

Dispatches from the Raven Crowking

IV - Megadungeons and Campaigns



Daniel J. Bishop

Porphyran
Patrons



COMPATIBLE WITH
DCC
RPG

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Introduction

Welcome to the fourth volume of Dispatches.

This volume focuses on the idea of a megadungeon. In the early days of gaming, these grand edifices were often the focus of extended campaigns, forming a “tent pole” that propped up the rest. Of course, this is not the only way to use a megadungeon, and astute readers will note that several of the best known early campaigns had more than one such structure. There is something in deep in our psyche that responds to the idea of deep places underground, extending farther than one could ever explore.

While this work is predominately skewed towards the *Dungeon Crawl Classics Role-playing Game*, the advice is general enough to work in any system where megadungeons might exist. Moreover, a lot of the advice herein applies not only to megadungeons, but also to the construction of campaign settings as a whole.

Finally, as always, what follows is my opinion. There are other ways of doing things. This is just the way that works best for me.

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Dungeon Crawl Classics: Short Story or Novel?

One of the objections to the megadungeon concept in the *Dungeon Crawl Classics Role-playing Game* is that the source fiction of Appendix N is primarily short stories, and that the DCC role-playing game works best as a series of short stories in consequence.

Well, there is certainly some truth to the idea that many of the Appendix N authors wrote primarily short fiction, as they were writing for the pulps. Robert E. Howard, for example, wrote primarily short stories. There is only one Conan novel, *The Hour of the Dragon*, and his planetary adventure novel, *Almuric*, seems to make up the list of Howard's longer fantasy. Fritz Leiber, of course, wrote short stories that sometimes strung together into longer plots. H.P. Lovecraft and August Derleth were also primarily short story writers. For Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness*, *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, and *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* are notable exceptions. *The Lurker at the Threshold* was completed by August Derleth from a Lovecraft fragment.

In the case of Manly Wade Wellman, Howard, Lord Dunsany, Lovecraft, or Derleth, one story may very well be disconnected from other stories, even in the same series. It matters little what order Wellman's *Hok the Mighty* or *John the Balladeer* stories are read, for instance. In other cases, such as the stories of Gardner Fox or Leiber, the order matters quite a bit, because the stories resolve into larger plots. These are not so much short stories, but serialized novels.

(Manly Wade Wellman went on to write five *John the Balladeer* novels, of which I have managed to obtain *The Old Gods Waken* and *After Dark*, the first two. When one compares that to the short stories, which can be collected in a single book, one has to wonder in this case whether it is fair to say Wellman is writing primarily short stories or novels with this character.)

If we examine Appendix N, 22 specific books are recommended and 13 specific series. Of the 22 books, 20 are novels and 2 are collections of short stories. Of the 13 series, 4 may be considered series of short stories, although

I would argue that the listed series of Gardner Fox are novels that were published serially, and that the *Fafhrd & Gray Mouser* series by Fritz Leiber in places comes close to being the same.

The megadungeon model does not require that each session revolve around the megadungeon, but merely that it always be part of the background in the event that the players are looking for something to have their PCs do. It is a convenient resource to allow the players to choose their own course - if they absolutely refuse to follow rumours and plot hooks to Hirot, they can choose to explore westward into the Great Ruins of Thereitis.

While many believe that the megadungeon was invented by J.R.R.T.'s vast ruins of Moria, or the halls of Thrór under the Lonely Mountain, one can discover vast underground tunnels and ruins in the writing of Edgar Rice Burroughs, Gardner Fox, Robert E. Howard, H.P. Lovecraft, and Margaret St. Clair. Vast ruins (including underground ruins of many levels) also feature in Sterling Lanier's *Hiero's Journey*.

Like it or not, the vast ruin, and the network of underground tunnels, are as Appendix N as any other aspect of gaming. Likewise, novels are at least as influential as short stories in Appendix N fiction. As a consequence, the megadungeon is an apt fixture in many (but not all) *Dungeon Crawl Classics* campaigns. It provides a place for the PCs to explore, it allows the players to make meaningful decisions about what quests to undertake, and it gives the judge a place to locate lost civilizations, forbidden magic, and all of that goodness that puts the "dungeon crawl" into *Dungeon Crawl Classics*.

Balanced Encounters

When people talk about “balanced encounters”, they may mean one of several things – anything from creating encounters that are generally appropriate for a dungeon level (as with early *D&D*) to ensuring that the PCs can win every fight with an “appropriate” risk and expenditure of resources (as with the base assumptions of *3e* and *4e*).

What underlies this, of course, is a simple question: If the PCs fail, who is responsible?

Look back through forums focused on *3e*, and you will discover all sorts of complaints about the CR system. I have not been an aficionado of *4e*, but I imagine that similar observations related to that system’s encounter budgets also occurred. The books, essentially, offer a way for encounters to be “balanced”; if the PCs fail it is either because the books failed, or the DM didn’t follow the guidelines.

The first time I encountered this was in *2nd edition Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, where the DM was encouraged to fudge in order to save the PCs. In *1e*, there was certainly language that suggested that the DM was **allowed to do so**; in *2e* the suggestion was that the DM **should do so**. 1st edition’s “balance” was focused around campaign-length play and mechanisms that allowed the players to estimate their risk. A prime example of this is that, in general, the deeper one delves, the greater the treasures and the risks. This, of course, was not absolute – PCs may encounter “Monster Level” 3 monsters on the 1st level of the dungeon.

Moreover, while these tools were available, reading the advice to players in the *1e Player’s Handbook*, it is clear that players should expect the DM to try to trick them into undertaking more risk than expected. Long sloping passages that lead down to another level without being noticed, chutes that do the same (but obviously rather than slyly!), and traps that cut off retreat are to be expected.

In *1e*, not only is managing risk the player’s job, but the DM is expected to make this difficult. Not impossibly so – the DM is not supposed to be a jerkwad – but difficult enough to push the players into upping their game.

The modern obsession with balanced encounters starts with the idea that it is the GM, not the players, who must find the balance point. In a game where the GM forces the players to dance to his tune (and thus forces encounters upon the players, as with *3e*, *4e*, or most “adventure paths”), it makes sense that the GM has an increased responsibility to make those encounters “fair”. Applied to all gaming, though, the idea is a nightmare. Every time you hear that the GM has “made a mistake” and has to “correct an encounter” as the reason for fudging, the idea that the GM should balance encounters is at its heart.

I do not like games where the book, or the GM, is supposed to balance the encounters. I like games in which the GM is supposed to allow enough context to exist (which does not, by the way, mean that the context simply appears without being sought out by the PCs) to allow the players to generally balance the encounters. And which allows the players to be wrong.

Some players will “play it safe”, while others will take great risks, courting disaster in order to have a chance for great rewards. That is, to me, part of the interest of the game.

M is for Megadungeons

This article began as a series of forum posts, which in turn became a series of blog posts. The initial impetus began with the idea of putting together a megadungeon setting for my own “fantasy heartbreaker” game, *RCFG*, as a persistent part of a campaign milieu. Although the posts began related to a different game, the theory and ideas presented herein can be used with *Dungeon Crawl Classics* as well. Where appropriate, I have revised the original posts to mesh better with the *Dungeon Crawl Classics* system.

There are several advantages to including one or more megadungeons in a sandbox campaign setting. The first should be obvious – even lacking any other clear plan, players always have a location that they can investigate in order to play. This dramatically reduces the amount of “hang time” in sandbox play, while the players decide their characters’ next move.

Another, less obvious, use is to include history and mythology into the campaign world in small chunks. Rather than being just a collection of rooms and corridors, with groups of evil humanoids, cultists, and wandering monsters to fight and treasures to be found, a comprehensive megadungeon can be intimately linked to the history of the campaign world. Imagine, if you would, a megadungeon in a “Medieval Earth” world, built by Roman-types on Egyptian ruins, which eventually goes through a Sumerian region to reach pre-human caverns. At the very least, the un-dead encounters would be marked by the era in which they first died.

In games using the *d20 System*, the Game Master can select resources that reflect this. Green Ronin’s *Testament*, for example, could be used to lay out the oldest regions, with *Hamunaptra* being used to lay out the regions atop that. And so on. As characters descend further into the dungeon, they encounter monsters, spells, and magic items they have never encountered before. The wise GM has linked these to stories of the mythical past...so that there is a thrill of recognition, and an understanding of age, as the characters encounter these things.

There is no reason that discerning judges cannot adapt game elements from other role-playing games. The most important consideration is to reduce complexity of game mechanics, while retaining the desired feel.

The Importance of Names

Gary Gygax had a knack for introducing new places and people, and making them seem old. “The illusion of history” as it were. I think that Ed Greenwood has this as well, or certainly did when *The Forgotten Realms* was first appearing in *Dragon Magazine*. I think that this illusion of history is necessary for a setting to “feel” right. (I also tend to think that this is why we keep going back to Greyhawk.) Creating an illusion of history is a skill that the wise GM works hard to cultivate.

Prior to setting pen to paper, I know that I want the megadungeon to contain both “Name” places and “Name” creatures - things that the players can use to mark their PCs’ progress through the whole.

It is far more exciting to encounter an interesting location or being that you have heard many rumors about than it is to encounter the same without any build-up. So, I first devise a list of place-names to use, which can be mentioned in rumors, scrawled messages, etc. The goal is to give the players locations to search for, and to allow them the satisfaction of locating some area that they have long desired to find. This also adds to the “illusion of history” of the place. It implies an existence beyond what the players can immediately – or may ever – see.

At this point, I don’t know what these locations actually are, although the names themselves are suggestive in some cases. I created the following list by looking at the names of dungeon areas and descriptive elements from the *1st Edition Dungeon Master’s Guide*. This is probably the greatest fantasy role-playing resource ever produced, and if you do not own a hardcopy, it is well worth investing in. Looking at the Dungeon Dressing tables, you will see many names for various types of rooms, as well as many good adjectives to describe them. In order to prevent myself from falling into favored tropes, and in order to spur creativity, I made a list of elements I liked, and then used random rolls to link them together. This is what I came up with:

The Amber Courtyard
The Black Hall
The Cerulean Well
The Cistern of the Dun Waters

The Bandit’s Roost
The Burning Dome
The Chamber of the Bronze Throne
The Copper Pool

The Crimson Catacombs
The Crypt of Sleeping Dogs
The Ebony Grotto
The Groaning Arch
The Library of Bones
The Moving Pool of Xar Yggar
The Restful Chapel of St. Vigilant
The Scarlet Gallery
The Smoking Shrine of Ly Valle
The Spinning Chapel
The Tawny Altar of St. McCoy
The Vermillion Idol of Destiny
The Waterfall of Fearful Whispers

The Crypt of Red Markings
The Dripping Garden
The Green Lake
The Hall of the Bitter Banquet
The Machine of Sparkling Crystal
The Pool of Shadowed Vermin
The River of Uncertain Dreams
The Sea of Ivory Stones
The Sour Temple
The Tapestry of Winds
The Verdant Caverns
The Wandering Library
The Yellow Fountain



The Bandit's Roost will obviously be a place where bandits gather. The idea of a roost makes me want this place to span several levels, with criss-crossing rafters and hidey holes in the walls. I can easily imagine narrow beams that slope across a wide drop, allowing access from one level to another.

The Dripping Garden makes me think of a damp, misty place where plants are growing in a sort of hanging garden. Perhaps there are also primordial oozes, and giant slugs?

The Moving Pool of Xar Yggar is a teleportational device, perhaps leading to other planes, or other regions of the campaign milieu. Xar Yggar is, if not obvious, an anagram of "Gary Gygax".

The Machine of Sparkling Crystal is probably an artifact, now malfunctioning, created by a madman. Perhaps I'll name him Mull.

The Restful Chapel of St. Vigilant should be a safe place for adventurers to hole up and rest.

The Sea of Ivory Stones suggests a beach of water-smoothed bones.

The Verdant Caverns is a series of locations with plant-based monsters.

The Vermillion Idol of Destiny - idols and statues evoke many things, such as a worship area, a trapped treasure (behind the giant gem eyes...) or a more intriguing 'Special' like a sentient omniscient object that answers questions under certain circumstances.

The Wandering Library should appear on the Wandering Encounters tables. Its location literally moves, and it may well move while the PCs are within, depositing them on a different level altogether..... Yet within its moldering tomes can be found much knowledge of use to adventuring types. The books change location with the Library, so those who "borrow" one discovery that they don't have it for long. For this reason, perhaps, there is a kind of truce in the library.....Perhaps even a Librarian who enforces the peace?

Evocative Monsters

As with places, there should be creatures within the megadungeon that characters hear about before they encounter....or, alternatively, that they encounter and then learn the significance of. The megadungeon needs about 20 “name” creatures to start with. Again, we don’t have to know the statistics of these creatures, or anything about them really. We just need evocative names.

We also want to include a wide number of creature types. I am going to follow the *3rd Edition Dungeons & Dragons* convention of creature types (although I changed “magical beast” to “beast” because, without a separate “beast” type, why bother to continue with the “magical” adjective?). This isn’t strictly necessary; you can choose creatures on the basis of whatever you like. My specific goal here is, again, to ignore falling into my own favored tropes.

(Everyone has game elements that they find themselves exploring repeatedly throughout their lives. There is nothing wrong with this – it helps to give the game a cohesive feel. Intentionally stepping outside these tropes doesn’t prevent them from arising, but it does give space for the unexpected, and is good for your creativity.)

We want to have at least one representative of each of these types: Abomination, Animal, (Magical) Beast, Construct, Dragon, Elemental, Fey, Giant, Humanoid, Monstrous Humanoid, Ooze, Outsider, Plant, Undead, and Vermin. It is not necessary that each of our “name” creatures is actually a single creature; it could be a particularly notorious group of creatures, such as a tribe of orcs. Animals, humanoids, plants, undead, and vermin are especially good for this “notorious group” treatment.

You may think, at this point, that the thing to do is to choose the biggest, baddest creatures that you can, crank them up to 11, and call it done. Certainly, this can be done for some of these creatures. But remember that the goal is not simply to give the PCs a memorable fight. Despite some claims to the contrary, fantasy role-playing games are largely about exploration and discover, not simply fighting. The fellow who claimed that the game is about fighting vicious monsters, rather than (as opposed to *as well as*) traipsing through Faerie, is just plain wrong.

The goal is to create creatures that, directly or indirectly, the PCs will encounter repeatedly, and which the players will talk about long after the last die is rolled. Indeed, for some of these encounters, no dice might be rolled at all! If you have read earlier volumes of Dispatches, you will know that one of the most important design rules I follow is: For every hour of design, you should get at least two hours of play. Creating creatures with repeated play value helps to meet this goal.

These creatures must include both allies and enemies, and may fill any of the major NPC roles. They can include potential mentors, patrons, rivals, informants, protectors, and even love interests as well as mere foes to fight. Indeed, they must fulfill at least a few of these roles or the whole dungeon will fall flat. “Fight -> fight -> fight” does not a fantasy role-playing game make! It certainly doesn’t make a compelling setting.

I decided to break down the creature types as follows. Note that “rats” are probably the most obvious animal type for a dungeon, which is precisely why I avoided them. It is harder to get your players interested in a group of rats or bats in a dungeon than in, say, a form of subterranean hound.

- **Abomination:** Otyugh
- **Animal:** Cat, Hyena
- **(Magical) Beast:** Sphinx
- **Construct:** Golem
- **Dragon:** The Bludgrue Wyrms (we will decide what this means later, and certainly some smaller dragons will be its offspring!)
- **Elemental:** Invisible Stalker
- **Fey:** Nymph
- **Giant:** Stone Giant
- **Humanoid:** Dwarf, Orc, Human, Kobold
- **Monstrous Humanoid:** Medusa
- **Ooze:** Gray Ooze
- **Outsider:** The Librarian (type?), Angel of some sort (chained?)
- **Plant:** Assassin Vine (representing some form of root?)
- **Undead:** Ghouls, Vampire, Ghost
- **Vermin:** Giant Centipede

That gives us 22 individual “name” creatures to give titles to and to develop. At the same time, we will want to develop the “name” locations, and (in some cases only) link named creatures with locations where they fit. And we still

need those evocative names! It is desirable to have names that both “sound right” and that reflect the atmosphere of the game. I came up with these:

- Gathouse (from Gothous, from shoggoth)
- Etolkin (anagram of Tolkein)
- Ny Sandu (anagram of Dunsany)
- El Nysrith (anagram of Slytherin)
- Ogrushrub (anagram of Burroughs)
- Hobert Warder (from Robert E. Howard)
- Owlgrin
- Portersmith
- Malcaper
- Grimalkin
- Elzamere



Legendary Treasures

In addition to some major sites, and some major creatures/creature groups, we need to consider major treasures – the “swords & hoards” that lure the PCs into the dark. In this case, we will be developing the following items (at a minimum):

- Sword
- Staff
- Hoard
- Gem
- Crown
- Amulet
- Ring
- Shield
- Mail
- Tome

Dungeon Crawl Classics has a general ethos that magical treasures should be unique. Beyond that general rule, we are considering ten treasures that PCs would be willing to die for...perhaps even willing to turn to betrayal in the darkness below, slaughtering each other for the chance to hold the campaign's equivalent of the Arkenstone of Thrain!



Brainstorming

Once you've got all these potential names and elements, it is time to begin linking them together. When brainstorming, don't throw any idea out! Even if you don't use it on this project, it might be the perfect element to add to something you are working on later.

(1) The hyenas look like grotesque mastiffs. They might be linked to the Crypt of Sleeping Dogs.

(2) The otyugh dwells in Filthfall Middens, a great chasm that runs through several levels, and is used by many creature groups to dispose of waste. Imagine the odor!

(3) The grey ooze is huge, maybe even colossal...inky black, intelligent, and telepathic (psionic?). It is called "Blott". Blott is neither good nor evil, and has plenty of food in the dungeon. It wants something that the adventurers can bring in from the outside.....I am thinking some sort of drug that the adventurers would need to deal with the seamy underbelly of society to acquire.

(4) The dragon's name has softened over the ages. While ancient books may refer to "The Bludgrue Wyrms", it is now "Blothegrue".

(5) Cinderqueen. Not sure who this is yet, but I liked the name.

(6) Some area of deep mudflats. Movement is very difficult for adventurers, but not for flying creatures. Even something like stirges could cause problems here, even for mid- to high-level adventurers.

(7) Remember those polished bones on the beach? Well, without wind there won't be regular wave action underground, so one has to determine what polished the bones. I am thinking of a "Bonestripper's Guild" (perhaps the ghouls mentioned earlier). These are creatures the characters can talk to.... from a position of strength, anyway. Think of the ghouls in Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book* or their implied source in H.P. Lovecraft's *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*.

(8) Bandit's Roost would be near the surface (so the bandits can get out to

plunder). It is now occupied by a Parliament of Cats. Many, many cats from miles around gather here for mysterious purposes of their own. And for this to work, the cats must remain mysterious, despite the players' fervent wishes to learn their secrets! Some of these cats are just cats, others are tough, and some may even have class levels. Cats can be found on any level of the dungeon. They have their paws in everything in all of the human, halfling, and elven communities for at least a league in all directions.

If the cats are treated well by the PCs, all is well. They simply watch. If not, the PCs find themselves haunted by cats everywhere they do. The cats meddle in local politics, and use their influence to wreak vengeance on PCs who attack them. The city gaoler has a cat. When the PCs are refused a room at the inn, the innkeeper's cat blinks at them from atop the bar. Etc., etc.

Eventually, the cats may deign to speak to PCs that consistently treat them well, neither pushing their advances nor forgetting gifts of catnip or cream. Perhaps by the time the PCs are level 3-5.....though a PC with a cat familiar may be able to send said familiar to treat with the Parliament earlier than this.

The cats know (or at least seem to know) absolutely everything. And their influence can open doors that would otherwise remain shut to the PCs. Even the King has a cat.....

Another quick note, while I'm thinking of it. It is all too common for PCs to encounter creatures that are in the prime of their lives. Our megadungeon requires that there be young, and old creatures as well. Indeed, one of our "name" creatures could be something that was the most dangerous thing in the dungeon, once, but is now far past it's prime.

It is far too easy to think of setting as a location for PC encounters. If you want your setting to live and breathe, though, it has to have a sense of existing long before the PCs come onto the scene, and long after they are gone.

Pattern Mapping

It may be imagined that, once the basic elements are decided on, the GM should simply begin mapping the project on whatever scale seems convenient. On larger projects, however, it is often useful to begin with a “pattern map”; that is, a plan of the pattern by which the whole will be mapped.

In our particular case, we have already decided that many of the upper underground ways will, in fact, be the sunken and collapsed streets of our ruin. Therefore, it would help us greatly to have at least some general parameters of that ruin in mind.

What I have done is made a quick sketch of the River Ynde and the outlines of the ruin. I then placed the major locations which would be visible from the surface of the ruins. You will notice immediately that even getting this far meant the inclusion of new features. The boundary of the town implies the possibility of a wall (and towers?). I have added the location of the main Market, a Ruined Keep, an Island, Old Wharves, and the so-called Lesser Ruins on the south side of the River Ynde.

Market: This provides an area that is largely free of buildings and debris, and thus is open to rife plant growth. We will place one or more entrances to the lower levels here, as the result of subsidence. In effect, at least part of the Market will be an area of uneven footing, deeply rooted trees, slopes, and yawning “cave” mouths. Should be fun.

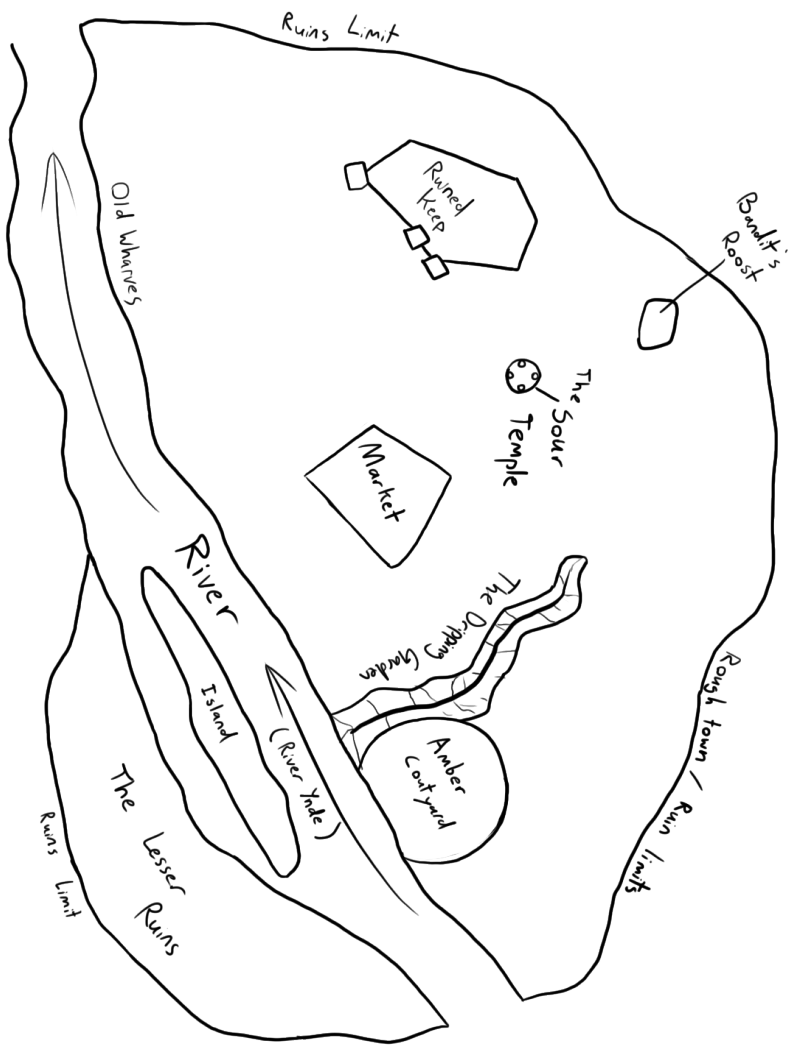
Ruined Keep: An obvious landmark, the Ruined Keep will be on a rise of land, looming over the remainders of the ruins. Flying predators, such as Esbastus, are likely to lair here, especially in the upper towers (where and if they are stable). The dungeons of the keep provide their own sublevel(s), above (but connected to) the first underground level of the ruin proper. Because of its fortified position, the Ruined Keep has become the lair of fairly tough monsters.

Island: Everyone loves Deep Ones, and where better to hide their secret base than in tunnels beneath an island?

Old Wharves: Everyone loves Deep Ones, and where better for them to ex-

pand their secret base than in tunnels beneath some old wharves? Of course, it is likely that wererats or other ratmen were here before the Deep Ones, and may resent the intrusion. Smells like a faction war to me.

Lesser Ruins: Another Deep One enclave, some animals, and a few monsters from the surrounding woods make this portion of the ruin interesting, but it is decidedly less dangerous than the main ruin. Thus, the Lesser Ruins are a good place for new players/characters to “cut their teeth” (as it were). Still, even an “easy” region wants for some looming danger, so we will add the Bloody Door, beyond which lies a passage straight down into a very difficult sub-level.



What we are doing now is akin to the “side view” maps of dungeons in some of the TSR-era *D&D* books -- we are exploring the relationships between areas that must be mapped, rather than producing actual in-play maps. Locations of some features should make sense within the whole, and the layout of the streets followed from where boats could dock, where the Keep would naturally be, and where the biggest Market (largely determined by the location of gates, wharves, etc.) would be. Basically, streets radiate out from these points. The goal here is to give a general layout of primary, secondary, and tertiary streets to facilitate mapping.

We can see how the pattern affects the parts. For instance, the Dripping Garden has to be near the Amber Courtyard due to its backstory, but the old streets need not follow the course the Dripping Garden now runs along.

Once the old streets are mapped, the location of features in the first underground level can also be placed, as these should follow “street logic” in some way. After that, we will place the rough locations of items on the second underground level.

After that, the work forks into two parts: (1) Determining what is happening in the Middle Levels and (2) Mapping the Upper Levels. These accomplished, we can begin placing encounters in the Upper Levels, devising Wandering Encounter charts, and get the region ready for actual play.

Thereafter, the Middle Levels get pattern mapped, and we go through the process of fleshing them out while deciding exactly what is in the Lower Levels. The Middle Levels then get mapped while the Lower Levels are pattern mapped. The Middle Levels get encounters, the Lower Levels get mapped, and (finally) the Lower Levels get encounters.

By the time all of this is done, the Upper Levels may have been “in play” for a year or more.



Placing Elements

By this point we have quite a few elements to play with. Now we have to decide where they should go in the overall structure.

A megadungeon has upper levels, middle levels, and lower levels. Without knowing exactly how many levels the dungeon has, we can divide the dungeon in this way. Thus, each of our elements can be found in one of these sections.

Where an element is found will affect its development. A major treasure located on an upper level must be very well hidden, or have a truly fearsome guardian, or it would have been plundered long ago. Likewise, a major monster located on an upper level must have some reason for not simply decimating everything within its grasp...including the PCs! A creature like Blott might be found on the upper levels, for instance, because it is more interested in satisfying its addiction than in eating people.

Some of the creatures and places we've already described belong on a particular tier (upper/middle/lower) of the dungeon on the basis of the development work we've done already. For instance, Filthfall Middens should be on the Middle Levels, where it can be accessed by many creatures (perhaps falling into the Lower Levels), and Bandit's Roost should be in the Upper Levels.

Otherwise, we can roll 1d6, spreading these elements evenly throughout the dungeon.

We should also consider how many entrances to develop. I would say, 4d6 to the Upper Levels, 2d6 to the Middle Levels, and 1d6 to the Lower Levels. Of these, most will be hidden and/or otherwise obscure. Discovery of a new way into/out of the dungeon can be a treasure itself!

There should be ways to move easily from the Upper Levels to the Middle Levels, and even to the Lower Levels. Some levels and sublevels may well be "hidden" -- difficult to find. Likewise, if a primary level is spread out far enough, finding the ways out of it can be a fun challenge. What is important, though, is that once they are found they are relatively easy to use without slogging back and forth every time.

(In my *AD&D 2e* campaign, the Dungeon of Thale had one known entrance/exit, controlled as a business, where adventurers paid 10% of their take to use the gate. There were many other entrances, through the city sewers, in basements, through teleporters, etc., waiting for the PCs to discover so that they could avoid the toll!)

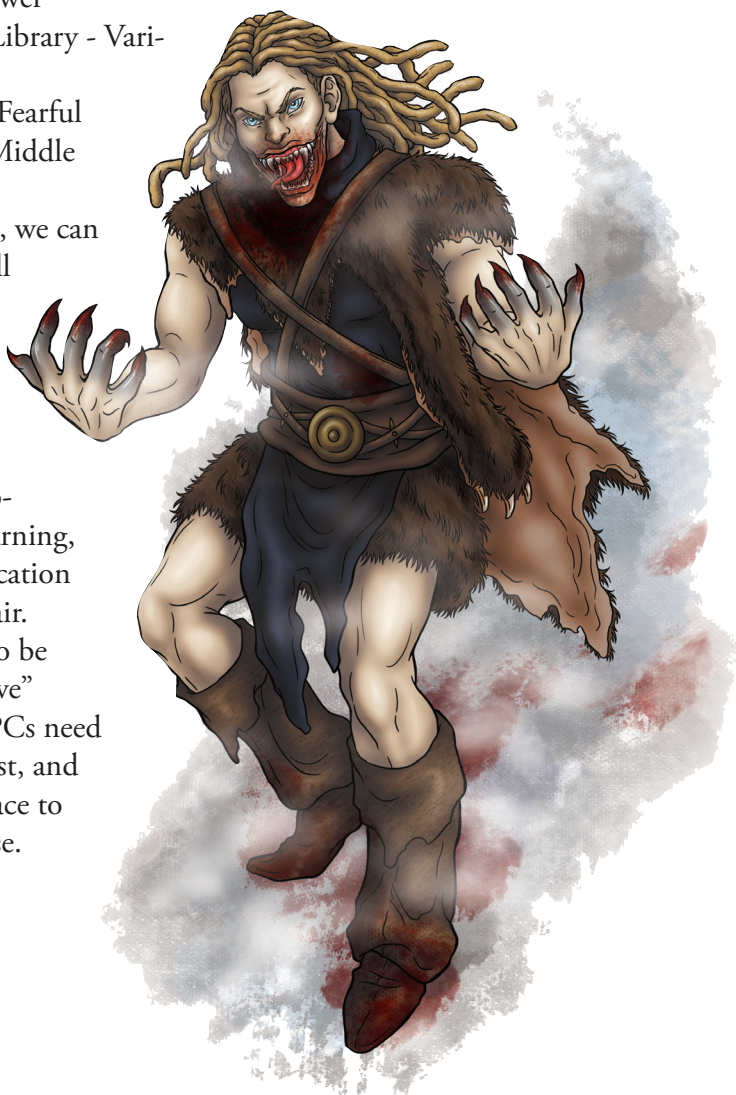
I am also considering a “Circvs Minimus”, where miniature animals and monsters were once displayed and sent to fight each other. Those animals are long gone now, and the Circvs is the home of trolls. Luckily, these trolls are too small to do much harm, although they are as loud and vocal as ordinary trolls (which might make PCs hearing them give them more heed than necessary).

- Amber Courtyard - Upper
- Amulet - Lower
- Angel of some sort (chained?) - Middle
- Bandit's Roost - Upper
- Black Hall - Lower
- Blothegrue - Upper
- Blott - Upper
- Bonestripper's Guild - Middle
- Burning Dome - Middle
- Cerulean Well - Middle
- Chamber of the Bronze Throne - Middle
- Cinderqueen – Lower
- Circvs Minimus – Upper
- Cistern of the Dun Waters - Lower
- Cloudy Vault of Whispering Leopards - Lower
- Copper Pool - Upper
- Crimson Catacombs - Lower
- Crown - Lower
- Crypt of Red Markings - Upper
- Crypt of Sleeping Dogs - Upper
- Deep mudflats - Middle
- Dripping Garden - Upper
- Dwarf - Middle
- Ebony Grotto - Middle
- El Nysrith (anagram of Slytherin) - Upper
- Elzamere - Middle
- Etolkin (anagram of Tolkein) - Lower

- Filthfall Middens – Middle
- Gathouse - Middle
- Gem - Lower
- Ghost - Upper
- Golem - Upper
- Green Lake - Lower
- Grimalkin - Middle
- Groaning Arch - Middle
- Hall of the Bitter Banquet - Lower
- Hellroot: Assassin Vine - Lower
- Hoard - Upper
- Hobert Warder - Lower
- Human - Lower
- Invisible Stalker - Upper
- Kobold - Upper
- Library of Bones - Middle
- Like-Not - Lower
- Mail - Upper
- Malcaper Middle
- Medusa - Lower
- Monstrous Centipede - Upper
- Moving Pool of Xar Yggar - Middle
- Ny Sandu - Lower
- Nymph - Upper
- Ogrushrub - Middle
- Orc - Lower
- Owlgrin - Upper
- Perfumed Machine of Sparkling Crystal - Middle
- Pismire's Yellow Fountain - Lower
- Pool of Shadowed Vermin - Upper
- Portersmith - Middle
- Restful Chapel of St. Helmbright the Vigilant - Lower
- Ring - Upper
- River of Uncertain Dreams - Middle
- Scarlet Gallery - Lower
- Sea of Ivory Stones - Lower
- Shield - Middle
- Smoking Shrine of Ly Valle - Upper
- Sour Temple - Upper
- Sphinx - Upper

- Spinning Chapel - Middle
- Staff - Middle
- Stone Giant - Lower
- Sword - Lower
- Tapestry of Winds - Upper
- Tawny Altar of St. McCoy - Middle
- Tome - Lower
- Vampire - Upper
- Verdant Caverns – Middle
- Vermillion-Handed Idol of
Destiny - Lower
- Wandering Library - Vari-
able
- Waterfall of Fearful
Whispers - Middle

Looking at these, we can see that there will be some very dangerous areas even in the Upper Levels, so the PCs should probably have fair warning, say, about the location of the dragon's lair. There should also be plenty of "inactive" areas. After all, PCs need somewhere to rest, and you want the space to build up suspense.



From General to Specific

Eventually, we have to consider specifics for a megadungeon. In this case, we are looking at specific ideas of how some of our brainstormed material might be developed. The areas between the major regions described herein are mostly “empty” regions – lost streets and empty buildings, with a few lairs, hazards, forgotten treasures, and (of course) wandering monsters to make them interesting. There will also be clues as to the nature of the major areas they connect.

Overview

Balton Major was a town nestled in the hilly Greenshaw forest, along the River Ynde. It was founded upon (and largely built over) the ruins of Baltanus, an ancient city of a Romanesque people. Nearby, at the edge of the Greenshaw along the Ynde, was Balton Minor. Balton Minor still stands; it is a potential base of operations for PCs and NPCs alike as they explore the megadungeon.

It may seem odd to some that this megadungeon project begins above the surface, in a ruined city. The classic megadungeon is below the ruins of a castle, in a giant skull-shaped mountain, or something like that. This megadungeon happens to intersect with, and be built beneath, the ruins of a city.

Where a megadungeon is located will have a (potentially) profound effect on its structure. I have run megadungeons located beneath a bustling urban metropolis (the Dungeon of Thale...similar in some ways to Undermountain in *The Forgotten Realms*), megadungeons modeled off the MERP versions of Goblingate and Moria, and even a “Wandering Dungeon” that spans many planes (entrances were on the random encounter tables of other adventuring sites).

Beneath Baltanus were many catacombs that led eventually to natural caverns, which in turn led into a mythical underworld unguessed by Baltanus’ citizens (and, perhaps, portals to other planes of existence). Baltanus also had a system of real sewers, which Balton Major did not. Baltanus was ruined due to humanoid incursions, and later subsidence buried portions of the old city. It was further subsidence, leading to an actual collapse of an entire cavern

system, that brought Balton Major low roughly 300 years ago. Now much of the town is below ground, buried by rubble and time.

The Upper Levels consist of the buried streets of Balton Major, including still-intact or partially-intact buildings, often twisted or lop-sided (to create fun three-dimensional areas) as well as the upper reaches of Baltanus. Water runs through the Upper Levels in places, making some of these structures appear almost cavern-like. Others are still open to the sun, at least dimly, and in their upper areas, not unlike steep-walled canyons, some dry and others swampy. Wider “canyon” areas are generally vegetated, and may include the odd plant monster.

Blothegrue’s lair is in the ruins of a warehouse near the largest of these open areas, which the dragon uses as a place to take flight and land. The “Name Treasure” hoard is Blothegrue’s, and it is still known as the “Merchant’s Hoard” because it is believed to have been culled primarily from the warehouses in and around the dragon’s lair.

The Amber Courtyard

A region of honey yellow cobblestones and ruined warehouses near the River Ynde, the Amber Courtyard is open to the sky. Some of the attached warehouses are likewise open, their roofs having fallen in long ago, but this is certainly not the case for all of them. Tangled trees obstruct the roadways still leading into the Courtyard – some of these are now tunnel entrances – and provide homes for quick, agile scavengers. This is the home of the great yellow-gold dragon Blothegrue, and the location of the Merchant’s Hoard. Blothegrue is the daughter of the Cinderqueen, found far in the lower reaches of the dungeon. In fact, Blothegrue did not so much settle in the ruins as crawl up from below them to make this her lair.

(In *Dungeon Crawl Classics*, a dragon’s personal outlook and abilities are not tied to its color – Blothegrue is a house-sized fire-breathing dragon with a venomous bite.)

Blothegrue’s hoard contains a massive amount of trade goods (as befits its name), but it also contains somewhere within its vast bulk the fabled Ring of Artimax, an artifact created by the legendary wizard whose name it bears. In addition to being a powerful ring of rejuvenation, the Ring of Artimax is said to have seven gems set within it, each with a different power that is released

when pressed.

It is recommended that the judge examine the description of artifacts and relics in *1e Dungeon Master's Guide* for ideas as to what these powers might be, then weave them into hints and legends of the Ring throughout the campaign.

Blothegrue spends much of her time in the Amber Courtyard – she is not so active as she was a century ago – but enterprising players may attempt to pilfer the Merchant's Hoard while she is away. Obviously, any such pilfering will be detected, and the dragon will do its utmost to wreak vengeance on the perpetrators, perhaps going so far as to lay waste to Balton Minor.

If the judge wishes, an NPC may eventually steal from Blothegrue, putting the PCs in conflict with the dragon whether they wish it or not (unless they leave the area entirely). This sort of conflict is a means by which the GM can eventually bring the Cinderqueen into play. As with Grendel's Mother in *Beowulf*, the Cinderqueen does not take kindly to the slaughter of her offspring, no matter how much her offspring has provoked just such a reaction. Obviously, some care must be taken with this development, as the Cinderqueen will be a truly epic monster.

There is a group of kobolds in the upper levels, so we will link them with the Amber Courtyard as well, and call them the Yellow Claw tribe. The Yellow Claw worship and serve Blothegrue, maintaining pits and cages where captured beings are kept as ready meals both for themselves and for their dire mistress. Thus, low-level adventurers defeated by the kobolds are not immediately slain, but are in need of rescue or escape. Again, these kobolds will go through the crucible of the tables on page 380 of the *Dungeon Crawl Classics* core rulebook

In some cases, meals may last months before being consumed. There should be plenty of time for rescue attempts, escape plans, or even negotiations (“A captured bear surely has more meat on it than one small halfling...”).

Most of the area occupied by the kobolds are ruined and buried (with some surface) streets. They are winding, narrow, cobbled, and dangerous. Rooms in this region are the interiors of old buildings, some of which have been connected together in ways they originally were not.

The scavengers in the trees include both blood-drinking flyers (modeled after stirges), and small monkeys with horrid skull-like faces.

Angels and Devils

The Wandering Library is occupied by a devil (something suitably human-looking) known as the Librarian. It is trapped here. The chained angel mentioned earlier was chained as the price for trapping the devil. The devil is trapped until the angel is released, and does much to cause this to happen, all under the guise of offering friendly advice.

The chained angel is bloody, with wings torn out and bones obviously broken. She is clearly in pain, but her eyes are lucid and her voice is clear. She is chained because she chose to be so, in order to stop the devil, and she does not regret her choice.

The Librarian is intelligent enough to know that it needs powerful heroes to release the angel (and thus itself), and so will attempt to aid heroes in gaining the experience needed to do so. It is willing to play the long game. However, it does reveal itself in fits of temper when pressed.

The Librarian can take either male or female form, and will use this ability to make it appear as though there are two Librarians, either of which may be away at any given time. The Librarian has been the lover (in either of its human guises) of several prominent (but foolish) adventurers over the centuries.

The devil will not mention the angel unless characters do first. It will then refer to the angel as “My bright sister”, claiming that the angel is cursed, and cannot ask to be released. Indeed, she will beg not to be. The devil will not admit to being trapped itself under any circumstances – doing so will obviously reinforce what the angel says (as she tells the truth).

If the devil is slain, the Library no longer Wanders, and the angel is instantly released and restored. In this event, she will grant some boon to her benefactors. Obviously, the devil must be more powerful than the angel, or she would have slain it herself.

Bandit’s Roost

This is a narrow chasm running from the surface down four levels of the dungeon, with tunnels and roofing beams criss-crossing everywhere, sometimes

from one level to another. Bandit's Roost was originally occupied by Ten-Penny Dick and his gang, but some 40 years ago Ten-Penny Dick was captured and hanged at the crossroads north of Balton Minor, and the remaining members of his gang were driven deeper into the Greenshaw.

The area is now occupied by a Parliament of Cats. The senior cats refer to themselves as "Senators", with the Chief Cat being called the Lord Speaker. Cats do not have long lifespans, which is true even for these cats, but they do tend to live at least twice as long as the average cat. Some few of these cats may even have a limited form of teleportation, which only works when no one is watching. Certainly, they seem to have some mysterious ability to bypass doors and get into closed rooms.

The cats do not themselves keep treasure, but the bandits have hidden treasure in this region. The cats have no use for it themselves, and will not be upset if it is removed. They know about it, of course, but cats do not volunteer information, and seldom give a straight answer to any question (if they are willing to speak at all).

Where the interlaced beams go from one level to another, it is obvious that subsidence has caused a street to fall, so that it is now on more than one level. Some of these areas might still be unstable.

The cats hate the Yellow Claw kobolds, who view them as food, but have good relations with Esbastus, sometimes giving her information on successful adventurers.

Bandit's Roost is a home to a lurk as well – a fey creature that can fit into impossibly small areas, loves shiny things, throttles people from behind, and likes to display its treasures in the moonlight. The lurk and cats simply ignore each other. Of course, there must be a nearby area, open to the moonlight (but sufficiently lonely....perhaps a room with a fallen roof) where the lurk can display its treasures when it wishes to.

Blott

Found as a wandering monster, Blott is a gargantuan, inky-black, intelligent grey ooze with telepathic and psionic abilities. It makes an easy living as a scavenger in the ruins of Balton Major and Baltanus, and has no need of adventurers as a food source. It shuns the sunlight, however, and knows full

well that leaving the ruins would make it prey for many creatures...especially adventuring types.

Blott is addicted to *mallumas*, a highly addictive plant-derived hallucinogen that sometimes awakens dormant psychic powers. It became addicted long ago, when it consumed an addicted adventurer, who was carrying a considerable amount of the drug. It was this incident which awakened Blott to its psionic potential, and changed it from the slate grey of its kind to the inky black color it now possesses.

Mallumas, when consumed, can cause periods of torpor – nearly hibernation – as well as hallucinations of out-of-body experiences. When Blott is there is a 20% chance it is quiescent, and will take no actions unless attacked. When deprived of *mallumas* long enough, addicts can become extremely violent – there is a 10% chance that Blott will be in this condition when encountered, attacking anything and everything unless offered a dose of *mallumas*. The other 70% of the time, Blott combs the ruins, looking for adventurers who can purchase drugs for him in Balton Minor.

Should the PCs (willingly or unwillingly) become Blott's suppliers, they will discover that the ooze has a vast knowledge of the upper levels. Blott can certainly point them to the easiest areas to explore, where they have the best chance of looting with the least chance of being killed. But Blott also wishes to protect its suppliers, and will lie to keep them away from what it views as "dangerous areas" (even if the party wishes otherwise). If the PCs do not make regular shipments, Blott becomes angry, threatening, and (eventually) violent. Of course, the ooze will not kill all of the PCs, even if it wishes to make an example. There must be someone to bring it more *mallumas*, after all.

The ooze offers no coin for its drugs, either, and each "hit" of *mallumas* costs 25 gp or more, as well as potentially causing legal problems for the purchaser. What Blott initially tries to sell as a mutually beneficial "partnership" is just a form of slavery. The ooze doesn't care about the group's goals, and – sooner or later – if they wish to be free of Blott, they must leave the dungeon forever, or kill it.

Bremeni's Copper Pool

Located in a great, cathedral-like dome, Bremeni's Copper Pool is a circular basin some 20 feet across, whose water looks coppery (possibly from reflect-

ing the painted ceiling, possibly for some other reason) and tastes somewhat metallic. The pool always keeps the same water level, no matter how much is removed, and no matter how much matter is placed into the pool. How this is accomplished is unknown, but the pool radiates strong magic. The water is cool (but not cold), and safe to drink.

Many creatures come here to drink. So long as characters remain in the cathedral-like dome where Bremini's Copper Pool is located, other creatures (including mindless creatures, such as vermin) offer no violence. Undead do not come here. Thus, this is a very safe place to make camp.

If characters use this area to ambush monsters coming to the Pool, they automatically get surprise for the first 1d6 encounters. Thereafter, all creatures they encounter here become aware of their presence automatically, and are automatically hostile to the PCs, even if they would not otherwise be.

As with all "Name" places and creatures, it is worthwhile to allow the PCs to hear about this place first, through rumors, other adventurers, or scrawled graffiti, so that they can seek it out, recognize it when they've found it, and actually get some use from it. Not everywhere in the megadungeon should be "challenging" – some areas should provide opportunity to rest, to gain allies, and/or to learn about the setting.

Circvs Minimvs

Somewhere in the lower parts of the upper levels is the fabled Circvs Minimvs of ancient Baltanus. This group of rooms is the buried remains of a coliseum, its related rooms and pens, and the sewers that once ran beneath it.

In the ancient days, the archmage Artimax discovered a means to reduce the size of creatures permanently, and then cause them to breed true at their new size. He then bred creatures for exhibition at the coliseum, which were intended as a curiosity. When Baltanus fell, the miniature creatures survived, and the normal-sized creatures died. The miniature creatures still breed true throughout this region, which has many areas that are magically lit (and thus has vegetation, and a whole ecosystem in...ahem...miniature). There are diminutive horses, elephants, ostriches, lions, tigers, apes, and even rhinoceroses. In short, any animal the GM desires may have reduced members here.

What Circvs Minimvs is famous for, though, is its many inch-high trolls.

These trolls are too small to offer harm to any PC, but their voices are loud enough to be heard, and they resent the intrusion of larger beings into their region. They especially resent that such beings can see farther than they do, and live in a larger world. They follow the PCs around, heckling them at every opportunity, trying to engage them in narrow-minded arguments, and in all ways trying to pull larger creatures “down” to their level.

Moreover, they seek to convince any who will listen that Baltanus was always the ruin that it now is, that the larger creatures which lived here were no different than those that live here now, and that the coliseum was always buried beneath the earth. In short, things have always been as they are now. Any mention of Artimax brings snorts of derision, for they deny the archmage was responsible for anything, and claim that his accomplishments have long been eclipsed by their own modern accomplishments. Trolls are, they will point out, giants, whereas Artimax was merely human.

The *Circvs Minimvs* isn't particularly dangerous for PCs, and may offer a safe place to rest, if one can ignore or eliminate the trolls.

Crypt of Red Markings

Once part of the catacombs of Balton Minor, the Crypt of Red Markings is a series of un-dead-haunted tombs, tunnels, and crypts. Scrawled upon the walls are occasional runes and glyphs drawn in blood. As one gets toward the center of the Crypt, the runes and scrawls appear more frequently and more densely. These are, effectively, the “spellbook” of Yl Nesrith, whose ghost still haunts this area.

Most people who know of the ghost believe Yl Nesrith to be a necromancer, and it is certainly okay for the player characters to believe the same. Yl Nesrith has used his magic to create bizarre un-dead here, as well as cunning traps, all in an attempt to prevent his mortal remains (and treasures) from being pawed over by adventurers. Reburial in a modern graveyard, with all of his grave goods, will lay Yl Nesrith's spirit to rest (at least until his grave is despoiled...).

A PC wizard who is able to spend enough time here unmolested could potentially learn a great number of spells from the walls. It is even possible that a PC could become apprenticed to Yl Nesrith. However, although the ghost has altered some of the un-dead, it controls none of them, and cannot guarantee safe passage to anyone. Some of the spells scribed on the walls are



living spells, and are themselves dangerous to examine, requiring a Will save to avoid casting them once read.

Crypt of Sleeping Dogs

This area of broken crypts and tunnels is in the middle upper reaches. It is occupied by the numerous feral descendants of the hounds of Balton Minor, which have developed infravision and a natural immunity to ghoul paralysis. Statistically, they are similar to hyenas, having a heavy build and strong jaws for cracking bones. In appearance, they are huge black mastiffs with red eyes.

This area is rumored to contain a fortune in grave goods, including the fabled *Chainmail of Vraxgyg*, but adventurers are warned to avoid the region. “Let sleeping dogs lie” is the common wisdom, although the Hounds of the Crypt are far more likely to be prowling in search of fresh meat than they are to be found asleep.

The ghouls of the Bonestrippers’ Guild would dearly love to see the Hounds done away with, so that they could claim and polish “them lovely bones”, but the ghouls lack both the power and the courage to destroy the Hounds. The kobolds of the Yellow Claw are terrified of the Hounds, and the Parliament of Cats would like to see the Hounds destroyed for their own reasons. Thus, the PCs have several potential allies in assaulting this area, although these allies are not all equal, and few alliances will survive the end of the Hounds themselves.

The Dripping Garden

A series of cobbled streets, with running water down the center of them, seem almost like natural caverns, trapping the moisture and making everything extremely damp. In places, there is no ceiling, so that lush vegetation can grow. In other places, roots push down from the ceiling, and/or there is a heavy growth of fungus. Plant monsters and vermin are found here in abundance. The Dripping Gardens also include the buildings lining the streets, whose doors have long ago rotted away, making the interiors easily accessible for all sorts of creatures.

The Yellow Claw kobolds hunt in the Dripping Garden, generally for vermin (for their own table, not that of Blothegrue). They will be happy to capture adventurers there as well. The kobolds speak of (and fear) Kyckbodimyck, an albino centipede of huge size that sometimes hunts the hunters.

Within a natural-seeming grotto off the main route of the Dripping Garden, the oracular nymph Eodora has taken up her abode. The kobolds know of her, and fear her, also, but they treat her as a goddess (rather as humans might fear and propitiate a goddess of death). Eodora doesn't normally appear to the kobolds (who leave her, truth be told, disgusting gifts), but might prophesy to adventurers. Indeed, Eodora offers the judge the ability to ensure that players learn whatever information he wishes.

Esbastus

Esbastus is a gynosphinx that patrols the outer perimeter of the ruins of Balton Major, asking riddles, demanding tribute, and sometimes eating an unlucky adventurer or kobold. She has learned to avoid the ranger, Owlgrin, of whom she is afraid.

Typically, when encountering humanoids, Esbastus offers them a choice between paying tribute or answering a riddle, where failure is death. She will not accept less than 100 sp in coins as tribute, but has a craving for gems. This craving, combined with an inability to properly evaluate the value of gems and jewelry, may prove her undoing – her lair already contains many gems which are in fact made of paste or worth far less than she esteems them to be.

The judge must have several riddles prepared, and be ready to use them. Once a riddle is answered, Esbastus should not repeat it to the same characters. Generally, the judge should allot no more than 10 minutes of real time for answering the riddle before Esbastus becomes impatient, and then no more than 5 additional minutes before she pounces. Remember that PCs should not be allowed to receive the answer by rolling dice. A good many riddles can be resourced off the Internet, as well as being taken from primary sources such as *Mother Goose*.

In the event that PCs can neither pay tribute nor answer a riddle, Esbastus politely asks them which of their number they wish to sacrifice – and she is not interested in the party's mule or dogs! She will give them no more than 5 minutes to decide before becoming impatient, and then no more than 5 more minutes before making the decision herself (through random roll).

If the party manages to escape intact (which is certainly possible), Esbastus will attempt to get surprise on their next encounter and pounce on them,

slaughtering them all. Whoever survives this second encounter she will actually admire, and greet as though an old lover thereafter, perhaps asking for gems or riddles from that character, but neither expecting tribute nor answers to her own riddles. If the group manages to wound her to half her hit points or more, she will avoid them thereafter as she does Owlgrin.

Esbastus is on something like cordial terms with the Parliament of Cats, but they will not mourn her death, nor she theirs. The judge may allow players who are good at riddles to be known to the cats through Esbastus' admiring words about them.

The Green Woman

This jade golem currently occupies a crossroads in the mid-upper levels. While it relentlessly pursues any who attacks it, so long as they remain within the dungeon, no one is certain what its other commands may be. It is generally doing nothing more than standing – a fortune in jade for the character(s) who can finally collect it! Somewhere in the dungeon are clues that would actually allow the PCs to discern what this construct is here for, and perhaps even control it.

The “Old Blood”

The vampire mentioned earlier predates Balton Major, and preyed on the town while it existed. It is a “survivor” of the Romaneque people (we will call them the Aetali). I am unsure at the moment whether “beautiful seductress vampire” or “creepy Nosferatu vampire” is more appropriate for the dungeon. It could, like Jack the Ripper, select its victims on the basis of some particular criteria, and be self-limiting in its progeny as a result. If it attacks only creatures it hates on some basis, then it may well destroy its own spawn.

Earlier, we had determined that there would be some orcs in the lower levels (the mythic underworld). Perhaps these are descendants of the humanoids who sacked Baltanus. In this case, the vampire may hunt those who show signs of “the orcish taint”. It would be a terror and a legend among local orcs. As always, we should use the tables in the Dungeon Crawl Classics core rulebook to make these orcs different from generic humanoids.

The vampire knew both Baltanus and Balton Major as they were as living, thriving communities. It has existed within the megadungeon as a dungeon. As a result, it has knowledge which is invaluable to adventurers, if they can

find some way to wrest that knowledge from its guardian.

Owlgrin

The 3rd level warrior, Owlgrin, hunts monsters in the upper reaches of the megadungeon. The judge may use this character to provide occasional timely assistance to PCs in need. Owlgrin doesn't make friends easily, and prefers to remain semi-mysterious. Eventually, of course, he might go to the PCs for help with some problem, but this is more likely to be worded as "You must go to X and do Y" than "I need your help".

Pool of Shadowed Vermin

This deep pool is surrounded by sunken streets, tunnels, and chambers rife with vermin. The pool itself radiates strong transmutation magic, as drinking from (or bathing in) this pool transforms the unfortunate victims into vermin. The pool is located in the lower part of the upper levels. By the time that the PCs reach this far, they should have had some opportunity at least to be warned....and if not, capturing their erstwhile companion without harming it, and then restoring him or her to natural form, could be an adventure in and of itself. Characters able to break enchantment may find that some vermin in the area are actually other monsters, humanoids, or (grateful) adventurers, but vermin reproduce quickly, and there are many vermin here that are simply that. If the judge desires, some vermin might change into other types (potentially more or less powerful), as the pool affects vermin as well.

Smoking Shrine of Ly Valle

A rift in the floor of this chamber allows noxious fumes to fill the room, disappearing upward through a wide chimney. This is a shrine to Ly Valle, an Aetali goddess of divination. Any who leave food or coin here might (20% chance) hear a prophesy spoken. Unfortunately, these prophesies are now spoken by an invisible demon, which was conjured long ago and pressed into service maintaining the shrine. It is insane from its long servitude, and attacks anyone who profanes the shrine in any way. The demon is, however, bound to remain within the shrine, and is thus easily avoided.

The judge is encouraged to keep a roster of 10 potential prophesies, with about 20% of them providing some level of accurate information. When a prophesy is used, the judge should line through it and provide a new one for that position.

The Sour Temple

Originally the Temple of Umartal in Balton Major, the air in the Sour Temple now smells and tastes acrid with the displeasure of its god. Still, the Sour Temple is a place of some refuge in the upper ruins, and truly evil creatures seldom venture therein.

Umartal has a church in Balton Minor, where an order of adventuring priests and monks – known as the *Seekers of Restoration* among themselves or the Silver Chalices (for their emblem) among the locals – works toward the cleansing of the Sour Temple. This is a major undertaking, for it requires that the Upper Levels at least be cleared out enough for human habitation.

Once PCs become established, they may well be approached by the Restorationists, who are willing to supply adventurers with information, advice, healing, and other resources in exchange for their work restoring Balton Major. The Restorationists will also expect to receive reports on what is encountered in the ruins, and to have the opportunity to copy maps created by adventurers supported under their charter. The Seekers will not work with characters that are obviously immoral.

The judge is encouraged to make use of the Seekers of Restoration both as a potential group to which PCs can belong, and to provide NPC backup for smaller groups. The Seekers can provide a limited supply of NPCs to aid groups on important missions.

If the PCs manage to eliminate any of the three major threats of the Upper Levels – Blott, Blothegrue, and/or Esbastus (see previous), they will receive a boon from Umartal the next time they enter the Sour Temple. These boons should be special abilities which aid the PC in question (so that each PC can receive a different set of boons). No boon should be more powerful than the ability to cast a 1st-level spell once per day.

Tapestry of the Winds

I like the idea of the *Tapestry of the Winds* leading to a pocket plane. Let's run with that. In fact, let's let the party know that the Tapestry exists ahead of time, and that there are rumors of survivors of Baltanus having fled through the tapestry with their treasures. Somewhere on the pocket plane, there is a major hoard to be found.

Of course, the pocket plane will be a whole new environment all to itself, with Romanesque intrigue, some unusual monsters and substances, etc. Moreover, the Tapestry will be hard to find as it is no longer hanging upon the wall, but is folded up in a storeroom somewhere gathering dust.



Otyugh: Dwellers in Filth

Deep beneath the city, where the offal from the sewers collects in deep pits, dwell the dreaded otyughs. These creatures have three stumpy legs and three tentacles protruding from an oozing mass of diseased flesh. Two of the tentacles are long, ending in spiked paddles that can strike or entwine other creatures. The third tentacle has been modified to support two eyes, allowing the otyugh to see while submerged in the odious contents of its lair. Its central body has a huge mouth with sharp fangs capable of delivering deadly bites. Even if the victim should survive, he may succumb to disease thereafter.

A concealed otyugh automatically gains surprise unless looked for, and even then it gains surprise on a 5 in 7 chance.

When it makes a tentacle attack, it can reach up to 15' away. The otyugh must determine if it wishes to attempt a blow or to entwine prey – a blow does more damage, but entwined prey takes 1d4 constriction damage each round and can be drawn 5' closer. A DC 10 Strength check prevents the otyugh from drawing its prey nearer during any given round; if the check result is 15+, the victim escapes. This check is not free; it requires an Action Die.

Anyone bit by the otyugh's filthy maw must make a DC 15 Fort save or suffer 1d3 points of temporary Stamina damage. Thereafter, even if the initial save succeeded, the victim must make an additional DC 10 Fort save each minute or suffer an additional 1 point of temporary Stamina damage. This condition lasts until magically healed, three consecutive saves are successful (including the initial save), or the victim is dead.

Otyughs do not eat freshly killed prey. Instead, they allow bodies to rot for 3d3 weeks before they are fit for consumption. Because of their rubbery hide, they take only half damage from bludgeoning weapons. Their bodies are about 8' in diameter.

There are persistent rumors of evolved otyughs, smaller but smarter than their more common kin. It is possible to speak to, and bargain with, these beings. They often know much about the area they live in – be it a sewer system or a dungeon – and want nothing more than new and interesting carrion and feces in return. Don't ask. The life of an otyugh, evolved or otherwise, is not

something most humanoids would wish for.

Otyugh: Init +1; Atk tentacle blow +6 melee (1d8+3) or tentacle entangle +4 melee (1d3 plus entangle) or bite +5 melee (1d12 plus disease); AC 16; HD 8d8+16; MV 20'; Act 2d20; SP surprise, entwine, constrict, draw closer, disease, ½ damage from bludgeoning weapons, immune to disease and poisons, infravision 120'; SV Fort +12, Ref +4, Will +4; AL C.

Evolved Otyugh: Init +3; Atk tentacle blow +5 melee (1d6+1) or tentacle entangle +2 melee (1d3 plus entangle) or bite +3 melee (1d8 plus disease); AC 15; HD 6d8+12; MV 30'; Act 2d20; SP surprise, entwine, constrict, draw closer, disease, ½ damage from bludgeoning weapons, immune to disease and poisons, infravision 120'; SV Fort +9, Ref +5, Will +8; AL C.



The Megadungeon and Dungeon Crawl Classics

For my money, *Dungeon Crawl Classics* is the best system out there for Sword & Sorcery type gaming. But I want my game to take place in a persistent world, where player investment in each game session adds to a total lore that allows them to take control of the adventure and make it their own. I want the players, not the judge, to dictate that they shall try to steal gold from ancient Opar, or take the gates to old Barsoom, or travel to Shadrizar the Wicked, or seek a lost spell in the ruins of Melniboné.

Ideally for me, a game should consist of three types of adventures:

- 1. Persistent Locations:** Areas that the PCs can learn about and choose to adventure in as a matter of course. This includes, of course, the exploration of the campaign milieu itself, and all manner of penetration in the the known and the unknown!
- 2. Opportunities:** Things that happen at a particular time and offer a particular chance to adventure which can be taken or left, but which, if ignored, have consequences (even if those consequences are only that a particular opportunity is lost). For example, a ship crashing into a reef has some opportunity for rescue/exploration, but if the PCs do not recover the cargo, other parties will. Most of the published DCC adventures are of this nature.
- 3. Player-Initiated Quests:** The PCs require something, and go out seeking it. This requires the ability to discover where the thing may lie, as well as the chance that it lies somewhere in the world to be discovered. The DCC core rulebook gives strong reason to include this sort of material, from the Quest For It advice to the need for wizards and elves to seek out new spells, and the need for clerics to seek the means to appease their gods.

The thing about Player-Initiated Quests is that they need to be tied into either a persistent location or an opportunity to adventure. For example, a desired new spell may always be in the ruins of the Castle of the Dragon Kings, or it may be placed by the judge to “hook” players into pitting their *Blades Against Death*, but the thing that the player(s) seek must exist in the

milieu, either all of the time, or as the result of special circumstances. There is no point in telling the players they can seek out Stardock without placing Stardock in the campaign milieu, or placing some method to reach Nehwon in order to seek the mountain in its original continuum.

A megadungeon is not an area intended to be explored as the exclusive focus of a campaign milieu (or, at least, not necessarily) but rather a place where it is always possible to return i.e., it is large enough, and complex enough, that it cannot be “used up” in a single adventure. There are many examples of megadungeons used in this way in Appendix N literature - from Moria in Lord of the Rings, to several complexes in the writings of Burroughs, Howard, Farmer, and Fox (among others), which are dipped into by their heroes for specific purposes, but never fully explored. In some cases, heroes of these stories do later return to some ruined pile in other adventures, giving a clear idea of how such a location can be used. There are even hints of megadungeons in Lovecraft.

Megadungeon play works very well with the *Dungeon Crawl Classics* rule-set. This is true even if one uses a megadungeon that was initially designed for another system - I have gotten excellent mileage out of Greg Gillespie’s *Barrowmaze* and *Barrowmaze II*, initially designed for *Labyrinth Lord*. Versions of *Moria* designed for *MERP* and *The Lord of the Rings RPG* by Decipher are both easily adapted to *DCC*.

In the end, of course, the *DCC*-inspired megadungeon will reflect the *DCC* rules and design aesthetic, so that it might become the location of a number of quick forays over the course of a campaign, with lots of things to do, lots of places to see, and lots of secrets to uncover. Even where a megadungeon is the center around which the campaign milieu revolves, other areas to explore, other people and monsters to oppose, and other opportunities that arise will send the PCs after pirates for one or more sessions, hunting man-apes for several others, and so on, in addition to their forays into the Great Ruined Pile.

The more Appendix N fiction I read, the more I note that most Appendix N adventurers live in worlds with multiple ruined cities and potential megadungeons, from the vast ruins in the swamp of the Palood to the hidden tunnels of the *Worms of the Earth*.

One thing I noticed pretty quickly is that every dungeon area would have a real sense of scale. Creeping around in narrow rooms and tunnels does occur

in Appendix N fiction, of course, but vast expanses – even vast underground expanses – are also pretty common. So, many regions should include some impressively large areas. For instance, it became clear that one area would have thermal vents that created a hothouse jungle environment, and that it should probably have some form of “sun” to that it is always lit – even if only from the reflections of deep earth lights upon the high cavern ceiling.

When viewed in this way, it becomes clear that a dungeon “level” is going to be a complex three-dimensional area which may contain many smaller levels or sublevels. Some of these might exhibit strong influences of other Appendix N authors, so that an area which is similar to the Africa of Edgar Rice Burroughs and Robert E. Howard might also contain a temple not unlike those that Leigh Brackett placed in her planetary romances.

In any OSR megadungeon, connectivity is important, because it is desirable that players can choose their level of challenge. In a *DCC* megadungeon, I find that this is even more true. The gonzo nature of *DCC* encourages players to take risks, and the play structure must do the same. Also, as each area will have its distinct features, the players gain an ability to “choose their own adventure”, whether facing the ape-men and dinosaurs of the hothouse level, or seeking lost knowledge among the courts of the shadow elves.

Both obvious and hidden connectivity must exist, and discovering hidden connectivity must be a reward unto itself....it must confer an advantage upon the PCs who discover it.

Creating some “standard monsters” for each area is desirable, and is probably necessary to run a large and complex area. However, these monsters should be non-standard creatures, for the most part, created to match the needs of the dungeon area. In this way, learning about the inhabitants is a benefit to the players, and is a bonus for long-term play.

Nonetheless, each area also need cool and unique monsters and NPCs that are one-of-a-kind, and these need not always be adversaries. Or, rather, some may be potential allies and potential adversaries, based upon circumstances. La of Opar, in Edgar Rice Burroughs’ Tarzan novels comes immediately to mind. NPCs must exist which can become allies, adversaries, love interests, mortal patrons, and rivals. This is, again, very much in keeping with the early essays in this volume of *Dispatches*.

Sometimes, the players will just want to kick in a few doors, kill a few monsters, and take their stuff. This sort of play must be supported. But *Dungeon Crawl Classics* is a game built to allow players to “quest for” extras, and there must be cool things in the dungeon that can be objects of those quests. Not only are there unique objects to be found, and unique patrons for wizards and elves, but there are places where spells may be learned, martial training may occur, stats can be boosted, corruption can be undone, and so on. Even a Fountain of Youth might be of value if some of the characters are elderly.

Not every treasure in *DCC* comes in the form of gold and gems. In fact, the most valuable treasures do not.

Finally, because of all the gonzo directions in which such a dungeon can go, there must be a unifying force or conflict that affects most, if not all, of the dungeon areas. This conflict or force should exist on a grand scale, so that it cannot be resolved in a few sessions of play. Best of all are conflicts that cannot be resolved outside of years of play, and that resolution should change the nature of the region forever – perhaps even destroy it. Read Michael Moorcock, A. Merritt, Poul Anderson, and Fred Saberhagen for ideas regarding overarching conflicts, and how resolving them can change everything.

Nonetheless, players should be given plenty of opportunities to have their characters meddle early on, and their meddling should have consequences, both for them and for the environment. A unifying force or conflict creates the unity that makes the megadungeon more than just a random collection of sites. Being able to take sides, and to influence that conflict, makes the game meaningful and fun.

Another Example

Examining the possibility of doing a megadungeon for *Dungeon Crawl Classics*, it becomes obvious to me that each “level” should instead be viewed as an “area” that may, in fact, contain many traditional “levels” – as well as buildings, villages, or whatever is needed to make the area work. Each “level”, in this sense, is not going to simply be a relatively flat area on a sheet of graph paper, but instead be a three-dimensional area which may take up several sheets.

Not only this, but there will be little or no “boxed text” or area descriptions in the traditional sense, as most parts the area will be in constant flux

throughout the process of exploration/adventuring. In some ways, exploration of a *DCC* megadungeon is similar to a hexcrawl...you will encounter peoples, make enemies, make friends, and find interesting areas to explore within the overarching structure. This, in fact, is the approach taken by Carl Bussler in *Black Powder, Black Magic Volume 4*, when describing the mines beneath Brimstone.

For example, a megadungeon could have a first level/area randomly determined to be based largely off the work of Mr. Edgar Rice Burroughs. This suggests many possibilities, from the jungles of Tarzan's Africa, the dry steppes of Barsoom, and the fierce beings of cloud-shrouded Amtor. Burroughs was also quite fond of "Lost World" tales, as with his stories of Pellucidar and Caspek.

With this in mind, I can see the entrance area to the megadungeon belonging to some form of mist-shrouded tropical jungle, a Lost World of prehistoric creatures and peoples, with the remains of some fantastic civilization and alien monsters. The temple of La in Opar is a good founding idea for one part of this region, because of its strong potential for intrigue, action, and treasure.

In addition, it is desirable to have more than one village of cavemen. Indeed, we should strongly consider three types, with a sliding scale of development from cannibalistic brutes to relatively modern people. These need not be fully "human" in the earthly sense – we can color-code these people if we so desire, as Burroughs does his Barsoomians. Let us say that the mostly-extinct ancients were golden, the closest to modern people red, the next most advanced green, and the least advanced also golden (they are the descendants of the ancients).

Some or all of these people can be advanced enough to potentially supply 0-level characters for funnel play, once the players have encountered them and learned enough about them to make such play work. Beware giving away the secrets of an area to let the players choose people from that area! But, likewise, once the area is explored and the people known, don't be afraid to make best use of them by letting the players try their hand at playing a green man of the Lost World!

We will want to have some of the alien types that Burroughs uses on Barsoom, Amtor, the moon, Pellucidar, Caspek, and Jupiter. I will select two reptilian types – serpent/lizard men as well as telepathic pterosaur-folk akin to

the Mahars of Pellucidar – and a race similar to the Skeleton Men of Jupiter. Using the Skeleton Men as a seed idea also allows us to consider the ghouls of Fritz Leiber. Perhaps our creatures will be an amalgamation of the two?

(Actually, I created such an amalgamation for *The Vault of Ash*, published by Shield of Faith Studios for the Crawljammer setting.)

As you can see, even without including actual “monsters” (and local animals), we already require quite a bit of work to get this “dungeon level” ready for play. Nonetheless, it should also be quite easy to gain a minimum 2 hours play value for every hour spend devising the setting.

Let us next examine what other “levels” will connect to this area:

- Level 2, which is a combination of Robert E. Howard’s Conan and Solomon Kane stories, mixed with the Harold Shea stories of L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt.
- Level 3, which is intended to be influenced by Lin Carter, August Derleth, and Lord Dunsany.
- Level 5, which is intended to be influenced by J.R.R. Tolkien, Sterling Lanier’s Paloud swamp from *Hiero’s Journey*, and Edgar Rice Burroughs once more.

Let us also assume that level 1 will link to sublevels that take their influences from Andre Norton, Manly Wade Wellman, Clark Ashton Smith, and Philip Jose Farmer. Part of the creation process is determining what these influences are, and how they will be used. Then, if the level/sublevel connections exist, we must also decide how those influences leave a footprint on the first level area. These footprints are important hints that connections exist, and also allow the judge to foreshadow the themes of the new megadungeon area.

Hopefully, by this point, you have more than enough inspiration to tackle a megadungeon of your own!

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