

THE ANATOMY OF ADVENTURE



M.T. BLACK

THOUGHTS ON ADVENTURE SCENARIO DESIGN
FOR ROLEPLAYING GAMES

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COVER BY MATTHEW WHITBY

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Foreword



The Horns of Elfland

*O, sweet and far from cliff and scar
The horns of Elfland faintly blowing!*

Alfred Lord Tennyson

Certain episodes from childhood are indelibly carved into the mind, and for me the following scene is recorded in deep, vorpal strokes. I was about nine years old and walking with my mother through a narrow, dirty shopping arcade in southern Sydney. We happened to go into a tiny toy store, and while my mother talked to the shop assistant, I wandered up and down the two cluttered aisles.

Then I saw it. Sitting in a wire display atop a wooden shelf was the *Dungeons & Dragons Basic Set*. I learned many years later that this was the second version of the *Basic Set* and was written by Tom Moldvay. At the time, all I saw was the stunning Erol Otus cover, which depicts a warrior and a sorceress in a dark cavern fighting a

draconic beast as it emerges from an underground lake. The colors are sumptuous—the warm, subdued purples of the cavern walls, the poisonous green skin of the dragon, the rich crimson robes of the sorceress, and the kaleidoscopic pile of glittering gems spilling out from an old treasure chest.

The back of the box was just as exciting, as it proclaimed:

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS Fantasy Adventure game is probably unlike any other game you've played before.

In D&D adventures players take the roles of elves, dwarves, halflings, or humans. They will wander through dark dungeons, meet strange wizards, and battle ferocious dragons. Playing D&D is like writing a novel with each player contributing a part...

So enter the Gateway to Adventure—step into the world of DUNGEONS & DRAGONS fantasy role playing game, a world of endless excitement and thrilling fun.

These vivid images awakened a yearning in my young heart that I barely understood. At that moment, I heard the “horns of Elfland,” to quote Tennyson, and I desperately wished to step through the promised “Gateway to Adventure.” It was another two years before I

was actually able to play the game, but once I had, it was the beginning of a life-long love affair.

That is how I started playing the game. But how does one move from player to designer? It is a perennial question in the Dungeons & Dragons community, maybe because our game is inherently creative. Whatever side of the DM screen you sit upon, you have built something original and wonderful at some time, and probably many things. And at some point, you have idly thought about sharing your creation with the world.

As a teenager in Sydney, I filled endless notebooks with maps, monsters, and adventures. Getting published was my dream, but it seemed practically impossible. The local RPG-publishing industry was so tiny as to be non-existent and breaching the walls of the overseas giants required resources I lacked. America felt as far away as the Moon.

It is utterly cliched and utterly true to say that the internet changed everything. By the 2000s, publishers, game designers, and would-be game designers were all rubbing shoulders in cyberspace. It mattered less than ever whether you were in Sydney or Seattle, though English was and remains the common tongue of the hobby. Many of us found it astounding to be able to talk online to those who had founded the RPG industry. It was a bit dream-like, as if figures from history were stepping out of treasured old books and into your life.

As the noughties turned into the teens, I found myself on the fringe of the old school D&D community. At home I was playing my beloved Basic D&D, and taking my players on a nostalgia-laced ride through the adventures I'd adored as a kid—*The Keep on the Borderlands*, *The Lost City*, *Slave Pits of the Undercity*, and so on. I was also dabbling in game design and published a few things online, though these early writings had few redeeming features.

Two things then happened to shift my gameplay habits. First, the old school D&D community, blessed by a small amount of success and prosperity, began to fracture quite unpleasantly and I started to back away. More importantly, Wizards of the Coast released the Fifth Edition of Dungeons & Dragons, and many old school players like me found the new edition scratched our itch in a way that Fourth Edition and Third Edition had not.

I immediately commenced a very satisfying Fifth Edition campaign. I also revived my dormant dreams of publishing something for Dungeons & Dragons. The communications revolution of the previous twenty years made this more feasible than it was back in the 1980s, though it still looked difficult.

The situation improved again in 2016 when the Dungeon Masters Guild was opened. For a share of the cover price, Wizards of the Coast permitted anyone to publish and market D&D-compatible material. They called this “Community Created Content” and the program can legitimately be described as revolutionary.

I straightaway began publishing on the DMs Guild. My first effort, a book of feats released a few days after the Guild started, was terrible. My second publication, a small adventure called *Temple of the Nightbringers*, was not terrible. It sold well, received good reviews, and I began to grow an audience. The horns of Elfland rang out once more, though this time I was playing a few notes myself.

It is nearly five years since I released that adventure, and I have continued to learn, to write, and to publish. Adventures have been my forte, and I have released more of those than any other type of product. I have enjoyed more success than I could have imagined, and at time of writing I have sold over a hundred thousand books and have more than thirty-five platinum best-sellers to my name. And that, in summary, is how I became a game designer!

Now, I am often asked what advice I would give someone who wants to start publishing RPG adventures themselves. I always suggest the following practical steps:

Develop your writing skills. I have encountered many people with fantastic ideas who cannot translate those ideas to the page. Roleplaying game designers are writers first and foremost. Just as a carpenter needs to learn how to use a hammer and saw effectively, a writer needs to learn how to use verbs, nouns, and various other grammatical tools with skill. Fortunately, there is a lot of material around, across all media, that can help you write better.

Learn the style guide. This may seem mundane but learning and adhering to the style guide of whatever system you are writing for will immediately boost the professionalism of your product. For Dungeons & Dragons, the style guide is available on the Dungeon Masters Guild. I also highly recommend *Writing with Style: An Editor's Advice for RPG Writers* by Ray Vallese, which contains many general principles applicable to most roleplaying games.

Read good adventures. Find good adventures and start reading them. They will teach you a lot—things like how to structure encounters, how to describe NPCs, how to tie locations together, and so on. Look for modern adventures that are popular and well-rated. You should also consider reading classic adventures from previous editions—you can find “best of” lists all over the internet. I still read old adventures all the time, and I learn so much from them.

Start short and start soon. It is not unusual to encounter new writers whose first project rivals a WOTC hardback in size and scope. A small number of newbies actually pull these mammoth projects off, but that is exceedingly rare. I strongly recommend you start small. My first published adventure was about 3,500 words in length and ran to 7 pages. People still buy and play it to this day! Start short and start soon. You will learn a lot by simply doing.

That is the foundational advice I give to everyone who asks, but I have much more to say on this subject. A couple of years ago, I started a newsletter called *The Anatomy of Adventure* as a way to keep in

touch with those who liked my work. Along with discount codes and product updates, I began including the occasional essay on game design, often dissecting my early adventures with the sharp eye of experience and identifying what I did well along with what I did poorly. These proved popular and more than a few readers suggested I put them in a book. That is the genesis of what is now before you, though I've substantially re-written and expanded all of the original essays.

This volume presents an eclectic rather than systematic look at the process of adventure design, but that is pretty typical of the few books in this genre. Having said that, I do provide a step by step "How to write a dungeon" guide in chapter 10, which seems a fitting finale. But you will find the other chapters just as practical, I think.

If you have enjoyed this foreword, you will probably enjoy the rest of this book. I know that many new adventure writers have found these essays valuable, but I hope and believe that veteran designers will find a few useful nuggets as well. Or, failing that, maybe you will just enjoy a few hours spent with someone else who is passionate about this craft. And perhaps, if we are lucky, you might hear the horns of Elfland faintly blowing once more.

Chapter 1



Goblins in a Cave

It's none of their business that you have to learn how to write. Let them think you were born that way.

Ernest Hemingway

How do you learn to write a roleplaying game adventure? Maybe we should start with a broader question—how do you learn any craft? The primary method is via imitation. The master crafter shows the apprentice how to do something and the apprentice then tries to do it for themselves. When it comes to artistic works, there is a fun and helpful word that sheds light on this process: *pastiche*. Wikipedia tells me a pastiche is “a work of visual art, literature, theatre, or music that imitates the style or character of the work of one or more other artists.”

It is a bit of a problematic term, though, because the word is often used to deride or dismiss a work. That is rather a shame, because

pastiche is a great way to learn. The renowned fashion designer Yohji Yamamoto said, “Start copying what you love. Copy copy copy copy. At the end of the copy you will find yourself.” I will shamelessly admit that my early adventures were pastiches of the D&D adventures I loved as a kid. Sometimes the influences are obvious, sometimes a bit more subtle, but pastiches they were. And as I wrote them, and kept writing them, I finally found my own voice.

In the Foreword, I mentioned my love-at-first-sight experience with the Erol Otus cover of the *Basic Set* when I was nine. I did not dare ask my mother to buy the box, however. It cost \$10, which seemed an impossible amount to someone who received 50 cents per week pocket money.

But a couple of years later, a kid at school who owned the *Basic Set* offered to teach me how to play in the school library. My first ever adventure was *The Keep on the Borderlands*. There were two PCs in the party, bolstered by 10 men-at-arms we had hired. My character was a first level fighter called Zargo, and we started by raiding the southernmost cave on the bottom level of the Caves of Chaos, which is a goblin lair. It was a life-altering experience as my eleven-year-old self entered an almost platonic realm where imagination and will combined in a unique and spirit-expanding way. But I am preaching to the choir.

In some ways, all of my game design efforts ever since have been aimed at recapturing that magical half-hour I spent fighting goblins

in the school library. My first *published* attempt to do so was *Temple of the Nightbringers*, which I uploaded to the Dungeon Masters Guild on January 17th, 2016.

I wrote the whole adventure over a weekend, in a burst of energy catalyzed by years of pent-up creativity. I did not think in terms of explicit design goals back then, but I recall that I wanted a low-level goblin adventure that invoked the experience I had playing *The Keep on the Borderlands*. It was a self-conscious pastiche, and the following is a “blow-by-blow” account of how I put it together.

I started by devising a hook: the local lord asks the characters to find and neutralize some goblins who have been attacking merchants on the Long Road, which is a major trade route in the Forgotten Realms. It is a cliched adventure hook, but it immediately captures the tone of the game. The presence of goblins tells you we are in a fantasy setting. The fact that they are raiding caravans tells you that the world is a dangerous place and people cannot simply travel about with impunity. Finally, having the characters sent to deal with the problem casts them in a heroic mold. They are not regular people; they are the *saviors* of regular people.

The adventure opens with the party heading toward the hamlet of Melton, where they are told they will learn more about the goblins. This sort of *in media res* opening, with the characters already going somewhere and undertaking some task, is particularly good for one-shots and for the opening adventure of a campaign. You will notice

this technique is used in both the *Lost Mines of Phandelver* and *Hoard of the Dragon Queen*.

Melton (which I invented) is a tiny hamlet midway between the towns of Longsaddle and Triboar, a "middle of nowhere" sort of place. It serves the same "home base" function as the Keep does in *The Keep on the Borderlands*, though Melton is much smaller and less sophisticated. I followed a pretty classic "town and down" pattern of adventure design here—wander around town and pick up some information, then head down the dungeon. It is a particularly good pattern for your first adventure. Or your thirty-fifth adventure.

Upon arrival, the characters immediately meet the town constable, and I will tell you now that she is the main villain of the piece. This whole "the good guy was really the bad guy all along" is a bit of a rookie move on my part, as it can easily go wrong. Experienced players will probably smell a rat immediately and might focus their attention on the constable rather than chasing down the goblins. An experienced DM can make that work without much trouble, but new DMs might struggle. I kept returning to this trope in my early adventures. I think I have broken the habit now!

I put some good color in the muddy little town of Melton. I was trying to capture the vibe of the pub scene in *An American Werewolf in London*, with creepy and peculiar locals who are wary of outsiders. The characters learn some interesting tidbits, including the fact that

the leader of the goblins always wears a mask! Yes, it is all very obvious, but it is fun to play.

The characters finally pick up an NPC guide who knows where the goblin caves are, and away they go. NPC guides are an excellent element to include in your adventures as they are a useful mouthpiece for the DM, and players always love getting help. This NPC, a half-elf scout named Dawn Mistwalker, stepped straight out of central casting. I would work a bit harder these days to bring her to life by giving her some sort of distinct mannerism or feature. Perhaps she shaves her head or has dark, swirling tattoos on her face.

There follows a short trek to the goblin hideout, interrupted by a rather nice little fight with a bugbear on a fallen tree bridge. Adding a terrain detail like that increases immersion, and in this instance, it affects the combat in a meaningful way as the party must cross the bridge single file. If I were writing this trek today, I might include a choice of routes and a more unusual monster. Perhaps the NPC guide says, "We can take the long way over the bugbear's bridge or take the shortcut past the giant killer beehive." I did not realize at the time how important it was to build meaningful choices like that into your adventures. I talk a lot more about this in chapter 7.

The adventurers arrive at the dungeon—and we must take a few moments to talk about the architecture of the location and how it shaped the adventure. My original vision was of a little goblin warren

that looked somewhat like the goblin lair in *The Keep on the Borderlands*, but I could not draw it myself and I did not know anyone else who could. Fortunately, the DMs Guild includes a few old maps that you can use in your products. The best one available resembled a ruined temple more than anything. Fine—the goblins were living in an abandoned underground temple. But whose temple? I looked over the evil gods in the Forgotten Realms and selected Shar, mistress of the night.

I did a little more research and learned that some of Shar's elite followers were called the Nightbringers. I decided this temple was one of their old bases, and suddenly I had a name for my adventure: *Temple of the Nightbringers*. It is a really good title! Furthermore, since Shar is an evil goddess, I decided there is probably some malignant magic still floating around the place, allowing me to introduce some undead creatures and other strangeness.

There are two important things to note here. First, although I started out with the goblin caves in *The Keep on the Borderlands* as my model, the location quickly evolved into something else altogether. As Yamamoto said, "Copy copy copy copy. At the end of the copy you will find yourself." Folk sometimes tell me they cannot get started because they cannot think of a really good idea. Start by imitating someone else's good idea. If you put the work into it, it will develop into something unique.

The second thing to note is that a constraint (I could not draw a map) turned into an asset. When I was forced to use the temple map, I ended up creating a bunch of new lore to make it all fit together. The result was a more interesting dungeon than the goblin warren I originally envisaged. In my experience, constraints fuel creativity. This is because you are forced to come up with smart little ideas to overcome the constraint, and these ideas take you in directions you might not normally have considered. Typical constraints for indie-creators involve cover art, word length, monster availability, and all sorts of other things. Rather than a liability, your constraints often turn out to be assets.

Having taken care of the architecture, I needed to figure out who was inhabiting the dungeon. Goblins, wargs, the goblin chief, and a couple of hobgoblin bodyguards make up the goblin gang. These days, I often put a “monster roster” together before I start writing out the dungeon, which has all the monsters I want to include. Seeing them listed together is helpful, giving me a strong sense of the “flavor” of what I am creating. Then, as I write the dungeon, I simply pick monsters off the roster as needed. I find this keeps me in the “creative flow” more effectively than having to stop and think “what monster would be here?”

I wanted some non-goblinoid-related creatures as well. It was always on my mind to include zombies, but you cannot just put them in a room next door to the goblins, as if everyone is living at the

monster hotel. Or can you? The Shar theme suggested a solution. All the necromantic magic floating around the temple caused some corpses to animate as zombies. Where did the corpses come from? Perhaps they were goblin prisoners. And suddenly it all clicked. The goblins locked these prisoners in the room next door to the barracks and listened gleefully as they died of dehydration and starvation. Hey—goblins are not cute, they are nasty!

A couple of weeks later, though, they began hearing noises coming from the locked room with the corpses. In terror, they nailed the door shut and put up "danger - keep out" signs. Now they cannot sleep at night, the tormentors having become the tormented. That is how you can have zombies living next door to goblins. And that little cycle is very indicative of the creative process at work.

I used a table in appendix A of the *Dungeon Masters Guide* to figure out the original purpose of each room in the temple, whether it be a barracks, a kitchen, or whatever. I use appendix A a lot when I create adventures these days—I talk about this more in chapter 10. One suggestion from the purpose table was a *summoning room*, and it so happened I had a place on my map with a pool in it. I decided that this was a summoning pool, used by the old high priestess of Shar to conjure fiends. The water is green and glowing, and it turns out she was mid-way through a summoning when the temple met its untimely end (whatever caused that). So, the pool is primed—

someone just needs to touch the water, and the spell will complete, causing an imp to jump out.

These little mysteries (a locked door that says, "keep out," a glowing pool of water) are essential to D&D. They are part of the *exploration pillar* of the game—the players see something that piques their curiosity and want to investigate. If you want your dungeon to hold the player's interest, you need to pepper it with little secrets and mysteries like this.

I also included a little puzzle. A weird black disc found in one room turns out to be the key that turns off a force field protecting a treasure in another place. "Lock and key" is the most basic puzzle there is, but players find it very satisfying. It is strange that I do not see more "lock and key" in D&D adventures, and I think designers sometimes unnecessarily reject the simple things that work. I had this in mind when I later wrote *Blue Alley* (co-authored with Alan Patrick and inspired by Ed Greenwood's original). The adventure is premised around hunting for various keys to progress and, based on the feedback we have received, it worked a treat.

There is lots of treasure in this dungeon—far too much. I was still stuck in the old school D&D mindset at the time. In the early versions of the game, you had to pour on the gold because it was the primary means to acquire XP. I have got better guidance now around how much treasure to include in a dungeon (based on the Adventurer's

League guidelines). But if you run *Temple of the Nightbringers*, you might want to nerf the cash a bit!

Ok, we have ticked off many of the major elements you expect in a dungeon. We have combat, we have a trap, and we have a puzzle. What else do we need? Someone to talk to! Sure, we have already hit the social pillar pretty hard in town, but I really like putting social encounters in the middle of dungeons. Breaks things up nicely and is very handy if the DM suddenly needs to communicate something to the party, or to bring them back on track.

I went for a pretty obvious social encounter, namely, a pair of prisoners. About 90% of non-hostile NPCs you meet in dungeons seem to be prisoners! But there are other options, such as:

- ✦ An elemental bound to a room or object.
- ✦ An explorer seeking information.
- ✦ A fugitive from the law, hiding out.
- ✦ The ghost of a previous inhabitant.
- ✦ An inanimate object, given the power of speech.
- ✦ A lost monster who has wandered into the dungeon.
- ✦ Another party of adventurers.
- ✦ A nature spirit or fey who is attached to a natural feature.
- ✦ An ancient guardian who has inhabited the dungeon for eons.

I am sure you can think of more.

In this instance, the two prisoners are working in the goblin kitchen, making a stew. They were captured from a caravan, and it turns out their families will reward the adventurers for returning them to Triboar. This would have been a better hook for the adventure, by the way. Families approach you in Triboar and offer you 200 gp to find their missing sons, last seen heading north on the Long Road. No mention of goblins, so you have the delicious mystery of what happened to them alongside much tighter "win conditions" for the adventure as a whole.

The characters finally confront the big bad boss and her pet worg. After she is defeated, the great unmasking happens, and they discover it was the village constable all along! It turns out she stumbled upon the temple ruins a while ago and found the "Mask of Shar," a magic item that gave her a buff when she put it on, but also slowly turned her evil. She gathered a gang of goblins about her and commenced her secret life as a bandit.

Someone wryly described this as a "Scooby-Doo ending," and I think that is accurate. Back in the days of the original Scooby-Doo cartoon, the heroes would always catch the monster, pull off its mask and exclaim something like, "It's Mr. Jones, the real estate agent!" The ending is very cheesy but, in my experience, it works ok. And it is easily omitted if you do not like it.

Temple of the Nightbringers was very well received upon release. At the time of writing, it has sold several thousand copies and has a

solid 90% approval rating. Lots of people have told me what an effective introductory adventure it is, and for many people, it has been their first experience of Dungeons & Dragons. It was a really good debut adventure and I remain proud of it. I had some trouble with the sequel, however.

Chapter 2



Second Album Syndrome

The second album is the hardest to write.

Theophilus London

I was surprised and pleased by the strong response *Temple of the Nightbringers* received, so I immediately sat down and tried to write another adventure. The result was *Terror at Triboar*, written over a weekend and published on February 6th, 2016. The initial feedback was a bit underwhelming.

There is a thing called “second album syndrome” in the music industry. The idea is that many years’ worth of creative energy goes into your debut album, and then you stumble when you have to turn around and try and do it all again, in a much shorter time frame, for the follow-up. I think I fell victim to this with *Terror at Triboar*.

Having said that, I do not regret publishing it as quickly I did. The inverse problem is getting so anxious about making the follow-up

“good enough” that you do not publish at all. I have seen many, many people fall into this trap, especially those who have a huge hit with their first product. I would much rather publish a bit too quickly than become too nervous to publish at all.

It is also worth noting that there are a lot of factors outside your control when it comes to sales. I have often seen follow-up products that are better quality do more poorly than their predecessor. Trying to nail down all the elements that affect sales feels like an impossible quest, especially in the microscopic market of indie TTRPG publishing. It is tempting to play endless games of “maybe it was because...” Maybe it was because it is school vacation. Maybe it was because school just went back. Maybe it was because the weather was really good this week. Maybe it was because the weather was bad. And so on and so on. Most such discussions are pointless.

I have thought about this a lot and come to the following conclusion. Assuming your product displays a basic level of competence (writing, layout, editing, etc.), your success comes down to either good luck (you happened to hit the zeitgeist that week) or good marketing. There is almost a spectrum when it comes to sales success, with luck at one end and marketing at the other. The more marketing you do, the less you are reliant on luck. I talk more about marketing in chapter 4.

Back to *Terror at Triboar*. This adventure was very much inspired by *Village of Hommlet*, though the resemblance is a bit obscure. The

great memory I have of *Hommel* is wandering around the village in a very freeform way and interacting with a variety of interesting people. It may have been my first experience of an urban adventure and I wanted to capture something of that vibe.

But there were a few other influences and constraints. I selected Triboar as the location primarily because of the alliteration it generated in the title. More significantly, I decided early on that I wanted to create a horror adventure because I did not have much experience in that genre, and I wanted to stretch myself. I had some images from *Creepshow* running through my head which I was hoping to work into the plot. I hoped to create something a bit disturbing—though it did not really work out that way, as you will see!

The adventure starts with some infodump via a too-big chunk of boxed text. There is an election coming up in a couple of weeks for the office of Lord Protector, who is the ruler of Triboar. By tradition, this seven-yearly event occurs on St. Oswin's Day, which celebrates the founding of the town. I made most of this lore up, by the way, based on a couple of hints from the canonical *Forgotten Realms* books.

The characters are summoned to meet the current Lord Protector, Darathra Shendrel. She tells them of some strange happenings in town. People have gone missing, livestock has been killed, and there is a mysterious figure wandering the fields at night. The townsfolk are nervous and whisper about a legendary creature called the

"Terror" that is said to haunt the town. The voters are unhappy and Darathra wants the characters to figure out what is really going on—before the election takes place! Yes, I have made her rather more cynical than how she is portrayed in *Storm King's Thunder*.

Darathra has a single lead for them to chase up, a crop farmer whose wife and child went missing a few nights ago. When I write investigation scenarios these days, I usually make sure the quest giver has at least two leads to share, and sometimes three. Whenever you can, you want to give the players meaningful choices to make.

The adventurers then wander about town and the surrounding farms, following leads and picking up bits of information about the Terror. I created a dozen encounters for the town, labelling half of them "clue encounters" and the other half "random encounters." The clue encounters eventually lead to an old graveyard outside town, while the random encounters were there to spice things up.

Players can get frustrated by too many meaningless encounters when they are in the middle of a juicy investigation, so I suggested to DMs that they only use a few of the random encounters. Despite this, I have heard about groups getting bogged down in town, as they grind through *all* the random encounters. Some Dungeon Masters have a "completionist" attitude, and that is something to be aware of when you create a list of encounters like that. These days I would be more likely to provide just two or three such encounters.

There is one interesting random encounter with "Sharkey's Men" (thank you, Tolkien). Sharkey is a criminal boss who is backing a rival candidate in the election and he warns the party off from helping the Lord Protector. If I were writing the adventure today, I might well develop that into a subplot of one or two encounters, climaxing in a showdown with Sharkey.

I did not really know how to plan an investigative adventure back then, and I found it pretty difficult to link the clues together. These days, when I create an investigation, I draw a "clue map" in the form of a flow chart with boxes and lines. The boxes are locations while the lines connecting them are clues, with everything eventually leading to the resolution. The chart ends up looking a bit like a dungeon map. My goal is always to give the adventurers a few different paths to get to the final goal, so they have meaningful choices to make along the way.

In *Terror at Triboar*, the clues ultimately lead them to an old graveyard outside of town where they meet a wraith who explains what is going on. The Terror is actually Sir Oswin, the founder of Triboar! He is under a curse that causes him to rise from his tomb every 50 years as a ghast and menace the town.

The adventurers stake out the tomb of Sir Oswin and destroy him when he rises that night. It is a bit like modern Americans staking out Mount Vernon and destroying the risen corpse of George Washington. At this point, I realized my adventure was not very

terrifying, and some elements of it were quite amusing. I had somehow ended up at the *Army of Darkness* end of the horror spectrum.

Once I realized this, I decided to drive the irony home a bit more. The Lord Protector is grateful for the destruction of the Terror and invites the adventurers to give the Sir Oswin commemorative speech on Election Day. And so, they stand at the tomb, speaking the praises of the person whose undead remains they recently destroyed! It is all very silly in a very D&D sort of way.

One interesting footnote. I released this adventure in February of 2016. In September that year, WOTC released *Storm King's Thunder* which detailed the entire town of Triboar, and I had to do some hasty revisions to ensure it all reconciled. This is one of the few times I have made extensive changes to an adventure after publication.

Terror at Triboar did not get the same acclaim as *Temple of the Nightbringers* on release, but it received better reviews as time went on. It currently has an 88% rating on the DMs Guild and is a platinum bestseller. I have always considered it one of my lesser adventures, but re-reading it now, I find a lot of things to like. I especially like that I put together a fun, easy-to-run investigative adventure in about 3,000 words. As my writing became more fluent, it became much harder to keep the word count down.

Terror at Triboar may have failed as a horror adventure, but failure is merely an invitation to try again. And as it happened, my next adventure would succeed brilliantly in this genre.

Chapter 3



Nightmare in Amber

If you write one story, it may be bad; if you write a hundred, you have the odds in your favor.

Edgar Rice Burroughs

I released *Shadows on the Long* on March 2nd, 2016. It was my third published adventure and the first one I consider to be *really* good. It was very much inspired by *Castle Amber*, the wonderfully imaginative module written by Tom Moldvay and published by TSR back in 1981. Moldvay based large parts of his adventure on the stories of Clark Ashton Smith.

I see *Castle Amber* as a sort of "haunted house," and I chose that genre for *Shadows on the Long Road*. I based the backstory on a Clark Ashton Smith tale called *The Nameless Offspring*. In my adventure, a rich warlock named Gideon Saltmarsh marries against the wishes of his fiendish patron, and his wife later dies giving birth

to a horrible creature. There is more than a hint that the patron might somehow be the father. Gideon raises this infernal Offspring as his own, and discovers it has rather grisly appetites...

The party gets involved when they find themselves surrounded by mists and come across a well-lit mansion. Yes, the old "surrounded by mists" adventure hook—it was fresh in the late 70s! They knock on the mansion door and are invited inside by an old man, Gideon Saltmarsh, and his gnome servant, Grundy. Gideon seems friendly enough, sharing a feast with the characters and playing some games with them. The most memorable of these is a wrestling match with Gideon's servant, a minor flesh golem called Magnus.

The adventurers retire for the evening, but sometime after midnight they are set upon by a group of thugs. After the thugs are dealt with, the adventure becomes a dungeon crawl through the mansion, with the adventurers encountering all sorts of nasty things. A few highlights include a ghoul chained up in a room, a grim chapel with an evil tome, and the ghost of Gideon's wife, whispering sadly to herself in her old bedchamber.

As the characters explore, they gather clues and slowly piece together the disturbing backstory. They finally make their way to the basement and find a pen filled with terrified people who Gideon plans to butcher and feed to the Offspring. Here is how I described this scene:

A row of iron bars cordons off one side of the room, and beyond those bars is the most pitiful sight imaginable. A great mass of people, all stripped naked, are crammed into the pen, wallowing in the mud and their own filth. Some are moaning, some are calling out in terror, and others merely rock back and forth in silent anguish.

It is a harrowing scene, and several people have written to tell me how much it affected them. It was based on the basement scene from *The Road*, which disturbed me terribly when I first saw it. The movies and TV do spectacle well, so do not be afraid to riff off something you see there.

A large ogre, who serves as Gideon's butcher, is in the next room, which is slick with blood and gore. Having dealt with the ogre, the characters come upon the Offspring itself, a vicious yet pathetic creature. Upon killing it and Gideon, the mansion begins collapsing. Should the characters escape, they find themselves (and anyone they rescued) back on the main road, the mist gone and no sign of the mansion.

It is the backstory that really makes this adventure work. Many of the villains, even the genuinely evil ones, are tragic figures themselves, which gives the whole thing a grim poignancy. I based the map on a real medieval manor map, and then let the backstory drive the encounters in each room. For example, there was a chapel

on the map, so I came up with a suitably macabre encounter with an ancient altar and an evil book. There is a lady's chamber on the map, and I placed the ghost of Gideon's wife in there, floating around next to her wedding dress. This is another example of a constraint (the map) driving creativity.

I littered the mansion with clues about the backstory. These took the form of paintings, books, furniture, engravings, NPCs, and so on. Secrets and clues are a great way to transform a good dungeon into a great dungeon. They do not have to reveal the whole backstory in an info-dump manner; you just need to share a few key elements and you will find players are quite ingenious at putting together the whole story. Mike Shea calls secrets and clues the Dungeon Master's "secret weapon" and I think he makes a strong case. Mike notes:

Secrets are powerful magic... they build a rich texture for PCs to discover. When we think about the tools we need for the three pillars of exploration, interaction, and combat; a list of ten secrets is as valuable to exploration as monster stat blocks are to combat.

Bringing the physical dungeon to life is always a challenge to do well. By this stage, I had discovered the simple trick of using google images to help me describe a location. So, for Gideon's bed chamber, I'd google something like "medieval lords' bedroom" and use the

image to help explain what it looked like. I still use this method today when I am struggling to visualize something.

Looking at the descriptions now, some of them are a bit wordy, but many of them are concise and evocative. Concise descriptions make the location very usable at the table, as the DM can quickly grasp them and keep the game flowing. Evocative descriptions bring the location to life in everyone's mind. Concise and evocative—this is my mantra, especially when it comes to boxed text.

This adventure is by no means perfect, and I can see some glaring mistakes. For example, I literally describe the front hall twice, once at the start when the characters are shown through to the dining hall, and later on when the adventure moves into "dungeon crawl" mode. The first description is completely redundant, and these days I would just say, "Grundy leads the characters to the Dining Room (location 1 on the map)". I make the same mistake with the dining room description, and I would find a way to tighten that up as well.

My mechanical inexperience is also evident. I wanted the party to face a flesh golem, but since the adventure is only level 3, I went to the trouble of stating up a "minor flesh golem." What a waste of time—if doing it now I would just use a regular flesh golem with minimum hit points and change the melee weapon immunity to resistance. Also, the flesh golem, the butcher, and the Offspring are all similar monsters—big brute-style things. If I were doing it again, I would combine the flesh golem and the butcher into one character,

and make the Offspring a bit more distinctive, perhaps even Lovecraftian.

There is a very deadly encounter in the adventure that has resulted in numerous TPKs. The adventurers enter Gideon's study while looking for him; Gideon is there, but invisible. He quietly leaves through the door, turns, and throws a fireball at the party! I've seen experienced players pick up on the clues that he is present (burning fire, the lantern is on, there is an open book on the desk, no other exit from the room), but it is a very tough encounter for a level 3 party. In hindsight, I would keep the encounter, but suggest to the DM that if a TPK occurs, the party should miraculously wake up in the pen, naked and on 1 hit point.

There is another design issue that has led to some grimly amusing finales. The basement has a gateway to the infernal plane of Minauros, which Gideon uses to meet with his patron. As I mentioned above, the mansion and basement begin shaking themselves apart when the Offspring is killed. A few parties have run out the gateway, thinking it was an exit back to our world—and found themselves in a hellish swamp with the tunnel behind them collapsing. Oh dear! If I were revising the adventure, I would keep the gateway to hell, but put bars across it.

But these are all forgivable flaws, I think. The adventure continues to be popular, and I receive great feedback about it even now, several years after publication. I am a little shocked at how dark some of it

is, but I remain proud of it. It is a platinum best-seller and currently has a 94% approval rating.

My next adventure was much lighter in tone, but before I published it, I planned out a small marketing experiment that ended up altering the course of my creative career.

Chapter 4



The Maker and the Marketer

Almost anyone can be an author; the business is to collect money and fame from this state of being.

A. A. Milne

I have seen the following sad story play out on the Dungeon Masters Guild quite a few times. An enthusiastic newcomer publishes their first creation, full of hope and expectation. They see it slip off the front page with few sales, and then begin desperately asking other creators on social media, “Any tips for promoting my product??”

Unfortunately, three days after launch is usually too late to develop a marketing strategy.

If you are creating and publishing your own books, you are wearing two hats. As creator, your responsibility is to make a quality product. As publisher, your responsibility (in this context) is to market the product. You are both the maker and the marketer.

These roles sometimes come into conflict. Marketing is a bit of a dirty word in the indie TTRPG community. It conjures up visions of greedy multi-nationals foisting soulless products on the unsuspecting masses. For many indie-creators, the desired product lifecycle seems to be something like this: you release your product with no fanfare, it spreads virally, and ultimately becomes a smash hit with you doing no promotion at all, just modestly watching from the sidelines.

Let me say that I do not think this attitude comes from laziness—rather, I think there is a vague feeling that marketing is cheating and should not be necessary if your product is of sufficient quality.

This is clearly nonsense. I have seen many *superb* products disappear into the abyss of low sales. There is no inherent justice in the marketplace, no guarantee that hard work and talent will be rewarded. The history of creative endeavor is replete with stories of brilliant artists who were unrecognized and unappreciated during their lifetime. If you want to avoid this grim fate, you need to make an effort to connect your *product* with the people who might *like* your product. This is the essence of marketing.

My first few books sold reasonably well, and certainly better than I expected. But they were nowhere near the top 10 of the DMs Guild, nor even the top 50! At the time, I do not think I used the phrase *marketing*, but I knew I needed some method of generating more sales if I were to get myself a hit. Just pushing products out into the

marketplace and hoping I would eventually get struck by lightning seemed like a recipe for frustration and failure.

About this time, I heard an interview with Monte Cook, who has run some of the most successful TTRPG campaigns ever on Kickstarter. Monte noted that he had struggled to understand how to make Kickstarter work for him until he began to treat it like a game. A game has rules and win conditions, meaning you can create strategies to succeed. Once Monte engaged his game-playing brain, once he figured out the rules and the win conditions, he devised a successful Kickstarter strategy.

I took the same approach with the Dungeon Masters Guild, asking, “How does this ‘game’ work and how can I win?” My insights were not especially startling or innovative, but they paved the road to success for me. I will share some of the early lessons I learned here.

The essential marketing strategy is to expose your product to as many potential buyers as possible. How to do that in my context? Well, the two uppermost strips on the DMs Guild website at that stage were the “Most Popular DMs Guild Titles” and the “Newest DMs Guild Titles.” These were the most visible parts of the site. Being high on those strips gave you great exposure to an audience that was interested in buying D&D books. I could not control what appeared on the “Most Popular” strip, but I could exercise a small amount of control over the “Newest” strip—by releasing new products!

I came up with the following strategy. I would release 4 products per month—1 paid product and 3 tiny free products. The free titles (which were mostly 1-page things such as subclasses) would keep my name fresh in people's minds and also (hopefully) drive traffic to my paid titles.

Another pretty obvious marketing concept is brand loyalty. It applies to writers as well as car makers! If someone likes one book you have written, there is a good chance they will like your other books too. I needed to make it as easy as possible for people who looked at one of my products to see my other products.

These days, the DMs Guild website automatically creates a strip for you called “More from this Title’s Contributors” but that did not exist at first. Drawing on some web programming skills, I created a text file with image hyperlinks to all of my paid products on the Guild. When I created a new product, I added it to this file, then went and edited **every other** product I had on the Guild and pasted the updated link list in. Since I was releasing so many products, I had to frequently update 20, 30, 40, or more titles. But the end result was that every single one of my products linked to every single one of my paid products.

Both of these strategies required a lot of work, some of it incredibly tedious. Looking back, I am amazed that I persisted as long as I did. But it was effective. I began to see a steady increase in sales across the board.

However, I took my most significant marketing step a few weeks after publishing *Shadows on the Long Road*, when I decided to release my first three adventures as a bundle called the *Triboar Trilogy*. Although product bundling was well established on DriveThruRPG (and in retail generally), to the best of my recollection it had not been done on the DMs Guild before that time.

I was selling these three adventures (*Temple of the Nightbringers*, *Terror at Triboar*, and *Shadows on the Long Road*) for \$1.50 each at the time (too cheap!) *The Triboar Trilogy* would sell for \$3, giving the buyer a 33% discount.

I was nervous. My three little adventures were selling nicely, and I did not want to do anything that might interfere with that. Yet I knew that this sort of product bundling was common across the entire retail space, and I figured it must work. I finally mustered my courage, shut my eyes, and hit "Publish." It was a turning point in my D&D writing career.

If you look at the following table, you can see the results. I introduced the bundle at the start of week 4 (which was June 26th, 2016):

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
Individual	\$95.50	\$113.50	\$118.50	\$75.50	\$51.50	\$65.50
Bundle				\$312.00	\$282.00	\$258.00
Total	\$95.50	\$113.50	\$118.50	\$387.50	\$333.50	\$323.50

Although the individual sales took a big hit, it was more than made up for by the bundle sales. I tripled my weekly earnings by releasing a bundle with a discount and *The Triboar Trilogy* became my first top 10 product.

Having proven the idea, I decided to crank it up to eleven. I worked extremely hard to release a whole bunch of adventures over the coming months, with the idea of doing a bundle for Christmas. By the time we reached November, I had published fourteen short adventures. I released the *Complete Adventures of M.T. Black* on November 18th, 2016 for the absurdly cheap price of \$7.95 (I increased it to \$9.95 a few days later) and went to bed. When I woke up in the morning, I was shocked to see it had hit number one, a position it held *for nearly six months*. This collection remains popular, having sold nearly 10,000 copies at time of writing, and enjoying a remarkable 98% rating over 100 reviews.

Because of that product, everyone in the DMs Guild creator community suddenly knew my name (this was not the case before).

And because of that product, doors began to open for me, leading to most of the opportunities I have enjoyed since then.

Writing those fourteen adventures was the *making* side of the business. Choosing to bundle those fourteen adventures was the *marketing* side of the business. The marketing went hand in hand with the making. If I had just focused on the making, and ignored the marketing, I would not have had the success I have enjoyed.

None of the strategies above is revolutionary or original. Whatever credit I deserve lies solely in taking established ideas and applying them to the little marketplace we are operating in. And the strategies above are not necessarily going to work for you today as the scene has shifted. For example, bundles are extremely common now and only a small number sell well. However, the principle of taking established marketing strategies and applying them to the world of TTRPG is *always* relevant. There is still a lot of potential for folks to distinguish their products via sound marketing.

These days, a large part of my marketing is done via email campaigns, and I have a mailing list of several thousand people. This sort of marketing is sometimes called EDM (Electronic Direct Mail) and it is highly effective. But I am learning more about this area all the time and you should be too. There is even an online course now called *Marketing 101 for ttRPG Creators*—I recommend you look it up.

Marketing is a massive and complicated topic. I find it painful and most of you probably do too. But if you can master it, even just a little bit, it will almost certainly lead to more sales, and hence more opportunity to create. And that is worth a bit of trouble, right?

Chapter 5



The Dungeon as Toy

*The “joy of discovery” is one of the
fundamental joys of play itself.*

Derek Yu

My first three adventures all featured iconic locations—*Temple of the Nightbringers* in a goblin lair, *Terror at Triboar* in a small frontier town, and *Shadows on the Long Road* in a haunted house. I decided to set my next adventure in another iconic location: a wizard's tower. This became *Tower of the Mad Mage*, which I published on April 7th, 2016.

Aside from the location, I started writing the adventure with two elements in mind. The first was a hook I found online (in a massive list of them), describing a wounded goblin who walks into a tavern and collapses, pleading for help. Second, I wanted to use one of the classic D&D “climaxes” as listed in chapter 3 of the *Dungeon*

Masters Guide; in this instance I chose #10, “A threat more powerful than the adventurers appears, destroys the main villain, and then turns its attention on the characters.”

These three elements (location, hook, climax) gave me a broad outline to work with. I decided to start the adventure in Longsaddle, an isolated hamlet about a hundred miles north of Triboar. As it happened, I eventually wrote six adventures based around Longsaddle and featuring its famous magical family, the Harpells. But more on that another time.

I named the goblin featured in the hook Skwelch, and he tells the following story to the characters. He and his tribe fought and killed a dragon inhabiting an old tower in the woods, taking possession of its hoard. Skwelch then fell out with the leader of the tribe, Glubnose, and was forced to flee. He wants the party to accompany him back to the tower and help kill Glubnose, and he offers half the dragon hoard as compensation.

I sketched out Skwelch's personality in just a couple of lines. In his mind, he is the leader of the expedition, so he constantly gives everyone orders, as well as barking out useless advice during combat. My goal was to make him as annoying as possible since I knew the party could not afford to get rid of him.

To my surprise, Skwelch proved immensely popular with players. I have had many people write to tell me how much they liked him, and in several instances, he ended up becoming a permanent

member of the party. It was one of the first times I realized how very satisfying it was to create a memorable NPC.

I included a few little encounters between Longsaddle and the tower. I often feel obliged to do this to enforce the idea that the wilderness is dangerous and that it takes effort to move about. But in this case they are unnecessary, and these days I would most likely say, "If you want some encounters before getting to the tower, please use the Tier 1 Hill Encounter table in *Xanathar's Guide to Everything*."

As an aside, there are other things you can do to convey the feeling of distance travelled without bogging the party down in unnecessary combat. For example, ask one player to describe a problem they encountered on the journey, and another to describe how the characters overcame the problem. Getting the players to roll dice to determine who makes up the problem and who makes up the solution is a way to gamify the experience a little more.

Towers, especially small ones, present a challenge to the adventure writer. They often serve up encounters in a linear manner, whereas you usually want the dungeon architecture to give your players some meaningful choices when moving around. I worked pretty hard to squeeze little corridors and rooms into the tower, so the players had a selection of doors on every floor.

But there was another problem. In my first map, it was self-evident which door would take you to the stairs leading to the next level,

meaning the characters could easily bypass about half of the encounters. So, I came up with a new plan that messed around with door placement to try and prevent people from marching straight to the top floor.

As part of my research, I looked at how wizard's towers had been presented in older adventures. I was a bit disappointed by how mundane some of them were. One thing about a wizard's tower is that it should feel magical—it is a chance to break out some gonzo ideas. And so, I included things like an air elemental playing a set of pan pipes, an attack by flying cutlery, and a stained-glass window that came to life. One room featured a diary that sprouted legs and ran away from the characters when touched, which provided a lot of entertainment to many parties. Those examining the diary learn the identity of the tower's creator, one Hugo Harpell, a now deceased member of the Harpell wizarding dynasty.

These sorts of encounters play into an idea which I call “the dungeon as toy.” What I mean is that our adventure locations should be *interactive*. Yes, there should be monsters to fight—that is the combat pillar of play. Yes, there should be people to talk to—that is the social pillar of play. But the locations themselves should contain things that you want to pick up and touch and play with. This is a big part of the exploration pillar of play, and I think it is neglected. Pick up the diary and it grows legs. Touch the holy orb in the chapel and

a glass knight steps out of the window. The treasury looks empty but actually has an invisible treasure chest in it.

Pools, fountains, statues, altars, tapestries, paintings, obelisks, shrines, and thrones are all wonderful for turning your dungeon into a toy, though you can and should use more mundane objects as well. The trick table in appendix A of the *Dungeon Master's Guide* has some good suggestions for effects. It is also a great idea to embed secrets and clues in interactive objects.

These toy encounters work best when you introduce a bit of verisimilitude, rather than just have random effects associated with random objects. So, leaving an offering on the altar to the god of healing restores your hit points. Touching the statue of the necromancer causes it to morph into an undead monster. The King's secret diary is hidden behind a tapestry depicting his greatest victory. That sort of thing.

I put a lot of this sort of interactivity into the tower, and I now think that is one reason the adventure has proven so popular. Almost every room has something to play with. I did not realize how universally applicable this idea was, though, and it is only in some recent dungeons that I have put renewed emphasis on the “toy” approach to location design. For example, here is the boxed text from an adventure I published a short time ago called *The Eye of Klothys*:

This dome-shaped chamber has whitewashed walls defaced by charcoal scribbles. In the middle of the room is a brass tripod supporting a hefty candle, while a broad clay jar sits against the wall in a pile of rubble.

This room provides ample opportunity for exploration, as there are all sorts of things for the characters to interact with. You can read the charcoal scribbles, look at the brass tripod, examine (or light) the hefty candle, or investigate the clay jar. Players love these sorts of rooms, provided the interactions lead to interesting results.

Let us head back to *Tower of the Mad Mage* and look at the climax. The characters finally get to the top floor and face off against Glubnose and the remaining members of his tribe. But just as the fight starts, there is the sound of something heavy landing on the roof! Yes, it turns out that Skwelch lied—the goblins did not kill the dragon after all, they merely scared it off. The players need to decide: do they help Glubnose, do they help the dragon, or do they retreat and fight the winner? It is a fun little dilemma.

When I played this adventure with my home group, the dragon wiped out the goblins with a single breath. She then advanced on the characters, who were standing at the door to the chamber. The whole party fled—except for the fighter who decided his character would not run, even in the face of certain death. And so he stood alone, facing down the evil draconic creature as it slowly crept toward him.

It is hard to convey how heroic this moment felt at the time, and it still sends a small chill up my spine thinking about it. His companions thankfully returned, and together they enjoyed a famous victory.

Tower of the Mad Mage is one of my most popular adventures, having sold thousands of copies and enjoying a rating of 96% from nearly 50 reviews. The feedback has been enthusiastic and generous. People appreciate how easy the adventure is to run, they enjoy the variety of encounters, and they love Skwelch.

But one review, received well over a year after publication, will never leave my heart:

I ran this game for my brother and his childhood friend along with their now pre-teen sons. When asked to do so I was a little nervous because my own campaign takes up so much of my time so I plunged onto the DM's guild website and, after reading many reviews, settled on "Tower of the Mad Mage."

The adventure is a very easy read and doesn't take long to prepare. It's well laid out and a DM can easily skip over some parts if they wish for time or simplicities sake without losing much. The theme is classic D&D - goblins, magic, fighting and decision making. If you're looking to run something dark or heavy on roleplaying and intrigue, then this may not be your best bet. If, however, you want to start a standard campaign or

wish for a way to introduce players to the game in a single night, then this is a great choice.

The players I had were a mixed bag of experience; my brother and his friend had played together in the 80's and I even found a couple of their Red Box dice to put out on the table. My brother has been teaching his son 5th edition, so that was easy. The final two players were new to the game entirely but had a good understanding of it by the end of the night...

I'm afraid I have to end this on a sad note as my brother's friend passed away two nights ago. Though feared, it was not unexpected. I would be lying if I didn't say that this gave our session a somber feeling, or that I didn't have to sit by myself for a while and collect myself after the session ended. It was, though, an excellent experience as, for one night, they got to be teenagers again throwing dice at imaginary monsters. So I wish to give my thanks to the author for creating something well put together and helping me give them one last adventure.

This is why we write. The games we play are not an escape from “real life,” they are a different and intense and profound experience of life, one that is just as real and full as any other. And the world would be so much poorer without them.

Chapter 6



The Lich that Got Away

*If you want to be a writer, you must do two things
above all others: read a lot and write a lot.*

Stephen King

I released *Little Shrine of Horrors* on May 12th, 2016, and it is an adventure that proudly wears its heritage on its sleeve. I created it as an homage to Gygas's renowned module, *Tomb of Horrors*, which was published in 1978 and had already established a legendary reputation by the time I started playing D&D in the early 80s. I often met other players, either at school or at conventions, who would say, "Have you played Tomb of Horrors yet? You have to check it out!"

My home group finally got a copy of this coveted module and had a lot of fun poring over the text and the book of illustrations that came with it. We never played it, though, for several reasons. Firstly, we had all read it! Secondly, we were not high enough level. But finally,

and most importantly, it had the reputation of being a "killer" dungeon, and no-one wanted to risk their precious characters.

Soon after I started publishing adventures, I knew I wanted to write a little deathtrap dungeon in homage to *Tomb of Horrors*. And while I say homage, I think it ended up being something of a parody. The name *Little Shrine of Horrors* simply popped into my head, inspired by the musical, *Little Shop of Horrors*.

I had two design goals. The first was to create a *Tomb of Horrors* style adventure for lower-level characters. It seemed a great shame that people should have to wait until they reached level 10 before having this sort of experience (sure, there were some older adventures around filling this niche, such as *The Mud Sorcerer's Tomb*, but I couldn't find much for Fifth Edition). In the end, I created this adventure for characters of levels 4 or 5. It is worth noting that this sort of level targeting was a bit of a rookie mistake. Permit me a digression to explain what I mean.

The *Dungeon Masters Guide* defines 4 *tiers* of play, each representing broad power bands spanning the character levels. Tier 1 is levels 1-4; tier 2 is levels 5-10, tier 3 is levels 11-16, and tier 4 is levels 17-20. These are not arbitrary numbers—the cut-off points represent places where Fifth Edition adventurers suddenly become significantly more powerful. For example, at level 5 (where tier 2 starts), martial characters get an extra attack, while spellcasters get access to third level spells, such as the devastating *fireball*.

Because of these power jumps, creating an adventure that covers a whole tier is usually easier than creating something that crosses a tier threshold. And if you scale over the entire tier, you vastly increase the marketability of the product. If I were writing *Little Shrine of Horrors* today, I would make it scale over levels 5-10. Both the *Dungeon Master's Guide* and *Xanathar's Guide to Everything* contain manual methods for scaling encounters to different levels, but there are many tools online that will do it automatically. End of digression.

My second design goal for *Little Shrine of Horrors* was to create a dungeon that was beatable. Gygax designed *Tomb of Horrors* to be a killer, partly because he was dealing with very experienced players with very tough characters in his home campaign. Indeed, he used to carry a copy of the manuscript around in his briefcase to humble any fans who were boasting a little too loudly about their mighty characters!

In practice, this means there are several "insta-death" style traps in the dungeon, and numerous points where luck seems more important than skill, which diminishes the playability of the adventure. Indeed, according to folklore, the first person to beat the dungeon did so by taking in a small army of servants to walk ahead of him and trigger the traps! I wanted an adventure that would challenge the characters without undue risk of a TPK.

In my adventure, an evil wizard created the deathtrap dungeon so he could watch in amusement while adventurers died trying to defeat it. An oldie but a goodie, though I included a twist that I will explain later. One notable feature was the identity of the creator. I had become quite familiar with the Harpell wizard dynasty in Longsaddle, having dealt with them in *Tower of the Mad Mage*. I decided that the dungeon architect was one Lucien Harpell, who was an awfully bad egg. The name Lucien was not random—the person who suggested *Tomb of Horrors* to Gary Gygax in the first place was a fellow named Alan Lucien.

It is interesting to see how the Harpell family was starting to develop in my little conception of the Forgotten Realms. The first Harpell wizard I wrote about, Hugo Harpell, was thought insane. This new wizard, Lucien Harpell, was a sociopath. I eventually wrote six adventures about the Harpells, and while some of the wizards in the family were benevolent, most of them were morally ambiguous. I thought this made them far more intriguing than the kind-hearted clan presented in the official material.

Little Shrine of Horrors begins when Gunthar Grimm, a fur trader in Longsaddle, posts a notice seeking brave adventurers. Should the characters respond, he tells them he is a wealthy and successful man who is nevertheless beset by regret, having lost the love of his life when he was young. He has recently discovered the dangerous shrine of Lucian Harpell, which contains a magic item that can help

him called the *Amulet of Lost Dreams*. Gunthar offers the characters generous compensation if they will retrieve the amulet for him.

After about a day of travel, the characters find the entrance to the shrine, which is flanked by a statue engraved with this warning:

Yonder lies the Shrine of Lucien Harpell, greatest mage of this or any other age. In the arts of golemancy, artificery and necromancy, his equal has never been known, nor will be again.

Cursed are those who enter this tomb. Cursed are those who look upon this statue. Cursed are those who seek his riches. Know that your demise is certain—your lives will be short, and your deaths slow.

Read this, fools, and despair!

I thought that was a suitably dire warning, and the comment about “golemancy, artificery and necromancy” gives the players a hint about what they will face within. Upon entering the shrine, they find they are trapped and must solve bizarre puzzles and overcome deadly traps to regain their freedom.

I did a lot of research for this adventure. I spent weeks combing through puzzle and trap books, looking for inspiration. I also looked at every published deathtrap adventure I could find. I wanted to avoid

the standard tropes in this genre and give the adventure a fresh feel, and it turned out to be much harder than I thought. I managed to create the dungeon I wanted, but the writing was a real challenge. I planted a couple of *Tomb of Horrors* easter eggs, though I wish I had included more. If I were cleverer, I would have found some way to work in something from *Little Shop of Horrors*, too.

It is tough to get puzzle difficulty right. If you make them hard enough to challenge experienced puzzlers, most groups will be stumped. Create them to be just tough enough for regular groups, and the people who really like puzzles will blow through them. The smart move, commercially, is to create something that will be fun for the broadest number of people, and that is what I did here. From the feedback I have received, most players have found the puzzles solvable and enjoyable.

Traps are easier to create than puzzles, though good traps take some work. In a trap-focused dungeon, you want to give the players a clue about the deadlier traps. Maybe there is an electricity trap on the door handle, and this just happens to be the one door handle they have encountered that is made of copper rather than iron. This foreshadowing makes it much more satisfying for the players because it gives them the feeling that they can beat the trap if they are observant and clever enough—that is, it gives them a sense of agency.

Note that I am talking about especially deadly traps here, and in an environment that is packed with traps. I am not suggesting every little pit trap in your dungeon should have some sort of clue or foreshadowing. Having said that, in *Little Shrine of Horrors* I put a pit trip at every four-way intersection. After they trigger a couple of them, the players should figure out where they are and avoid them. I like putting minor traps in patterns like that, where it makes sense.

We should speak about the map. I am reasonably pleased with the design, though it is a little too regular for my tastes now. The corridors all run vertically or horizontally, and the rooms are mostly aligned and regularly shaped. The original *Tomb of Horrors* map had a zany chaos to it, with huge rooms next to tiny rooms and winding tunnels going everywhere. I thought it very ugly at the time, but I admire it now. Tastes mature, I guess!

When the characters get to the final room, a booming voice tells them the tomb entrance has re-opened, and that they are now free to leave. Should they persist, a climactic battle against constructs and undead ensues. The characters also notice a black curtain across the back of the chamber. Should they approach it, the booming voice becomes rather frantic, demanding the characters leave the curtain alone.

Yes, this is a *Wizard of Oz* moment. When the characters throw back the curtain, they discover their patron, Gunthar Grimm, is there in the control room. It was a set up all along! It turns out that Gunthar

discovered the long-abandoned shrine a few years ago, and he figured out how to operate it. Since then, he has made good coin by luring foolhardy characters to their doom and stripping their bodies of loot afterwards.

It is a bit contrived, but it plays very well at the table. My main concern is that it is *another* case of the "goodie turns out to be the baddie" twist, which I inserted into far too many of my early adventures. The *Dungeon Masters Guide* even specifically warns you not to overuse this particular twist! Ah, well, I am a slow learner. On the upside, it gave me the chance to write an amusing "man behind the curtain" scene. There are purists who might balk at that sort of thing, but most players I have encountered take great delight in finding themselves in a scene they recognize from popular media.

I worked harder on this adventure than on any previous one, especially in the research phase, but my labor was well rewarded. The feedback has been consistently excellent ever since I released it, and it is currently rated 94% on the Dungeon Masters Guild. The only tiny bit of criticism has been from experienced puzzlers who find it a bit easy. But the vast majority have found it a satisfying experience.

Re-reading the adventure now, it is obvious that I had begun to understand the importance of giving meaningful choices to the players. Player agency is foundational to an engaging gameplay experience and is something I spend a lot of time thinking about these days, as I will explain in the next chapter.

Chapter 7



Meaningful Choices

*The thing that makes a game a game
is the need to make decisions.*

Greg Costikyan

One of the great “aha!” moments in my game design career was realizing how very fundamental the idea of choice is to the gameplay experience. As a consequence, some time ago I shared the following game design tip on twitter:

Giving the players meaningful choices will increase their engagement with your adventure. Three things make a choice meaningful:

- 1. The player knows they are making a choice.*
- 2. The choice has consequences.*
- 3. There is information to inform the choice.*

This tweet garnered a few thousand likes, and provoked general agreement. Still, I think some of these points are less obvious than they may appear, and I am also keen to explore some of the inevitable subtleties and caveats that get lost in a tweet-length tip. So, let us unpack it a little.

Meaningful choices increase player engagement

We will start with my opening statement: "Giving the players meaningful choices will increase their engagement with your adventure." This is game design 101 and might seem obvious to many, but it is always worth challenging and exploring the obvious. Let us hear what several game design veterans think about the importance of choices (or decisions) in a game.

You may know of Sid Meier, who created the *Civilization* series of computer games. He famously defined games as "a series of meaningful choices," (note that he sometimes uses the phrase "a series of interesting decisions" synonymously.) This statement has been oft quoted (and debated) in the game industry. Meier may have meant it as hyperbole, but at the very least, it affirms how central choices are to gameplay. In his memoir, *A Life in Games*, Meir expands on the idea a little more:

...the gift of agency—that is, the ability of players to exert free will over their surroundings rather than obediently following a

narrative—is what sets games apart from other media, regardless of whether that agency is expressed through a computer keyboard, plastic tokens, physical movement, or entirely in the mind. Without a player's input, there can be no game; conversely, it takes only a single interaction to transform an observer into a participant, and thus a player.

Tynan Sylvester, the creator of *RimWorld*, says, "Decisions are ultimately what make a game," while Jon Shafer, the designer of *Civilization V* and *Stardock*, asserts, "A designer's goal is always to make every decision the player faces interesting."

Ok, it seems that video game designers are very invested in the concept of choice! But let us listen to someone from the TTRPG field. Greg Costikyan, creator of such classic games as *Paranoia* and *Star Wars RPG*, is a well-known commentator on the game industry. He says, "The thing that makes a game a game is the need to make decisions." He spends a lot of time talking about this in his seminal essay on game creation, "I Have No Words & I Must Design." He defines "decisions" as one of the six essential elements of a game (the other elements being goals, opposition, resource management, game tokens, and information).

Costikyan says that games, "depend on decision making. Decisions have to pose real, plausible alternatives, or they aren't real decisions." He also notes that, "Trivial decisions aren't any fun" and

that, "Interesting decisions make for interesting games." Where Costikyan says, "interesting decisions," I have used the phrase, "meaningful choices," but we clearly mean the same thing.

I could quote many more people, but I hope these snippets have convinced you that *choices* are at the heart of any game you create. Ok, so how do we make the decision points (places where you make a choice) in our Dungeons & Dragons adventures meaningful? My tweet suggests that three things are involved, so we will look at each one in turn.

The player knows they are making a choice

For a choice to be meaningful, the player must know they are making a choice. This might seem like a tautology. Players always know when they are making choices, right? No, not always! Sometimes an adventure hides important decisions behind seemingly trivial actions, with the result that players do not realize the consequences of what they are doing. You might call this a *hidden choice*, and it is generally detrimental to the player's experience of agency.

Let us think of a contrived example. The characters are going to see the queen to receive a quest. You privately decide that the queen likes fighters, so if a fighter is the first to address her, she approvingly provides the party with a mighty magic sword. However, if another character speaks first, the queen offers no additional help. In this

instance, the players make an important choice (which character speaks first), but they do not realize they are making an important choice. And this robs the decision of meaning and interest.

What is an example from real-life D&D? One that comes to mind is from the classic Gygax module, *Dungeonland*, which mimics the *Alice in Wonderland* story. Here is the situation. When the players reach the bottom of the rabbit hole, they see a table and a bunch of other things. If they immediately stare at the table and do not take their eyes off it, the adventure goes in one direction. If the characters do *anything* else, the adventure proceeds in quite a different manner. There is nothing to suggest that the decision to stare at a particular object is important. The players do not realize they are making a decision that will have a massive impact on their experience of the adventure. This critical choice is hidden.

You can usually fix hidden choices by providing the characters with more information. In the first example, you might decide that anyone asking around town learns that the queen has a predisposition toward fighters. This tidbit gives the players a hint about how to handle the encounter, and it rewards them for making the effort to do some research beforehand. The *Dungeonland* encounter is a little trickier to improve, especially since it happens right at the start of the adventure. Ideally, you would provide a clue somewhere, but I do not really like this choice and would probably eliminate it from the adventure.

The choice has consequences

For a choice to be meaningful, it must have consequences. Choosing option A should lead to a different experience from choosing option B. Once again, this seems obvious, but in many adventures, option A has precisely the same consequences as option B. Some designers call this a *hollow choice*.

I sometimes see a trivial example of this in wilderness maps. There is a fork in the road. Both branches travel in parallel for a distance (without encounters) and then rejoin back into one road. In that instance, the player is making a choice, but it is not a meaningful choice. There are no consequences to choosing the left or right fork. The player thinks they are doing something significant, but they are not.

Sometimes, hollow choices are a bit more sophisticated than choosing a path through the forest. One typical example in D&D adventures is related to what we call "plot armor." Plot armor is a design device whereby we protect certain NPCs from dying (or being imprisoned or changed in some way) because they are essential to the future story. It creates hollow choices because the players engage with the NPC under the presumption that they can harm, neutralize, or influence the character, whereas their decisions and actions are entirely meaningless.

There is a subtle example of plot armor in chapter 1 of *Hoard of the Dragon Queen*. In the closing scene, the characters can choose to fight a mighty half-dragon warrior. If the half-dragon wins the fight, he shows up again in a later chapter for a return battle. However, if the characters manage to kill the half-dragon, his *identical twin brother* shows up instead! The practical consequence is that you cannot kill the half-dragon in chapter 1. Choosing to fight him or not fight him is a hollow choice.

The fix in these cases is easy to articulate. When you present the players with a choice, make sure there is a different consequence for each option. To use the split paths example, placing an ogre on one path and a chest of gold on the other one makes the choice of way consequential. And avoid giving your monsters plot armor. If the players defeat the half-dragon in chapter 1, let them enjoy a less stressful fight in chapter 3! If the boss monster *must* communicate with the characters without the risk of being killed or impaired, have it use an intermediary, such as a messenger or a magic mirror.

Now, a big caveat. Games designers talk about something called the *illusion of choice*, especially in the context of presenting an "open-world" experience to the players. If the characters enter Waterdeep, for example, we want them to feel like they could go anywhere in that huge metropolis, but it is not practical to document every shop and every person in the city. Instead, we document a smaller number of elements and then present them in a way that gives players the

feeling that their characters can go anywhere and do anything they wish, just as if they were wandering around a real city.

Strictly speaking, the *illusion of choice* is created by presenting a series of *hollow choices*, but I think this is the legitimate place for them. I prefer to keep them at the margins of the game, such as random NPCs you might encounter in a big city. Even then, I would advise caution. I think that players "sniff out" when there are lots of illusory (or hollow) choices at the heart of the game. They start to feel like they are being "swept along" by events and that their decisions do not matter. And once that happens, they disengage.

There is information to inform the choice

For a choice to be truly meaningful, there has to be some information available to the players that informs the choice. When such information is lacking, we might call it an *uninformed choice*, with the player essentially making a random decision.

You encounter uninformed choices quite a lot in D&D adventures. A good example comes in the classic adventure, *Tomb of Horrors*. In the original version, the characters enter a metal cubicle with three iron levers. Pushing the levers up enables you to progress, while pushing them down results in a likely fatal fall. There is no information informing you whether up or down is better. And this particular adventure is full of choices like that!

In my view, *Tomb of Horrors* would be improved if these sorts of encounters presented the player with more information. Maybe you can examine the levers and figure out how they work. Or perhaps there is a clue elsewhere in the dungeon indicating whether pushing the levers up or down is good. You do not want to give the players the information on a plate, but you do want to reward good play, such as exploration and investigation.

Having said all that, there are times when uninformed choices are legitimate design elements. In an old Waterdeep scenario called *Blue Alley*, the players are also presented with three levers to pull, with no indication of what they do. Pulling the left-hand lever showers you with gold, the middle one causes a fake magic dagger to appear, while the right-hand lever causes all of your gear to teleport to another room! The player knows they are making a choice, the choice has consequences, but with no information to inform the choice, the player is effectively tossing a coin. However, *Blue Alley* is a "funhouse" dungeon, a genre of adventure that involves weird and wacky happenings. The lever trick is fun and has limited consequences, so I think it works in this context. It fails my test as a "meaningful choice," but is a good bit of design for this particular dungeon. Even so, I would not overuse this sort of element. It is fun in small doses.

Must every choice be meaningful?

My original tweet said, “Giving the players meaningful choices will increase their engagement with your adventure.” This is not the same as saying that *every* choice must be meaningful in the full sense of the word. I have already mentioned some instances where uninformed and hollow choices can be useful and fun. And there are lots of trivial choices the players make throughout the adventure, such as what to have for breakfast, that do not need to be laden with significance.

But meaningful choices give players a sense of agency, and this goes a long way toward building up their engagement with your adventure. Choice remains at the heart of the gameplay experience, and all new game designers need to learn how to put meaningful decision points into their games. One great way to do that is to study the work of other designers, and we will explore that idea more fully in the next chapter.

Chapter 8



Steal like an Artisan

Every artist gets asked the question, 'Where do you get your ideas.' The honest artist answers, 'I steal them.'

Austin Kleon

I published my sixth adventure, *Wizard in a Bottle*, on May 17th, 2016, just a week after publishing *Little Shrine of Horrors*. It is the adventure that first got me noticed by a wider audience, mostly because it was given away free in an early edition of WOTC's online magazine, *Dragon+*.

For some reason I can recall the provenance of virtually every idea I put into this adventure. In some ways, it is a very derivative creation, but I drew a little bit from a lot of separate sources rather than a lot from a single source. By the time it all gets squashed together, I ended up with something pretty unique.

I sometimes encounter designers who pooh-pooh the idea of studying older games and using them as a source of ideas. Some believe (apparently) that their own creations are completely original. I am a little skeptical about such claims. True innovation is rare, and it is extremely easy to either subconsciously imitate something you have seen before, or to retread old ground without realizing it.

I'm reminded of something prominent game designer, John Wick, said a few years ago: "The older I get, the more I hear young RPG designers say, 'Never been done before!' And then I just point at something Greg Stafford did a few decades ago." And the truth is that even the innovative founders of our hobby, folk like Stafford and Gygax, were standing on the shoulders of those who came before.

Should we just give up trying to break new ground because, "There is nothing new under the sun"? By no means! Rather, I think we need to *own* our influences rather than denying them in a vain attempt to prove our originality. Consciously imitate and learn from the recognized masters. As Yamamoto said, "Copy copy copy copy. At the end of the copy you will find yourself."

If "never been done before" is your only design goal, I suspect your project will fail on all creative levels. Firing up the forge of inspiration needs more than a desire to be "original." Looking at the great work of the past is a good way to gather artistic fuel and may be the only way to ever surpass such work. As the celebrated poet, T.S. Eliot, puts it: "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface

what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different.”

Given my views on this, I was rather delighted to discover a book called *Steal like an Artist* by Austin Kleon. The subtitle is “10 things nobody told you about being creative.” His opening paragraph is provocative: “Every artist gets asked the question, ‘Where do you get your ideas.’ The honest artist answers, ‘I steal them.’”

He is not talking about plagiarism, as he makes clear. Rather, he is talking about actively engaging with the great works in your field, consciously learning from them, and taking what speaks to you into your own work. This is one of the reasons I spend so much time looking at old adventure designs. I enjoy doing so, but I also learn a great deal from the practice.

As I discuss my adventure, *Wizard in a Bottle*, I am going to “pull back the curtain” as much as I can and explain the origins of the ideas there. As I do this, I am very aware that drawing a straight line from influence to idea is a bit simplistic. Ideas usually emerge dripping and half-formed from the swirling chaos of our id rather than neatly hand-delivered from a single sender. Still, we can often identify a likely primary influence, so I think there is value in this exercise.

The title of this adventure is one of the better ones I have come up with. I was reading about veteran designer Rob Kuntz's adventure, *Bottle City*, at the time and was thinking about a “bottle” adventure of my own. The phrase “Wizard in a Bottle” popped into my head,

and I liked the rhythm of it. I still do! If I look at my first dozen or so adventures, at least a third of them started life with the title only.

The premise, when it came to me, was inspired by one of the plot seeds in *Eureka: 501 Adventure Plots*, which is a great book that you should buy now. This seed (by Kurt Schneider) involved the characters searching for a long-lost adventurer, who turns out to be in suspended animation. I took a couple of key elements and put my own spin on things, also inspired by the numerous "suspended animation" episodes I had seen on Star Trek. It is a classic trope.

Interestingly, the title and plot outline were not related initially. I have an ideas file on my cloud drive where I jot down random thoughts. "Wizard in a Bottle" was one entry while "Suspended animation adventure" was another. The "aha!" moment came when I joined the two together. The person in suspended animation was a wizard who was trapped, genie-like, in a bottle! Some of my best adventures had their genesis this way, through the amalgamation of two seemingly unrelated ideas. So very often in this business, the magic happens through an inspired combination. Goblins? A bit tired. Goblins riding giant bats? Much better!

I needed a location for the adventure. Clearly, some sort of magic-user had trapped our titular Wizard, and that person most likely lived in a tower. But I had recently written a tower adventure (*Tower of the Mad Mage*) and was not ready to do another one. The answer came when I was reading through some old Chris Perkins material. His

second published adventure, *A Wizard's Fate*, was set in the cellar beneath a ruined magic-user's tower. This seemed to resolve my dilemma nicely, so I pinched that location. Tick.

In my adventure, an iron merchant named Ulfgar Longwood asks the party to track down a former comrade who he has not seen for twenty years. The missing person is a wizard named Amilya Greyheart. Through the use of divination magic, Ulfgar has discovered her last known location—a ruined tower a couple of days north of the city. He assumes Amilya is dead and asks the characters to bring back her remains for burial.

The adventurers get to the ruined tower and must first deal with an ogre who has taken up residence. There is nothing very distinctive about this encounter, and were I writing it today I would be inclined to buff it up a little. One way I do this is with *story cubes*, which you can buy at your local hobby store. You simply roll up an idea and fit it into the encounter somehow.

Let us work through a real example. I just rolled up “tortoise” on my story cubes. Ok, when the characters encounter the ogre, she is feeding her pet tortoise and making gentle cooing sounds. This simple addition makes the encounter much more interesting. Suddenly the ogre is slightly sympathetic, and many parties will be inclined to try and talk to her rather than simply fight her. And the idea of this brutish ogre looking after a tiny tortoise is ridiculously cute.

Giving creatures something to do is one of the best ways to bring them to life. You can transform an otherwise mundane encounter into something special by adding in some action. And actions are a much better way to portray a creature's personality than a simple assertion—it is the classic advice of *show don't tell* at work. In the example above, I *could* say, “The ogre has a soft spot for weak creatures,” but that leaves it up to the DM to figure out how to bring that information to the party. Showing the ogre gently looking after her pet tortoise is a more powerful way to communicate the information, and much more useful to the DM who is trying to give the scene life.

The Dungeon Master can take and develop such little seeds in various ways, as well. As the characters eavesdrop, they might hear the ogre saying, “Nice little turtle, you'll be good in my soup tonight,” or “Don't worry, Brarg, we'll figure out how to turn you back into an ogre,” or “I've never met a talking tortoise before.” All of this from a single roll of a story cube!

Following the ogre encounter, the characters must solve a simple word scramble puzzle to unlock the trap door that descends to the basement. I do enjoy these little pen and paper puzzles, though finding plausible ways to insert them into an adventure is a challenge.

The dungeon beneath the tower has just five or six chambers (depending on how you count them). One of the first locations is a sitting room with a bunch of clay skulls on the wall. Press the correct

one and it opens a secret door, press the wrong one and it explodes. This idea is straight out of *The Mud Sorcerer's Tomb*, one of the most highly rated *Dungeon Magazine* adventures ever. If I were doing it these days, I would try to customise the idea a bit more—perhaps instead of skulls, there is an array of terracotta eyeballs that follow you around the room, for example.

The chamber to the west of the sitting room has a stone pool filled with putrid water. If you approach it, a water weird rears up out of it and attacks. The scene was inspired by the cover of *Dungeon of Dread* by Rose Estes, the first book in the *Endless Quest* series by TSR. I loved that book as a teen and adored the cover. I found the book and re-read it a few months ago, and was a bit disappointed, I am sad to say. Sometimes, you cannot go back—you are better off just holding on to that delicious childhood memory. I still think it is a great cover.

Some of my design inexperience came through in this encounter, though. A water weird is CR 3, and the adventure was written for level 2 characters. This worried me so much that I went to the trouble of creating a "Lesser Water Weird" monster that was only CR 2. I did not realize at the time that a level 2 party can take down a lone CR 3 monster without much trouble. And even if I wanted to nerf the monster, a better and easier way is to simply reduce its hit points! The water weird cannot even leave the fountain, so it really should not give the party much trouble.

There is a treasure vault on the other side of the sitting room, protected by a portcullis with a fun little trap that was inspired by Raging Swan's *Dungeon Dressing* book. In their trap, when you touch the portcullis it begins screaming and you take some sort of sonic damage. In my variation, when you touch the portcullis a siren goes off and you must make a saving throw or find yourself compelled to bash your head against the floor. A bit silly but also quite amusing, and I think it is a good example of taking an idea and putting your own twist on it.

The room immediately north of the sitting room contains a little cabinet of curiosities, which was inspired by a random page on Wikipedia I flicked to one evening. Looking at this chamber now, I wish I had used just a few more evocative phrases to bring the location alive. The standard writing advice of "kill your adjectives" does not apply quite as much in adventure writing, where you do not have paragraphs and paragraphs to build a scene. Sure, using lots of adjectives gives your writing a bit of a pulpy vibe, but D&D was born out of the pulps.

There are a couple of dust mephits on the grimy floor of the cluttered cabinet room. Gosh, I love mephits! They are one of my go-to monsters for low-level parties, and I probably need to be a bit more sparing with them. I think there was a missed opportunity here, as the cabinet of curiosities was full of animal skeletons. A better encounter would be to have the skeletons animate and attack. These

sorts of “missed opportunities” are the things I notice most when re-reading my old adventures. The experienced eye sees all sorts of patterns that allow you to pull the dungeon together into a cohesive whole.

An even better idea would have been to have a trick or “toy” encounter here (see chapter 5) rather than a combat encounter. As written, you have a cabinet full of marvelous oddments but no way to interact with them. What if you touch a giant’s spear and have the *enlarge* spell cast on you? Perhaps a hand mirror shows a recording of a prior moment in the dungeon. Maybe a dream catcher puts you into a deep slumber where you face a nightmare monster. Those are just a few ideas (which I generated using story cubes, by the way!)

East of the cabinet room is a longish hall before the final chamber. There are nine paintings on the walls, each one depicting a different layer of hell. When the players get to the middle of the hall, two imps emerge from pictures on either side of the party and a nice fight ensues. I was inspired a little by *Return to the Tomb of Horrors*, which has a round room with a bunch of paintings that were gateways to different places. Of course, the “portal picture” is an old fantasy trope. I think I first encountered it in C.S. Lewis’s *Voyage of the Dawnreader* as a child, though the idea was most fully developed in Roger Zelazny’s *Amber Chronicles*, which I read obsessively in my teens.

So, we get to the final room, and it is an alchemical laboratory. Given the person we are seeking is trapped in a bottle, that is nice and consistent. However, Amilya is not the only one present. If the characters have a look through the lab equipment, they notice that “an alembic on one of the shelves contains a green mist that is glowing very faintly.” These are the remains of the Sorcerer, the person who originally built the tower and basement. In a questionable attempt to achieve immortality, he managed to distill the *very spirit* out of his aged and decrepit body and into a glass container.

The Sorcerer has the power to toss about vials of acid and other nasty stuff, and the fight lasts until the character’s find and smash his container. After that, at last, they can free Amilya from her twenty years in suspended animation. I describe her as having “raven hair and a lithe build.” A cliched description, but I was (and am) consciously trying to avoid describing women as “beautiful” or “stunning” or whatever. Not only are they very weak adjectives, but the focus on female attractiveness is tired and unhelpful.

With the dungeon complete, the adventure rolls into an extended coda (inspired by Kurt Schneider’s plot seed) with Amilya causing trouble as she tries to win back her former fiancé, who has married and had five kids in the intervening twenty years. Truthfully, I am not quite sure that it works—it feels a bit anticlimactic and a lot of folks

who run the adventure skip this last bit. If I were writing the adventure today, I doubt I would include this section.

I released the adventure, and it got good reviews and was selling quite well. Then, a month or so later, the editor at *Dragon+* got in touch with me and asked if they could feature the adventure in the magazine. Of course! They paid me a nice little sum and included a code that allowed people to download the product for free. To my delight, the adventure was downloaded several thousand times, which really helped bring my name to a wider audience.

Wizard in a Bottle continues to sell well and is currently rated 86% by its reviewers. It showed me how important it was to read the work of other people, especially the “masters” in the field, when I was seeking inspiration for an adventure. Sometimes, would-be creators tell me they simply cannot think of anything to write. Skim through an old issue of *Dungeon Magazine* and you will have plenty of ideas before the end! Or think about one of your favorite adventures, and consider how you can re-imagine that play experience. I have done that more than a few times, as you will see in the next chapter.

Chapter 9



There's a Robot in my Dungeon

*If there's a book that you want to read, but it hasn't
been written yet, then you must write it.*

Toni Morrison

In chapter 6, I alluded to the legendary TSR adventures of my youth, those that were mentioned in hallowed whispers in the playground. One of these fabled titles was *Expedition to the Barrier Peaks* ("You go into a crashed spaceship, and you get laser guns, and you fight robots!!! Wow!!!") The concept lit up my imagination, and I desperately wanted to play it. I finally got my chance when a new kid at school produced a copy.

The designated Saturday arrived, and a group of us sat around the table, waiting for the brilliance to unfold. Sadly, it was a very disappointing game experience. We were confronted with endless identical rooms to enter and search, interspersed with some

repetitive fights. We gave up after about an hour and played *Game of Life* instead. Expectation, please meet Reality.

I do not think our thirteen-year-old DM was well prepared for the game, but I think the adventure itself has some problems as well. There is a lot of “dead space” in the first few levels, and I feel like it only really warms up by level 4. Yet despite my bad experience, I never quite let go of the “dream” of what *Barrier Peaks* could have been, and when I started self-publishing D&D adventures, I decided to create my own version. I called it *Expedition to the Lost Peaks*.

Here is another example of pure pastiche proudly presenting its provenance on the cover. I will not lie—although these homages were well received by the public, I occasionally worried that I should be doing something more original. But I was encouraged when I came across this quote from W.H. Auden, one of the greatest English-language poets of the 20th-century. He said, “Some writers confuse authenticity, which they ought always to aim at, with originality, which they should never bother about.” Finding your authentic voice is much more important than being original. And as you find your voice, originality will inevitably follow.

For those starting out on this creative journey, find something that you are genuinely and authentically passionate about, and do not worry if it has already been done. Do you want to write about a cave complex full of monsters? Go for it—and do not be concerned that *The Keep on the Borderlands* did it before you. Do you want to write

about a charismatic vampire ruling over a small province? Do it—and do not be bothered about *Ravenloft*. Do you want to write about a dangerous island full of dinosaurs? Go ahead—and do not be troubled that *Isle of Dread* has already been there. In all these things, if you bring your passion and you execute well, you will create something worthwhile.

Expedition to the Lost Peaks has proven to be an enduringly popular adventure and is currently rated 90% by reviewers. It starts in Longsaddle, with a Harpell matriarch commissioning the characters to investigate a strange metal object she has learned about in the Lost Peaks. As you have probably guessed, the object turns out to be a crashed spaceship.

I picked the Lost Peaks as the destination because of the similarity in name to the Barrier Peaks. But it was actually a rather good location for an adventure since the area is relatively isolated—had the spaceship crashed next to Waterdeep, many people would have gone to investigate already. My spaceship is much smaller than the massive craft presented in *Barrier Peaks*, but that is by design since I wanted an adventure you could run in a session or two. One of the problems with *Barrier Peaks* is that you have endless identical rooms and you also have large spaces with nothing in them. It is kinda realistic but does make it potentially repetitive and dull.

My spaceship has two levels, the largest one being the Green Deck, which is like a giant terrarium. Here you have got a self-

contained little wilderness adventure where you fight things such as bulletes, manticores, chuuls, and other strange beasts. You start the level on an observation deck that gives you a view of the whole tangled indoor wilderness, and in the distance, you see a pack of allosauruses dash off. Throughout the level you hear these dinosaurs call out, so you always know they are somewhere ahead. Foreshadowing a dangerous encounter like that is highly effective.

There are little treasure stashes around the level where you can pick up stuff like blasters and frag grenades. Finding cool loot is a big part of the fun with science fiction crossover adventures! The high-tech items all have limited charges and no obvious way to recharge, so the DM does not have to worry about the characters leaving the adventure with too much firepower.

To explain why there was loose gear around the level, I created a little story about an escaping prisoner, who was killed while flying through the air above the Green Desk, resulting in his loot being scattered everywhere. There is a friendly treant who tells you this story and also refers to the mysterious makers of the ship.

This tiny story was not only a fun bit of color, but it also suggested a few encounter seeds, including the discovery of the prisoner's body. There was a lesson for me here—adventures usually have an overarching plot, often expressed as a narrative question ("where did this spaceship come from?") but you can sprinkle your adventure with subplots as well that are not really related to the main plot ("who

was the flying man and why was he a prisoner?”). Laying a few of these across the top of a dungeon is a great way to make it more interesting.

One way to do this is to imagine the dungeon in its natural or equilibrium state and then postulate an event that disrupts this equilibrium. It might be a prisoner escaping, a new monster moving into town, someone coming here to hide out from the law, or some kind of natural disaster. This disruption to the equilibrium gives the characters a mystery to investigate and can heighten the dramatic tension. Imagine you are invading a goblin den and you suddenly come across a room containing six dismembered goblins. The players are immediately on edge, wondering what killed the goblins, why it did so, and where it is. Subplots can transform an otherwise prosaic dungeon.

Back to the *Lost Peaks*. Having cleared the Green Deck, the characters find themselves on the Medical Deck and have some fun playing around with alien tech and also fighting off the security bots. It is clear my inspiration here was the old *Paranoia* roleplaying game, which I loved when I was a kid. I wanted this level to be a bit zany but also dangerous. I called the robots “guardbots” and “medbots,” which are both terms from *Paranoia*.

I threw some body-horror in here as well. You enter a chamber where there are some living heads and a living brain in some jars. “Brain in a jar” is an old trope, but I still find it disturbing, and I have

used it in a couple of other adventures, most notably *The Clockwork Queen*.

After clearing the Medical Deck, the characters make their way to the Control Room where the ship's computer reveals the big secret of why the ship is there and who owns it. Spoilers—the ship was run by mind flayers who were surveying the planet aeons ago for possible conquest when they crashed. The strong suggestion is that the mind flayers who escaped the crash are the ancestors of all the mind flayers on Toril. Ok, this does not quite square with established lore, especially the Spelljammer stuff. But I thought it was a fun idea.

The computer also has a nasty surprise for the characters. It has remained functioning for all these years because it was obliged to render whatever assistance it could to its masters. Having determined that mind flayers are well established on the planet, the computer has completed its functions and initiates a self-destruct sequence. The characters barely escape in time. It is a fun climax, though I wish I had gamified it a bit more.

This adventure gets a lot of things right—it has a strong premise, is tightly written, has a good mix of combat, social, and exploration, and also has a dramatic conclusion. It is short, but it goes close to fulfilling the vision I had when I was thirteen years old, staring longingly at the cover of *Barrier Peaks*.

The feedback for *Expedition to the Lost Peaks* has been very favourable. The adventure is currently rated 90% and has sold over

4,000 copies. I think it is a good example of how you can take something you love (or want to love) and make it your own. The success of this adventure, and the delight it has brought so many people, is one of the reasons I will never apologize for riffing on past classics. Having said that, soon after I wrote this adventure, I began earnestly using another idea-generating tool, one that proved to be immensely powerful. We will discuss it in the next chapter.

Chapter 10



Let the Dice Talk

*Creativity involves breaking out of established patterns
in order to look at things in a different way.*

Edward de Bono

There is an old joke about a novelist and a neurosurgeon who meet at a party. The neurosurgeon says, “When I retire, I plan to write a book.” The novelist says, “What a coincidence! When I retire, I plan to operate on brains.” The novelist, of course, is making an ironic (or bitter) comment about the devaluation of their craft. In a culture with high literacy rates, many people fancy they can write a book. Having spent a lifetime reading, such folk do not imagine they might need to serve a writing apprenticeship first—in their assessment, they are experts already.

We see the same thing in the roleplaying game community. There are many, many people who have invested a remarkable number of

hours in this highly addictive hobby. And it is only natural for such folk, once they decide to publish, to consider themselves experts already. But one of the downsides to such “expertise” is that you are tempted to skip over the basics. And in doing so, you might miss ideas, techniques, and tools that can greatly enhance your work. I know because I did exactly that.

As a Dungeon Master with many years’ experience under my belt, I felt like I did not really need the *Dungeon Master’s Guide* very much. That was a book aimed at beginners, in my view, and I was beyond the lessons it contained. Folly! The latest edition of this book is a distillation of forty years of experience, and it simply oozes useful advice and ideas. I realized this myself a few years ago when I had another look at appendix A, which helps you generate a dungeon using random tables.

Now, I know some are skeptical about creating with random rolls, but this technique is well established in the hobby. Indeed, using randomness has a respectable history in the arts. For example, in the early 20th century, the French-Romain poet Tristan Tzara invented a composition technique called *découpé*, where he took an existing composition, cut up the words, and re-arranged them into a poem.

Many creators have since used similar techniques, including Kurt Cobain and David Bowie. Writer Ray Bradbury used to write down lists of evocative nouns, then pick them out at random and create stories from them. Using random words as creative prompts is a

pretty standard technique in many writing workshops and has even been turned into a dice-based game called *Story Cubes* (which I mentioned a couple of chapters ago). Lateral thinking expert Edward de Bono calls this the “random input technique” and has taught it to business leaders for decades.

When I started creating D&D adventures, I did not give much thought to randomness. I was aware of the technique, but I think I had put it into the “beginner” basket. But not long after completing *Expedition to the Lost Peaks*, I happened to pick up *The Dungeon Alphabet* by Michael Curtis, an adventure writer whose work I admire. This particular book contained a couple of dozen random lists for DMs to use when generating dungeons. I found the lists very imaginative and creatively provocative. I went searching for similar works and landed upon the extraordinary *Tome of Adventure Design* (or TOAD) by Matthew Finch. This weighty book contains hundreds of tables, most with dozens of detailed entries covering just about every aspect of fantasy RPG adventure design. I have found it an indispensable tool ever since.

But the 300-page TOAD can be hard to navigate, and for some time I have thought we needed something less complicated but still relatively comprehensive. I then revisited appendix A of the *Dungeon Master’s Guide* and realized what a superb job the authors had done. It turns out that these were the tables I had been looking for all along.

You can use them to generate engaging and playable dungeons, and I have increasingly relied on them when creating D&D content.

But aren't such tables only intended for use at home? Can you use them in publishable material? To test this point, I used the appendix A tables to outline two of my most recent D&D adventures, *The Cannith Schematica* and *The Eye of Klothys*. I also used randomly generated maps for them. At time of writing, both adventures are highly rated.

Why do random tables work? Edward de Bono described it this way, "The general principle of the random input is the willingness to look for unconnected inputs and to use these to open up new lines of thinking." Our minds are good at finding connections between seemingly unrelated words, and these connections are a fertile source of fresh ideas.

Science fiction writer Ray Bradbury gave a more detailed and personal explanation of why randomness helps creativity:

Three things are in your head: First, everything you have experienced from the day of your birth until right now. Every single second, every single hour, every single day. Then, how you reacted to those events in the minute of their happening, whether they were disastrous or joyful. Those are two things you have in your mind to give you material. Then, separate from the living experiences are all the art experiences you've had, the

things you've learned from other writers, artists, poets, film directors, and composers. So all of this is in your mind as a fabulous mulch and you have to bring it out. How do you do that?

For Bradbury, the random noun list helped him “dredge” (his word) his subconscious and bring the best ideas to the surface.

Ok, what does this look like in practice? For the two adventures I mentioned above, I used the appendix A tables to generate the following information about each chamber:

- ✦ Chamber purpose
- ✦ General feature or furnishing
- ✦ Chamber state
- ✦ Chamber contents
- ✦ Hazards, obstacles, traps, and tricks (if applicable)
- ✦ Monster motivation (if applicable)

Doing this for every room gave me an outline of the dungeon, which I then fleshed out in an iterative manner, adding details, moving things around, and looking for interconnections to develop.

Let us work through a single chamber as an example. Assume we are creating an adventure called *Temple of the Jade Bishop* (a title I devised using tables from TOAD). Following is how we can roll up a chamber for that dungeon using the appendix A tables. These are all genuine rolls, by the way—I am going to let the dice talk.

Chamber purpose

Pages 292 to 295 of the DMG contain lists of chamber purposes, such as bedrooms, kitchens, libraries, and so on. Defining this information helps you add details to your chamber that may interact with other chamber contents in intriguing ways. The chamber purpose tables are divided up by the dungeon type, so there are different tables for strongholds, tombs, mines, etc. I will use the “Temple or Shrine” table on p. 294. I rolled 01, meaning our chamber is an “Armory filled with weapons and armor, battle banners, and pennants.”

General feature or furnishing

Pages 299–301 contain a bunch of features and furniture to add to your chamber. I usually roll up a single item from one of these tables and later look for a way to turn it into some kind of toy, as I described in chapter 5. In this instance, I decided to use the Religious Articles and Furnishings table on p. 300. I rolled 48, meaning there is an “incense burner” in the room.

Chamber state

Page 293 has a table that tells us the current state of our chamber. This information potentially changes the battlefield terrain and may

also suggest ways in which to make the chamber interactive. I rolled 2, which is “Rubble, partially collapsed.”

Chamber contents

Page 294 has a table that determines the encounter type of a chamber, that is, whether it contains a monster, a treasure, etc. I rolled 78, meaning this chamber contains a “Trick.” As you will have gathered from chapter 5, I love tricks! Modern dungeons need more tricks.

Hazards, obstacles, traps, and tricks

Pages 296 through 298 contain random tables for hazards, obstacles, traps, and tricks. Since we rolled up a trick for the chamber contents, I am going to use the trick tables on page 298. I rolled 12 and 33, meaning my trick object is a “pool of water,” and my trick effect is “Magic mouth speaks a riddle.” A talking pool of water—how cool! I love random tables.

Monster

We did not roll up a monster in the chamber contents roll above, but I will describe my process for monster encounters anyway. The *Dungeon Master’s Guide* does not have monster tables, so I either

choose the monster by hand, use the encounter tables in *Xanathar's Guide to Everything*, or use a random web tool such as *Kobold Fight Club*. I often choose a monster type as the general theme for a dungeon or level, such as fiends or elementals. Even if randomly rolling for monsters, I tend to roll a few times until something *feels* right.

If the monster I select is intelligent, I roll on the monster motivation table on page 296 of the DMG. The motivation information adds depth to the monsters, can help you understand the dungeon's history, and sometimes suggests what the monster might be doing when the characters show up.

Pull it all together

So, here are the random elements I rolled up for my temple chamber:

- ✦ Armory filled with weapons and armor, battle banners, and pennants
- ✦ Incense burner
- ✦ Rubble, partially collapsed
- ✦ Trick: Pool of water, magic mouth speaks a riddle

The dice have spoken and provided us with some idea seeds. Now we turn the results over to our brain and let it figure out ways to tie these elements together. Why can the pool talk? We are in a temple, so perhaps a drop of the god's blood got mixed in there, which made

it magic. Ok, we have tied the pool to the temple theme. And perhaps you have to burn incense to get the pool to talk. Good, we have also linked in the incense burner! Having the pool in the armory is a bit strange, but maybe this temple is dedicated to the god of war, so this is a kind of ceremonial armory. Nice! See how we can link these random ideas together?

Ok, let us tidy it up and summarise. Sometime in the past, a drop of blood from the god of war got mixed in with a natural pool in the wilderness, and the god's followers (led by a senior priest known as the Jade Bishop) built a temple around it. The chamber that houses the pool is at the center of the temple and has been decorated like an armory in honor of the god. Now, when you burn incense in the incense burner here, the pool gives you a riddle-like hint about an upcoming conflict.

That sounds rather good to me—and all inspired by random rolls!

The whole temple

Let us put together an outline for a 10-room temple using this technique. For convenience, room 1 is the chamber we rolled above, though we would likely renumber the rooms once we get a map. As far as monsters go, I have decided this temple will have a fiendish flavor, with perhaps one other sort of monster for contrast. Since this

is a fairly small dungeon, I will re-roll repeat values. For larger dungeons, I have more tolerance for repeats. Here goes:

Temple of the Jade Bishop

1. Armory; incense burner; rubble; trick => pool of water speaks a riddle
2. Robing room; altar; ashes; empty room (no encounter)
3. Guardroom; offertory container; wrecked furniture; monster (random) => ettercap
4. Crypt for the high priest; paintings; rubble; monster (dominant inhabitant) => shadow demon is hiding from enemies
5. Drinking well; holy symbol; holes in the floor; hazard => green slime
6. Weapon workshop; idol; ashes; treasure => adamantine armor
7. Chapel; font; rubble; trick => tapestry casts *polymorph*
8. Central temple; stand; campsite; monster (ally) => quasits want to conquer the dungeon
9. Monk cells; kneeling bench; a pool of water; monster (pet) guarding treasure => hell hound guarding chest full of gems
10. Dining room; lamp; converted to a divination room; trap with treasure => open door and stone block smashes you

That looks like a fun little dungeon to me! You see some unusual results when you use random rolls, and these really provoke the creative process. For example, in chamber 4 we have the boss

monster, a shadow demon, hiding in this (presumably abandoned) temple from its enemies. Perhaps it is being chased by some archdevil enemy who cannot enter the prime material plane. The archdevil sends an emissary to hire the party to go to the temple and destroy or capture the shadow demon. So, there we have a little backstory and hook, prompted by the random roll!

Chamber 8 also has a slightly unusual encounter. Some quasits, allies of the shadow demon, want to conquer the dungeon. What does it mean for such weak creatures to desire conquest? I think I would play them as a bit of comic relief. When the party encounters them, they boldly declare they are masters of the temple and will destroy anyone who dares to pass.

The next, hard step

The next step, and it's a hard one, is to go through each room and convert it into a full encounter, tying together the different threads, fleshing out the descriptions, and making sure it is fun and playable. This step often involves shuffling things around a bit, which is fine—the random elements are there to serve you, not to shackle you. Based on experience, the 120-word outline above would evolve into a 3,000-5,000-word dungeon by the time I am finished with it.

Random tables will not do the work for you, but they will help you get out of creative ruts and stimulate new ideas. It is a creative

process that I have found invaluable, especially as I have sought to increase my output. I know some folk fear that any sort of framework is inherently limiting, but the opposite is true. A good creative process (like randomization) helps broaden your thinking, forcing your mind into new and unexpected places. Speaking about his random list technique, Ray Bradbury said:

These lists were the provocations, finally, that caused my better stuff to surface. I was feeling my way toward something honest, hidden under the trapdoor on the top of my skull... similar lists, dredged out of the lopsided of your brain, might well help you discover you, even as I flopped around and finally found me.

To help you discover you—that is really my hope, not just for the techniques in this chapter, but for all the material presented in this book. Bradbury talks about flopping around in search of his creative voice. I prefer the image of shuffling forward: we might be moving slowly, but to move at all is the thing.

Afterword



I have Not Yet Begun to Write

*A writer is a person for whom writing is
more difficult than it is for other people.*

Thomas Mann

As I write this, my thirty-fifth adventure has just been published on the Dungeon Masters Guild. Called *Thimblerrigging*, it is part of the Adventurer's League *Dreams of the Red Wizards* series, which is aimed at experienced players. One scene from the adventure requires the players to enter the fortress/library of Candlekeep, seeking a piece of secret information. The story outline said I needed to give it a *Ninth Gate* feel, with the NPCs being very unhelpful and the characters struggling to make progress.

When I first read that part of the outline, I had no idea how to turn it into a playable D&D scenario! So, I did what I often do in such cases—I put out a call for help on social media. I had to be pretty

oblique as the plot line was still confidential, but I asked for suggestions around “gamifying” social interactions. Some good discussion followed, and folk pointed me to a few examples of it being done well. After sweating a bit of blood, I came up with the following approach. Spoiler alert, of course!

The characters arrive at Candlekeep wanting to find out some information. The head librarian knows what they need but does not trust them. He instead sends them off to visit various book chambers within Candlekeep, each with a librarian in attendance. The characters learn some useful lore from this research, but do not find the information they are looking for, and nor can the librarians help them. The experience should start to get frustrating, as they go from chamber to chamber without finding what they need.

However, each librarian has a small personal problem that becomes apparent as the scenario progresses. If and when the characters help a librarian, they gain a “reputation point.” Once they get 3 reputation points, the head librarian is convinced they are trustworthy people, and volunteers the information they have been looking for. It is a nice little piece of misdirection: the players go into the scenario thinking their research skills are to be tested, whereas it is really their worthiness being scrutinized.

Some of you are thinking “That’s cool, I might try that in my next adventure,” while others are thinking, “I don’t much care for that approach.” Both valid responses! But my point is that, after

publishing thirty-five adventures, I am still learning all the time. This book was not intended as the master crafter giving you definitive instructions. Rather, I am a fellow apprentice who is showing you a few tricks I have picked up along the way.

I have learned lots of other tricks as well, but it is time to bring this little book to a close. If it proves sufficiently popular, I may publish a sequel or two. Otherwise, perhaps we will bump into each other on social media, where we can swap some tips and excitedly discuss our latest projects. Because I *am* still excited by this craft, and I am certain my best work lays ahead of me rather than behind. To misquote John Paul Jones, “I have not yet begun to write!”

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