components:

At will: *vicious mockery*

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The fool attacks three times.

Dagger (12). *Melee or Ranged Weapon Attack:* +6 to hit, reach 5 ft. or range 20/60 ft., one target. *Hit:* 6 (1d4+4) piercing damage.

Junk Merchant

The junk merchant (sometimes known as a snake-oil salesman) carts around a load of useless trinkets but is convinced they are valuable. They regale unfortunate browsers with a tale of each torn and tattered garment (*"that cloak was worn by the great Elf Lord Filarion Farjeon as he rode to market the day before the infamous Battle of Breaking Tree"*), each bent and tarnished ring (*"that was given to my cousin's uncle's great-grandmother by the Duke of Galfridus"*), and each acrid and astringent tincture (*"that's a remedy for snake bite and colic made from the hairs of a Great Western Ape—quite rare I tell you!"*).

A junk merchant has a 5% chance of carrying something of actual value. Roll 2d6 to see what the junk merchant primarily carries then choose an appropriate artwork, exotic weapon, gemstone, magic item, potion, or other rare and valuable piece of merchandise to hide amongst their trinkets. It should appear to be just as dusty, fetid, rusty, and threadbare as the others. The merchant negotiates shrewdly and tirelessly for this item, though a socially skilled shopper may walk away with quite the bargain.

JUNK MERCHANT

MEDIUM HUMANOID (ANY), ANY NEUTRAL ALIGNMENT

Armor Class 11 (leather)

Hit Points 4 (1d8)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
10 (+0)	10 (+0)	10 (+0)	16 (+3)	15 (+2)	16 (+3)

Saving Throws Wis +4

Skills Arcana +5, Deception +5, History +5, Insight +4, Perception +4, Performance +5, Persuasion +5

Senses passive Perception 14

Languages Common and one additional language

Challenge 0 (10 XP)

ACTIONS

Dagger. *Melee or Ranged Weapon Attack:* +0 to hit, reach 5 ft. or range 20/60 ft., one target. *Hit:* 2 (1d4) piercing damage.

EQUIPMENT

Possessions. The junk merchant carries 5d6 random items of a type (roll 2d6 or choose). The vast majority of these items should be so degraded as to be useless:

- 2 Martial weapons / martial ranged weapons
- 3 Simple weapons /simple ranged weapons
- 4 Written items (books, diaries, scrolls)
- 6–8 Wearable items (armor, clothing, jewelry)
- 9–10 Useable items (instruments, pack items such as rope, tool kits)
- 11 Consumable items (common spell components, potions, tinctures)
- 12 Artworks (amateur paintings, books of poems, sculptures) 🎨

