

OUR FAVORITE
ADVENTURE MODULES,
AND WHAT WE
LEARNED FROM THEM

ESSAY BOOK

Our Favorite Adventure Modules, And What We Learned From Them

When the Kickstarter was launched for *How to Write Adventure Modules That Don't Suck*, the authors of that august tome prepared essays on their favorite adventure modules. The contributors to the project are all great adventure designers who have in turn been inspired by the adventures that came before them. The goal of the essays was to share their love of these favorite adventures, and also communicate to fans what they had learned as game designers from these adventures. *HTWAMTDS* is a tome of adventure design advice, after all, and such advice comes not only in pedagogical form, but also from inspirational sources.

Backer response to the essays was very positive! Therefore we have collected the essays together into this booklet as a stretch goal for the Kickstarter backers. We hope you find these essays to be valuable as you embark on your own adventure-designing projects.



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A BIT ABOUT TSOJCANTH: MY FAVORITE MODULE, WITH A CAVEAT

By Lloyd Metcalf

The Lost Caverns of Tsojcanth is one of my favorite adventure modules with a bit of a caveat that deserves a short explanation.

When I did my heaviest playing of AD&D, I was a young lad from the back woods of Maine. It was due to circumstance and chance, and a friend's grandmother stricken with "Satanic Panic," that I ended up with the core rule books. Because we were young and short on income, modules and add-ons were considered a luxury in our first gaming group. Nearly all our adventures and worlds were created from scratch back in those days. It wasn't until many years later that I discovered the joy of modules and *the Lost Caverns of Tsojcanth*. I will attempt to comment on it here without revealing spoilers for players. As a warning, there are still a few spoilers ahead!

Tsojcanth (S4 revised) is a Greyhawk module written in 1982 by the man himself, E. Gary Gygax. When S4 was released, it was an expanded and improved version of the competition convention module "Tsojconth." S4 came as a 32-page adventure with an additional 32-page booklet of monsters and magic items. The core of the adventure outline is to investigate the lost treasure of Iggwilv, where the party is confronted with her vampiric daughter. It tromps through 20 or so wilderness encounters, each with their own little sub-motivations. Hunters trapping hippogriffs, or being on patrol, etc. In the caverns there are also a number of sub-adventures and areas with their own flavor.

The Inspiring Parts

There are a few things about *Tsojcanth* that make it one of my favorite modules as a game designer, DM and writer. Reading through it reminds me to K.I.S.S. (Keep It Simple, Stupid!). The setup is nothing more than a few paragraphs. "There was mad archmage up there who had marvelous and wondrous treasure. No idea what happened to her." Shortly after, it launches into the meat of the adventure where encounters begin. It reminds the reader that the DM of the group is master of their world and adventures. It then sort of says, "Now here are some guidelines for you to fill in."

It reminds game designers that sometimes it doesn't pay to over-think complex story lines. It's also a reminder that you can have story twists and lines without a long soliloquy by the DM. The adventure cleverly reveals details about the story through player eyes. It makes the adventure fun and exciting and reveals the story without long exposés that put players to sleep at the table.

I am not sure if it is Gary's writing, or the final editing, that makes the writing brief, succinct and exciting to read. The room descriptor text carries the same value and it's loaded with suggested imagery that sets a DM up for success. The style is certainly something I strive for; indeed I often read bits of the module before I start outlining a project.

The encounters are summed up with numbered titles and a quick paragraph without complex "if - then" statement traps that I STILL tend to fall into when writing adventures. I can almost hear Gary's voice when I fall victim saying, "Hey! Let the DM run the game, you just need to supply the framework!"

Writing this now is even creating a new burning desire to open *Tsojcanth* again to review the way I set up traps, challenges and encounters in my design.

Adding Monsters and More

Tsojcanth added a number of new monsters in its 32-page supplement that accompanied the 32-page adventure. Many of these monsters made their way into the *Monster Manual II*. I almost always try to come up with new monsters and non-standard items to add to an appendix in my own adventures because of this. I feel it gives DMs some new tools to keep players eager to explore the adventure, even when they are well-versed with the text. A quest is most exciting when there is some element of the unknown, when death is real, and the story clear.

Keeping it Vivid

The cover art by Erol Otus sets the table up for great adventure. I can't explain exactly how, but it does. The interior also has a visual pacing and ease of reading that makes the entire module a continuous fountain of inspiration for me personally. When running through descriptions of encounters and scenes, I find myself staring at the art, both interior and exterior, to set the scene effectively. If you don't have a copy of this module, it's worth picking it up in paper or PDF form wherever you can.

Keeping the Inspiration Flowing

It's common practice to view and enjoy the work of masters and other creatives in the field to stay inspired and grow. It is possible to pull inspiration from others into your own work without plagiarizing, and adventure creation is no exception.

Adventure writers, RPG artists, gamers and DMs make up a tight community and it is my hope that through works like this that we never see an end to flights of imagination, growth and adventure.

MARKESSA AND THE MADMAN: THE SECRET OF THE SLAVER'S STOCKADE

By Casey W. Christofferson

One of the modules that really helped me understand how to design challenging but fun adventures for my buddies in middle school and high school has to be Secret of the Slavers Stockade by Harold Johnson and Tom Moldvay.

Man, I love this module! To begin with, it's a real doozy that I don't feel gets talked about enough when sitting around the grognard's game table. Let's break it down. A2 is the second of the Slave Lords saga. It's a tournament module which explains some of the weird stuff that happens towards the beginning (more on that later). What the tournament mode gives the adventure is a sense of immediacy. A2 isn't a simply a dungeon crawl, it's a raid, and its cause is just. The party is tasked with infiltrating a processing center used by the dreaded Slave Lords in an attempt to break up the criminal network once and for all. A2 doesn't require you to have played A1, but it doesn't hurt.

It is not an easy adventure to run, and has a lot of moving parts. But it is rewarding when the GM is properly prepared to run it. Characters have to use stealth as much as possible, but once they are discovered, all bets are off and the leaders of the fort can draw from chamber after chamber of enemies to throw at the characters! There is a particularly nasty encounter with an ankheg in mud followed by a run through a wall of fire. Obviously this choke point is designed for tournament play, because as part of a standard adventure design it begs the question “how do the slavers get the slaves into the fort?”

Parts of the fort are haunted. Other parts of the fort simply appear to be haunted but really aren't. For example, there is a secret lair of a character called the “Madman.” The Madman is a legitimate insane escaped slave who is living in the rafters of a whole wing of the fort. He even has a woman and her child that he has rescued and feeds hidden between the walls. He does nasty things to the hobgoblins and goblins he captures and may very well do nasty things to the player characters, like snatch them up with a noose and strangle them if they don't look out! How cool is that? When I was designing adventures for my buddies in middle school and high school, this is the sort of thing that had me thinking about what sorts of weird little bits I could add to my adventures. Backstory wasn't something I had really thought about before.

Another great thing about A2 is that it is one of the first modules I remember that explicitly tells you to move the leaders of the fort around and have villains directing the fort defenses. It is careful to remind you to save the “big baddies” for a later battle but it wants you to use the villains to direct traffic. This is one of the challenges of running the adventure but I would say as an adventure designer later in life it really got me thinking hard about adding tactics to adventures and going the extra distance it takes to explain the sorts of actions a villain intends to take when faced with a sophisticated party of adventurers.

Secret of the Slavers Stockade benefits from having great and memorable bad guys to do all that traffic directing. First off, you have Markessa. She's an elf, but not a drow! She's wickedly evil! She spends her time when she isn't running the Slave Lord's operation in the Drachensgrab Hills doing evil magical experiments on her prisoners. Nice! She also has body doubles and creatures she has “created” using no spell that exists anywhere in any Player's Handbooks you or I have ever read, I grant you that! She's so twisted she has generated her own race of “cavelings” from tortured slaves that have developed their own weird underground society.

Aside from Markessa, you have some other cool bad guys like Icar. Icar is so cool he has a portrait of himself playing with fire on the title page of the module done up by none other than the esteemed Jeff Dee! Then you have Blackthorn, an ogre mage who likes to polymorph himself into a freaky looking old man to creep out his underlings. Blackthorn is a big shot with the Slave Lords and although Markessa runs the show in the fort, you know that even though Blackthorn “works” for Markessa that doesn't mean he “works” for Markessa! There are a ton of other great bad guys in this adventure. Bad guys that were memorable to me and my friends struck me for some reason as an important factor in making a good adventure. You want to have memorable enemies.

Finally, I really like that the enemy base shows a mixture of bad guys and explains their reasons for being there. The Slave Lords themselves may be all about kidnapping people, fattening them up, and selling them off, but they are open for employment to all manner of humanoid creatures. They employ werewolves to train their worgs, and keep carnivorous apes to roam their courtyards. Their foot soldiers include hobgoblins, bugbears, goblins, orcs, an ogre executioner, humans, elves, and a minotaur!

A2 has served me well for years as a blue print for the type of location based adventure that I like to write, and is populated with the sort of characters that have a purpose and a reason for being. When players complete an adventure like A2 they have something big to talk about. They have memories to share with their friends that last them a lifetime and brave deeds to brag about to their friends. That is why Secret of the Slaver's Stockade is one of my favorite all time adventures!

CASTLEMANIA

By Michael Curtis

Her hair will be disheveled, her grave clothes tattered, her fingernails broken and her hands bloodied from the effort to dig herself out. Madeline has gone completely insane... And with those words, my fate was sealed.

Like the majority of gamers, my introduction to fantasy came not by the visual arts like movies or video games, but by the written word. Fairy tales and folklore ushered me across the threshold between the mundane and the phantasmagorical, breaking a path that wound far into my future and I still trod today. When inspiration is lacking, it is to novels and short stories I turn for ideas rather than the works of artists. Perhaps then it comes as no surprise that I consider the D&D module X2 *Castle Amber (Château D'Amberville)* one of the finest adventures ever penned.

Let's get this out of the way right now: Castle Amber is a fun house dungeon, one of those wild and nearly illogical places where form doesn't always follow function and the chaos holds a not-ungentle reign. This type of dungeon was far more the norm in the early days of the hobby, but has since fallen out of fashion. If you cannot adjust your sensibilities to embrace the gonzo nature of these types of dungeons, X2 will be a hard sell for you. And the module does have a poor reputation among some gamers. I, however, am not one of those.

Castle Amber, written in 1981 by the incredibly talented (and much missed) Tom Moldvay, is a love letter to "weird fiction" in all its many forms. It wears its inspirations on its sleeve. A well-read gamer cannot miss the homages to the works of Edgar Allen Poe, the Brothers Grimm, Roger Zelazny, Greek and Celtic myth, and Howard Phillips Lovecraft that pepper the adventure's pages. But these references all pale in the shadow of the adventure's true literary forefather: Clark Ashton Smith.

Smith's name may be absent for the famed Appendix N Gary Gygax assembled in the *Dungeon Masters Guide*, but that error wasn't repeated when Moldvay assembled the "Inspirational Source Material" for the D&D Basic Set (1981). *Castle Amber* clearly demonstrates Moldvay's love of Smith, and he uses the author's fantastical French region of Averogne in the adventure to great effect.

Moldvay taught me an important lesson about game design: Never fear your literary roots or letting others know that you have them. Reading through *Castle Amber*, one cannot help but see that Moldvay wasn't merely ripping off the stories of Clark Aston Smith and the other weird writers to meet his word count. He loved these stories and wanted to share that love with other gamers, allowing those who were familiar with them to enjoy the homages and to introduce these stories to those unfamiliar with them. I had a nearly identical experience when writing *The Chained Coffin*, an adventure that was inspired by Manly Wade Wellman's "Silver

John” stories. It was only in retrospect that I see I learned how to do this correctly thanks to Tom Moldvay.

Some thirty-odd years after being exposed to *Castle Amber*, I can look back on my own game design work and see how much this adventure affected my own design style. There’s an element of chaos and change that runs through my work. I’m a big fan of randomness whenever it’s applicable, making either dumb luck or player choice impact the game. We see this in X2 in encounters such as “The Dining Room” (sample the mushrooms in wine sauce with care!) and “Card Room” (may you always pull *Le Roi de Baton*).

My own work is also pervaded with an underlying thread of menace, madness, and horror. I’m not one for gore, but if I can send a chill down the spine of the game master – which is what happened to me when I read of the horrible fate awaiting Madeline Amber (as quoted at the start of this essay) – or better yet, the players, I am a happy game designer. *Castle Amber* shows that even when you have ogres in dressing gowns, squirrels whose touch turns acorns to gold, and Frankenstein’s Monster-esque boxing matches going on, you can still evoke a sense of dread.

Is it the perfect adventure? No, not by a long shot. There’s no such thing, first of all, but *Castle Amber* does have its flaws. It is without a doubt a railroad. The PCs awaken inside the castle with no choice but to proceed forward if they want to escape. That sort of heavy-handed beginning is sometimes a necessary evil in the RPG industry when you only have a certain thousand words to play with, but that doesn’t make it any less grating on the nerves of some players. As I discussed earlier, one’s tolerance for fun house dungeons will also impact your enjoyment of the adventure. Despite these flaws, there’s a heck of a lot of fun between the cardstock covers of *Castle Amber* and, if you can suspend your disbelief and go with the flow, you’ll never forget your stay at the home of the D’Ambervilles.

FALLING IN LOVE IN THE DESERT

By Jean Rabe

It was all the sand.

I fell in love with DMing and writing my own adventures because of Tracy and Laura Hickman’s *Desert of Desolation* series. They penned a perfect meld of story, magic, and monsters. I stretched the three adventure modules out so they would last a long, long while; the players could explore every inch of the arid wastes; and I would get that proverbial bang for my hard-earned shekles. (My gaming budget was quite lean in those years.)

- I3, *Pharaoh*, Tracy and Laura Hickman
- I4, *Oasis of the White Palm*, Tracy Hickman and Philip Meyers
- I5, *Lost Tomb of Martek*, Tracy Hickman

Pharaoh was first published in 1980 by DayStar West Media, a game company the Hickmans owned. It was expanded and published by TSR two years later for the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* game. *Oasis of the White Palm* and *Lost Tomb of Martek* were published in 1983. The three became a single 128-page product, a “super-module” in the summer of 1987 for the *Forgotten Realms* setting. You can still find them – separately and in super-module form – on eBay and through collectible game markets. And it is available as a PDF bundle from Dungeon

Masters Guild online.

I ran it for my game group back in the early eighties, before it was keyed to any specific setting. A student of Egyptian history, I adored the flavor and attention to detail. It taught me a lot about adventure design, especially in how to make the setting a crucial component, as much a factor as anything a villain could do to thwart the heroes. It made me realize I could borrow from real-world history to craft my own fantasy tales. And it showed me how important it is to let every character class play a necessary part in achieving final success.

Despite all the years that have fallen in between my buying *Pharaoh*, and the myriad scenarios I have written or run, those three modules remain my favorite. I even reran part of it a summer ago, refitting it for the Pathfinder game...thirty-three years down the road from the first time I cracked it open. Ahhhhhh – the desert was still just as glorious.

Jim Holloway painted the original cover art, Amun-re in the forefront, pyramids behind him, an eerie moon hanging high, a magical mist swirling just above the sand that hinted at horror. When I went to work for TSR in 1987, I had the pleasure of meeting Tracy and Laura Hickman and Jim Holloway...I count them all friends now. I have a few Holloway pieces hanging on my walls – but not of his precious, memorable desert.

“Back in the day,” TSR’s modules were blessedly simple on the inside – black print on white pages, basic artwork, great maps, no frills. As the years went by the company printed some of its products on muted tone parchment-looking paper, sometimes with brown ink, sometimes with color interiors, elaborate and overlarge maps, fancy fonts. I still prefer the simple black on white...easier to read, to highlight, and to make notes in the margins. The design aesthetics of the later years were lost on me because from a DM’s standpoint they were unnecessary. I just needed the adventure, and all the colorful and artsy staging should come from my running of it and should dance vividly in the players’ imaginations. I think the company could have saved a lot of money if it had kept things simple.

The Desert of Desolation delivered everything a DM and her players could need: an exotic setting, a desperate mission, magnificent treasure, and near-death experiences at the claws of powerful foes. The background read like a fine piece of fiction. “*I am the pharaoh Amun-re, son of Takosh-re of the House of Mo-pelar. I am now only a shadow....*” The Hickmans knew – and know – how to weave a story.

Tension, humor (a gnome named Prit who tunnels with a spoon), terror, enchantments...there was nothing lacking. Okay, it takes a gimmick to get it rolling, an event that transports the characters to the desert and forces them to take part. I remember a player grumbling about that. But I also remember the player having a fine time and not sure at the end if his character should go back “home.” He’d become rather attached to the setting.

For me it wasn’t just another “dungeon crawl,” it was an epic, a story the characters wrote as I led them through the pages of a desert nation that had been foully cursed by its last pharaoh. It had an intriguing plot peppered with twists, traps, and a fine assortment of beasties to bash.

Denied a path the afterlife, the ghost of Amun-re begs the characters’ aid. He claims to need his treasures to defeat the curse. So it’s part maguffin hunt. Awesome. The characters must explore a six-level temple and pyramid. So it’s part crawl. Wonderful. It has a cult bent on protecting the place...with personalities to encourage role-playing above hack-n-slash. Great. And there are empty rooms that let me throw in my own encounters. Nice. Those empty rooms provided my first platform for game-related design; I started to create my own after that, and had several published by TSR.

As *Pharaoh* played out you could feel the sun, the heat, imagine your skin blistering and your throat tightening for lack of water, the grit swirling around and pelting your burning eyes. You could sense the wonder at the massive pyramids that rose in the vast barren stretches.

Every character class in the D&D game got to shine – fighters because there were, indeed, things that needed bashing; thieves because there were plenty of traps to maneuver around; wizards because magic was required above steel and fists to best some of the challenges; clerics because this realm was rich with faith and mysticism. The adventure was so well designed that no one character class outshined another; every player had equal opportunities to be at the center of the action. And there were objects in the treasures useful to all the classes.

It's got a mummy in it – pyramids, ya know...there has to be a mummy. In both my runnings of the adventure – in the early eighties and a summer past – the characters woke it up. And neither time did they need to. It's the lever-factor, the button...gotta pull it or push it, or in the mummy's case prod it to see what happens.

After *Pharaoh* concluded, the *Oasis of the White Palm* kicked in with a vile efreeti intent on destroying the desert. The characters inadvertently release the fiend and so are faced with the task of making things right.

There are dervishes, dustdiggers, thunderherders, and Symbayan Airlancers, giant spiders, a sunken city, and exploding fruit. There is a bride to rescue and a crypt to plunder.

And there are three "star gems," which are used to trigger parts of the scenarios. It is not intended for the characters to keep the powerful gems, and there are safeguards to prevent it. My players...ah, my players were clever and crafty and determined. They found a way around the "boxed text." Their characters got those star gems. They were having such a grand time; I certainly was not going to deny them.

I think it was all the sand.

ME AGAINST NOSNRA

By Skip Williams

Gary Gygax's *Against the Giants* adventure has drawn many accolades over the years, and it remains one of my personal favorites for many reasons, starting with fond memories of sitting down in Gary's den armed with a character sheet and a fistful of dice. Our group played through the first section, *The Steading of the Hill Giant Chief*, in one long evening. Our party, a mismatched collection of player characters from Greyhawk, the local campaign Gary ran with co-DM Rob Kuntz, trotted off to confront the evil hill giant chieftain Nosnra in his fortified home.

Against the Giants has a reputation for being a true slugfest, and that's mostly true. The whole adventure offers plenty of challenging – and ultimately very satisfying – fight. Nevertheless, we spent a great deal of time slinking around the stronghold's upper works. Our scout discovered the sentries entrusted with guarding the front door, drunk and snoring, and we were delighted (and a little nervous) to dispatch those unfortunates quietly and venture into the chambers beyond, probing ahead with a medallion of ESP to get an idea of what awaited us. We avoided the nursery, but tangled with a couple of the residents, including a vicious giantess and a pet cave bear. There was a brief moment of humor when we broke into the

chamber belonging to Nosnra's (unnamed) wife and pawed through her small clothes.

We eventually located an entrance to the stronghold's dungeons and had a rollicking good time beating up Nosnra's servants and looting his treasures. We guessed – correctly – that we could make a racket and get away with it. As the evening rolled on, we paid heed to the clock and returned to the upper works to carry the fight to Nosnra himself. That precipitated a running battle with the chieftain and several of his guests. I had the distinct pleasure of laying low a stone giant with a javelin of lightning. All in all, we had a great time ruining Nosnra's evening.

We wrapped up the action by reflecting on what we had seen: Hill giants working with stone giants and other monsters, and playing around with a magical chain that ultimately provided the link to the other adventures in the series.

In the ensuing months, I had the pleasure of watching the staff at TSR Inc. turn Gary's manuscript into the company's first adventure module, and even spent some time proofreading the product.

Over the years, the whole giant series become much more than a pleasant memory of one great night of gaming. It also became my textbook to creating adventures. The series has all the elements I expect from a great adventure:

It has a solid backstory. Nosnra and his fellow giants were part of larger scheme involving the drow cleric Eclavdra and her bid to spread chaos over the world. Eclavdra, it turned out, had links to foul deity Tharizdun.

It has a fully developed site. Nosnra's hall has a decidedly lived-in feel. Everything in the place is there for a reason. Whether you discover the Steading as a player whose character's future (or life) is at risk, or as a game master preparing to run the adventure, you immediately get a sense that the place is more than just a setting for a few battles, but a place where life has been going on for awhile.

Not every foe does the optimal thing every time. From the sleeping guards to the raucous party in the great hall, the giants in Nosnra's hall make a few mistakes that clever players can exploit.

The action isn't forced. Gary presented a setting that's ripe for player characters to exploit, but nothing happens until the party gets busy adventuring. Player decisions, not the author's timeline, are what drive the adventure forward.

Of course, the adventure isn't quite perfect, especially considering today's standards:

Encounter descriptions are short, sketchy, and often inconsistent. These days, commercial adventures usually feature carefully structured encounters that make it clear exactly what the player characters perceive when an encounter starts, what motivates their opponents, how the opposition fights, and so on. Gary tossed out a few lines about each encounter using no particular format. The adventure includes a few suggestions about how some of the key baddies act, but the GM is left to sift through the text for each encounter to locate its essential elements and fill in a great many blanks.

The adventure is coy about telling its own story. The great story that takes player characters from Nosnra's timber hall to the threshold of the drow realms is only very gradually revealed. There are hints here and there, but GMs don't really get even a hint of what's truly going on behind the scenes at the Steading. We never get to know who recruited Nosnra for Eclavdra's

scheme or even if the drow cleric or the hill giant chief ever met.

The players' introduction is appallingly blunt. There's practically nothing in the manuscript that pulls the player characters into the adventure, just a brief mention that the party has been hired (or impressed) and that the characters face "the headsman's axe" if they fail to check Nosnra's activities. Even in 1978, when I first played this adventure, I found myself wondering just whose army the headsman was going to bring along if my efforts were found wanting. These days, any adventure designer will suggest at least a few compelling hooks that will draw player characters in and make players enthusiastic about undertaking an adventure.

I truly believe that my adventures in *The Steading of the Hill Giant Chief* still resonate each time I sit down to create any role playing adventure.

THE SOLITAIRE ADVENTURE THAT CHANGED MY LIFE

By Lester Smith

A good thirty years ago, an old friend named Jim insisted on GMing solitaire adventures for me. I think it's just that he had enjoyed them himself, wanted me to share that enjoyment, and wished to see my reactions as each adventure unfolded.

Our favorite RPG at the time was *The Fantasy Trip* (by Steve Jackson before he went on to create GURPS). So Jim ran me through TFT's *Death Test* and *Death Test 2*, and the rather amazing *Grail Quest*. But the adventure I remember most was a little one in a fantasy magazine. I think it was in an early issue of *Space Gamer*, though I've scoured my collection, and unless it's in the elusive #5, I may be misremembering. And I think the title was *Thief's Quest*, but I can't be sure.

What I do remember clearly was it opening with my character gaining consciousness in an alley, where he'd been mugged and left with nothing but his clothes and a small knife. Across the street was a jewelry shop, closed for the night--a tempting target for my thief. So he crossed the street, picked the lock with his knife, slipped inside, and was promptly killed by two guard dogs.

I renamed the character and started again, this time scaling a wall of the shop to gain the roof, looking for another way in. While he was up there, a city guard wandered by. Thankfully the character was alert and stealthy enough to slip away from sight before being spotted. He finished scouting the roof, found no other way in, and returned to the street.

After that, he wandered the city for a bit, dodging more guards while seeking some sort of real weapon for fighting the dogs. (He shouldn't have had that advance knowledge, but I did, so Jim ruled they'd been growling behind the door.) Eventually he entered a bustling tavern and made friends with a burly guy who bought him a drink and agreed to help rob the jewelry store. We left and accosted a passerby to get my character a sword and a leather tunic. Then we returned to the shop; my thief picked the lock; and we rushed inside. The thief jumped up on a side table for height advantage (a +2 modifier in TFT), while his new friend bore the brunt of the dog attacks, and the beasts were soon defeated.

Two interior doors now faced us. My thief chose the left (I'm a sucker for the left) and his companion stepped inside, to immediately be fatally immolated by a fireball from a wizard night guard. My thief then managed to surprise and quickly dispatch the mage. (Wizards are

generally fragile, and in TFT they spend health to cast spells, the fireball being exceptionally draining).

After scouring the room and turning up nothing of worth, my thief returned to check the righthand door, which proved to open into an office full of portable wealth. He loaded up, wandered the city some more, and had a generally good time with a variety of encounters, before Jim called it a night and left the magazine for me to read while he was gone.

Inside those pages I found nothing but three pages of numbered paragraphs with the usual "which way" decisions: "If you do this, go to paragraph XX": "If you choose this instead, go to paragraph YY"; and the words "If you choose something else, go to paragraph ZZ." Paragraph ZZ had a table with references to other paragraphs, based on a bunch of possible actions, followed by the injunction that if yours didn't appear there, roll a D6, and on a result of 6 create a random encounter with the TFT rules.

There was no city. There was no tavern. There was no new friend waiting, no passerby to accost on the way back. There were no streets for a night out on the town afterward. All that existed was three rooms holding two guard dogs, one wizard, and some treasure.

That adventure experience changed my life. I'd just had an object lesson in extemporizing from a basic framework. Up to that point, adventures I'd experienced tended to be dungeon crawls, with limited choices for moving forward, and italicized flavor text for the GM to read aloud. Many modern adventures still use that format.

But here was a solitaire adventure that broke the solitaire mold with that "If you do something else" option. And I'd just seen a GM create a city outside even those boundaries, based just on the words, "if you roll a 6, create a new character to encounter."

Since that time, I've experienced some other very creative solitaire adventures: A later edition of Space Gamer was my first introduction to Call of Cthulhu, and it had a mechanic for tracking time as you went, with a deadline before horror engulfed the city; an issue of White Dwarf revealed an island map hex by hex, paragraph by paragraph, so that you had to draw it as you explored; and the Middle Earth Quest paperbacks from ICE included in just two pages a set of RPG rules so rich I adopted them alone to GM a Conan campaign.

Nevertheless, that three-room adventure sticks with me the most and has had the biggest effect. My article in How to Write Adventure Modules That Don't Suck reflects what I learned from it: Be prepared with a basic story mapped and statted out (I use three acts), but be ready to extemporize from the player characters' actions.

Thank you, Jim. And thank you forgotten author of that unforgettable adventure. You two changed my life. I'm a writer and game designer today largely because of it.

MY FAVORITE PUBLISHED ADVENTURE: THE SAMPLE DUNGEON

By **Brendan J. LaSalle**

I have plenty of favorite adventures, several of which I have written about in articles and blog-posts before, but I want to write about my favorite adventure that I have never discussed publicly, the published adventure that shaped my gaming habits and my early adventure design philosophy more than any other. It's known as "A Sample Dungeon," by Gary Gygax, and it appears on page 94 of the AD&D Dungeon Master's Guide.

I call it "The Abandoned Monastery."

It has a fully realized dungeon map but only the first three rooms come with descriptions. But how they captured my imagination!

The description toggles between the location's ancient times ("When the monastery was functioning, the faithful were brought here after death . . .") and its current conditions ("The monster lurks directly over a center litter of husks, skin, bones, and its own castings, awaiting new victims to drop upon."). I love Gary's descriptive word choices. I love how he pays just the right amount of attention to each detail without overburdening. I love that every room has a hazard. I love that opening the door to area 2 blows out all your light sources, leaving you in the dark in a proper horror movie moment, a jump scare that makes sense given the environment. That's a fantastic detail, one of many in the description of three rooms out of the 39 the map presents.

The Abandoned Monastery is a perfect introduction to dungeon design. You get a hook, a side hazard (that 3rd level thief who covets the legendary fire opal!), some wandering monsters, some judiciously mapped out treasure. You get to see how the master sets a dungeon down. And then you have the rest of the map to fill with your imagination.

I ran the Abandoned Monastery for the first time in about 1982, right after I (finally!) got my own copy of the DMG. I used the first three rooms exactly as written, and used clues from the wandering monster table and the backstory for inspiration to fill in the rest. An evil cleric had taken over the crypt areas, and was raising undead servants to help him dig down in the areas where he hoped the ancients might have hidden the fire opal. The ghost of the Abbot dwelled in the northern section, and if approached respectfully he might give the player's a quest that could make their fortunes . . .

I was a kid, 12 years old, so my Abandoned Monastery adventure was in turns hyper-dangerous, silly, derivative, and absurd. But my oh my we had some fun.

I used the map several times after that initial game for random dungeons - I used the random tables in the DMG (relying heavily on Appendixes C, G, and H to fill out the adventure), reducing Gary's creation to nothing more than a staging area for random encounters. Looking back it seems like it should have been terribly dull - the heroes kick the door open, then wait while I roll for to see if there is an encounter, then to see which monsters and how many, random hit points, etc. But I don't remember complaints - I remember everyone calling home to see if they could spend the night so that we could keep playing until bed, and then first thing in the morning.

I recall a standout running fight: my two players and their hirelings fled from a randomly

rolled dozen striges, opened a door to an unexplored room - knowing full well that anything, or nothing, could dwell inside and their characters were either going to survive or perish based on this one decision and the tender mercy of my crayoned percentage dice.

I rolled: the room held 2 lemur devils, whom my PCs cheerfully pounded into guacamole while the stirges vainly batted their wings against the door. I can still see my friends' faces, all lit up and excited. Their gambit had worked, and they lived to fight another day. Robbie danced in his chair and nearly knocked his soda over.

We were such dorks. We had so, so much fun.

What did Stevie Wonder say? I wish those days could come back once more, why did those days ever have to go?

Years later, circa 1988, I played in a Sunday afternoon pick-up game at Tulane University. I remember it was so home-brew you could hardly recognize it - I played a pre-gen human ranger minus spells, minus tracking, plus thieves' skills, a knocked-together class the GM called a Dungeon Ranger, and somebody else had some kind of bird man warrior. My then-girlfriend was mapping - her character had wizard and cleric spells, that's all I remember.

We reach a stopping point, trying to figure out what our next move should be, and I have a thunderbolt realization - the upside-down map I had watched expand for the past two hours was The Abandoned Monastery! It hadn't hit me until the DM had us carefully map that tiny half-corridor branching off from Room 25. There had been no limed-over skeleton of the Abbot - the DM was running all original content. But he had recycled that wonderful, iconic map.

Suddenly I was rushed back into those old days of games that lasted until my mom made me come home Sunday night, those games that lasted all summer. I was suddenly much more invested. The dungeon was realer, my character's peril more acute. It felt wonderful.

Also, I was brimming with player knowledge and I meant to exploit it. This to my shame.

"I think we should go back and check every room we've been through so far for secret doors," I announced to the table.

The DM looked at me. I looked back, grinning. I knew, he knew I knew, I knew he knew I knew.

Tulane DM ran an excellent game, and my kinda-sorta cheating didn't detract from it one bit. For me, anyway. Again, to my shame, and I would probably never use player knowledge like that ever mostly again.

The Abandoned Monastery is a literal blueprint for how to design, introduce, populate, and adjudicate a Gary Gygax-style dungeon. I can't recommend reading it - studying it - enough. Never forget we stand on the shoulders of master storytellers and inscrutable wizards.

WE DID THE MASH

By Jim Wampler

As the author of *Mutant Crawl Classics RPG*, it will likely surprise no one that the single most formative D&D adventure of my youth was Gary Gygax's *S3: Expedition to the Barrier Peaks*, first published in 1980. I'd been playing D&D for a year or more in 1980, but I had not fully grasped the potent advantages of an occasional genre mash before playing this adventure.

This, even though my younger brother had already introduced a D-Hopper drawn from Robert Asprin's "Another Fine Myth" into his fantasy universe, and despite me running a full-blown *Gamma World* campaign of my own, and even with the methods for mixing D&D with *Gamma World* and *Boot Hill* explicitly outlined in pages 112-114 of the *Dungeon Masters Guide*. I apparently needed a no-holds-barred genre mash experience to turn on the fusion-powered light bulb.

When my brother ran us through *S3*, it was a revelation. By then, our party of characters ranged from 9th-to-12th levels, and we were feeling pretty froggy about our general competency levels and ability to steamroll over any opponents. By then, we'd slain dragons and demons alike, been to a few planes, and were starting to have an influence on the politics of the continent. We thought that we were ready for anything, most especially an off-the-shelf adventure from TSR. What we weren't ready for was the Grand Duke of Geoff sending us into a death-trap metal cave full of vegepygmies and robots.

Our fighters thought that they would make short work of the walking celery sticks, but 75 of them spilling out into a hallway at once was nearly overwhelming. My magic-user had all the wrong spells memorized (a *Polymorph Other* to turn a fellow party member into a rust monster would've sure been a handy way to circumvent those endless access card doors). And having never had any reason in the past to try and talk to iron golems, it occurred to exactly no one to try and talk the karate robot into fighting the wrestling robot. Instead, we just got our asses kicked by both of them.

You had to be there. In fact, largely because of *Expedition to the Barrier Peak's* persistent influence throughout the ensuing decades, it's nigh impossible today to fully explain just how caught off guard we were by that adventure. From our 1980 vantage point, it was as though we had travelled back in time a couple of years and were playing D&D *for the first time again*. We didn't know what to expect down on the next level of that place, and *S3* never failed to deliver. Oh look – it's a cute little horned bunny just sitting on that tree stump minding its own business – OH MY GODS, RUN AWAY!

I get it now, though. Now I'm hip to the beats that Gary Gygax was laying down. For starters, Gary was, as we all know, well-steeped in the fantasy and science fiction literature of the past – particularly the seminal authors of the 1920s and 1930s pulp magazines, whose works were being republishing in paperback form in the 50s and 60s. Those highly-regarded stories and novels were mostly written in a time when there was little distinction between the fantasy and science-fiction genres, and in fact, even the term "science-fiction" had not come into regular use.

So in those stories there was underlying super science at the heart of some of Lovecraft's eldritch horrors. Barsoom seemed to be nearly as much a swords & sorcery setting as science-fiction one. Conan met and fought an alien. Jack Vance's *The Dying Earth* series equated magic and advanced technology as one subject, merely seen from differing perspectives. Even

Tolkien's Middle Earth, if read carefully, contains black powder and machinery.

So while the bibliophile Gary Gygax knew all of this from his readings, the game designer Gary Gygax knew something else — that the job of a good game master was to continually sift through his literary reservoir for ever-new ways to surprise and challenge players with the novel experience and the unexpected twist.

And nothing will surprise a wizard faster than the sudden production of a firearm. That very idea was key to the climax of Ralph Bakshi's animated movie, *Wizards* (1977). One of the best running gags in J.D. Webster's *Finieous Fingers* comic in early *Dragon* magazines was the mage Bored Flak reaching into his backpack for a magic item that turned out to be a bazooka (I mean "wand of fireballs"). Ash's "This is my boomstick" speech in Sam Raimi's *Army of Darkness* (1993) is the stuff of horror cinema legend.

And I can assure you, during a session of *Expedition to the Barrier Peaks* run at our local game store just a couple of years ago, there were no two happier players than myself and a good friend, as his elf stomped through the levels wearing power armor it took him 45 minutes of dice rolls (and several *Heal* spells) to master, and my magic-user brandishing a blaster rifle he wasn't quite sure how to fire yet. Even if we did almost TPK twice.

So when asked what was my most influential D&D adventure, I can resolutely state that it was *S3: Expedition to the Barrier Peaks*. It's the reason I have always liked a little SF peanut butter in my fantasy chocolate, and it was a prime motivator for me to take on the challenge of making *Mutant Crawl Classics* RPG fully compatible with *DCC* RPG. It's all about the novel experience!

THE CAVERNS OF THRACIA

By Jon Hershberger

Much has been written over the years about Jennell Jaquays' seminal fantasy adventure, *The Caverns of Thracia*, originally published in 1979 by the Judges Guild for the original *Dungeon & Dragons* game. This site-based adventure provides four main levels and several sub-levels, three primary factions of tribal non-humans, and numerous set-piece encounters that will be remembered and recounted by players for years. *The Caverns of Thracia* was one of the very first published adventures I bought as a young gamer, and remains to this day one of my favorite fantasy adventures. I have used *Caverns of Thracia* in my ongoing home campaign and for convention games off and on over the last ten years.

Jaquays used teleporters, secret doors, one-way doors, trap doors, rooms with difficult-to-find entry points, underground waterways, and variable room and level elevations, along with the seemingly natural crevasses and cavernous chambers, to create a cavern complex that is both difficult to understand conceptually and spatially, and very challenging to map.

Two design aspects that Jaquays used to great effect in *Caverns of Thracia* were the use of sublevels and the use of verticality within the dungeon complex.

Sublevel 2A - The Crypts of Ancient Thracia, with its Frost Vault, the Hall of Ancient Statuary, the Guardian of Singular Combat, and the Audience Chamber of the Stone King, provided for exceptional gaming experiences for my home group. The sublevel confounded their sense of direction and spatial orientation. Intra-level stairs, split-level chambers, and animating

statuary all worked together to keep the characters on edge. The complex encounters with the Chamber of Skeletons and the animating (and out-of-phase) stone gargoyle guardians almost ended in a total party wipe!

The vertical shaft, running from the chamber behind the Hall of the Sphinx (on Level 2), to Sublevel 2B - Temple of Athena and the hidden stronghold room nearby, was a prime example of Jaquays' use of vertical passageways to keep players guessing what they were missing. Likewise, the hidden air shaft that runs between the chamber near the groll outpost on Level Two and the Frost Vault on Sublevel 2A eluded my players for a long time.

Jaquays' *Caverns of Thracia* doesn't have sublevels hanging off of all the levels or in all directions. Rather, it's the selected use of all of these dungeon elements, working together and in harmony with one another, that makes *Caverns of Thracia* one of the classic dungeon adventures from the heydays of the hobby.

I am once again using *Caverns of Thracia* for my convention games this year, taking characters down into the Crypt levels and deeper, into the Sanctuary of The Sun & Moon and the realm of the Minotaur King.

Some of these same adventure design elements are used in today's DCC RPG adventures. Harley Stroh's *Sailors on a Starless Sea* is one such adventure, itself featuring a couple of one-room sublevels and a fair degree of verticality where the keep's hidden stairs lead down toward the Starless Sea. Also, with the addition of the supplemental adventure, *The Summoning Chamber*, the module introduces an all-new adventure area that employs a vertical shaft and a couple of stairways that lead down into darkness....

THE FIRST CAMPAIGN

By Kevin Melka

What was the first campaign you ever played? Roughly defined, a campaign is a group of individual ongoing RPG adventures (or nowadays one extremely large adventure) that your favorite Game Master runs on a regular basis. During such campaigns players typically use the same characters, building them up from 1st level to some of the most powerful heroes in the land. In the past two decades, the concept of an RPG "campaign" has become commonplace. However, for those of us who began gaming in the early years of D&D, the concept of a campaign was difficult, as was finding players to join you.

When myself and my friend John discovered gaming in the early 80's, D&D adventures often came out in a scattered variety of levels, making it difficult to find something to play that fell into the correct level range of your favorite character. We didn't want to have five or more characters to play whatever varied-level adventure TSR published that month or printed in *Dragon Magazine*, and the consensus was to stick with one character (maybe two) while we tried to learn how to play this crazy game. Since at the time we didn't know how to write our own modules, this made finding adventures to play frustrating.

To supply a bit of historical context - in 1978 TSR published the two single-series adventures based on tournaments run at Gen Con - the G-series (*Giants*) and D-series (*Drow*). However, these adventures started at 8th level (*Steading of the Hill Giant Chief*), ranging all the way up to 14th level (*Vault of the Drow*), concluding with the classic and deadly *Tomb of Horrors*. While all great adventures, by starting strong out of the gate with 8th level adventures TSR made

it difficult for players brand new to D&D, like myself, to find 1st level adventures to play. So, in 1980, with a brand-new *Players Handbook* and *Dungeon Masters Guide*, I found in the Toy Department at my local Shopko Department Store. But my gaming life sat idle and my fascination with fantasy gaming lingered in a lethargic state because we didn't have anything (so we thought at the time) to play.

It wasn't until a year or so later when a hobby store in my home town began carrying a small amount D&D that we found a copy of *B2: Keep on the Borderland*, and suddenly things were back on track. I'm not sure how many times we played through the adventure (it wasn't until later I had learned of *B1: In Search of the Unknown*) with my friend John and I swapping back and forth between being player and Game Master the summer before our junior year in high school. Somewhere, I don't recall where, we stumbled upon a copy of *X1: The Isle of Dread* which also added to our gaming entertainment for a while. However, two things once again stalled our gaming lifestyles - high school, and the lack of available adventures.

Between getting our drivers licenses, unending homework, and a part time jobs (and John got a girlfriend, how dare he!) our gaming lives sat idle for over a year. Adding to this agitation was the only adventures we could find to play were 5-6 levels above the only characters we had, which in those days was intimidating for novice gamers in a small Wisconsin town far from Lake Geneva.

Then it happened ... we saw the "sign-up sheet".

Remember that this was the early 1980's and there was no Internet to bring gamers together like today. With this sign-up sheet, two gamers were suddenly more than six who were all looking for the same thing - more adventures to play. Not long after this gaming group began to take shape, we discovered the adventure that would lead us to our first real campaign: the release of *A1: Slave Pits of the Undercity*.

This adventure and its brothers that followed (A2-A4) allowed us the option of having a character as low as 3rd level and play a series of sequential themed adventures up to 7th level, something none of us had ever done before. Coupled with fresh reprints of the G-series (*Against the Giants, 8th-12th*) and D-series (*Descent into the Depths of the Earth, 9th-14th*), and suddenly our gaming group was neck-deep in our first RPG campaign in the *World of Greyhawk*. We loved it.

Soon after in 1985 the second campaign for our group took shape in the form of *Temple of Elemental Evil*, the 128-page adventure that would later become known as the first "megadungeon." Coupled with the familiar *Village of Hommlet, T1-T4* was the first adventure to take our gaming into a single, massive underground complex filled with enough tricks, traps, and treasure to vault us all the way to 8th level. By the time my *Unearthed Arcana* barbarian defeated the demoness Zuggtmoy (that's how I remember it), TSR had released enough single adventures for our group to fill the gaps before and after modules like ToEE, but by this time gamers like myself craved the more complete campaign than the lone, scattered level adventures.

Two years after we crushed the followers of Elemental Evil who were storming the eastern continent of Oerik, and after a change in TSR's ownership, a Canadian game designer named Ed Greenwood created a little world called the *Forgotten Realms* that would change our gaming group forever. This popular campaign setting quickly became the proud father of dozens of adventure modules and source books, novels, and computer games that continually emptied our gaming group's collective wallet. More importantly, the vast lands of Faerûn also gave us

something that had never been done before – new adventure-campaign settings within itself. The oriental *Kara-Tur: The Eastern Realms*, the Aztec-themed *Maztica Campaign*, and *Al-Qadim: Arabian Adventures* quickly filled our gaming shelves, and everyone in our group wanted to be either a ninja or samurai.

Let's also not forget some of the other classic campaigns and adventures that sprout up in the wake of *The World of Greyhawk* and *Forgotten Realms'* success – *Dragonlance*, *Dark Sun*, *Ravenloft*, and *Birthright* – and we eventually played them all. Of course, we enjoyed the adventures modules, but we loved the campaigns more. The adventures we played helped build our D&D memories, but it was the campaigns that brought us together over the months and years that followed. Without the concept of campaigns, D&D may have grown up much differently. I know I would have.

PLAYTESTING A LEGEND

By James M. Ward

I was extremely lucky in 1974 to meet Gary Gygax when he was just creating the many adventures that were to become D&D and AD&D legends. I had the fun of play testing the *Tomb of Horrors*, *Vault of the Drow*, *Land Beyond the Mirror*, *Against the Giants*, and on and on and on.

My very first memory of playing D&D was going over to Gary's house on a Saturday afternoon. I met his wonderful family and was introduced to his beautiful young wife Mary. I think Ernie, his oldest son, was in 7th grade then and while I was a college graduate, Ernie and I soon became fast friends as I greatly respected his skill at D&D and still do today.

Brian Blume helped me roll up a character. The numbers indicated I should be a magic user as I had a high intelligence and dexterity. I equipped myself with a quarter staff and some throwing daggers and a few other backpack items. My choice was between a *sleep spell* and a *light spell*, and I picked a *light spell*.

I was hooked in the first five minutes of the adventure and it became a lifelong activity that has served me well 43 years later. So in my first game I watched Don mapping our way down into Greyhawk dungeon. I was told we would be exploring a new section of the dungeons. It was okay with me. I had my mouth open the whole time and I couldn't believe the fun I was having. We came to what I was told were three unusual portals. Up until now Gary had done what he always did as the Dungeon Master. He spun the story so I could feel the walls, sights, and smells of the dungeon. My imagination was equal to the task of what we were doing. I felt the heat of our torches and the smell of blood on our weapons from a fight with a giant boar.

Suddenly, as we walked through one of the portals, poof, we were on an island. Eventually one of those portals led to Jack Vance's Dirdir fields, one led to a land beyond the mirror, and the one we took led to an enchanted land. As Gary spun the tale, we could smell the sea salt in the air. We walked through a jungle filled with dinosaurs. The way Gary detailed the adventure, there was no suspension of disbelief. It was easy to imagine we were there. The group checked and we could go back through the portal any time we wanted to get back into Greyhawk Dungeon. None of us wanted to leave the island just yet.

It was the middle of the night. We could have made camp and waited for the dawn, but all of us were too excited to do that. There was a full moon and we thought we had plenty of

light. As we moved through the jungle we could hear the roar of some colossal creature in the distance. The fighter types drew their battle axes and two handed war swords. I was told some of those weapons were magical. Surely, those types of weapons could easily defeat any creature we would meet. Our cleric cast a *bless spell* on all of us and we shared a potion that allowed us to see better in the dark.

We ended up running from something that could have been a T-Rex. One of my first lessons was that we shouldn't fight everything we encountered. Fighting was only when we would gain something from the battle. Fighting a creature was stupid and dangerous if the battle could be avoided. It was a lesson I took with me on every adventure from then on. We didn't stick around to see what the creature was. The creature stopped chasing us when we came to the edge of a village of huts. In the gloom Gary described a large grass hut with an open window. I looked inside, but it was dark. So, I figured what the heck. I cast my *light spell* and it woke up ten unusually large natives. They came boiling out of their hut and chased us. They were clearly ready to use their spears.

There was no coddling here. There was no pampering of my character because I was new. Spears were tossed at our group and I was pinned to the ground. I had four hit points and the spear in my back did six hit points of damage. The rest of the group ran into the jungle. My time was done and my first adventure was over.

Eventually Ernie had to use the last *wish* on a *wish ring* of his to bring us all back alive and well in the city of Greyhawk. On my next adventure I had the fun of exploring Greyhawk City and meeting the wizard in the Black Tower.

My first adventure ever had been a partial play test of Kong Island which was to become *Isle of the Ape*.

Imagine my joy as I played every Saturday over at Gary's. I made many more silly mistakes. I ended up saving the group with my own *ring of wishes* over the years. I remember that first game like it was yesterday.

Soon Gary Con is happening. I just finished designing my own *Metamorphosis Alpha* version of the *Tomb of Horrors*. My *Doom of the Warden* will hopefully impress people in years to come. I look forward to seeing the faces of players as they hear my description of the doomed starship and its quest to return on course.

THE RANDOM DUNGEON GENERATOR

By Jon Hook

When I was a kid, my favorite AD&D module was *S2: White Plume Mountain*, by Lawrence Schick. This is a module that I read and re-read multiple times, and I so wanted to run my friends through it, but for one reason or another it just never happened. As an "art kid," I drooled over this module because of all of the amazing art. I'm not sure what printing it is, but my copy has the Jeff Dee front cover with a group of adventurers battling a mantichore, and the Bill Willingham back cover with a white-haired adventurer wielding Blackrazor. In addition to Dee and Willingham, the whole module is filled with amazing art by the likes of Dave Sutherland, Darlene Pekul, Diesel LaForce, Jim Roslof, and a stunning region map of White Plume Mountain and the surrounding areas by Erol Otus.

Someday... Someday I will find the time for me and a group of friends to generate a party of adventurers who are up to the task to delve into *White Plume Mountain*. But, the intent of this essay is to share with you my favorite memory of playing D&D, and for that, we must forego the published modules, and instead turn our eyes to the *Dungeon Masters Guide*; specifically to Appendix A: Random Dungeon Generation.

One of my best friends in high school was Robert Heitkamp, and between the two of us, we had just about every popular role-playing game published in the early '80s. Certainly, we had every TSR product produced. And Robert's dad was just as enthusiastic about the games as we were. I'll never forget one Friday night at Robert's house when his dad announced that he was going to create and run a D&D adventure for us, (Robert, me, and a couple of other guys who were all over at Robert's for a sleep-over). He then told us how he was going to use the appendices in the back of the DMG to create a dungeon full of random monsters for us to battle our way through. No motivational narrative to hook us into the dungeon; it was just good 'ol "Kill the monsters and take their stuff" kind of play.

It was a fantastic experience! He really drew us in, because we helped roll the dice and consult the book as we built the dungeon. As it is suggested in Appendix A, we began mapping this dungeon in the center of our graph paper with one of the random start rooms. And with each room, Robert's dad would secretly roll on Appendix A: Table V. F: Chamber or Room Contents to let us know if there was anyone or anything in the room.

My memory has gotten foggy with age, but if I recall correctly, we didn't get very far into this random dungeon. While it was fun to roll for each element of the dungeon (your current passage, side passages, special passages, turns, doors, rooms, etc.), it was time consuming. We made sure to place every door right where the tables instructed us to do so, we shaped each room as the roll of the dice willed it, stocked with the creatures rolled on Appendix C: Random Monster Encounters. I know we played as first level adventurers, so the creatures we faced weren't too difficult.

I think about this night sometimes, and it makes me nostalgic to try it out with my friends. If you haven't checked it out for yourself (or if it's been awhile since you have), you owe it to yourself to review the Appendices in the back of the DMG again. As noted above, Appendix A lets you create a random dungeon. Appendix B is the random wilderness terrain outside of the dungeon. Appendix C, the random monster generator, is huge; it has a table for ten levels of monsters, undersea monsters, astral monsters, monsters with psionics, and wilderness monsters! No stone is left unturned.

Based on my experiences with the random dungeon generator tables, my advice to judges would be to embrace chaos; don't feel obligated to have every paragraph of the adventure memorized; don't limit the dungeon to what has already been defined. Sometimes your players will want to go "off-roading," and if you occasionally practice using tools like an old *Dungeon Masters Guide* (or your own imagination), you can become quite skilled at providing a rich and entertaining experience for your players with little to no preparation. While not impossible, this would be a challenging way to run a campaign, but certainly an occasional side quest is quite doable. The reward for you, the judge, is once you have practiced the art of improvisational dungeoneering, your players will provide opportunities for you to flex those skills when they want to investigate the suspicious innkeeper, for example, even though he's an unnamed NPC in the adventure module. You'll be ready to indulge your players as they pursue this red herring, until you're able to seed in a clue or encounter that points the characters back toward the Thieves' Guild, where the rest of the published adventure

is focused. And when you're good enough, you can provide on-the-fly encounters for your players, and they won't even realize that they have gone "off script" as far as the adventure module is concerned.

MY FAVORITE ADVENTURE MUST HAVE BEEN A HOME GROWN

By Merle M. Rasmussen

The first *D&D*® adventure I remember playing must have been home grown. A longtime friend, James Thompson, invited me to play with a group of gamers who were members of the SCA (Society of Creative Anachronism). We met in the basement of the YMCA on the Iowa State University campus. I remember that my character, Elrem, was assigned to lead the expedition's pack mules through the dungeon. (When was the last time you took pack mules on a dungeon crawl?) Bored with this mundane task, Elrem decided to look inside the packs. He was immediately threatened with severe bodily harm by several members of the expedition who did not want Elrem snooping. Elrem never did find out what was inside the packs. He resumed his lowly job of pulling the mules forward as the rest of the party fought skeletons and mummies. Since it was October 1975, I thought it was a Halloween game.

Lesson #1: Be more inclusive. To encourage new players, include them in the action. Otherwise they may become bored, create a new role-playing game genre, and leave your name out of future publications.

The first module I remember receiving by mail was Dungeon Module G1: *Steading of the Hill Giant Chief* by Gary Gygax, first copyrighted in 1978 by TSR Games. TSR Games needed me to write a mission module to go in the box with the *TOP SECRET*® *Espionage Role Playing Game Rules*. It should be noted that G1 is the first of 3 modules for *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*®. On the cover is a seal with the words, "Official D&D Tournament Module used at ORIGINS '78." It was sent to me as an example of how to write a module.

I remember G1 was covered by crisp, clear shrink wrap. The outside cover was printed in orange and black ink. The inside cover contained Upper Level and Dungeon Level maps printed in blue ink. The module was printed in black ink on 10 pages. Room 3 on the Upper Level is a Dormitory with 12 young giants. The text reads, "There is no treasure, but by wearing the young giants' garb, with suitable padding, the party could pass as the youngsters if not seen closer than 20'."

Lesson #2: Do not give dubious advice. Having to kill 12 young giants that fight as ogres is difficult enough (perhaps even unethical). Trying to pass as a young giant (in blood stained clothing) inside the giants' stronghold seems a highly implausible tactic. Will the disguise fool a wandering orc or a pet cave bear beyond 20' away? Modules need to have both internal and external logic. The laws of nature apply unless there is a good reason they do not.

The first module I remember studying intently was Dungeon Module B1: *In Search of the Unknown* by Mike Carr, first copyrighted in 1979 by TSR Hobbies, Inc. It is for use with *D&D*® *Basic Rules* and an Introductory Module for Character Levels 1-3. On the Upper Level is a Room of Pools. Each of the 14 pools appears differently. They include a Pool of Healing, Acid

Pool, Pool of Sickness, Green Slime Pool, Drinking Pool, Pool of Wine, etc. I suddenly realized that the only way a player could determine what was in each pool was to test it! The Room of Pools was attractive and dangerous at the same time!

Lesson #3: Not every treasure is guarded by a trap. Greed and curiosity can be as harmful as encountering a monster. Of the 56 rooms in this dungeon, I only remember this fascinating Room of Pools 38 years later.

Dungeon Module B1: *In Search of the Unknown* was a watershed adventure for me. I borrowed heavily from it when writing mission module *OPERATION: SPRECHENHALTESTELLE* for the *TOP SECRET® Espionage Role Playing Game*. This special instructional module was first copyrighted in 1980 by TSR Games. The introductory setting is ideal for learning *TOP SECRET®* and can be played again and again.

Lesson #4: Keep titles short and simple. Although memorable for its length and difficulty in pronouncing, *OPERATION: SPRECHENHALTESTELLE* should have been shortened to *OPERATION: PISCES*.

OPERATION: SPRECHENHALTESTELLE has three maps: Above Street Level, Street Level, and Below Street Level. The four-page Agent File 001 contains a Player's Background Sheet, Players' List of Potential Characters, Tips for Players, and sketchy Sprechenhaltestelle Agent's Map. The 28-page Administrator File 001 contains "Human Target" instead of "Monster" and "Object Target" instead of "Treasure & Location." There is a Human Target List and an Object Target List with which the Environment can be keyed. There is also an extensive Personal Language Knowledge and Usage Chart. Each NPC (non-player character) can speak 4 languages at varying proficiencies. Many NPCs communicate with other NPCs by various methods. Most NPCs know some secret Code Phrase.

Lesson #5: Dead men tell no tales. You might want to suggest to paranoid players to not attack everything that moves. Players should be informed if a communications web exists among NPCs. Players need to be informed if NPCs might carry secret information that can help player characters (PCs) with their adventure.

I was not impressed by fantasy, but I was inspired by roleplaying. *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS®* led directly to the development of *TOP SECRET®*. A couple of years after *TOP SECRET®* was published, TSR hired me as a game designer. As the newest designer, I was primarily assigned to write *D&D®* modules.

Lesson #6: Players want detail and maybe even want to learn something useful. To add to verisimilitude, I lace my adventures with technical jargon plus weapons and gadgets that could really work. When writing *TOP SECRET®*, I spent a lot of time at the ISU Library. Nowadays, I use the internet extensively.

Although I am known for writing fantasy and espionage, I did write three adventures for GDW's *PARANOIA® SCIENCE-FANTASY ROLE PLAYING GAME*. I hope to soon be published in science fiction and the old west genre. Please watch for them!

MY ALL-TIMEY FAVORITIST ADVENTURE EVER

By Chris Clark

Let me begin by saying: I am biased, as is any analog, non-digital entity. I know what I like, and in most cases, I know why I like it. That does not mean that you will share my viewpoint, or should, or even that perhaps you should quietly call in some professional psychiatric assistance for prevalent narcissism. In fairness, however, I do like my own 'stuff'. If I didn't like it, I'd never let it out of my office, and yes, that's happened more than a few times.

I do have a lot of favorites from the years that I spent 'growing up' in gaming. I started playing AD&D 1st Ed. back in 1975, and I did not start writing my own adventures for several years. During that period I was blessed with exposure to an immense scope of ideas, from the utter terror of S1 and the *Tomb of the Lich*, to the G-series *Giants* and the *Caverns of the Drow* in the D-series. From that era I have to say that I was most impressed, and am as yet most easily persuaded to once again Dungeon Master, T1 *The Village of Hommlet*. Its characters make sense, it has subplots that are logical, numerous, and surprising and yet, in the end, it comes down to a dungeon crawl upon which all else hinges. In a word: masterwork. Thanks Gary.

Yet this adventure would not be the last one saved if I were to be sent away with but one to while away the hours in some dank prison. It is not the adventure for which I would forgo meals, companionship, or beloved pets. That accolade I reserve for a module I wrote for Gary Con back in 2012. Only one copy of the adventure was created, in full TSR trade dress (it looked exactly like a TSR publication). Full publication of that adventure would have caused numerous violations of copyright and trademark law.

I did warn you of my bias.

I therefore do not expect that anyone reading this has ever heard of (unless you played in one of my events that year) the adventure that tops my all-time-favorite list, *The False Prints*. I am still writing adventures, and so may surpass myself, as may any of the extremely talented writers out there currently creating new adventures, worlds, and challenges, but this, thus far, is my personal best. It also best matches my play style, one that I adapted from my good friend James M. Ward: let the characters kill themselves; don't be the reason that they died, even as adventure designer.

I am known for writing adventures with multiple meanings: *A Challenge of Arm's* actually has within a character named, 'the Arm', *Holey Ground* is an adventure situated in an area of subterranean subsidence where the party is dumped into a blessed mine, *A Problem of Manors* is both about a rude robotic servant and a manor that has been enslaved by said robot, *Seizun of the Son* ... you get the drift.

The False Prints is no exception. A king discovers that his Grand Vizier has been kidnapping young virginal girls and selling them to demons under the cover of a beauty pageant every year. The vizier kills the king in order to hide his crimes from the citizenry, and leaves a trail of clues that implicate the local assassin's guild, *The Black Hand*. The vizier has a problem this year, however, as the local populace has run out of virgins that his demonic customers might consider to be 'of age.' In point of fact, only one such virgin is available, and he is the wrong sex: the young orphaned prince soon to be crowned king.

The vizier then hatches a tremendously complex plan with absolute precision. He acquires a gender changing potion for the prince as well as some appropriate (in size and style) clothing and a nice set of wigs to fit the soon-to-be-victimized prince. He has a secret tunnel dug from

the keep's dungeon to the prince's private chamber and then has the workmen who created it killed so that he might gain clandestine access to the quarters of the prince.

He bribes the members of the Black Hand Guild to smooth things over after suspicion falls upon them, and then hires several of their members to attack the prince two nights hence at a local inn. The vizier further places contracts on two of the keep's guards during the intervening two days, and asks the guild to leave their calling cards so that all will know that the guild has had its revenge upon the kingdom for suspecting them when they were indeed innocent.

The guild, good to their word, murder one guard each day.

The vizier, feigning actual concern, convinces the prince that more guards are needed, but that none of the local hirelings-at-arms may be trusted due to the popularity of the Black Hand. The vizier convinces the prince to hire personal bodyguards from the outside the kingdom, and sets up an interview with these potential guards for the evening following the second guard's assassination.

The guards being hired are the player characters.

After an opening encounter where the characters are interviewed and subsequently hired, The Black Hand attacks the inn as instructed. The player characters, solid heroes one and all, emerge victorious. The vizier gushes over them, offering them lodging for that very night, a meal, and drinks if they desire. He offers to have the after-combat mess cleaned up for the characters, as, after all, they have done enough already. He offers to have the bodies of the vanquished guild members disposed of, and tells the characters that such is the least he can do.

Every party, with a bit of convincing, consumed some of the refreshments offered by the vizier. Without fail, every party that ever played this adventure felt they had to loot the bodies of the assassins. They refused to let the vizier's hirelings clean up the aftermath until after such looting was complete. The loot is, of course, extremely worthwhile.

Each player receives a suit of +3 magical black leather armor emblazoned with the sign of the Black Hand Guild, an automatic +2 repeating wrist crossbow that has a magazine of 6 shots, black Leather *Boots of Climbing* embossed with the sign of the Black Hand Guild, and a +2 short sword the hilt of which is emblazoned with the sign of the Black Hand Guild. There are some coins as well.

The vizier then suggests to the prince that his new, proven guards should perhaps accompany him back to the keep and stand watch over him this evening to thwart any further assassination attempts. The prince, young and timid, readily agrees.

The food and drink consumed by the characters contains a slow-acting but powerful soporific. 4 hours after the party returns (and they all did) to the prince's chamber to watch over him, the entire party, including the elves (they don't sleep, but they are not immune to drugs), is asleep. While they sleep, the vizier and his minions enter the prince's chamber, kidnap the prince, and take him to the dungeon below to begin his transformation into a virginal girl. They then alert the palace guard that "not all is well with the prince."

Two hours after the prince is taken, the party begins to awaken. The reason for their interrupted slumber is painfully evident: someone is pounding on the bolted chamber door and demanding entrance "in the name of the prince." The characters are of course accoutered in their shiny new leather armor, with their wrist crossbows, *Boots of Climbing*, and all other

gear that definitively marks them as members of The Black Hand. It is generally about this time that one of the characters remembers that The Black Hand was suspecting for the attempt on the prince, as well as the murder of the king.

The adventure then becomes a grand game of hide and seek. The party must avoid the palace guard that feverishly hunts for them, while tracking down clues that prove their innocence and reveal the current location of the prince they are sworn to protect. They must locate and defeat the vizier and his henchmen before they are arrested for the disappearance of the prince, and possibly the murder of his father. The party always managed to finish victorious in the six times this was run, but it was always close... and always fun.

The best attack always comes from an unexpected direction. Making sure that reasons exist for everything in your adventure leaves your players only one direction of blame: themselves.

No, you can't buy this one, as only one copy of it exists. Still, it's definitely my favorite.

THE SINISTER SECRET OF SALTMARSH

By Chris Doyle

One of the best early adventures I recall reading and being inspired by was *U1: The Sinister Secret of Saltmarsh*. This classic was published in 1980, but I probably did not get my hands on it until 1982 or so. It was the premiere adventure from the United Kingdom: it said so right on the cover! This was a well designed adventure balanced for low-level characters, and I had the pleasure to run it several times at my table. Yes, it had a Scooby-Doo feel to the plot and setting (even the cover art seemed to be inspired by the classic cartoon opening), but when you are 12 years old, somehow that seemed fine. And I'll admit, Scooby-Doo episodes have inspired some of my adventure writing over the years.

The adventure was divided into two parts. The first part featured a "haunted house." I use quotes because it's not really haunted, but instead was used by a band of smugglers as a hideout. The encounter design was simple, but elegant. You will not find hordes of humanoids to overcome, but instead well-designed tricks, traps and a poisonous snake in the well. Yup, I lost a favorite PC to a snake bite on my first go around as a player. It was the perfect set of challenges for fledgling characters, plus enough investigation to keep their interest. The final encounter in the sea caves below the house features an illusionist as the Big Bad Guy. To this day, I'm fond of illusionists and have played my fair share over the decades. The haunted house section flowed right into part 2, *The Sea Ghost*.

The Sea Ghost was the smuggler's ship moored off the coast. I could not get enough of the three plus pages of special notes about the assault on the ship. It was so open ended! There were no 10 foot wide corridors that limited your decisions. And the maps! Deck plans that would inspire me for years (or I would swipe as needed for other adventures), not to mention the longitudinal section and rigging diagram. I thoroughly enjoyed the extra detail given to the crew and the NPCs, including the different treasure each generic smuggler carried. It was a dynamic setting where the smugglers moved around and were not tied to a particular location. *The Sea Ghost* encounters also featured investigation such as the hidden rooms, an aquatic elf prisoner, and the lizard men. This included plenty of hooks to get the PCs to the next adventure, *U2: The Danger at Dunwater*. Personally, I'll never forget the pseudodragon that latched on to our party's ranger, and shared many further adventures.

I drew many inspirations from *Saltmarsh*. First, it was refreshing to have an adventure not set underground. Yet the haunted house and the ship were still compelling locations full of excitement and “things” to do. It really gave me a different perspective on adventure locales and how the plot could be weaved into them. One of my early RPGA adventures was a haunted house, but it was “not really haunted.” Second, the use of tricks, traps and investigation fascinated me, which inspired me to feature similar themes and encounters in some of my own adventures. The player handouts were simple, yet effective, and I remember begging my Mom to use the photocopy machine at work on that page of the module so I didn’t have to rip it out of my book. Third was the unique NPCs with just enough details to make them stand out and be remembered. And fourth is the aquatic setting. Not only did we get a ship setting in *U1*, but *U2: Danger at Dunwater* was in the swamp, and *U3: The Final Enemy* was an underwater sahuagin lair!

Take a look at many of the adventures I have penned over the years, and there is a good chance at least part of them feature water encounters. That’s what you get when you spend 20+ years as an aquatic biologist during the day, and an adventure author at night. True Story: a few years ago when getting ready to run a playtest of my adventure *Fifth Edition Fantasy #6: Raiders of the Lost Oasis* (which is set in a desert, by the way), I gave my players (some of whom have gamed with me for decades) the option to outfit their PCs with a limited selection of magic items. Pick one item from list A, one from list B, and 2 potions from list C. The players knew the setting was a desert, and for chuckles I included a potion of water breathing on list C. Four out of five players took a *potion of water breathing*, expecting some kind of shenanigans from their GM. Of course, they didn’t know that you start the adventure captured without equipment, but it was fun nevertheless to see them agonize over a *water breathing* or *healing potion*.

My adventure *DCC #7: The Secret of Smugglers Cove* was a direct homage to *U1*, right down to the title, the mansion, and the sea caves. *DCC #11: The Dragonfiend Pact* prominently featured a well, and yes, there was a snake at the bottom! The pseudodragon encounter added as a second thought eventually became a featured NPC and even graced the cover. I recall Joe saying, “Dragons on covers sell books! Can you expand that encounter?” Even Castle Whiterock has a “hidden” underwater level. Many of my most recent 5E adventures feature water encounters as well. But most recently, *FEF #8: The Eye of the Leviathan* features a coastal fishing village (complete with sea cliffs) and an assault on a pirate ship. That ship, *The Black Orchid*, was directly inspired by *The Sea Ghost*.

So, was *U1* the best adventure module? Probably not. For one thing, a fully designed village of *Saltmarsh* would have been ideal. And perhaps a few more combat encounters in the upper levels of the haunted house would have hit the sweet spot. But there is no denying this is a classic, and I’m guessing I was not the only RPG author to be inspired by the sum of its parts.

CASTLE WHITEROCK

By Bill Olmesdahl

I've been ruminating about which of all the thousands of great adventures written over the last several decades is my favorite. Wow. Where do you start? There are so many legendary modules from the early days of our hobby. Should I talk about The Village of Hommlet? Everyone I know who's played T1 has a story about the gatehouse and those killer frogs. Or maybe I could talk about The Tomb of Horrors. Old time gamers go white when you mention that death trap. How about Ravenloft, the adventure that spawned an entire new TSR world of horror and despair? I could go on and on. I've read, run or played them all over my nearly 40 years as a gamer. At the risk of sounding like I'm trying to butter up Mr. Goodman, my favorite adventure is Goodman Game's Castle Whiterock.

If you're not familiar with Castle Whiterock, it's a MASSIVE boxed dungeon put out at the height of the D&D 3.5 boom as part of the Dungeon Crawl Classics line of adventures. The boxed set weighs in at over 700 pages between the various books. But size isn't everything. What's inside is an amazing old school dungeon complete with everything you need to run a game for years!

Why Castle Whiterock? To me, CW has everything I look for in an adventure: Dragons! A Lich! Drow! An entire underwater level! Legendary items and new artifacts! Did I mention dragons? This is what a mega dungeon is supposed to be. It's 15 primary levels plus many sublevels of old school dungeon grinding. I've run three groups into Castle Whiterock (so far, no one has finished the adventure, but I keep hoping) and each time has been unique and memorable in its own way.

Who hates encounters with low level humanoids, like orcs, troglodytes, or even something like bandits? I used to. Most of the time, they're just thrown into a module because there aren't that many other monsters for low level PCs to fight. They become the stereotypical monsters "sitting in the room playing cards" waiting for the PCs to come. Not so in Castle Whiterock. The first half dozen or so levels are primarily humanoids bolstered with a smattering of other foes, but they all have a good reason for being there. The whole thing feels like an ecosystem. And that's no small accomplishment. You've got a campaign that runs characters from level 1 to level 20 and it feels like it could really exist.

The adventure starts out with a bang. The PCs find a group of monks working in the ruins to restore the site, or that's how it seems. If the PCs aren't very clever, very perceptive, or very paranoid, they will find out the hard way that monks are actually slavers working with various groups deeper in the dungeon. In my three runs of the adventure, only one group has not ended the first session as prisoners in the orc dungeon on level two. And that's a great thing. Everyone has had a great time figuring out how to escape and getting to use some of those non-combat skills.

My most recent Castle Whiterock group had an amazing battle against a half orc/half cloud giantess cleric. It was one of those epic fights that the players will be talking about for years to come. The combat raged for more than twenty rounds with the ranger, paladin, druid, and cleric all down. The day was won by the humble oracle and a lucky shot from her bow. But even more amazing is the battle mattered to the party. They knew their foe and had put together her history. They cared about more than loot and experience. They were involved in the story! That's what makes Castle Whiterock special to me. You can't help but start to get caught up in all the stories that run through and link every level and sublevel. It sucks you in

and you care about the Who, What, Where, How, and Why. In my experience, that's rare in an off-the-shelf module. That's why I love Castle Whiterock.

A Blast From the Past

The general theme of "how to write adventure modules that don't suck" has pervaded Goodman Games seminars and products for many years (including one earlier edition by the same title, that was released as a short PDF).

Shifting now to the first person: Thanks to DCC uber-fan Jen Brinkman, I was recently reminded of a long-forgotten article written by myself (Joseph Goodman). It was published in the Summer 2007 issue of *The Crusader*, a magazine published by Troll Lord Games (and at one point edited by James M. Ward). My friend Steve Chenault, owner of TLG, asked me to contribute a column to their magazine. I titled the first submission..."How to Write Adventure Modules That Don't Suck." As far as I know this is the first time that phrase appeared in a Goodman Games context. And I completely forgot about that column until Jen somehow discovered it and asked me to autograph that issue of *Crusader* at Gary Con last year!

To come full circle, both Steve and Jim contributed to this latest Goodman Games edition of *How to Write Adventure Modules that Don't Suck*. It is fun to see how this evolved.

For those of you who want to read this original article, here is the text.

THEM'S FIGHTING WORDS #1: HOW TO WRITE ADVENTURES THAT DON'T SUCK

By Joseph Goodman

The curse of the RPG publisher is crappy submissions. For every polished gem by the likes of Harley Stroh or Chris Doyle, dozens of malnourished proposals fall dead by the wayside. My company Goodman Games primarily publishes adventure modules, so most of the rejection letters I write are for crappy adventures. When Steve Chenault said I should write a column for *Crusader*, I immediately knew what the subject should be: How to Write Adventures That Don't Suck.

Consider this a public service. By spreading my purported wisdom on the subject of adventures, I hope to improve the prevailing quality of submitted material - increasing the yield for Goodman Games, Troll Lord Games, and other fine publishers. There are many mediocre adventures just a few edits away from being great, and perhaps this column will push a few over the cusp.

If you're wondering what qualifies me to give my opinion on this, I can only offer one qualification: The Dungeon Crawl Classics line is still going strong, and I think that's testament to my ability to pick good authors and good adventures. I've published more than 50 adventure modules, and I've read (and rejected) a lot more than that.

This, then, is a few things you can do to ensure that you write adventures that don't suck. A good adventure doesn't need to have *all* of these items. But most good adventures do have many of them. This list is focused on fantasy adventures, by the way.

- Convey a sense of the fantastic. Convey this through encounters, descriptions, and most importantly, magic. The fantastic is what makes D&D so much fun, and that has to come across in the adventure.
- Create memorable encounters. Avoid repetition. Consider all aspects of an encounter: timing, environment, opponents, hazards, battle conditions, and so on. Think about templates, feats, equipment, magic items, and spells as ways to make opponents interesting. Try to come with ideas for rooms that players will still be talking about 20 years from now.
- Work hard. Dungeons with stirges, darkmantles, chokers, rust monsters, orcs, and other no-brainer monsters strike me as lazy. The job of a *published author* is to produce material that the typical DM at home *could not produce*. Don't submit derivative dungeons.
- Think of new twists on old classics. Don't throw in a rust monster. Instead, make it a rust spider that climbs walls. Players will never suspect that the reddish-brown spider attacking them actually has the same stats as a rust monster. Surprise the players!
- Include "easter eggs" - at least one well-hidden room with a cool treasure of some kind, accessible only to very diligent or very lucky PCs.
- Give intelligent treasure. Why give gold when you can give art objects? The treasure should match the villains and location. Sometimes the best treasure is information, because information leads to more adventures. The classic example is a treasure map; other options include blackmail lists, diaries and journals, or spell books with new spells requiring rare adventure-worthy components.
- Include a good villain. Not every dungeon crawl needs one, but the best ones often have them. The adventure has to establish a strong emotional framework for the villain, too; it's not enough for him to just be "another evil necromancer."
- Allow sequel potential. The DM should be able to continue the plot threads begun in this adventure to create future adventures for his campaign.
- Make the levels distinctive. Each level of the dungeon should feel distinct from the ones before and after it. They shouldn't blend together.
- Create a strong narrative feel. Usually this is a buildup with a climax in a big encounter at the end, but that formula can be varied. Regardless, focus on an encounter list that forms a storyline that reads like a great adventure novel.
- Secret doors. Lots of secret doors! Every dungeon needs at least one secret door, preferably hidden in a place the PCs won't think to look. Secret doors at the bottom of pit traps, secret trap doors mounted in the ceiling above normal doors... think of ways to fool the players.
- Require thought. There should be at least one puzzle. That doesn't necessarily mean a riddle. It could be a room that's hard to figure out, or a strange new monster that can only be defeated in a special way that's alluded to elsewhere in the dungeon.
- Pace it well. Long, tiresome combats should be followed by quick rooms. Thought-provoking puzzles should be followed by bloodbaths. Slow, trap-filled hallways should be followed by a rousing fight.
- Involve the group. Meter the action so there's an even mix of involvement by all character classes.

- Include a twist, preferably at the end. Note that read-aloud text can be used *against* the players, primarily for this purpose. Establish PC expectations through read-aloud text, then use those expectations against them to create plot twists.
- Subplots. Subplots vary widely, but the best ones have a few things in common. First, they involve several PCs in an ongoing drama of some kind. Second, they create mystery or intrigue. Third, they lead to potential future adventures.
- Include new monsters. A new monster that throws off the characters is good (as opposed to simply duplicating the role of an existing monster, which is a waste of space).
- But don't include too many new monsters. Players get frustrated if everything is unfamiliar. And an adventure should stand on its own two legs *as an adventure*, not simply as a vehicle for new crunchy bits.
- Maintain a "cut to the chase" feeling – start with a bang and get to the action fast. Don't waste time on empty rooms unless they really add something.
- Use intelligent ecology. Most monsters need to eat, sleep, and drink. Dungeons should allow for this fact.
- Give a strong atmosphere. The dungeon should have a strong, cohesive vibe of some kind, whether dangerous, or evil, or disturbing, or reptilian, or whatever.

Why is this column called "Them's Fighting Words"? Because as I'd say down in Georgia, my hobbies (outside of gaming) are "reading and writing, feeding and fighting" – the latter being, more specifically, boxing. This column is my chance to match my physical sparring with some verbal sparring. Tell me what you think of the above – and next issue, I'll tell you more about great adventures.

– Joseph Goodman, president of Goodman Games, who is currently training for his public boxing match