Dispatches from Raven Crowking

Vol.1 - Choices, Context, and Consequence

Daniel J. Bishop

Dispatches from Raven Crowking
Vol.1 - Choices, Context, and Consequence

Contents

Introduction

Welcome to **Dispatches from Raven Crowking's Nest Volume I**. Pull up a chair, set your drink near your hand, and let's talk. That's pretty much what this is. Chatting about games in general, and **Dungeon Crawl Classics** in particular.

So, some background. I ran my first game on Christmas Day, 1979, in Hartland, Wisconsin, less than 50 miles from Ground Zero in Lake Geneva. My first RPG was Holmes Blue Box **Dungeons & Dragons**. My family wasn't wealthy, and when the first edition of **Advanced Dungeons & Dragons** came out, I spent over a year before I could acquire the books. In fact, the first **AD&D** book I purchased was the **Fiend Folio**, after spending the summer in the Youth Conservation Camp system to get the money. That also allowed me to obtain the rest of the books, and a number of back issues of **The Dragon**.

Prior to that, in order to run my weekly **AD&D** game, I was using copies of the rules I had laboriously reproduced by hand in spiral notebooks. The game fired my imagination early, and I was willing to work for it. My parents were able to use taking **D&D** away as a lever to make me bring my grades up, resulting in my making the honor roll every year thereafter. Looking back as an adult, I can see all the effort my parents made, and I am humbled by the debt of gratitude I owe them.

Other games came and went. I played **Gamma World**, **Traveler**, **Villains & Vigilantes**, **Twilight 2000**, **FASA Star Trek** and **Doctor Who**…more games than I can really remember, to be honest. My first published adventures were for **3rd Edition Dungeons & Dragons**, in a magazine called **Dragon Roots**. By the time 4e was coming out, I was getting a little fatigued. I began working on my own system. And then I met **Dungeon Crawl Classics**, and it was like coming home again.

Dungeon Crawl Classics is now my system of choice. Thanks to **Mark Gedak** and **Purple Duck Games**, I started writing for the system with **AL 1: Bone Hoard of the Dancing Horror**, and never looked back. Although I have since published DCC work with **Dragon's Hoard**, **Goodman Games**, **Mystic Bull**, **Brave Halfling**, and others – I freely admit a standing goal to place something with every publisher of DCC materials – writing for **Purple**

Duck is also like coming home.

As the name implies, ***Dispatches*** has its genesis in my blog, ***Raven Crowking's Nest***. ***Dispatches*** has a few advantages over the free blog versions of the same material. First off, the material has been re-edited, cleaned up, and in some cases expanded. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, it is in print so that you can keep it on your gaming shelf. Finally, ***Dispatches*** will contain some new material as well…a "thank you" for your continued interest!

I have opinions – lots of them! – but I'm going to dispense with the "IMHO"s and "IME"s, and assume that you, the Gentle Reader, are smart enough to know that I am talking about my own opinions and experiences. And, if I am wrong in that assumption, feel free to tell me so!

Good Gaming!

Choices, Context, and Consequence

Part I

If I were asked to give advice to a new Game Master – or even an old hand looking to better her game – the thing I would most strongly emphasize is the interplay between choices, context, and consequences. In my experience, anyone who understands this interplay will be at least an adequate GM…and no one who does not, no matter what their other fine qualities, is never really satisfying.

Choice, at its most basic level, is a decision. Do we follow the path, or go off into the woods? Do we explore the swamp in search of the ruins of Zondo's Castle of Phantasmal Fun? Which passage do we take at the intersection? Should we parlay with these goblins? Do we trust them? Do we run from the floating gaseous eyeball of death rays…or do we fight it?

Context is the information that informs a choice. The choice to follow the path or go off into the woods is meaningless unless one has some idea what each choice means. Are bandits known to lay ambushes along the path? Is there some lost ruin supposedly hidden in the woods? Is there some landmark the characters can make for? Are they merely trying to cut off a wide curve of road they know is ahead? Are they trying to throw off pursuers? Is there a chance of getting lost if they leave the road?

Consequences are what happen as a result of making a choice. You follow the path, and arrive at the village. Or you meet some bandits. Or you take to the woods and get lost. Or escape the wraiths that are pursuing you to recover a magic ring.

Ideally, the consequences of any given choice lead into new choices. Rather than simply arriving at the village, you arrive at a village where a man is being beaten by a crowd. Do you intervene? When you run into the bandits, do you flee? Fight? Let yourself be robbed? If you are lost in the woods, what do you do? What do you discover? What do you do about it? Having escaped the wraiths, you come out of the woodland near a farmer's field. Do you accept

his invitation to dinner? What do you tell him about the strange folk asking about you?

When your game seems to be lagging, it is most likely due to either a lack of apparent choices or a lack of the context required to make those choices meaningful. The easiest way to renew the energy of a game session is to interject a new choice, or to provide some information that enhances the context of already existing choices. I have heard folks complain about the amount of background information available in some published adventures, "with no means for the players to learn it". Huh. Of course there are ways for the players to learn that information! One of your major jobs in presenting a published scenario is to examine that background – that context – and figure out how the players can learn bits and pieces of it. Then, when play falters, you have something more to ratchet up the excitement than another wandering monster.

Now, there is nothing wrong with a sudden combat; one of the reasons that combat is popular in role-playing games is that the choices are clear, both in context and in consequence. The context is, "That bugbear is trying to kill you!" and the consequence is "If you don't stop him, he will!" Much of the beauty and excitement of combat can be understood by thinking of it in these terms. When you examine other bits of GMing advice, you will see that they encourage you to devise more interesting "combat encounters", by varying the context (often by using a unique location, such as on giant gears, requiring different choices), or by varying outcome (when innocents might die, or when your opponent wants something other than to slay you – to capture you, perhaps?).

There is an argument to be made that it is the job of the adventure writer, not the GM, to consider how the players can learn the background information from an adventure. Yes, the adventure designer should consider this. That doesn't mean it is not the GM's job as well. As a point of fact, an adventure designer has to include whatever background information so that the GM running the adventure can, at least, understand what is happening in the adventure, and make meaningful decisions when the players throw him a curve ball. The adventure writer doesn't get to dictate PC choices, any more that the GM does, and while some means for the players to gain information should be included, the players themselves may not use them. It is incumbent upon the GM to have flexibility with his specific players, and their specific choices. It is also necessary that the GM realize that the players may not obtain that

background information, and for the players to be aware that learning important details is a reward for play, not something that will simply happen because they are sitting at the table.

In most games, means are built into them for PCs to acquire information. The writer of an adventure can, and should, consider how information can be learned. This does not make it any less the job of the GM to consider the same, and to be open to the player's attempts to learn new information. I don't need Gary Gygax to hold my hand in order to consider what might be learned about the Caves of Chaos if the PCs interrogate a kobold. Neither should you.

It isn't just background information that provides context. One important part of context is the "footprint" of creatures in the game world. A creature whose presence is foreshadowed is often more effective than one who is simply thrown at the PCs out of the blue. Let us take a basilisk as an example: With one GM, the basilisk simply appears as an encounter, perhaps turning one or more characters to stone before being ultimately slain. For the players, it may seem like a GM-driven "gotcha!", and whatever deaths occur are probably going to feel anti-climactic. How could they feel otherwise? The players have had no chance to anticipate the encounter. Their choices leading to the encounter lack the context needed to make them feel meaningful. With another GM, however, the players get to hear fearful goblins speak in hushed tones about the "Mistress of the Dark Chasms". They see the lizard-like drawings the goblins make before the altars where they worship Her. They find the broken bits of goblins turned to stone by the creature, and may even see where it rubs its skin against the rocks (including, perhaps, a cast-off skin?). Now the players have some context with which to base their decisions. They can stock up on mirrors, try to match their magic to the challenge, or bypass the area entirely. The cast-off skin might give them the idea that the basilisk could be blind at some point, and thus far less dangerous – some divination might be in order. Finally, if they do enter the Dark Chasms, and some of the PCs are petrified by the monster, it no longer feels like a "Gotcha!" The outcome is a consequence of player choices.

As another example, imagine that you are devising a campaign milieu in which you imagine that there will be a great deal of wilderness exploration. How do you control pacing? How do you make the wilderness interesting? Once more, Choices, Context, and Consequences come to your aid. The main bane of wilderness (and, to some extent, town) adventures is that they

are seemingly-open-ended. The choices seem to be limitless, which actually makes it very hard to choose. After all, it isn't enough to simply select a compass direction and trudge along…we want our choices to be meaningful. And to be meaningful, they require context.

We can first provide context by including some landmarks. Landmarks in a role-playing game do the same thing they do in the real world. They provide us something to steer by, to aim toward, and to fix our location with. If you are lost, you can look for higher ground, find a landmark, and correct your course, but these landmarks can have reputations that provide further context.

For example, The Old Forest is known to be queer, and the Withywindle that runs through it is the heart of its queerness. Because the hobbits in ***The Fellowship of the Ring*** know this, they know also that they should be trying to get through the Old Forest as quickly as possible, and to avoid the Withywindle (even if they cannot do so successfully). These rumors not only inform the hobbits' choices, but they foreshadow their encounters with Old Man Willow and Tom Bombadil.

Likewise, in a role-playing game, if the great mountain range known as the Trollshanks is said to be home to trolls and giants, the players know that they are likely to encounter those creatures, and prepare accordingly. If they know it is famous for its steep cliffs and deep gorges, they will prepare climbing equipment, or be prepared to make choices to go around. If they know further that a rich dwarf mine was located there, that has since fallen to evil, they will also have motive to actually enter the area.

Among other things, context (1) foreshadows potential encounters, (2) foreshadows potential rewards, (3) allows the players to set goals, (4) allows the players to understand the goals of other creatures within the game milieu, (5) gives clues that allow for "aha!" moments when the players put things together, and (6) makes choices meaningful because context foreshadows consequence.

Part II

"Decision Paralysis" occurs in a role-playing game when a player (or group thereof) simply cannot decide what to do. The character may have many available choices, but the player cannot seem to make any of them ***meaningful*** within the context of the game. The problem is almost always rooted in context or consequence. If the difficulty is rooted within context, there are two potential problems. The first is that the player(s) involved lack enough context to make a meaningful choice. The second is that the player(s) have context, but there is no clear advantage to any choice that can be made.

Both problems can be resolved by giving the player(s) additional information. However, we also want our players to make their own decisions, so we need to be careful not to add information in such a way as to bias their choices. Usurping player choices – or, worse yet, getting the players to rely upon you to tell them what choices they should make – is one of the worst things you can do as a Game Master.

So, how does the GM go about creating additional context without usurping player choices?

Let's take an example: A party is exploring the Gloomy Megadungeon of Huge Hallways when they come to a Y-shaped intersection, allowing the group to go either left or right. The GM knows that the left passage leads to the lair of a troll, while the right passage leads to a hidden treasure, then more passages that end up in an area controlled by goblins. The group, faced by the choice of going left or right (they have stated that they do not wish to turn back!) end up facing a moment of decision paralysis.

What should the GM do?

First off, ***wait***. We have been told so often in recent years that the GM is in charge of pacing, that some of us have forgotten that this is untrue. Pacing is created through an amalgam of player decisions and GM-enforced consequences to those decisions. If the players decide to spend their time wondering what to do, or discussing their options, that is a valid decision. ***The GM must accept that not deciding – or not deciding right away – is also a choice, and should be treated like any other.*** I cannot stress that enough. The natural consequences of bickering over a decision in a dungeon hallway may be unpleasant, but if so, they should occur because they are natural consequences of the players' choices – not because the GM wishes to control

the pace.

If you enforce natural consequences, sooner or later (and most often, sooner), the players themselves will take control over pacing. That is one of the important functions of wandering monsters in old school role-playing games. They act as a spur to keep the characters moving….but they are not an arbitrary spur. They do not usurp player choices. Now, perhaps one of the players will have his character look down both hallways, to see if there is anything he can see. The wise GM knows that what the player is really looking for is more context, with which to make a decision. And the wise GM also supplies that context, but not in a way that makes the decision for the player(s).

> *"The left passage has a bad smell, as though of rotting meat, and you can just see what might be a gobbet of flesh, dropped and left to rot by some creature. The right passage has cleaner air, but seems to be infrequently used….there is some minor detritus where the passage's walls meet the floor – a broken boot heel, a gnawed and dried apple core, a few dried bones, scraps of torn cloth, and the like."*

This adds to the context available to the players – if you want a fight, go left; if you want to go in a less frequented direction, go right – without taking the choice away. The contextual information arises naturally from how the area is used in the game milieu. It might even lead to other contextual information – did the heel come from a goblin boot? When the GM provides relevant contextual information, that can be used to help make meaningful decisions, the players begin to pay attention to that information. They might even start seeking it out on their own. But, let us say that our party still doesn't know what to do. They can't decide between left and right.

Now what does the Game Master do?

Obviously, the ultimate consequence of standing there indecisively is that, sooner or later, the troll comes by. Either it is bringing back dinner, or it's going out to find something to eat. Or maybe it's trying to get quickly to its nearby latrine. The GM is fully within his rights to spring the troll on the unsuspecting party….or, they might hear it coming (from behind them, or from the left way) and hide. Either way, more context is added….a troll lives down the left tunnel. Again, this should not be instantaneous, but should arise naturally from the fictional milieu. The goal is not to prevent the players from making a decision, but rather to enforce the natural consequences of a

decision they did make….the decision to stand there and wait while deciding. In a relatively safe open field, the party could take far longer to safely make a decision. Although it might eventually rain on them…

Not every detail is context. ***Context is detail that is relevant to making meaningful decisions***. As you develop your dungeons, populate your strongholds, and devise your wilderness areas, never be afraid to include too much context. Instead, you should be thinking, "How can I telegraph this encounter?" "What footprint should this creature be leaving in the area?" "What clues can I give to hint at this secret?"

On the other hand, be wary of having NPCs that usurp player choices. NPCs should always act from their own motives, and from their own limited information. Rather than have a Council of Elrond that tells the players what must be done, have NPCs who urge the players in this direction and that…. some offering good suggestions, others offering less good, all from the basis of their own goals and understanding. Just because an NPC wants to hire adventurers to perform some task, it does not follow that the PCs should be perfectly suited to that task….or suited to it at all.

Players get used to the idea that, if an NPC wants to hire them, this is "the plot hook", and it should be taken. If you want a living game, based on player choices, you need to break that cycle. In minor ways at first, and then more strongly, have NPCs offer jobs that are not suited to the PCs. They might be boring, and so glossed over, or they might be jobs that the PCs are out-matched or under-matched. You must make certain that the players come to understand that NPCs are not the GM. What they want is not what the GM wants. They must be taken on their own terms.

When the players understand that you are not going to tell them what to do, that you are going to offer them many choices, and that the pacing of the game is going to be largely based on their decisions, you have set the stage for truly satisfying play. This is what a role-playing game can do….what it is best at. You cannot get that experience from a novel or a movie, or from a computer game. This is where the medium shines.

Some people will tell you that it is hard to feel involved in a game where character death is common, or where choices are limited. They cite early role-playing games, with high character turn-over, level limits for demi-humans, or non-sword-wielding wizards as examples of these "flaws". As always, play

what you enjoy. Life is too short for bad gaming. But for my money, the only limitation to getting players involved occurs in the number of meaningful decisions they get to make. And the important meaningful decisions are not in character generation, or in builds, but in actual play. You can provide that excellence of play in any system – just remember that the important choices belong to the players, and it is your job to provide context to make those choices, and enforce the consequences thereof. Be aware that you might have to disregard some of the GMing advice your game of choice provides in order to do this.

Part III

As previously discussed, a choice is a decision and context is the information that informs a choice. There is a third element, consequences, that deserves special consideration, because the idea of consequence has changed the most in role-playing games. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that, in mitigating consequences, role-playing games have also limited choice, and limited the meaning of context.

Consequence is whatever happens as a result of choice. For example, if Frodo & Co. stick to the road, they might be overtaken by a Black Rider, but if they cut through the Woody End, they might get lost or worse. Destroying valuable artwork because it is of a necromantic nature means that you will not have the gold selling it might yield. Not finding the treasure means that you don't have it. Giving the Arkenstone of Thrain to Bard means that Thorin is going to be upset at you. Jumping into lava means you will die, and losing in a pitched combat is likely to mean the same.

Without consequences that flow naturally from the choices made, those choices themselves become meaningless. If Frodo & Co. have the same chances of meeting the Black Riders no matter what they do, and can become as lost on the road as in the open countryside, what value does the decision have? If you can destroy the necromantic art objects, or locate the treasure in a monster's lair, and the gold finds its way to you anyhow, what does do those decisions matter? In a word, nothing. Likewise, if failing in combat, falling into lava, etc., never results in death (or death without the player's permission), then failing in combat or falling into lava means less than it otherwise would. To paraphrase a great man, you might as well be playing **Candyland** with your baby sister.

In the case of **Dungeons & Dragons**, this mitigation against consequence first reared its head (in a strong sense) in the **Dragonlance** modules, where the GM is admonished to keep a certain NPC ambiguously alive no matter what happens. In a weaker sense, mitigation against consequence can be seen as early as **White Plume Mountain**, where there is an encounter that "scales" to the PCs' condition at the end of the module (or is omitted altogether!). It is also possible to set up an in-game situation where death (or some other consequence) simply *cannot* naturally occur. The condition of "Captain Jack Harkness" in **Torchwood** is an example – the character is simply incapable of dying. The proliferation of mitigation against consequence is probably due, at least in part, to the extended time it requires to create a character in certain game systems. In many older games, a character death meant that the player was out of action for only 5-15 minutes of real world time. This is not so for all games. Likewise, if it takes 45 or more minutes to resolve a simple combat within a game system, having another character ready beforehand doesn't necessarily mitigate against long wait times until the new PC can be introduced.

It should be easy to see how mitigating against consequences lessens the impact of choice with a single example. In **White Plume Mountain**, scaling or removing the final encounter based on PC strength would seem to punish players who did well in the module, while rewarding those who did poorly. If all parties have the same final encounter instead, it is clear that the "good play" choices leading to a party that still retains greater resources at the module's end are rewarded by having an easier time in the final encounter, while a severely depleted party might face a Total Party Kill. Likewise, if losing in combat always means that you are taken prisoner or left for dead, and given another chance to succeed, losing in combat loses much of its sting. The result is that the choices regarding that combat matter less.

Some GMs work hard to include other consequences to keep choices meaningful. "If you lose, your baby sister is enslaved!" Even so, having your baby sister enslaved is simply not as meaningful as having your baby sister enslaved, and also being dead. Obviously, if it is too easy to restore a dead comrade to life, and if there are few consequences for so doing, even death may lose its sting. It is therefore important that the GM not mitigate against consequences. Whatever the natural consequences of a choice are, those are the consequences that will occur. Sometimes that means an enemy will capture fallen PCs to hold them ransom, and sometimes it means that the PCs are the main course in a feast!

Yet, not every consequence should be horrendous to endure! Previously, I mentioned that "decision paralysis" is sometimes the fault of consequence. This occurs when all the choices seem bad, and the player(s) have no expectation of being able to achieve a good outcome. Game Masters naturally want their players to win, and to succeed despite the odds. Because of this natural tendency, and because of the importance of consequences for making choices meaningful, much Old School GM advice is based upon fighting this tendency and allowing the dice to fall where they may. There is a certain encouragement to be a Rat-Bastard Game Master (RBGM).

That is all well and good, so long as the consequences are natural to the choices made….but sometimes (perhaps too often, depending upon who you ask), all of the choices lead to bad ends. Or, worse yet, all of the choices but one lead to unnaturally bad consequences, meant to funnel the PCs into a single set of choices of the GM's choosing. And one can see where this is learned – if the GM is admonished to keep certain NPCs alive to fuel the story within official adventure products, why would the GM not conclude that the continuity of his expected storyline is more important than ensuring that the choices the players make is meaningful?

There are some GMs who refer to this as an "illusion of choice" or "The Plot Train"– I believe it is an illusion of an illusion. Most players see through it pretty quickly, and some will do increasingly foolish things to test the walls of their cage. Just how much plot protection is built into the game milieu? Enquiring players want to know! In order to avoid decision paralysis, it behooves the prospective Game Master to ensure that there are many chances for good consequences as well as ill. Good consequences don't have to mean treasure. They can be people who try to help the PCs in some limited way (I've used farmers putting PCs up for the night for free to good effect), alliances, potential romances, and even inspiring sights. Knowledge is always good, and most players appreciate having learned things through play rather than through blocks of GM-provided text.

Whenever possible, consequences should lead naturally into new choices, and/or provide additional context to choices the PCs are already facing. In this way, the players never run out of things to do, or leads to follow up on. The game milieu becomes a dynamic place, where descriptions are paid attention to for the context they provide, context is used to make choices, and the consequences of those choices are dealt with while leading naturally into new choices. If you can master this interplay, no matter what else you fail

in, you will always be able to attract and hold players. "Context —> Choice —> Consequence" is probably the most important thing a Game Master can bring to the table.

Conclusion

In conclusion, role-playing games are about making meaningful choices. If you enable your players to do so, even if you have difficulties mastering other parts of the game, you can be a good Game Master.

Context allows for meaningful decisions, because the context is the relevant information that the players have in order to make choices. Never be afraid of giving the players too much context! If the players seem stuck, you can always throw them more context!

Choice is what the players do. They make choices for their characters. As a Game Master, your job includes providing context for those choices, and ensuring that natural consequences follow those choices. ***Your job most emphatically is not to make choices for player characters.*** It is fine to ask, "Are you *sure* you want to do that?" but you should not say "Your character would not do that". Master the art of keeping your nose out of PC choices! Even when NPCs interject comments in PC decision making, make sure that you are flowing from the NPC's knowledge and motives. There must be a clear divide between NPC suggestions and the DM suggesting through an NPC

Consequence, simply described is outcome. Consequences should arise naturally from choices made, and from the context of those choices (the game setting, or milieu). Consequences should also, whenever possible reveal more context and/or open up more choices. Some game systems and/or playstyles encourage mitigating against consequences more than others, but you should resist the urge to do so. ***When the Game Master mitigates against consequences, he reduces the impact of player choice. An "illusion of choice" is rarely sustainable….if it is sustainable at all.***

I have followed these principles for many years, and I have never been at a loss for players. While no system can guarantee you the same success, mastering "Context —> Choice —> Consequence" should improve anyone's Game Mastering. In my experience, anyone who understands this interplay will be at least an adequate GM…and no one who does not, no matter what their other fine qualities, is ever really satisfying.

Prepare for the Epic Endgame!

There is a bit of famous advice from the great Ray Winninger about setting up a campaign milieu; to wit, never force yourself to create more than you need to. The question then naturally, what do I need to create? I am going to suggest that, very early on – perhaps so early that not a single PC foot has trod the dirt of your masterpiece – you consider what might become a proper, epic, finale to an adventurer's career. You want to drop hints about these possibilities early on. Perhaps as early as the first session.

Please note that I am not saying that you should craft your adventures to be "about" some particular epic endgame. Nor am I saying that you should choose the final goals for the Player Characters soon to be entrusted to your tender care. Nor, finally, am I saying that the campaign milieu ceases to be used after such an epic endgame is concluded. I am not advocating an "adventure path" type design. You shouldn't be thinking about a single epic endgame. You should consider at least 3 possible endgames, and perhaps up to 10 of more. A single epic endgame forces the players along the path you set for them. Multiple potential endgames allow the players to choose what interests them. They then get to set their own path.

Possible epic endgames include (but are not limited to):

- *Artifact:* Gain possession and control over some great artifact or relic. Alternatively, destroy the same.
- *Ascend to Godhood:* Work things out so that you are a permanent fixture in the cosmology of the game milieu. Later PCs can worship you!
- *Become Immortal:* Always worthwhile, and it's nice to be a permanent fixture in the campaign milieu.
- *Gain a Kingdom:* Rip the crown off of the bloody head of the previous ruler, whom you strangled on his throne.
- *Great Love:* Win the love of some paragon of beauty or virtue, of whom the bards sing, and who is won only at great cost.
- *Legendary Challenge:* Become the greatest chessmaster in the world. Beat the Devil in a game of poker. Reach the top of Mount EverestWasEasier.
- *Legendary Hoard:* Uncover some great hoard of treasure, and get it home.

- *Legendary Location:* Find Atlantis, the Garden of Eden, or the lowest level of **Castle Greyhawk**. Then get out to tell the tale.
- *Legendary Monster:* Defeat a unique, named monster, feared for its power. The original **1st edition AD&D** tarrasque was a challenge of this kind.
- *Overcome a God:* Pretty self-explanatory. Note that this need not be in combat.
- *Overthrow Evil Regime:* Also pretty self-explanatory, and may lead directly into….

Note that these epic endgames are not mutually exclusive. A character might need to seek out an artifact, within the hoard of a legendary creature, in order to defeat a god, and hence become immortal.

What Makes an Endgame Epic?

When a PC is 1st level, he encounters and slays an orc. When he is 3rd level, he encounters and slays a tougher orc. When he is 10th level, the orc, although now a giant of some sort, is still really nothing more than a bigger orc. When devising an epic endgame, it is imperative that the matter cannot be resolved simply by slaying an epic-level orc.

No. What you want to do is create a situation where wading into combat simply will not work. The character must seek eldritch lore, deal with demons and/or demigods, field armies, and bend the campaign milieu to his will. Thousands or millions of beings are affected, for good or for ill. Succeed or fail, the campaign milieu will permanently affected by the PC's quest. It becomes a major point of the world's history, remembered for many generations to come.

To be truly epic, an endgame must demand that the player character gamble. Way back at 1st level (or 0-level, in the **Dungeon Crawl Classics** game!), the PC had scant guarantee of survival, and even less of success. As the character grows, his chances of success grow with him, and his survival becomes far less doubtful. An epic endgame reverses this. Once more, the character must gamble everything, with a good chance of losing. It is this real chance of losing that makes victory taste sweet….and the consequences of loss must be dire. There must be real and obvious reasons why no one has tried this before….or, if they have (and that is a great campaign backstory!) why they failed.

If the players have a chance to learn about these potential endgames right from the start, they have something epic to compare themselves to. We can liken a person's strength to "a modern-day Hercules". The prepared epic endgame allows your PCs and NPCs to refer to someone as "Tougher than the tarrasque itself" in the same sort of exaggerated way. Imagine the campaign where a great Iron Colossus stands vigil over the city harbor, issuing commands on behalf of its Red Priesthood, and threatening destruction if those commands are not heeded. The PCs are affected by those commands early on in the campaign, and eventually decide to gamble everything in ending the Red Priesthood's power forever – even if it means finding some way to destroy the Iron Colossus!

The wise GM doesn't allow the Colossus to be defeated in mere combat, however. The thing is invincible. No, instead, she has the players seek out the home plane of the spirit that animates the great monster, where they must field an army to reach its iron fortress. And then, and only then, can they challenge its Red Priest master to a contest that will wrest control of the Colossus from the Priesthood and into the PCs' hands. And, if they win, one of their number must remain behind to be the animus of the indestructible thing….. Increases of power do not make a game epic. Rather, risk must be increased, and the fates of nations or worlds must hang in the balance. Just make sure that, whatever the consequences of failure, you are ready to allow the PCs to fail, and the consequences to occur.

After the epic endgame….

If the world is still there, the players make some new adventurers, and play on. The landscape is changed by the events of the endgame. Old PCs are lords of the realm, or gods, or lost. They have truly affected the campaign milieu. The new PCs are moving in their shadows. And, perhaps, those shadows will suggest some new potential endgames…..

Whether the players immediately realize it or not, really affecting the campaign milieu through the agency of your own choices, taken at risk, and with full acceptance and understanding of the potential consequences, is the best thing about playing these games. And it is one of the things that tabletop games do infinitely better than computer games….because those changes can be persistent. You owe it to your players to craft those opportunities. You owe it to yourself to watch them unfold.

Defining the Epic Endgame

What is an epic endgame, why would you want one, and why would you indicate what types of epic endgames there might be out there at the start of a campaign? What makes it epic? For that matter, what makes it an endgame?

> **Robin Hood:** [to Marian] "It's so beautiful, this place... the woods just now... full of noises... everything so alive. I kept thinking of all the death I've seen. I've hardly lost a battle, and I don't know what I've won. 'The day is ours, Robin,' you used to say, and then it was tomorrow. But where did the day go?"

If you've seen Robin and Marion, you know Robin Hood's line, "I'd never have a day like this again, would I? Well, it's better this way." and you know what an epic endgame is all about. It is not about beginning a character's career, or growing the character, it's about endings. It is a chance to do something with a character that will forever change the campaign world, and make that character remembered for years to come. It is about letting a beloved character go, knowing that the character has achieved a peak, and would never have a day like that again. It does not mean that the character disappears from the campaign world, or that the character need die, or even that the character need never pick up sword and lance and enter the fray again. It means that the focus of play is shifting to younger characters, characters eager still to make their mark upon the world.

Ultimately, role-playing games are about accomplishing something in a world where daily life holds little chance of real accomplishment. Possible endgames are telegraphed throughout a campaign because, if the impossible is possible for you, when you first meet it, then overcoming it means nothing. An epic endgame is epic within the scope of the campaign milieu. If travel to alternate worlds is common, then travelling to an alternate world is not epic enough to count. Not only are the stakes high in the epic endgame - even if only because death is around every corner - but the challenge is real. This might mean Gary Gygax's **Tomb of Horrors**. It might mean Harley Stroh's **Colossus Arise!**. It might mean wresting an island from the Venetians and then holding it from the Turks. Achievement is measured in relation to the milieu in which it occurs. Every James Bond villain that ever was? All of them have been thwarted while in the process of attempting to achieve their own epic endgames.

Think of the real world for a second. If you are daring, you know where the

epic endgames lie. Fort Knox. Mount Everest. The Tour de France. Running for high political office. The Pulitzer Prize. The Nobel Prize. Trying to find a cure for AIDs. You know what all of these have in common? You have to take big risks to achieve anything, and the odds are good that you won't succeed. Those who do succeed in their epic endgames - well, we know who they are. Mother Theresa. Muhammad Ali. Alexander the Great. George Washington. Abraham Lincoln. They achieve their endgame, or fail in the attempt, and then never have a day like this again. Their star shines bright to beckon others onward, but they have had their day, and the focus of history shifts to those who are daring enough to try to rise from the shadows.

Not every character will achieve an epic endgame. But in a well-managed campaign milieu, lures to achieve something beyond the reach of normal men - or even normal adventurers! - are always in the background. Because that is what life is, and that is what best allows the players to have an opportunity for achievement in the game. The alternative is "I've hardly lost a battle, and I don't know what I've won." If that's your thing, go for it. It's not mine.

Fudging
Just a Style Difference?

I contend that it is not. To my mind, a difference in style is cosmetic, whereas a difference that actually affects the substance being offered is not. If you don't buy into that premise about style vs. substance, the odds are very good that you will not buy into the reasons I think fudging fundamentally changed what is being offered by a game. Simply put, you can run your game however you like. So long as you have even a single player interested in the type of game you want to run, you should run your game however you like....no matter what I, or anyone else, thinks about it! That being said, the interplay between context, choice, and consequence is real, and it is what drives player interaction within the game milieu.

In my experience, the GM "fudges" for one of two reasons:

(1) He believes that the consequences of the choices made by the players should be ameliorated (for good or ill), or
(2) He believes that he has made a mistake in presenting the context, and therefore the (die roll dictated) consequences do not follow from the choice as presented to the players.

Either way, the GM is fudging because he has no faith in the choices made by the players. If the players play smart, and make a scenario "too easy", they are effectively punished when the GM pumps up the opposition. Likewise, when the GM makes things easier to prevent an "undesirable" outcome, he makes smarter play irrelevant while simultaneously deciding which outcomes are desirable and which are not. He narrows the range of the game to a very few possible outcomes.

There are three basic arguments that arise from the "pro-fudging" side of the debate:

1. Fudging allows the GM to keep "the story" on track.
This, of course, assumes that there is a single story that must be kept on track, with a known beginning, middle, and end. It is a fallacy, for example, among some GMs that every module has a known beginning, middle, and end. In

reality, events in a game without fudging are a story only after the fact. If you have determined the middle and end beforehand, then what do you need players for? How can something where the players only occasionally get some minor input into what occurs be at all the same as a game driven by player decisions?

Let's take, as an example, a lovely outing against a Hill Giant Jarl. There is definitely a beginning, but what the middle and end are no one can say until events play out. Do they find a way to burn the giants out? Are they cautious and clever? Do they tip their hand early, and end up facing the giants en masse? And the end....do they find the route to the next module in the series? Do they learn where to go by casting *speak with dead* upon the Jarl's decapitated head? Do they give up and run away? Do they all die? Even in a ten room dungeon, how do you know ahead of time that Room 10 is the end? Perhaps there is a TPK in Room 5. Perhaps Room 7 is so scary that the PCs give up and seek greener pastures.

Every published module has a beginning. Every published module has a lot of potential middle. Every published module has a lot of potential ends. If you know the middle and the end before you start playing, then you might as well be writing a novel. In fact, the very difference between player choice mattering and not mattering may be summed up with whether or not there is "the" middle and "the" end. And, as soon as you start lopping of ends ("Can't have a TPK in Room 3!") to meet your idea of what "the middle" and/or "the end" are supposed to be, you have moved away from doing anything like what I am doing with the game. The further you go down that road, the less this is "style" and the more it is substance.

Note also that there are game systems that have mechanics that allow outcomes to change. Many of those games give 1-shot "points" to the players, allowing them to choose when to alter the dice, thus allowing them to choose narrative paths by regarding context and while keeping potential consequences in mind. This is different, in my mind, to GM fudging, because there is no attempt to create an "illusion" that choice matters; instead, another layer of choice is being added. There is no "the story" before the fact; the story is what happens at the game table.

In essence, this argument supposes that a player-decision-driven sandbox and a railroad are two "styles" of the same thing. I reject this supposition, and contend that they are two different things. There is no reason for the GM to

keep things "on track" unless there is a track to follow.....and I would argue that such a "track" destroys the core strength of a Pen & Paper game, which is the interplay between context, player choice, and the consequences of that choice. You might as well be playing a computer game….and it is notable that computer games attempt to emulate that interplay of context, player choice, and consequence as far as they are able. That this is important, and considered desirable, by a large segment of the gaming population should be made obvious by its adoption, in so far as possible, by other gaming industries.

2. Fudging allows the GM to re-balance encounters when they seem unexpectedly unbalanced.

Although this is addressed somewhat above, I would like to note that the perceived need for "re-balancing" is often the result of player choices, which have made the encounter easier or harder than the GM expected. It is, specifically, removing the effects of those choices. Changing the encounter or fudging the die rolls in this case absolutely removes the value of player choice, for good or ill.

Another common rejoinder is that the GM is fudging to ensure the outcome desired by the players. But if the goal is to ensure an outcome that is desirable for the players, why not let them make that decision? Leave it up to them to fudge their die rolls, and fudge their current hit points? The answer is obvious – because it changes what the game is. It is not just style.

Any game that makes changing the die roll an overt choice, with limitations as to how that choice is implemented, empowers choice at the table. I am all for that. My game of choice (***Dungeon Crawl Classics***) uses a Luck mechanic that allows players to adjust their own die rolls, for example (or, in the case of halflings, the die rolls of your friends as well). Conversely, any game that attempts to make you believe that your choices matter, while the GM secretly fudges events behind the scenes to reduce the impact of your choices – whether by changing die rolls or otherwise – dis-empowers choice at the table. It is the same problem that would occur with players being allowed unlimited ability to fudge rolls and hit points at the table; it changes what is being done at the table, and it is more than just a change in style.

The funny thing is, whether or not the GM's fudging is of benefit is very easy to test. I would encourage any fudging GM to instead put that power in the hands of the players, in the form of Luck or Fate points, or what-have-

you, and then discover when the player wants the dice to stand or not. I will guarantee you that 90% of the players I have encountered – in two countries and several American states – are happier to have that decision in their own hands. The GM is plenty empowered – determining the context and what choices are available, as well as the range of consequences – without having to fudge anything.

A final rejoinder is that the GM cannot always balance encounters "properly", or take every eventuality into account, and therefore should fudge die rolls to maintain fairness. I don't believe that at all. It is noteworthy that the "eventualities" that the GM fails to take into account are the decisions of the players, and the consequences of those decisions. Changing things to revert an encounter back to the "expected status quo" is intentionally nullifying the choices made by the game's participants. In my opinion, the GM should be making it possible for the *players* to worry about balance. It is up to the *players* to determine when they are in too deep, and to take appropriate action.

This does not mean that the GM need not do his best to make a playable environment for the game, but it does mean that, having done his best, the GM should not then fudge to ensure that his expectations for how encounters will play out are met. It also means that, so long as the GM includes context by which player decisions can be made, it is possible to include encounters that are "unfair" if the players make poor choices.

An excellent example of this can be found in **Sailors on the Starless Sea** (by Harley Stroh, for the **DCC system**). There is a creature which can be easily bypassed, or which can easily kill over half the party if they fail to understand the clues providing context. I have run games using this module where both have occurred, and the players had great fun under both circumstances. It is, therefore, incumbent upon the GM to help make the context, and possible consequences, of choices available to the players. It is not incumbent upon the GM to fudge encounters. And, again, if the GM really feels that he is unable to do this properly, it is always better to put some form of "fate points" in the players' hands, so that their choices matter, rather than remove the effects of their choices from behind the curtain. In my experience, sooner or later, players always realize that the fudging GM isn't really the Great and Powerful Oz.

3. Not fudging is being a "slave to the dice" or a "dice fetishist".

This one is easy; if you don't want to consult the dice, don't roll them with the intent to consult them. If you don't want something to be random, don't make it contingent on the outcome of a die roll. There. Done. You don't need to be a "slave to the dice" in order to stop fudging.

Sometimes, in order to preserve the contextual information of the players to a level appropriate for their characters, the GM will want something to appear random when it is not. For example, when a thief is checking for traps in a location where no traps exist, not rolling is too good of an indication that there is nothing to find. Yes, you can roll the dice **without the intention of consulting them**, and still not be fudging. If, however, you are rolling the dice **with the intention of consulting them**, and then decide to ignore the result because you don't like it, then you are fudging. To avoid fudging, either you should not have included the potential result you couldn't have lived with, or you should not have consulted the dice.

The "dice fetishist" rejoinder is laughingly easy to respond to, because no one is suggesting you be a "slave to the dice". Simply don't make random rolls if you don't want randomness.

There is always, of course, the possibility that you are the type of GM who wants to fudge, because you want to preserve your storyline, or because you worked hard on an NPC or encounter, and you don't want luck or good planning on the part of the players to ruin your shining moment. **If that is what you want, and you can find even one player that goes along with it, or is actively pursuing it, that is the kind of game you should run.** But I will not be playing in it. My response is a firm, but polite, "No thank you". And I do not believe that it is a difference in "style" – the farther you walk down the fudging path, the more you are doing something that is very different from what I am doing. And that, my friends, is a difference in **substance**.

Reading Appendix N

The Efficiency Expert

Edgar Rice Burroughs was a prolific author, works include far more than the **Mars**, **Venus**, **Pellucidar**, and **Tarzan** novels. Some of his works have no overt fantasy or science fiction elements whatsoever. Whether these novels fall into the "Appendix N" criteria is, of course, debatable. They probably did not from **Gary Gygax**'s point of view, as Gary once told me he preferred **Robert E. Howard** for plots and ERB for monsters. There are no monsters in **The Efficiency Expert**, except for the purely human kind.

Still, I think that there is some value in looking at **ERB**'s other works, because he followed the same general pattern in crafting all of his novels, and because there are always imaginative details to look at.

The Story

Jimmy Torrance is the son of a wealthy businessman on the West Coast, who is doing very well in College sports, but whose grades are not the best. He manages to pull it together, graduate, and then heads to Chicago, hoping to make it good out East. Needless to say, his understanding of his job prospects are unrealistic, so that he ends up doing menial labour of various types before getting a job as an "efficiency expert" – on forged credentials. He discovers that the factory's assistant manager is actually embezzling from the company in order to pay his gambling debts. The factory's owner, Elizabeth Compton, is engaged to the assistant manager. Eventually, the embezzler kills the owner, and frames Torrance for the crime. Only the help of a pickpocket and safe-breaker known as "The Lizard" and the prostitute, Little Eva, prevent Jimmy Torrance from being convicted and hung.

Interestingly enough, although ERB has his protagonist marry Elizabeth Compton's friend Harriet, it is not until after Little Eva dies that this occurs. ERB makes certain that we understand that Little Eva is the "best girl" that Jimmy Torrance knows. Without killing Little Eva off (in what seems a contrived manner), it is clear that ERB would have been left with his wealthy hero marrying a streetwalker….something that the publishing world of 1921 probably wasn't ready for!

Elements for Gaming

Many Judges will recognize their PCs in recently-graduated Jimmy Torrance, who is surprised that the world isn't flocking to hire him to run their businesses. Being able to box, play football, and play baseball may be wonderful, but they don't translate to social prestige (unless you do them professionally); similarly, being able to survive a 0-level funnel adventure makes the PCs special, but it does not mean that the campaign world will fall all over itself to enrich them!

Jimmy Torrance is literally a man who gets by with a little help from his friends. But his potential friends are not just friendly for no reason….in each case, Jimmy does something for them first without any expectation of reward. He earns his friends. For example, the Lizard is introduced as a pickpocket. Jimmy foils the pickpocket, but refuses to turn him in to the beat cop that investigates the altercation. This is the beginning of Jimmy's friendship with the pickpocket, and of the antagonism the cop feels for him. When the Lizard follows Jimmy back to his room, he offers to return Jimmy's watch. Now, Jimmy wasn't even aware that his watch was stolen, but he takes it in stride, with good humor, and even offers to pay the Lizard what he would have gotten had he simply fenced the watch.

It should be noted that (1) the world isn't waiting for Jimmy to roll it over, (2) it is Jimmy's willingness to come to the aid of others – even at cost to him – that gives Jimmy the necessary advantage of having friends, and (3) the circumstances wherein he helps someone come at a cost to someone else, and that someone else ends up being an enemy to some degree or other. These are good pointers for a GM dealing with social encounters, and they are important for players to consider as well. The player who imagines that NPCs exist only to be used by his character will end up with characters who are not very popular with said NPCs. Notably, Elizabeth Compton is the only character in the novel who absolutely fails to learn this lesson, and she is punished for it.

For the GM, it is important to remember that having NPCs behave this way – doing something for the PCs without hope of benefit to themselves, sometimes at their own detriment – is a great way to make the players care about the NPCs in your setting. In addition, ERB draws a number of stereotypical characters – the union boss, the embezzler, at least two versions of the job boss, the beat cop, the prostitute with a heart of gold – all characters that can be used almost directly in a role-playing game. As a character, the Lizard begs to be used in a game.

Conclusion

There are certainly some non-PC elements in this novel. The idea of someone doing good being "mighty white" comes up more than once. As a modern reader, you might find this both jarring and/or offensive. ***The Efficiency Expert*** is not ERB's best book, nor is it the most important book for adding the "Appendix N" feel to your games. If you find yourself having access to a copy, however, it is a reasonably interesting and quick read.

Hiero's Journey

Hiero's Journey by **Sterling E. Lanier** was published in 1973, and is a post-Apocalyptic fantasy novel taking place 5,000 years after "The Death" – an all-out nuclear and biological world war. Within it, Hiero Desteen (destined hero?) is a priest (cleric?) who has psychic powers, traversing a changed landscape in search of a computer (!) to help defeat the Unclean and their lee-mutes (corrupted from lethal mutations, now meaning any mutation inimical to mankind). Along the way, Hiero assembles a party of adventurers including a telepathic bear, a riding moose (called a "morse"), a female warrior (and love interest), and an "Elevener" who seems an awful lot like a druid. The Eleveners are members of the "Brotherhood of the Eleventh Commandment", which is that "Thou shalt not destroy the Earth or the life thereon."

If this all sounds a lot like TSR's **AD&D** or **Gamma World** to you, you're not alone!

The Story

Hiero Desteen is travelling on his morse, Klootz, seeking a computer for his church, the Kandan Universal Church. The Church is opposed by the Unclean, humans who seek to use the knowledge that brought about the Death for their own ends, and who make common cause with mutants inimical to man. Over the course of his journey, he must fight the Unclean (and escape from their capture), defeat strange creatures, make new allies, traverse the vast and hostile marshes known as the Palood, and explore the ruins of the ancients. The novel is described as "A Romance of the Future". And it all takes place around the Great Lakes, which are now the Inland Sea, from post-Apocalyptic Canada to the massive jungles around modern-day Indiana. Naturally.

Elements for Gaming

This book is chock full of gaming elements, and it is easy to see how **Gary**

Gygax was inspired by it. Living in one of the Great Lakes states himself
(flooded by the Inland Sea by the time of ***Hiero's Journey***), Gary must have
felt some level of kinship with the landscape Hiero passes through.

Here we have the seed of the cryptic alliances of ***Gamma World***, the proto-
type of the ***Hool Marshes*** in ***Greyhawk***, auguries being cast (and enigmatic
answers being given), humanoid alliances against men, clerics in leading
roles, psionics, intelligent animals, and some weird creatures that defy natural
explanation. We also have a truly dangerous fungal entity (House) and its
attendant slimes….the abilities and descriptions of which seem familiar from
Gary's work in the ***Monster Manual*** and the ***Monster Manual II***. If you
want to know why giant lynxes are intelligent in the ***Monster Manual***, the
answer is probably the influence of this book.

This is the first novel I have read where the protagonist actually defeats a foe
and levels up. Seriously.

> He was amused that his new confidence seemed more than temporary.
> Beyond, and indeed underlying, the amusement was a hard-won feeling
> of mental power. Hiero knew, without even wondering how he knew, that
> Abbot Demero or any others of the Council would now be hard-put to
> stand against him...The two battles Hiero had won, even though the bear
> had helped decide the first, had given the hidden forces of his already
> strong mind a dimension and power he would not himself believed pos-
> sible. And the oddest thing was, he knew it.

> Tired, but feeling somehow wonderful anyway, he roused Gorm and the
> morse.

That's right. By fighting combats and defeating opponents, Hiero has become
more powerful. He is aware of the increase in power, and, although tired
(i.e., not at full hit points?) he feels "somehow wonderful anyway" (perhaps
because he gained hit points with the new level)? Interesting. Especially as
it predates the game whose mechanics emulate it nearly perfectly. Nor is this
the only time Hiero "levels up" after an encounter; using the ***Dungeon Crawl
Classics RPG*** experience system (where you gain XP for encounters whether
you defeat them or not) emulates the novel even better.

Another interesting note is how episodic the novel feels. While it is a single
story, the story seems to be a number of "adventures" that comprise the

whole. Hiero, Gorm, and Klootz form the initial adventuring party, encountering the Unclean. Then they traverse the Palood as a separate adventure. The warrior, Luchare, is rescued and joins the party as a third adventure. Hiero has a solo go, being captured and then escaping (I guess the other players couldn't make that session). The reunited party goes through a half-drowned Ancient city (and fights what may well be bullywugs) before encountering a new party member, Brother Aldo. They take a ship across the Inland Sea toward the place Hiero has been sent to investigate, acquiring several new PCs and NPC hirelings. The ship is wrecked, and the new PCs go through a sort of 0-level funnel in the jungle. The group deals with some female forest dwellers (who mate with the male party members in dreams) and then explore the underground multi-level complex of the Ancients. Along the way, they gain several artefacts from the Unclean, some of which are (or might as well be) cursed; including devices that allow the Unclean to track the group. Encounter-wise, this novel is rich indeed. Simply reading the Glossary in the back offers a number of interesting ideas for game play, and it is by no means complete.

Gorm, the telepathic bear: In GAME terms, clearly a PC, but not one anyone could choose to create. Using the *Dungeon Crawl Classics* rules, the Judge could allow special character types to arise as part of specific adventures. i.e., if you play this particular adventure, you might gain a unique PC not available otherwise. I think this is a good solution to the problem posed initially by the *1e Unearthed Arcana* and then later (and more strongly) by 3e – gamers want those unique PC types in their game, but if they become part of the standard generation process, they are no longer unique.

Morse: Large empathic riding moose. How this didn't appear in Gary's monster books is beyond me, because it is a cool idea that certainly fits in with Appendix N gaming.

House: A giant, intelligent fungus, the section with House in it might as well be the base template for all slimes, molds, and fungi in the original *D&D* game, were it not for other fungus monsters appearing in other Appendix N literature. With its "harem", House might be the model for *Juiblex* or *Zuggtmoy*.

The Dweller: A mental parasite that comes from beyond this world, let into it by the changes the Death have wrought. This would be a great encounter for any role-playing game, where battle takes place on the mental plane, rather

than the physical. There are actually several mental battles in the novel (it is easy to see its influence on psionics in **Dungeons & Dragons**), but this is probably the best of them.

Other Creatures: There are far too many monsters described in this book for each to be given a line-by-line listing. They include giant otters/weasels, wolverine men, the dam people (intelligent giant beavers), colossal giant frogs, giant leeches, giant snapping turtles, a giant loon, anthropomorphic ape-men (howlers), giant fish, giant gulls, man-rats, and a host of other monsters.

Conclusions
It is interesting to note how many of the Appendix N works are actually science fiction, or have science fiction elements. For its contributions to role-playing games, **Hiero's Journey** is sort of a must-read for fans of **D&D**, **Gamma World**, or their later-day clones and derivatives. It is pretty obvious why **Gary Gygax** included this one in Appendix N, and it is a novel that he listed by name.

I enjoyed the novel, as well as its sequel, **Unforsaken Hiero**. I had been told that the second book was not as good, but I enjoyed it very much, and found considerable material for gaming use. **Sterling Lanier** had intended to make the series a trilogy when he penned the second, but his death prevented the completion of a third Hiero novel.

Reading this novel will give most GMs a lot of good ideas for monsters and encounters, especially if they don't mind mixing science fiction and fantasy. If you can get it at a reasonable price, you should. If you are playing in a post-apocalyptic setting (**Crawling Under a Broken Moon**, for instance), then both novels are must-haves.

Shanthopal
Background to the Golden City

Long before the Earth was dying, and longer still after the younger kingdoms had passed away, the Great Powers returned to our world, and magic flourished once more. Harken now to the tales of the Golden City of Shanthopal, the Ancient Earth itself, and the Great Powers who shape her destiny.

Know that the Earth has gone through a great many Ages, where either Law and Technology are ascendant, or the Chaos of unbridled Magic holds sway. At this time, an uneasy balance between Law and Chaos exists, and it is for this reason that the Great Powers of the world are again abroad. They seek to sway the balance to their side, or maintain it, according to their nature. Fell beasts, and spells even more fell, are abroad in the world. Working artefacts of the Old Science still can be found within hidden places. The fabled Blue Star which follows the moon, according to the philosophers of Kulku Mara, the Dwindling God, was once built and inhabited by mortal men. The way to this aethereal bastion may yet be found, it is supposed, within the Golden City itself, Shanthopal; for central now to all the realms of men is Golden Shanthopal, the City at the Crossroads, where the markets of the world meet.

From the East, caravans brave the Golian Waste to bring spices, silks, and jade from the City-States of the Rudhara and the even more distant Empire of Kathur-Leung and Isles of Ama-Ko. To the North, beyond the fertile fields and villages that feed Golden Shanthopal, frown the grim and forbidding mountains known as the Ibetayas. The hidden valleys and high reaches of the Ibetayan Range are feared to hide many things, including the buried fortress of the secretive Magicians Oblique, the whisper of whose name brings fear to the lowland people. To the West stretch the nations of Mêdterra until one reaches the utmost north and west, were barbarian tribes hold sway: Hugrovania, Troyous, Morrosia, Aquitainia, and Virulanis. Across the Vilaymer Sea to the South lay the nations of Djinnaq, Mohurdistan, Tigrippis, and Old Ægyptus, where the Pharaohs of Sun and Moon have held sway in the Lower and Upper Valleys since the Age of Beasts Reborn. And, beyond the Sea of Powder, South and West, lie the nations of Zukulu, Kemolya, and Nubaris, and the vast perfumed Jungles of Æfrik and Oataxa.

Within Golden Shanthopal, many gods hold sway, and many temples compete. Officially, those who dwell herein worship of the Nine Gods of Shanthopal, who are said to inhabit tombs in the inner precinct of a massive arched sanctuary on the Avenue of Idols, but in practice They are largely ignored, save on Tithing Day. The Nine can be called upon by Their priesthood to defend the city, but Their price is high – sometimes higher than the price of those they would be called against, for the Nine prefer Their long dreams to the hard reality of Shanthopal. Indeed, it has been more than a century since the Nine have walked (unless rumors of Their sleepwalking in the catacombs beneath the city be true), and then They took the High Prelate and his Nine Cardinals for the audacity in calling upon them against what, in Their view, was but a minor threat.

Golden Shanthopal is riddled with tunnels and chambers below its streets. The Catacombs of Shanthopal are of two types: Temple Catacombs, for the internment of priests, and the Public Catacombs, which predate even the Old Cemetery, and have few direct access points now to the city above. The best known entrance to the Public Catacombs are the great doors (locked and heavily fortified) in Charnel Park.

Charnel Park is where the dead were burned by the thousands during the Boneplague. Its soil is rich and fertile due to the ashes spread there, but what grows there is not always perfectly natural and canny, and weird things are said to sometimes go abroad there at night. On a night of the new moon, would-be wizards or elves may meditate in Charnel Park to make contact with Bān-Scyga, the disease spirit which caused the Boneplague centuries ago. Many of the powerful families of Shanthopal have crypts dedicated to their ancestors. Most of these have surface levels, accessed either on private estate grounds or in the Old Cemetery. There are few family crypts in the New Cemetery, as there are few who have come into the requisite level of power and wealth since the New Cemetery was founded.

The older, larger, and/or more influential the family, the larger the crypt extends, both on the surface and below. Usually, this also means that there are better locks, more traps, etc., as well. Where family crypts connect to the underworld, there are usually strongly built locked doors to allow access; these are intentionally built to allow the family to go below for whatever purposes they may have. Thieves, smugglers, cultists, the wealthy, the secretive, and the paranoid have created tunnels beneath the Golden City, to allow for secret exit and entry into homes or businesses…or even secret temples and

spaces to gather unseen.

The city of Shanthopal has been built and rebuilt over the centuries, and events have buried whole streets and buildings. In some cases, portions of these streets are still open, and buildings can be reached through them. A building in one partially-open street might allow, through another door, egress to another portion of semi-collapsed streets. The easiest-to-reach portions of buried streets are the courts of beggars, but other streets remain the haunt of lingering dead things that mock the daily activities of the living, or creatures that have crawled up from below. Among the un-dead are the dapper ghouls of the dread Boneknapper's Guild, which collects and polishes bones, and uses human kneecaps for money.

In addition, as the mortal population of the Earth has dwindled in these later days, in many places there are blocks of ruined buildings, some of which have become tenanted by other things. The greatest region of these ruins, the mist-haunted Quarter of Uneven Dusk, is not entered by most folk after the hours of darkness.

Using Patrons in the Dungeon Crawl Classics Role-Playing Game

It is difficult to claim that any facet of the jewel that is the **Dungeon Crawl Classics** is shinier than any other facet, but there can be little doubt that patrons shine a bit more brightly for being new, interesting, and (perhaps) underrepresented in the core rulebook. Patrons are supernatural beings that are willing to bargain with mortals, trading magical power for service. Potential new patrons repeatedly show up in **Dungeon Crawl Classics** adventures (both official and third-party publisher adventures). When this article was originally written as a blog post, none of those adventures include a full write-up for a patron; that has changed considerably. In addition to those patrons appearing in the **Angels, Daemons, and Beings Between** sourcebook (**Dragon's Hoard Publishing**), new patrons have arisen in **Goodman Games**, **Purple Duck Games**, **Purple Sorcerer**, **Chapter 13 Press**, **Cognitions Pressworks,** and other publishers' game materials. This is great, because new patrons are always welcome. Furthermore, the concept of demi-patrons is introduced in **CE 5: Silent Nightfall**, and further explored in **CE 6: The Crimson Void** (both published by **Purple Duck Games**).

It is important to remember that all patrons are unique. When devising new patrons for your home milieu, consider making changes to how the **Patron Bond** and **Invoke Patron** spells work in relation to that patron. For example, **Yallafial, Queen of the Birds**, has a wavering attention span that varies between automatic failure when she is invoked to a +6 bonus on the spell check roll! Likewise, spells do not all have to be equally useful, nor do they all have to be useful in combat. Flavor is the most important consideration here; the spells must match the patron.

The **core rulebook** suggests that every patron has three spells, one each of levels 1, 2, and 3. This is certainly a way to go, and is a good way to create most patrons, but you need not follow this scheme slavishly. Some patrons may allow more spells; others may allow less. It is easy to imagine a patron with three 1st level spells in addition to one 2nd and one 3rd level spell. All the

Judge need do is make certain that there is a cost somewhere else to balance out this generosity – for example, especially harsh spellburn results or patron taint.

If you are considering patrons to be just a "Wizard thing", you are selling them short. The *core rulebook* discusses using patrons with Wizards and Elves, and gives a nod to other classes in the text of the *Patron Bond* spell. In addition it notes that powerful supernatural beings can affect the Luck of those who aid or oppose them. Patrons are among the supernatural beings meddling in the affairs of the world. The Judge is well advised to know what they want, if not how they intend to get it, and use patrons to spur adventures. Even if no one in the group has a patron, these supernatural beings are interested in moving PCs and powerful NPCs like pieces on a multi-dimensional chessboard, seeking to win advantage against other equally powerful beings. The relationship between patron and adventurers need not always be the result of a PC Wizard or Elf seeking out the patron. The patron may well seek out the PCs. Indeed, the patron may direct an NPC Wizard to cast *Patron Bond* to tie willing PCs to that patron's cause, whether they know the spell or not.

Likewise, PCs may find themselves opposing one potential patron while unknowingly aiding another in a game whose rules they don't fully understand. This sort of action happens quite often in *Appendix N* fiction, and is quite appropriate in the *Dungeon Crawl Classics role-playing game*.

For more ideas on using patrons in DCC adventures, consider the following:

- *The Portal Under the Stars* (*Joseph Goodman*): *core rulebook*, pp. 452-456. The entire action of the adventure, as well as the site itself, may be considered the result of a patron's actions long ago.
- *DCC #68 People of the Pit* (*Joseph Goodman*): Includes the most fully developed "patron" outside the core rulebook at the time of the original blog post, which drives the action of the adventure.
- *DCC #70 Jewels of the Carnifex* (*Harley Stroh*): Includes a potential patron (which must be developed by the Judge to be used as such), and the action of the module revolves around higher supernatural powers.
- *SC-1 Perils of the Sunken City* (*Jon Marr*): Excellent use of an interesting potential patron, and the rivalry between patrons is directly responsible for the scenario encountered. Again, the Judge must develop one of the patrons involved before they can be used by PCs; the other now

appears fully developed in ***The Sunken City Omnibus***. In my original blog post, I had written "Frankly, if ***Purple Sorcerer Games*** ever decided to put out a ***Sunken City Sourcebook*** (with an overview, some adventure hooks, NPCs, and full patron information), I would snap it up in a heartbeat!". That is exactly what ***Purple Sorcerer's Jon Marr*** did, and I was glad to snap it up!

• ***SC-2 The Ooze Pits of Jonas Gralk*** (***Jon Marr***): Again, this module supplies the Judge with the bare bones of two potential patrons, both of which demand more information, and the action is driven by their interactions with mortals.

These are certainly not the only DCC adventures to deal with patrons, but they are adventures that show how it may be done in various ways and with interesting effect. From ***Purple Duck Games***, look for ***Paul Wolfe's AL-2 Sepulchre of the Mountain God*** for two more potential patrons, and ***AL 6: Playing the Game*** (***Perry Fehr***) for three more new elemental compatriots to Ittha, Prince of Elemental Winds. Somnos, in my own Through the Cotillion of Hours is not fully detailed as a patron, but the basics are given. See also ***CE 2: The Black Goat***, and the ***FT Series*** for ideas for ideas on how to work patrons into adventures. ***Stormlord***'s recent ***Black Powder, Black Magic*** has an excellent introduction to a potential patron in the first issue, although he is not fully described.

In conclusion, try to remember that patrons are not just for spellcasters. Try to make your patrons proactive as well as reactive within the campaign milieu. As Elric's foe, Theleb K'aarna, learned to his regret, it is not just casters who drop patrons – patrons also drop casters who fail in their tasks. Elric's not being bonded to the powers of Law didn't stop Donblas the Justice-Maker from aiding him in Nadsokor. The more fully realized your patrons, the more they influence your campaign world, and the more that world comes to life. It's part of the genius of the system, and a very bright facet among the many bright facets which make ***Dungeon Crawl Classics*** my personal role-playing game of choice.

Devising Initial Adventures for Dungeon Crawl Classics

Theory

When preparing to run a ***Dungeon Crawl Classics RPG*** campaign, the aspiring Judge must obviously devise a starting adventure, or use one that is currently on the market. This essay assumes that the Judge wishes to devise his own adventure. The initial adventure described in the rule book is intended to be a 0-level character funnel, in which numerous 0-level nobodies are winnowed down to the core surviving adventurers. Thus ends the initial adventure.

I argue that this is a mistake (and I would argue that the funnel in the ***core rulebook*** seems to imply the same). In my opinion, the best initial adventure offers a natural stopping point where the survivors can rest, reflect, and grow in power, and then continues with the newly minted 1st level adventurers. In ***DCC***, the 0-level characters require an average of 5 encounters to reach 1st level. That may be a lot of encounters to survive at 0-level, but it is not a lot of encounters for an adventure. The sample initial adventure in the ***core rulebook***, for example, contains more than 5 encounters. Remember that dealing with traps also counts as an encounter!

Obviously, the Judge can vary the number of encounters required (as does the initial adventure in the ***core rulebook***) by making some less difficult, so as to result in 1 or 0 XP. This is perfectly acceptable, and makes sense. However, this also limits the adventure, and prevents the characters from experiencing actual growth during the adventure. The setup of the ***DCC*** strongly encourages ***actual growth*** during the initial adventure – both based upon the ruleset and the Appendix N source material – so that, again, allowing characters to level during this adventure should be strongly encouraged.

I therefore encourage you to break your initial offering into two parts: the 0-level character funnel, and the 1st-level finale.

The 0-Level Character Funnel

Some of the requirements of the 0-level character funnel are obvious, but some might be a bit trickier for the Judge to anticipate. That the funnel must contain enough danger to winnow the wheat from the chaff is clear – character death must be a real possibility. In addition, **character growth** must be planned for. Your surviving characters are going to become warriors, thieves, wizards, clerics, and demi-humans. The demi-human path is easy; the characters were prepped for this by rolling their starting occupation, and the **Core Rulebook** contains at least one Patron that is well suited for elf characters. Elves can buy one set of mithral armor and one mithral weapon at standard prices when they attain 1st level; you will need to have something in place to both allow this to occur, and to not create a situation where said mithral goods are always available (If you have access to my **FT Series** adventures from **Purple Duck**, the Forest Anvil in **Creeping Beauties of the Wood** is designed specifically to address this need.)

Thieves are also easy enough to deal with, so long as the funnel contains sufficient traps for them to overcome and sufficient wealth for them to obtain. Preferably, there is treasure that requires some intelligence and/or work to attain.

Warriors are going to need access to weapons and armor. Your initial setup must make these available, even if they are not the best possible weapons and armor (and they should not be)! Potential warriors are also going to need opponents they can fight. As with the initial offering in the core rulebook, this should be a combination of simple and difficult fights, and the difficult fights should be resolvable using brains over brawn. The opponents must also be interesting, at least some of them demonstrating some unexpected property… even if you only make the giant rats have hand-like paws and be capable of speech. Clerics and wizards are the tricky pair. You have to ask yourself, what in the 0-level funnel can encourage a character to take these two paths?

If you have the **core rulebook**, or picked the **Free RPG Day** version of **The Portal Under the Stars**, give a quick read-over of the adventure. Now, come back and tell me, why would any PC going through that adventure feel a calling toward clericism? The player may wish to have a cleric, sure, but that career does not arise naturally from the adventure as presented. **Your initial funnel must include the divine in some way, shape, or form.** It may include a hidden shrine where the influence of a god is felt, or it may include a fight against some unholy thing in which a holy artefact is of aid. It may include

a mark of a god on the floor of one chamber where the PCs find themselves safe against the undead hordes assaulting them. There must be **something**. Good examples of this can be found in **Sailors on the Starless Sea** and **Prince Charming, Reanimator**. I love **Frozen in Time** as a funnel, but any cleric arising from it does so purely from the player's desire, the group's need, a survivor with a high Personality, or some combination of the same. Likewise, you are going to have to do some background work on the divine in your setting. If a cleric knows the spells of his god, you are going to have to know which spells those are. Moreover, you need to communicate this effectively to your players if they choose to level as clerics.

Potential wizards need a way to access spells. They also need a way to make contact with potential patrons. This, again, means that you as a Judge should go to the effort of devising those patrons fully. Don't worry if the material isn't used yet; as your campaign progresses, your unused patrons can appear as the masters of NPCs, and may eventually attract different PCs to their patronage. You need to be willing to give your players options; just don't be shy about making them work for it. In **The Portal Under the Stars**, there is a way to confer access to the invoke patron spell that will not necessarily be obvious to the players. This is okay; it is better to have too many opportunities that are hard to find than too few that are obvious. This is a requirement for a feeling of actual discovery.

Note, too, that not every patron should be wise to choose. Offering players poor choices, as well as good choices, is a necessary part of allowing them to decide their characters' fates by those choices. Moreover, some things that seem to be good, or bad, choices, should be the opposite. Better yet, whether the choice be for weal or woe can depend upon subsequent choices….

Transition

Look again at **The Portal under the Stars**, and see how the adventure points towards investigating a dryad sighting to the east. Your 0-level funnel should contain a similar sense of unfinished business, which draws the characters into the 1st-level finale. In effect, I argue that the **core rulebook** offers only half of a starting adventure – if you use it, you really ought to prepare the other half! If not, you steal an important part of the role-playing game experience from your players.

Remember that in the **DCC**, characters gain XP for surviving encounters,

even if they run screaming from them. This builds in a good way to transition – a threat remains that must be dealt with, but the 0-level characters are not powerful enough to do so. They must go back into the darkness, perhaps by another route, to deal with what was left behind. There is precedence for this in Appendix N fiction as well. See, for example, **A. Merrit's The Moon Pool** and **Dwellers in the Mirage**.

The funnel may also indicate the resting place of a treasure which can be accessed only at certain times, giving the PCs a chance to rest and level, but a need to head out again before too long.

Another model might be taken from **The Hobbit**, where the overall adventure is getting from Point A to Point B, and the 0-level funnel is reaching some safe place (ala Rivendell or Beorn's House) along the journey. Characters can then rest there and level up. The advantage of this model is, of course, that what the group is headed to Point B for might make up their first 2nd level adventure, if they have enough encounters along the way. The point is that (a) the danger (or goal, such as a treasure to be won) must be pressing enough to require returning to the overall adventure sooner rather than later, but (b) must allow enough downtime to believably level the characters.

Imagine a scenario where a village is being attacked by Unknown Things in the Night, and send the 0-lvl PCs to a nearby castle for aid. On the way to the castle, they experience the 0-lvl funnel as the Things try to stop them, and even see where the Things are coming from. They rest at the castle, level up, and are sent back to deal with the Things themselves! Perhaps the local lord is responsible for the incursion in some way –such as a curse – and he hopes the PCs will deal with it for him, as he cannot.

The 1st-Level Finale

The 1st-level finale need not make the characters reach 2nd level. Its purpose is twofold: (1) to resolve the issue(s) arising in the 0-level funnel, and (2) to showcase character growth. As to the first purpose, even using the "treasure map" scenario, the adventure must "loop back" onto the material in the funnel. It answers some unresolved questions, faces similar opponents, and/or fulfils the promises of the first half.

For example, the funnel could include a locked and unopened door, and the treasure the map leads to could be the key. Or, if the PCs were forced to flee

from some chthonic horror as part of the funnel, have the danger it presents continue to be real. Imagine a scenario where the funnel leads in through one set of tunnels, which the horror causes to collapse behind the fleeing PCs. Now the PCs must enter through another way (possibly by following the horror's minions), and end its terror for good. What, then, of the other tunnels leading to its chamber? Meat for other adventures, perhaps.

Examine the structure of **The Hobbit**, and you will see how ideas, themes, and creatures recur within the text. Bilbo lives underground, enters the troll hole, enters the goblin caves, enters the wood elves caves, and enters the dragon's lair. He bandies words with hidden meanings with Gandalf, with Gollum, and with Smaug. He sleeps in on the day the company is to leave, Bombur falls into a long magic slumber, Thorin sleeps beneath the Mountain in death. He finds the key to the troll's hole (which they would have thought secret), gets the keys from the wood elves' gaoler, and figures out how to use the key to the hidden door in the Lonely Mountain. He finds Sting, the Ring, and Arkenstone. And so on. Each section of the story parallels and reinforces earlier sections.

If one was using **The Portal Under the Stars** as the 0-level funnel, a suitable 1st-level finale would link the dryad to the extradimensional tomb in some way. Perhaps she was the lover of the warrior-mage from long ago? Perhaps she also serves the goat-headed patron, but has displeased him in some way? Better yet, the quest for the dryad leads to a portal to the alien's world/dimension, giving the PCs strong reason (though perhaps not taken!) to avoid making pacts with the goat-headed entity.

The point is that the arcs should not seem unrelated by the time they are resolved – the second half brings the events of the funnel to a satisfying conclusion. The best 1st level finales will make the players rethink what they learned in the funnel by casting that location and those events in a new light.

No More Generic Orcs!

The **Goodman Games** "No more generic orcs" concept also means "No more generic campaign milieus" – you will have to work to create a vibrant **DCC RPG** setting. Your world will contain gods, patrons, spells, and monsters that are unique. It is better to start with the first adventure. The unknown works better within the context of the known. This is true in much of the Appendix N literature, as well as in role-playing games. You might create unique orc

analogues, and the humanoids in the next valley over might be unique, but you would be wise to develop a stable of recurrent creatures as well. Consider again the way the goblins, wolves, and eagles are used in **The Hobbit**. They are not simply "throw away" creatures that appear in one chapter so that the creatures in the next chapter may be unique. And all appear again in **The Lord of the Rings**. Each of these volumes also has unique creatures which are encountered only in specific locations. A persistent world needs persistent creatures; and Appendix N worlds also needs unique creatures. The best of all possible worlds has both. Horses, dogs, wolves, chickens, and pigs are certainly ubiquitous. That **Conan** encounters lions in **The Tower of the Elephant** should not imply that there are no lions elsewhere in the world – quite the opposite, actually – but encountering **Yag** within the Tower should remain a unique occurrence. New creatures allow for surprise, fear, and wonder. Known creatures give a world depth, and allow choices to be made within a familiar context. The discerning Judge will have to learn where to draw the line between the two.

Reading the Appendix N books is a good start to this. You will see how various authors dealt with having enough persistent creatures to make their worlds viable, while allowing unique entities to be unique. Another good example to follow is **Doctor Who**. In classic **Doctor Who**, various monsters recur, but not always in the same way they had been seen before. The new **Doctor Who** series makes use of classic monsters as well, and is not afraid to change them to meet a different vision. Both versions also include a plethora of new creatures, and you can easily see how the new, the persistent, and the unique are combined to create moments of both surprise and series depth.

In order to showcase character growth, it is actually valuable to have some of the same creatures appear in the 0-level funnel and the 1st-level finale. Just not **all** of the same creatures. That way the players can experience their characters' growth in a visceral sense. The "glowing starfish" they found so difficult in the funnel are now easier to defeat….it is the thing spawning these creatures that they really need to worry about. Getting at least 2 hours of play for each hour of work is an important goal for Game Masters. This is as true for **DCC** as for any other game. If you want to run a campaign in this system, you should strongly consider how you can reuse the material you have created. Persistent and recurrent monsters are as important as unique ones. You should prepare for this with your initial adventure as well.

Different from WotC-D&D

In *Wizards of the Coast's 3rd edition of Dungeons & Dragons*, there was an expectation that characters would gain a level after an average number of encounters, and this has formed the basis of expected play thereafter. Overall, I feel that this is a bad idea, and that it led to some real problems in the way adventures for these editions were created.

I've written about this before. Specifically, the expectation that challenges would rise to match new levels led directly to a different kind of "funnel" – adventures that were extremely linear in nature. If an adventure is to take the PCs from 1st level to 3rd level, it is important that they cannot encounter the 3rd level encounters at 1st or 2nd level. The adventure designer ***must*** control the order of encounters, and the only way to do this is to proscribe player choices that would allow encounters to occur out of order. There is some danger of the same result with the setup I am proffering. In order to avoid problems of this nature, there ***must be*** a logical rest point between stages, and it must be the ***stages***, not the individual encounters, that are level-dependent. In effect, the rest area acts as a "choke point" between the stages.

There are two considerations the adventure designer and Judge must take into account:

1. The players must absolutely have freedom in the choices they face dealing with each stage.
2. There should be some ability to bypass the rest point and/or take the stages out of order.

In other words, while the overall adventure may follow an "A > rest point > B" formula, both stages A and B must be more free-form in nature. The first stage may be less free-form than the second as a matter of form: an average of five encounters along a journey offers fewer choices than a sprawling ruin or dungeon complex does. It is still better to offer more than one possible path, so that would-be adventurers can avoid one set of encounters by choosing to face another. For example, if stage A required reaching a fortified area, the characters might have a choice of taking an underground tunnel or a mountain pass. The PCs might even split up (there are, after all, plenty of characters in the 0-level funnel), attempting both routes in the hope that someone makes it through!

Stage B should be as free-form as you can make it. The more choices the

adventures face, the better, so long as those choices don't rob the scenario of its energy. The ability to bypass the rest point is also important. Let us say, again, that you imagine Stage A is to reach a fortress, where the PCs are sent to investigate a ruin as Stage B. Some trail should lead from Stage A to Stage B directly, bypassing the fortress, and, while there should be sufficient clues that this is the "wrong way" (i.e., is not the way to the fortress, not that the Judge considers it a wrong decision by the players), the players must be free to choose it. They might just do a reconnaissance. They might all die. They might resolve the problem before reaching the fortress. Indeed, having resolved the problem, they might never bother going to the fortress at all. All of these results must be okay, or players are stripped of a level of agency they have a right to expect.

Conclusions

The perfect introductory adventure for **Dungeon Crawl Classics** isn't going to come about by accident, and it will not come about by following the **TSR** or **WotC** model. The ruleset offers the potential for a really excellent first experience, but the prospective adventure designer has some unique challenges based upon the ruleset used.

1. Design for the "0-lvl funnel > rest area > 1st-lvl finale" structure.
2. Make sure that each stage offers significant choices, and that the structure can be subverted by the players if they so choose.
3. Make sure that each class has the requirements to reach 1st level in the funnel stage. That means the chance to gain weapons and armor, interact with the divine, gain wizard spells and gain potential patrons.
4. Make sure that the rest area offers a way to gain mithral equipment for elves. Preferably, the rest area should include a church or temple for new clerics to be invested, and something that hints at future adventures. There must be some reason that the folk in the rest area don't solve the problem themselves.
5. The funnel stage must tie into the finale stage; there must be continuity of plot, theme, etc. The finale stage serves to bring the funnel stage to a satisfying conclusion, and shows how the characters have grown.
6. Design work for the introductory adventure should be persistent whenever making it so doesn't damage the overall milieu. While some monsters should be unique, others should not be. There should be reasons for higher-level characters to revisit the initial adventure areas. Note that, as the **core rulebook** suggests that a relatively small milieu

is ideal, this shouldn't be difficult.

7. It is never a bad idea to plant the seeds of other potential adventures. Do so early; do so often.

You can do less, but doing so means that you'll not be taking full advantage of the strengths of the ***Dungeon Crawl Classics*** rules. Sometimes this might even be a good thing – not every funnel needs to be "ideal"! No structure should be followed slavishly!

Postscript

Some gameplayers have expressed the opinion that the idea of seeding the adventure area to prep for 1st level characters is antithetical to the idea of throwing four 0-lvl nobodies per player into the funnel and seeing who comes out. I don't believe that this is so.

Providing the means for religious experience doesn't mean that any survivor will be a cleric, nor does seeding the area with potential spell knowledge or patrons mean that any survivor will be a wizard. What it does mean is that, if some survivor ***should end up being*** a cleric or a wizard, that decision will make sense. Likewise, the idea that the characters then have a chance to see how their schlubs have grown, and to discover a new facet of the original funnel – that some of their initial assumptions and understanding were wrong – is pure Appendix N. It is also good game structure, and need not assume anything about who survives, or what class they will be. What I am suggesting is meant to deepen the funnel experience, not to subvert it.
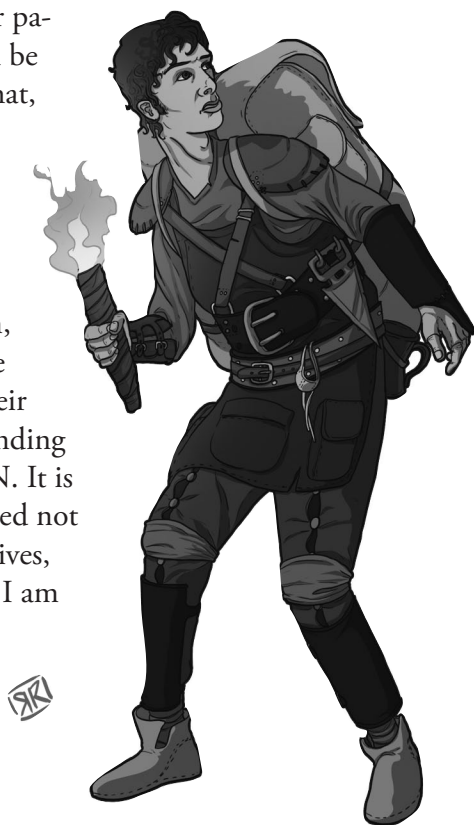
Learning Spells on the Fly, or, The Slippery Slope of Arcane Doom

A wizard or elf may attempt to learn a spell he is aware of without spending the requisite time to study, but such an attempt is hazardous. First off, the character must make a check against DC 10 + the spell level as part of an attempt to cast the spell. The initial check consists of 1d16 + caster level + Intelligence modifier. If this check fails, the character suffers a misfire from the attempted spell. If this check results in a natural "1" the check automatically fails, and the would-be caster suffers corruption as well. In addition, in the event of a natural "1", all subsequent attempts to learn the same spell on the fly reduce the die used for the check, as per the die chain. Each failed attempt also gives a +1 bonus to learning the spell if normal research is then used, to a maximum bonus of +4. If the character succeeds, he has learned the spell! This hap-hazard method of learning, however, requires a second Mercurial Magic check with a -20 penalty to the roll. The effects of both Mercurial Magic checks take place whenever the wizard or elf casts this spell.

Ammonites for Dungeon Crawl Classics

An ammonite is a prehistoric cephalopod mollusk, similar to a chambered nautilus in appearance, but related to squid and octopi. An ammonite has a large, spiral shell resembling a tightly-coiled ram's horn and numerous long tentacles. They attack with grasping tentacles and a sharp jawplate structure called an aptychus. Smaller ammonites only attack in swarms, while larger ones can attack individually.

Depending upon the size of the ammonite, the tentacles may be used merely to grasp, or may also constrict and rend for additional damage. Damage from constriction and rending is automatic to any creature struck by a tentacle attack, taking place each time the ammonite has initiative. A captured target can escape by making an Agility or Strength check (using an Action Die; DC determined by ammonite size). ***Note:*** "Size" is not normally used in ***Dungeon Crawl Classics*** the way it is used in SRD-based games. I used it in this case to allow differentiation between various sizes of creature.

A Large or a Huge ammonite can hold multiple opponents, although it can only bite one at a time. A Large ammonite can hold two creatures; a Huge ammonite can hold four. An ammonite with a bite attack can only bite a held opponent, and it can do so once per round without using an Action Die.

If its morale fails, an ammonite releases a cloud of black ink into the water, creating an area of total concealment four times as large as the originating creature. This ink cloud disperses after 1 round per Hit Die of the ammonite creating it. Each ammonite holds enough ink to create 1d4 ink clouds. It takes from 1 hour to 1 day, depending upon the size of the ammonite, to create enough ink for an additional usage, with smaller ammonites recharging their ink clouds more quickly than larger ones. The ammonite uses the opportunity so created to escape.

Ammonite swarms share the common characteristics of all swarms: They are effectively immune to weapons damage and spells without an area effect. A creature caught in the area of a swarm must make a DC 10 Fort or Will save in order to take any action, or the Action Die is lost. A swarm automatically

attacks any creature in its area each round.

5% of Medium ammonites gain an evil intelligence. As ammonites grow, this chance increases by 5% with each size category, so that there is a 10% chance of Large ammonites being intelligent, and a 15% chance of Huge ammonites being so. Intelligent ammonites gain 1 levels of the wizard class if Medium, 1d4 levels if Large, and 1d5+2 levels if Huge. The manifestations of an ammonite's spells should always match the creature's nature – related to water, tentacles, the ocean, clouds of ink, its spiral shell, and darkness. An ammonite wizard can only use one of its Action Dice to cast a spell in any given round. Ammonite wizards are Chaotic.

Tactics

Ammonites simply grasp their prey, drawing it close enough to bite, until driven off or slain. If an ammonite can hold more than one creature, it will bite at the creature it bit last 50% of the time, and bite a random held creature 50% of the time. An ammonite that fails a Morale check releases its ink cloud and flees in a random direction.

Ammonite swarm (5' radius swarm of six-inch-long ammonites): Init +3; Atk swarming bite +0 melee (1d3); AC 16; HD 2d8; swim 10'; Act special; SP swarm traits; SV Fort +3, Ref +6, Will +0; AL N.

Ammonite swarm (10' Radius swarm of foot-long ammonites): Init +2; Atk swarming bite +1 melee (1d5); AC 14; HD 3d8; swim 20'; Act special; SP swarm traits; SV Fort +4, Ref +5, Will +0; AL N.

Ammonite (Small): Init +6; Atk grapple +2 melee (1d5) or bite +0 melee (1d4+1); AC 14; HD 1d8; MV swim 30'; Act 1d20; SP grapple (DC 10 to escape); SV Fort +4, Ref +4, Will +0; AL N.

Ammonite (Medium): Init +4; Atk grapple +6 melee (1d6) or bite +3 melee (1d5+2); AC 14; HD 2d8+2; MV swim 40'; Act 2d20; SP grapple (DC 12 to escape), 5% are intelligent with 1 Wizard level; SV Fort +6, Ref +2, Will +2; AL N.

Ammonite (Large): Init +2; Atk grapple +8 melee (1d7+1) or bite +4 melee (1d6+2); AC 16; HD 3d8+6; MV swim 30'; Act 4d20; SP grapple (DC 16 to escape), constrict and rend, 10% are intelligent with 1d4 Wizard levels; SV

Fort +8, Ref +1, Will +4; AL N.

Ammonite (Huge): Init +0; Atk grapple +12 melee (2d6+2) or bite +4 melee (3d5); AC 20; HD 8d8+24; MV swim 20'; Act 8d20; SP grapple (DC 20 to escape), constrict and rend, 15% are intelligent with 1d5+2 Wizard levels; SV Fort +12, Ref +0, Will +6; AL N.

R'yalas, Lord of the Drowned Ones

This huge, ancient ammonite wizard is a suitable opponent for powerful PCs. He dwells in a deep grotto beneath the warm seas of a "Lost World" region teeming with gigantic amphibians and huge saurian monsters. This creature keeps the **Malachite Rod** within its lair, allowing it to animate and control drowned sailors as guardians and servitors. The wealth of a dozen or more wrecked ships awaits whoever can defeat R'yalas. They will need some form of diving gear first.

In writing stats for R'yalas, I used Umwansh, Father of the Waves, from **Angels, Daemons, & Beings Between**, as his patron. This was merely so that invoke patron results for a maritime patron would be readily available to the harried Judge. However, if the Judge has the time and inclination, a more specific patron of warm seas, un-dead sailors, drowning, madness, and mollusks would be even better. Cthulhu, anyone?

R'yalas, Lord of the Drowned Ones (Huge ammonite wizard 5): Init +0; Atk grapple +14 melee (2d6+2) or bite +6 melee (3d5); AC 20; HD 8d8+5d4+39; hp ;79; MV swim 20'; Act 8d20 + 1d14; SP grapple (DC 20 to escape), constrict and rend, spells (+6 to spell check: *Animal Summoning, Choking Cloud, Flaming Hands [energy substitution – freezing hands], Magic Missile, Invoke Patron (Umwansh, Father of the Waves), Patron Bond, Invisible Companion, Nythuul's Porcupine Coat, and Fireball* [energy substitution – acid ball]); SV Fort +14, Ref +1, Will +9; AL C.