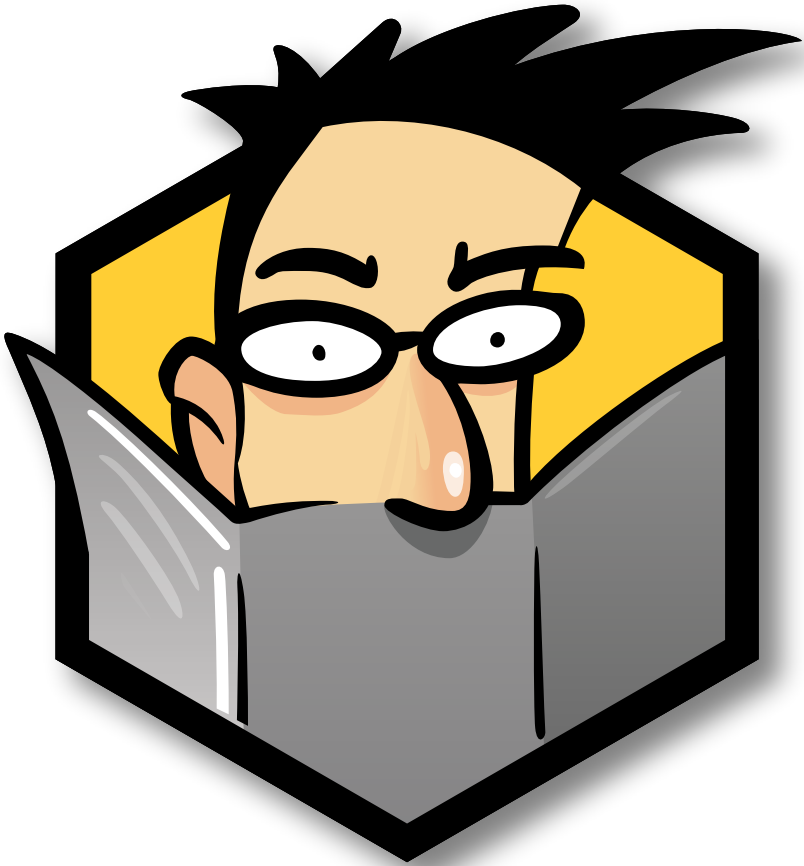


# Roleplaying Tips OMNIBUS

1



*Have more fun at every game!*

*Johnn Four*



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# Johnn's D&D 5E Campaign Updates

## Session #4 Assault on Orc Valley

*Sometimes the dice tell the story of the session. Lady Luck gives us a happy ending. Or not. Here's how Friday's game went down.*

It's dark out, and the PCs are still celebrating their victory over the local gang of thugs at the inn, despite the ringleader getting away.

The wizard uses mage hand to impress the locals and harass the help. The fighter woos a farmer's daughter. The rogue entertains the crowd with rowdy songs.

A dirty, smelly dwarf saddles up to the bar and orders a drink (a new PC). He gets hammered fast. When a card game breaks out with the gambling-addicted fighter and the two locals he cleaned out the other night, the dwarf sits in.

Then a stranger saunters in and seats himself beside the mage. As they talk, he notices the mage hand. He asks the mage to give him a signal if the dwarf has a good hand at the card table, then he joins the game.

Thanks to a little arcane assistance, the stranger does OK. Then the game escalates into a tense hand with a lot of coin being pushed into the centre of the table. It comes down to the fighter, the stranger, and a card shark local. If the local wins, the fighter has to plough the



farmer's field. Cards are revealed, and... the stranger claims victory. Everyone at the table gets suspicious, but there's no evidence of cheating.

The stranger takes his winnings and leaves the table with the girl the fighter was flirting with earlier. Everyone drinks more.

The next morning, the party splits up. Some are too hung over and refuse the call to adventure. The paladin and monk meet with the Townmaster to prepare for elections.

The mangy dwarf, fighter, and mage decide to investigate the orc bandits they heard were menacing the road up near Wyvern Tor. As the three travel along the Triboar Trail, they spot the wispy smoke of a roadside campfire up ahead. Then they hear the chilling sounds of torture.

The group rushes forward and discovers four hobgoblins holding a goblin over a fire, demanding to know where Cragmaw Castle - the goblin HQ - is located.

It's the party's first encounter with these tough, soldier-like creatures. Though only the druid is harmed, he nearly dies. A hobgoblin is taken prisoner.

The goblin is rescued only to be interrogated again, this time by his so-called saviours. He tells the PCs the castle is to the south.

Reviving and conversing with the hobgob prisoner reveals King Grol and the Spider operate out of the castle as well. The party makes peace with the hobgob, who offers to join their cause against Glasstaff, the goblin king, and the mysterious Black Spider.



The party agrees. But when the hobgob is released, he immediately attacks. Despite overwhelming odds, the hobgoblin follows his training and honour-bound ways. He dies.

But all the fighting draws the attention of a nearby owlbear, which crashes into the PCs and starts beaking and clawing flesh.

The druid turns into a bear, and it's Mothra vs. Godzilla for several tense seconds as both creatures stand on their hind legs and pound away at each other.

It turns out the dwarf is a strong addition to the party, for he's victorious, and the PCs grab what loot they can from the hobgoblin camp and continue down the road, but not before killing the goblin.

Two days later Wyvern Tor breaks the horizon. The tall mountain is flanked by two others, giving the appearance of wings. The PCs encounter an orc bandit group and dispatch the ugly, brutish creatures. They track the orcs back to a valley, where an orc village stretches out. A large ogre sits in the middle of the village, growling orders, while orcs whip goblin slaves to work harder in the fields and gardens.

The party wonders if these odds are too much even for bears and mage hands to overcome. They decide to try a divide-and-conquer approach. They crawl close to the village and let loose their arrows, hitting the ogre leader twice with amazing shots.

The orcs charge, a group of almost a dozen hot on the retreating heroes' heels.

The druid wields his nature magic to help the party hide while the orcs run by. Then the PCs strike from behind in ambush.



The fight is intense. Eleven against three - 3.5 if you count the druid-bear.

The fighter goes down. He gets healed and bounces up again. Then the druid goes down. Then the mage. It's just the fighter left, and there are three orcs.

The foes exchange mighty blows. An orc falls. Then another. It's just the fighter, who has only three health left, and a tall orc warrior, unharmed and enraged.

The orc hits! But the wily fighter summons all his willpower and somehow survives and even gets a second wind just in time for his counterattack.

With 10 fallen orcs, the fighter knows the only way he can kill this creature is to hit it with everything he's got. Maximum damage is the only result that will save the party.

The fighter swings.

And hits!

We all wait to see the damage... and it's boxcars! Maximum damage. The only roll that would kill the orc in one blow.

Everyone cheers.

Lady Luck blew on those dice that night.

We wrap the session up there. The PCs scout the village again after resting and find it deserted. With some careful tracking, they find the creatures holed up in a cave at the base of Wyvern Tor. They'll need more help to defeat the entrenched foes.



I like it when players take chances. You often get great, memorable stories that way. Like this time, when only one roll could save a TPK, and the group got it. Hopefully *my* dice are lucky next time. ;)

We play again in a couple weeks. It should be interesting to see how the cave assault goes. I'm off the plot now, with an unscheduled stop with these orcs. The ogre leader is still alive, as are his best warriors. This cave is a holy site to the tribe. The shaman lives there. It was only out of desperation they dared retreat here with their families against the evil people from the human town. There's a surprise waiting in that cave for the PCs. And it'll surprise the orcs too...

## **Session #5 Casualties Afflict Phandelver**

We played last Friday and had a blast. A disintegrating blast as you shall soon see.

The session starts with the PCs resting and preparing to assault the orc shaman's cave. It is a full table. PCs missing last session jumped in immediately on the premise they were getting worried about their friends and went out searching for them. With the party reunited five strong, they venture forth into the mists to clean up the orc raider tribe.

As they approach the cave mouth guarded by a pair of sentries, screaming erupts from the dark hole. Then a clawed-up and bleeding orc body flies out of the cave mouth and sails through the air over a cliff. More screams of pain and terror perforate the morning air.

The PCs advance and quickly take care of the guards. With trepidation, they peer into the cave.



They see mass murder. Blood covers the walls and floor. Claw marks scrape the stone walls. And a terrified huddle of surviving orcs with backs turned to the characters peer into a tunnel leading deeper into the mountain.

The PCs charge. And that's when the fighter perishes. Just as the orcs and their ogre leader are falling to the chop-chop-chopping of the PCs' hatred, another wave pours from the tunnel, fleeing from the unknown monstrosity. The party's main murder hobo gets hobbled, then murdered, as fresh pork overwhelms him.

Finally, the cave goes quiet as the last orc falls. Two mysteries lie before the characters as they retreat outside for a short rest.

First, what was ripping the orcs from limb to limb? Second, what was causing the strange mutations they saw amongst the orc foes they just fought? One orc was orange, one had a two-foot-wide head, another had 10-pound testicles.

Just as the PCs are girding up for another foray into the cave, they hear weak cries for help coming from that tunnel at the back. The cries don't sound orcish, so they advance. Passing through the cave piled with orc bodies, they discover the dark tunnel is filled with even more orc carcasses, plus many goblin slave carcasses.

Hopscotching their way through, the party enters a smaller cave that must have been the shaman's room. The walls are decorated with strange runes, bone mobiles, and wolf pelts. In the corner is a bound man. He's been tortured by his captors. He's naked.

This is the new PC for Chris, the dead fighter's player. He tells the party he saw terrifying tentacled creatures burst through a hole in the wall at the back of the cave. That's what's been making pork pie of the PCs' enemies. Based on this news, the party piles bodies up to



block the hole. Unfortunately, this rouses one of the creatures and it begins clawing its way through the fleshy barrier. The creature is fearsome, with two massive claw-tipped limbs, the body of a giant lobster, and a tentacled mouth.

The creature latches onto the druid and claws, then grapples him. The stalwart dwarf fends off the poison now swimming through his body and counterattacks. It's a tough battle, but the PCs manage to kill the creature by pretending to flee and retreating to a more defensible position, where they whittle the monster down.

Flush with victory, the party ventures back into the shaman cave and begins looting. Roscoe the rogue discovers a secret door. He opens it and finds a short passage with a solid oak door blocking the end.

Curious, the party opens it. This is when the paladin goes down.

The room beyond the door contains a bubbling fountain filled with fetid water. The walls are covered in more shaman runes and fetishes. The newest party member jumps into the fountain and frolics. The druid joins him, as does the paladin's goblin servant. Meantime, the mage casts detect magic and realizes there are two magic signatures in the room. One is the fountain. One is something big and invisible in the corner.

The rogue runs up to the invisible thing and touches it. It's cold, damp, and spongy. The paladin comes over to investigate, as does the druid. This forces the beholder(!) to attack, making him visible. A ray shoots out of one eyestalk. And faster than you can say "pile of gray dust," the paladin is hit and turned into a pile of gray dust. This, just after acquiring some fine full-plate armour from the orc leader minutes ago, the party's best treasure since the campaign start.



Everyone flees. Except the mage, who takes a moment to disbelieve. The beholder aims an eyestalk at him. The mage flees.

Back to the safety of the entrance, the mage realizes the beholder was not alive. It was dead. It was an undead zombie beholder. In a cave. The party retreats back to camp.

Counting their losses, the survivors consider themselves lucky and head back to Phandalin. It takes three days to return home. On the road back they meet a mercenary - Jason's new PC - and he joins up with the party.

Back at the mining town, the group convalesces at the inn. They drink heavily. It's time to break out my new carousing table (I've included it at the end of this issue).

The dwarf wakes up the next morning with no memories, naked, and lying beside the chewed-up body of a humanoid. The dwarf's face and hands are covered in blood.

I forgot to mention that, back at the fountain, the fighter received a permanent hit point after his swim.

And the dwarf earned an intense fear of orcs. This is unfortunate, because the dwarf's most hated foe is orcs. This must have really messed up the dwarf, because the body he woke up beside was that of an orc.

Roscoe the rogue wakes up with a new tattoo. Rolling a d6, Jeff gets a 6. Roscoe is now the proud bearer of a unicorn tattoo.

The mercenary wakes up with vague recollections about hearing a terrible secret. But he can't remember the details.



The mage gave all his money to someone with an incredible money-making scheme. The guy has left town.

The half-orc barbarian, who makes the dwarf very uneasy, did not drink, he just caroused. So he wakes up with purse, skin, and dignity intact.

We end the session there, with the party ready to follow up a lead back down the Triboar Trail, questing for a ruined watch tower.

I think we won't play now for another month. In two Fridays is Halloween, so we can't play that night. November 14 will likely see our next gaming.



# Making Undead Cool Again

*Johnn Four*

This month's [RPG Blog Carnival](#) is "Things That Go Bump in the Night", and is hosted by [Of Dice and Dragons](#).

Undead are boring. We've gamed them so much they're predictable and common. But for the fantasy city campaign I'm planning, I'm adding undead. Lots of undead. And I have a plan to make them cool, interesting, and scary again.

Here's my plan.

## Give Them Leaders With a Mission

The first thing I'm doing is hitting up my bucket list. As I mentioned issues ago, I have a wishlist of cool gaming moments, elements, and products I want to GM before I roll my last die.

I keep this wishlist in a small Field Notes square grid notebook. If an idea hits me away from home, I'll add it to Evernote, and then transcribe it into the notebook. I've just started this practice. Before, I had only had [a blog post](#) and some notes spread around in different books. Now I have just one simple notebook. And hopefully I fill it with new ideas fast. One can never have enough inspiration.

So in my wishlist are a bunch of monsters I want to run in upcoming campaigns. I scratched tarrasque off last campaign. That bad boy



co-destroyed Riddleport in the grand finale. I've got many more critters on my list to go.

And I'm taking a half dozen or so for my new game and making them undead. These creatures will be the leaders of different undead factions operating within the city. While each amazing monster chases its own agenda, they also pursue a terrible common objective. This gives me my bucket list, campaign plot, and city design elements all on a delicious zombie platter.

The tip I'd like to pass on to you is to revitalize your undead by combining them with other creatures and monster types to surprise your players. A platoon of githyanki ghosts dive-bombing in on flying zombie dolphins might just catch the PCs unawares.

Give your undead a driving urge or motive, too. Switch up the classic situation where they are just lying around for centuries waiting to animate or escape. Instead, have them animate and escape pre-campaign. Then give them some form of leadership and a purpose for the PCs to tangle with during the campaign.

Maybe the mummy storm giant wants revenge. The lich beholder wants to resume his foul arcane experiments. And the death knight black dragon has some lands to re-conquer.

Give undead in your game a role greater than XP salad and a side of ribs. Make them smart and organized. And have them pursue an evil plan with the intense focus only an angry alien mind can muster.



## Give Them Society

Skeletons keep whacking until they're a pile of bones again. Zombies shuffle along until their legs get cut out from under them. Ghouls and ghosts just attack until fed. Where's the roleplaying? The intrigue? The plot?

For this campaign, I'm giving the horde some culture. I might even teach the yoghurt heads some manners. I'm using my 3-Line Culture technique to create several factions with interesting identities and roleplaying opportunities.

I'll give each faction a monstrous undead leader, who will influence their faction's:

- Goals
- Membership makeup
- Action style

With culture and aims designed, I'll give the undead intra-horde conflicts on three different levels:

- **Species vs. species** (e.g., dogs hate cats, vampires hate \_\_\_)
- **Leader vs. leader** (territory and resource disputes, strategy disputes, and rival vendettas and hatred – a terrific fruit punch of strife!)
- The horde's **common goal** and what tribe or faction wins the big prize first

Last, and perhaps the best way to make undead interesting again in this campaign, is they can all think and talk. Even the skeletons will become NPCs. And the party can interact, roleplay, scheme, and conflict with them all as they see fit.



## Give Them Unexpected Mechanics

If sentience and personality aren't enough to surprise and entertain players, I have two more game mechanics I'm going to layer on.

### Infection

Undead are contagious. That should terrify even priests and paladins, because there's going to be at least three different kinds of infection:

- **Bite me.** A good solid bite should make walking dead out of at least a couple party members.
- **You'll make a great dad.** Riffing off the recent Alien article, some undead will lay their eggs into PCs. A red dot means you're going to be a parent!
- **Geiger counter.** Speaking of Aliens and the late artist H.R. Giger who inspired them, some undead will emit radiation that erodes your life force until you are one of them.

The infection mechanics, I think, will not only change the tone of the campaign to one of fear and horror, but will transform the setting and nature of gameplay.

First, I'll create an infection meter. It will climb as the campaign winds on and the undead spread, making the area ever more dangerous to trespass. Just having infectious undead means they become a dynamic campaign factor, a measurable tension, and a looming doom.

Second, the PCs will have to rethink their hack'n'slash approach. It's one thing to grind toe-to-toe with skellies and then take their loot, but it's another when that fight means you wake up the next morning with no skin and a rattle when you walk.



## Evolution

The second mechanic has the undead evolving rapidly over time. It's another tension meter pulling at the players to act smart and fast.

Lower undead transform into higher undead. Skeletons and zombies become ghouls and ghouls become ghosts and reapers. Did you ever play the board game Titan, where monsters travel the board and evolve? That's the type of thing I'm thinking of.

And here's where I need your help. I'm struggling to figure out an elegant mechanic for this evolution. Is it time based? Or based on kills?

Or maybe it's a terrifying family tree based on infections and spawning more. A multi-level mummification pyramid scheme.

If this was your campaign, how would you have the undead become tougher and more powerful and evolve while the PCs try to survive? Hit reply and let me know.

## Wrapping Up

Modify your undead in your next campaign to catch your players off-guard. Give the creatures cultures, personalities, and new mechanics. Nothing says you can't change things up and make your campaign special this way. Remember, flying zombie dolphins are NPCs too.



# Show, Don't Tell

*Raldog*

Thank you for the link to [“How To Be A Better Player”](#). I've been GMing a group of guys who only liked hack'n'slash. Absolutely no roleplaying whatsoever on their part, only on mine. A couple of guys actually said roleplaying was “kinda weird,” but was okay because it was different. I had, and still have, no response to that.

I had gotten to where I didn't really plan our games anymore since all they wanted to do was to fight. I've been playing for 30 years, so I know how to provide fun things to do, but if the party doesn't want to do them, doesn't take the bait, or worse yet, completely ignores the bait, what can I do? I've hated hack'n'slash forever, and here I was doing it.

Anyway, one of the main roleplaying haters was tired of my once-a-month game, so he decided he was going to try running his own game, which he promised would be more often than mine. I didn't have a problem with that.

**Step 1:** The new GM has never allowed an evil PC in the game. Ever. He's been playing 25+ years, so it took quite a bit of convincing on my part, but he eventually allowed me to roll up a neutral evil sorcerer. I instructed him that I would never turn on my fellow PC's. That's not how you have fun!

**Step 2:** The first time we sat down, and he began roleplaying as GM, 30 seconds into the session I did the same exact thing he has



always done to me. “Naw!! Don’t care! Nope! I don’t care what he says. I’m Not Roleplaying.” Everybody else at the table laughed because they remembered him doing those things, only he didn’t. He actually denied he had said such things. That went on for about 30-45 seconds, then I showed them fools how roleplaying was done. Including him.

**Step 3:** Right off the bat we were employed by a casino owner who had us try to collect from some people who owed him money, which we did, but boy, were they tough. Almost too tough. While we were fighting the bad guys, I made it a point to roleplay my attacks and trash talk.

On our way back to the casino I began telling the party the casino owner set us up. He was trying to kill us by having us go against people who weren’t playing. Well, we weren’t going to play that either!

We confronted the casino owner by threatening him and telling him if this was going to be amateur hour then he’d need to double our pay, and pay us up front. The GM and I roleplayed that entire conversation, which took about 5 minutes. The rest of the party just watched in awe, and were grateful for the money.

**Step 4:** Our next mission took us to the docks, where we promptly got into a fight with some folks who didn’t think they owed the casino anything. The last enemy standing was kicking our butts. We weren’t taking him down. Only one other enemy was alive, but he was on the ground and bleeding out. When it became my turn I grabbed the last enemy’s attention by yelling at him, and when he looked my way, I punched my dagger through his dying friend’s



head. Then I told the enemy to lay down his weapon, which he did. My group still did nothing but watch.

**Step 5:** We tied up the last guy, and after questioning him, I sliced open his face and instructed him to tell others there is a new group handling collections for the casino.

**Step 6:** We instituted a no-weapon policy in the casino, which everyone minded except for a couple of members of the City Watch. We roleplayed the “Don’t wear your weapon in here ever again” conversation, which was pretty tense, but they got the message. We spoke to their boss, and we instructed him that if any of his men wore their weapons into the casino ever again, there were going to be problems, official business or not. That conversation took about 10 minutes, and one other player actually joined in.

**Step 7:** One night, immediately after closing, some thugs attacked us by kicking open the doors and breaking through the windows. While the fight was going on, during my turn I was yelling about how much those doors and windows were going to cost, and that they were going to repay us with their blood. We won the fight and cut off the head of the boss thug. One of the other party members suggested we load the dead bodies onto a wagon and leave it in front of the compound the thugs were associated with. Finally the group was learning how to roleplay.

During my games there is a LOT of conversation about all kinds of stuff which has nothing to do with the game. There was so much action that they weren’t playing video games on their laptops (because the fights are fun), but now that they’re learning how to roleplay maybe that trend will end. We’ll see.



We haven't played my game yet, but so far, three of the players want to change their alignments from good to evil, including Mr. I'm Not Roleplaying. They now know how to make D&D fun, but unfortunately, I couldn't properly voice how that should be done. I could only show them. The website you've shared explains more succinctly than I ever could. I have passed the link onto my group.

I love your blog, but the thing I love most is your game summations. I love reading those. Thanks Johnn. No matter what, you've made my game better in more ways than you can possibly imagine.



# How to Create a Critical Path Walkthrough

*Johnn Four*

I initially wrote this article for a video game development website. However, I thought you would be interested in this technique as a useful GM tool. Hopefully it's easy for you to replace the video game angle with tabletop RPG in your head as you read. The ideas should port right over.

## What is a Critical Path Walkthrough?

Wikipedia says a critical path is “the longest necessary path through a network of activities.” In game terms, it's the longest path through your game a player needs to take to complete your game.

However, I like to look at it another way: **What's the shortest route your player can take to see the end screen?**

Before you leave the planning stages of your game, take a few minutes to plot its shortest course. This surfaces important information about your design and gives you a chance to make course corrections before investing time in coding and game assets.



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# Why Create a Critical Path Walkthrough?

Walkthroughs help you understand your own game better from a player's point of view. It's an objective look at your creation - normally tough to do - and so a valuable tool in your dev tool belt.

## Test Progression

Use your walkthrough to play your game on paper from just a progression point of view to see the experience you're about to unleash. For example, does your walkthrough tell a great story? Or is it disjointed, boring, or maybe incomplete?

## Journey Map

A walkthrough works like a map. Travel your game with your map in hand to see what you're putting your players through. Does gameplay progress smoothly, or does it feel a bit random and confusing? Are there spots of friction, no fun zones, and WTF moments?

## Find Gaps

Look for gaps. Why would players leave the planet by buying the worst ship when their coffers brim from the previous stage? Story-up the humble ship mandatory requirement or plan for the players buying a palace on rockets.

With the optional sliced away like cellulite, can players meet a stage boss too soon?

Walkthroughs show you the minimum route, which means players might not have the prereqs they need to progress, or they might have too much power too soon and play unchallenged.



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## Discover Dead Ends

Discover dead ends, infinite loops, and cul-de-sacs. Your map will reveal these game killers and more. Even on paper, you can spot grinding or loops.

I recently played Steve Jackson's CYA book, *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain*. After crossing the river I got stuck in a loop, was hitting the same four-way intersection, and couldn't penetrate deeper, even though I tried every exit. Frustrating.

## Test Transitions

Something underrated in games is transitions. These are subtle, but so important. A great transition frames upcoming gameplay. It sets the right expectations by the signals it sends.

If your game fails to deliver, or serves up something else, players will bail. Your design might seem logical with a smooth progression. Your cut scenes might all make sense. But test this against your critical path to see if players can do things in the wrong order, miss transitions, or fork the wrong way after great transitions.

## Find Design Bugs

Bugs where players can make not one more step in your game without restarting will kill. They kill the fun. And they kill your game. Walk your map and test each progression.

Do players have the info and motivation they need to continue? Do their toons have the equipment, abilities, and power to progress? Or do surprise shortcuts put people too far into your game too early, unprepared?



## **Time Estimate**

Something a bit more prosaic, a critical path walkthrough gives you an estimate of minimum game play time. It also gives you time per stage, letting you know if there are uneven or poor pacing moments.

## **Marketing**

And something not often thought of, a walkthrough helps promote your game. Don't wait to see if a fan creates one. Do it yourself and spread the word it exists. This will help stuck players, add credibility to your title, and give you more content online for people to find and discover your game.

## **How to Create a Critical Path**

Only document gameplay essential to finishing the game. What's mandatory to reach the end screen? Cut away the optional.

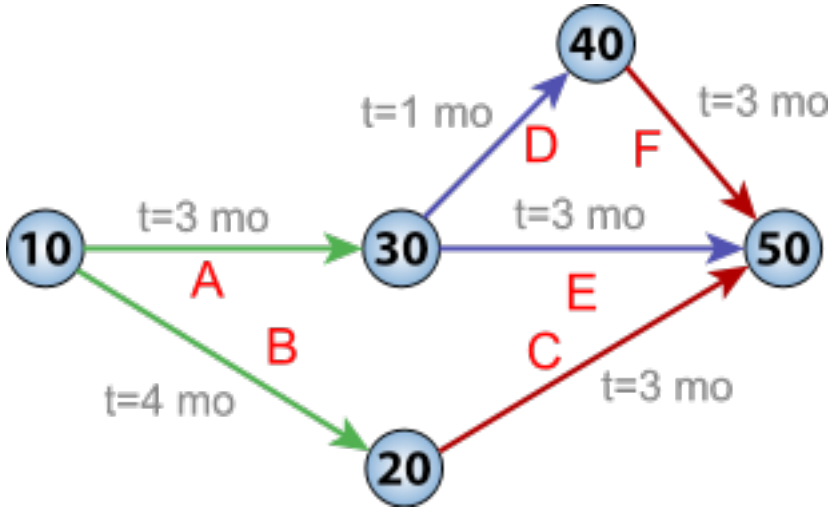
### **Step 1**

Divide your game into sections. Acts, chapters, levels, screens, whatever logical way you've chunked out your game.

### **Step 2**

Draw the sections. Make a map.

Start with your opening encounter or screen. Then draw circles for each new major game section, in order of critical path play. Connect circles with lines where players can move from one section to another.



Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical\\_path\\_method](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical_path_method)

### Step 3

Now, walkthrough your game at this 10,000-foot level.

- Are all essential acts, chapters, levels, and screens on the critical path? If so, what does the progression look like?
- Anything missing? Look for gaps, bypasses, and stuff buried in optional play that needs to migrate into the critical path.
- Any waste? Needless excess also kills fun.
- Any loops or frustrating dead ends?
- What's the story like? Grab an empty doc and write the terse story of the critical path. Then decide if it's complete and interesting, or if you need to add or subtract to improve it.
- How's the pacing feel?



At this most simple view, you can fix a lot with your design before wasting resources fiddling with the smaller bits.

## Step 4

For each step in your map, note dependencies. What does the player and toon need to progress? Also top-line what players must do in each scene or screen. Step back and see how this sits with you. Look for repetitive play, such as similar quests back-to-back.

## Step 5

Now we get granular. Break sections and levels into their distinct screens, locations, events. It might be room-by-room, or a more abstract screen or encounter series. Use your map, and break its areas into their atomic gameplay scenes.

## Step 6

Step back again. Do a quick walkthrough of each section. Repeat the checks in step 3 to spot bad gameplay.

Also check logical end points such as milestones, quest completions, level-ups, and achievements. You're looking for logic problems, dependency issues, and pacing.

For example, does an important quest happen too fast while a minor quest goes on for too long? Does the player reach a milestone in gameplay that's out of synch with story or toon advancement?

Are there multiple or parallel paths through your game? If so, challenge the design of each. Would your game be better if you merged sub-critical or non-critical paths? Would your game improve if you cleaved a certain part into optional gameplay?



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## Step 7

Now we're getting closer to the traditional walkthroughs you see posted online or written in books. Plot out the specific actions players must take to walkthrough each screen, location, scene, encounter, or event.

In sandbox situations, run through the basic actions players can take. For example:

- Move
- Talk
- Attack
- Open/Search/Smash/Close
- Use skill or ability

Test these core actions against expected current toon states. Look for problems and fix. Also look for repetitive tasks, grinding, and dull gameplay.

## Step 8

Estimate the time each encounter will take to complete. Add times up to get an estimated critical path total. How do you feel about that time? Give it the Goldilocks treatment: too much, too little, or just right? View this through player, game dev, and resource requirements lenses.

*Tip:* When you build and run your game, time-play again to see how accurate your initial estimates were. Use this feedback to improve your next estimates.



## Build Walkthroughs First

A critical path walkthrough of your game, whether done on paper or in charting software, helps you see your game more objectively, from an experiential perspective. Focusing on what's essential to see your end screen gives you feedback on how your game flows, how your story matches up to toon and gameplay advancement, and if the minimum sequence of play creates gaps or dead ends.

This diagnostic tool will save you time and money because you can spot problems in moments and fix them before digging into coding and asset pipelines.

If you update your critical path walkthrough again just before you ship, as a final check, you can also publish the walkthrough online as another marketing tactic to draw more attention to your game.

Try it out and let me know how it goes!



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# Getting Back in the Game

Da' Vane

RPT reader Paul sent this request about jumping back into the hobby:

*I thought of an article I would read - "Been Away Too Long - How To Come Back To The Game You Love." I am in my mid-forties and haven't been involved in the RPG scene in awhile mostly due to family, raising kids, etc. I want to not only play but run games. Any suggestions would be welcome. :)*

*- Paul*

Roleplaying Tip reader Da' Vane has been going through similar issues, and she has the following advice. If anybody else has suggestions about how to Get Back in the Game, please drop me a note. Take it away, Da' Vane!

Hi Paul,

This subject is a matter close to my heart - I have been trying to get back into the game for a while.

## Rediscovering D&D

Now is a great time to get back into RPGs. It is the 40-year anniversary of Dungeons and Dragons, and Wizards of the Coast



have decided to celebrate this with the 5th Edition of Dungeons and Dragons.

In the aftermath of the Edition Wars, which started when 3.x was released in 2000, and escalated even further with 4th Edition in 2008, it can be a confusing time to get back into D&D since there are so many options.

Dungeons and Dragons 5th Edition is a good place to start, because you are keeping up with others as far as the release schedule and learning curve goes. Virtually everyone is a new player with this new system.

The Starter Set with the introductory adventure, *The Lost Mine of Phandelver*, is a good way to get into game. You can also grab the [D&D Basic Rules for free](#) and start playing 5th Edition for your own campaign, assuming you don't mind winging things a bit or cribbing content from other sources.

## What if I Don't Want D&D or the 5th Edition?

If you find Dungeons and Dragons 5th Edition isn't for you, a quick visit to [D&D Classics](#) allows you to check out some of the other versions available.

You can also look at the D&D-esque [Pathfinder Roleplaying Game](#) by Paizo, which is based on D&D 3.5. You can check out [a free version of the rules](#) before investing in any of the books.

Older editions of D&D are also popular these days. The Old School Revival (OSR) movement dedicates themselves to preserving and recreating the earlier versions of D&D. Described as retro-clones,



you can find one of the most common ones, Swords & Wizardry, for free [at Mythmere Games](#).

For non-D&D games, check out [FATE](#) and [Savage Worlds](#), excellent, multi-genre, rules-light games.

You can find many other games at DriveThruRPG. Most publishing companies have PDFs of their systems and supplements available here. You can also find interesting things in the [free products section](#) as companies like to release lite versions of their systems for potential customers to try.

## Other Ways to Play

All of this assumes you have a gaming group. If you are having trouble finding a group, check Johnn's guide to the top online Player Finder services and tips for finding offline groups, [Filling the Empty Chair](#).

What if gaming around a table is not an option for you? For many, online gaming is a good substitute for tabletop games, allowing you to talk and play with gamers from all around the globe. [Roll20](#) is a good online virtual tabletop.

You might also look into playing by email (PBeM) games. A good site for this is [PbeM Players](#). It has a vibrant community of PBeM gamers. In addition, you can always find out how to run your own PBeM games, which might be another way to engage friends and family who have scheduling issues when it comes to attending a social session.



## Commitment Issues

One problem I have is trying to get my friends to take me seriously whenever I raise the topic of running a game for them. With disparate hobbies, schedules, and priorities, getting anyone to commit to anything is annoying.

The number one question always asked is: who else is going? Few want to be the only one to do something, and it is too easy to let the idea slide unless you can nail them down. People don't want to commit to something they are not sure they will like, and there is always competition from other activities.

So organise something social and less intensive to start with, particularly with non-gamers. Try board games, card games, and similar fun-related hobbies to build a gaming habit.

Once your friends and family are used to a social group, you can direct them towards different activities that lead up to you running your own game for them to try it out.

Whatever you do, the trick is to have patience and never give up. The last thing you want to do is alienate people by being too pushy for them to game with you. This will make the entire task that much harder. Try to remain positive, engage your friends and family with your hobby, and see who takes an interest.

## Conclusion

There are many ways to get back into gaming. Finding GMs and players can be tricky, so sometimes you need to look towards playing the long game. If you can't find a group, create one. And if you can't find gamers, then look at how you can spark the gaming bug within people you know.



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# GM Toolbox: Cementing, Shifting, Delegation

Rickard Elimää

<https://plus.google.com/u/0/116235159947041206206/>

[Comment from Johnn: The following article is based on a discussion I had with Rickard Elimää, where I asked him the following question:

*RPGs are interactive, so we can't get the finely groomed and polished story of a book or movie. So I guess my larger question is, what methods can a GM use to help produce those great emotional moments a writer has the luxury of crafting, especially through rewrites?*

Rickard responded with great insight, and I have compiled the content into an article for your gaming edification. Take it away, Rickard!]

## Sequential Play: Cementing, Shifting, and Delegation

I'm playing with either fish tanks, sequential play, or collaborative storytelling. Each one has got its own advantages, and I'm even mixing them up in the same session. *Feng Shui* (sequential play) and *InSpectres* (collaborative storytelling) will sound the same when I'm playing them.



It's hard to analyze myself about how I game master, but I remember one specific episode when we were playing Svavelvinter (an adventure module; Eng. Winter of Sulphur) when I clearly stated several times to the players that it was going to be a hard railroad. One player said afterwards that he felt their choices mattered. How did I manage to do that?

I can see three techniques that I use:

- Cementing
- Shifting
- Delegation

All three are about how to structure an adventure by how different information is presented, to be able to steer the players in a way so they can get a sense of the plot, setting, or history. Which one depends on what effect the game master wants to achieve. **I'm mostly into delivering a surprise through giving the players an insight.**

The definition of sensation, as one of the reasons of why to participate in a task:

*“To experience something. To escape from reality. To get an insight or to live out a different perspective.”*

If you've ever watched the movie *Man From Earth*, you know what I'm saying when I talk about seeing things in another perspective.

## Sequential Play

Sequential play is a way of structuring how the game is played, very similar — if not the same — as designing a game system. If I want to present a sensation for my players, I will go with either:



- 
- **Linear Play:** Pre-written places of interaction followed in one order.
  - **Assembly Play:** Pre-written places of interactions that can be executed in any order.
  - **Ballistic Play:** Pre-written start and finish, with the players doing whatever in between.

Alternatively, I will go with a combination of them. For example, pre-written places of interactions that can be executed in any order with a fixed start and end. Note that the place of interaction can be an event happening, a conversation, or an actual place where the players discover something.

Also note that anything can happen in that place. So even if I'm going with linear play, the players can still interact the way they want in that particular scene. I remember one theoretic discussion over at the Swedish roleplaying game community years ago, where one suggested the *picture frame*:

*“The player can paint whatever they want, but not going outside the frame.”*

I thought this was a nice analogy for one type of structure for an adventure, but it can also be applied for a place of interaction. An example I hate to use is when you investigate a haunted house. You could run out the house and call the cops at the first sign of weirdness, but that's not how you should play *Call of Cthulhu*. That's painting outside the (often unsaid) frame.

Why do I hate to use that example, even if it shows clearly what I mean? Because I think it's a flaw in the scenario design if you allow that option.



I will talk about three techniques in three different sections:

- Cementing
- Shifting
- Delegation

I will do that by sharing some play experiences and my thoughts about how I should handle them. Which one I'm going to start with, because I mentioned the CoC example, is now obvious because you need to cement certain things to have a better success at delivering a certain sensation.

## Cementing

An acquaintance contacted me and wanted feedback for a convention scenario. The setup was straightforward:

The players played a family with a cruel and abusive father during the 18th century. The cruelty is portrayed at the beginning of the scenario through several scenes, and it should lead up to one member killing the father. The father awakes as an undead and starts to create an army of zombies by brainwashing the citizens of the village, either by magic or by killing them and raising them as undead. What shall the players do to stop that from happening?

Well, what should I do to make this happen? There are a couple of events bound to happen, but it doesn't start until the father is dead. So that's a bit I cemented: *I changed the scenario so the father was already dead*. I wrote on each character how they killed the father. One pushed him over an edge to fall into rocks into the sea. Another poisoned him. A third... well, you get the picture.



What had happened was he had risen only to be killed by another family member. The only one innocent was the one playing the father's doctor, and I wrote on the doctor's character sheet that he should investigate what happened (which, amusingly, led 3 out of 4 times to him being framed and often killed by the others).

We started out playing with all characters sitting in a house. It was raining outside and the dad had died. I then took the liberty to jump backwards in time and frame some scenes to show the behaviour of the abusive father. I cemented that too.

When all this was done, I returned to the house in the rain. The players were thinking the dad was dead. Suddenly, the door is thrown open and the dad is standing in the rain, all wet, walking in like nothing had happened. Imagine the players' faces. Imagine the unease they suddenly felt.

In the adventure suite *Svavelvinter* the linear story goes as follows:

Characters discover that a temple is abandoned. They are contacted by a group of local barbarians. They are sent to retrieve magic items. An undead king awakes, wanting his sword back, which is one of the magic items they stole. They go to a castle where an evil cult had their residence to kill the cult members. So why should the characters want to go to the temple? Why should they want to retrieve the magic items? Why should they go to the castle of that evil cult?

The adventure itself gives out a couple of goals and character suggestions. One is a priest who wants to contact the temple - only to discover the priests have been kidnapped (by the cult). Another has a mission to look for a person. A person who the character later finds out joined a cult.



One player, who had already played the adventure, came up with the idea of playing a pathfinder guiding the characters. (And why would a player want to replay an adventure? Because of the sensation the adventure's setting brought combined with my game mastering.)

So what should be cemented to not make the characters run away and contact the police in Call of Cthulhu?

- **Cementing through the use of unavoidable scenes.** If something must happen, start with it. It sets the tone of the game.
- **Cementing through the use of background information.** People will begin to expect something. Use this expectation to your advantage. The example above shows how you can break the expectation to gain an effect.
- **Cementing through the use of goals.** This makes the players believe that it's what they want when it's really the adventure itself that controls what they strive for.

## Shifting

Shifting is another structure I use when I do sequential play. Playing out a story in roleplaying games is done through scenes, where a new scene occurs when there is a (significant) change in either place or time. There are two types of scenes:

**Resting:** These scenes wait until the characters do something, such as entering a place, visiting a person, triggering a situation, or fulfilling any other kind of requirements.

**Delayed:** These scenes will happen no matter what the players do but will show up later. Something will happen after the second day



has passed, or they will be contacted by an organization because of the character's (cemented) agenda.

As previously mentioned, in *Svavelvinter*, the characters got hold of an artifact sword. This triggered the awakening of a skeleton king. During any point of the adventure, the king will step in, grab the sword, and go away. (It was a setup for the metaplot later to be revealed.)

I played *Svavelvinter* because I wanted to playtest my now published game *Matiné*. The characters got involved in a skirmish, and the game system said a combat should come to an end after 5-6 turns, otherwise the game master had to narrate its ending. Again, a skirmish. The possibility it was going to end in 5-6 turns was slim.

So when it was time for me to end the combat, I remembered the skeleton king wanted his sword back. A huge army of skeletons flooded the battlefield, making all participants flee or be killed. A huge knight with old armor covered with cobwebs went up to the character that had the sword, looked at him, took the sword without a word, and went off. I could have done this scene at any time, but here seemed an appropriate moment.

What I find interesting is that I tend to use shifting while playing other forms of play structures, like collaborative storytelling or an open-ended fish tank. The fish tank is a model where the relations between factions (an umbrella term I use for events, items, people, and groups) ARE the scenario. It's used to play out mysteries and intrigues, and the players discover the story by having the game master reveal the relations. I use the revelation as a reward for interacting with other people.



When the players talk to someone, I look down at the relationship map that is typical for the fish tank. I choose one or more relations to be revealed and also come up with a reason why the person knows that relation. Someone can always have heard of another relation in form of a rumor.

I talked about three different styles of structures within sequential play: linear, assembly, and ballistic play. This is one part of assembly play, where you've got a lot of scenes but they can occur in any order.

- **Shifting can only occur with the right type of preparations.** Placing a band of bandits in one place will make them fixed. Having a band of bandits to throw in at any time, that's shifting. Having events waiting to happen at the right moment, that's shifting. The players will still go through the scene, but when you feel it's appropriate.
- **Shifting can be used to adapt to the players' plans and actions to reward them.** Make them feel smart. Make them feel like they contributed with something. Never take that feeling away from them.
- **Shifting can be used to add twists.** Playing out a large battlefield between humans? How about throwing in a third party of undead?

## Delegation

I remember when I was in my teens and the players started out imprisoned. I thought out 13 different ways of fleeing. The players did the 14th. That made me realize some things shouldn't be prepared.



I noticed that if I ever had a solution to a problem I threw in front of the players, then the possibility for me to block the players' ideas would increase. Why didn't I like that the game master should come up with solutions to skill contests in D&D 4E? Yeah, you probably understand my answer to that.

So I only come up with the problems, but never the solutions. When I read about bangs, I got a similar notion. Only throw in bangs at the players. See how they react. React, to take a stand where your character is. It's one way of helping out the portrayal of the characters.

When I prepare a sequential story, I do that to bring a sensation to the players, but they can also give themselves a sensation by portraying a character. Nothing in my preparations hinders the players, but unlike bangs, it doesn't help either. On the other hand, you could cement personality traits or relations between the characters if you want to put focus on either reacting through personality or creating relationship drama.

So what does this have to do with sequential play? The immersive experience through the sensation of another person's perspective might seem to have little to do with it, but the process of not thinking up solutions does. Even if a scene is bound to happen, when I game master, the players can still choose from where to enter that scene and where to end it. I will leave that up to them.

When I play *Feng Shui*, it's going to start with me cementing some goals through the fight at the beginning of the session and then letting the players take their own way to the fight in the end. Sometimes I have scenes to throw in, assembly style. Sometimes



I do a pure ballistic play where the players have a picture frame to paint whatever they want, as long as they are inside the frame.

*This Is Pulp* is collaborative storytelling, but it's also ad hoc linear play. All the participants will make up tropes - **People, Rumors, Events, and Places - as P.R.E.P.** The players then form a goal to follow together, based on the tropes, and the game master then uses all this to come up with an antagonist. That person then frames scenes using the tropes to create dangers for the characters.

The players can do anything to overcome the danger but only affect what's happening in the scene. The game master will still steer the characters, and the story, towards ending with a fight between the antagonist and the characters. The game takes 1.5 hours to play, so it's not like you need diversity in how the frames are set.

- **Let the players take the responsibility of portraying their characters.** This will add to the general atmosphere for the session. You do, however, need the players to buy into this way of playing. That's why I used the word *responsibility*.
- **Let the players come up with ways to come to the end.** This will ease the burden for you as a game master, and lets you have less prepared.
- **Let the players take care of coming up with the solution to the problems they face.** It will make the game master more open to the players' solutions, but also make the players more involved.
- **Let the players take care of coming up with their own goals.** In *Svavelvinter*, I can see the game master saying, "Hey, you're going to fight an evil cult. I want you to come up with reasons to why you want that cult destroyed." It's their decision, but based on your premise.



# Sequential Play and Adventure Design

When I wrote these previous sections, I began to realize how close writing an adventure and these techniques were:

- **Sequential play:** Following the structure of a combat round.
- **Cementing:** Picking skills, setting the tone, choosing class, and race.
- **Shifting:** Creating a rule system that adapts to the players' ideas. The moves in *Apocalypse World* are an example of this.
- **Delegation:** Writing background and personality for their characters. Coming up with relatives.

So I wonder, can you create a whole game based purely on the structure of how you write an adventure, and why isn't this used more in roleplaying games?

## Sequential Play: Uncertainty, Investment, And Reincorporation

This is a really hard question to answer, possibly because it's a big one. If I paint in broad strokes, I would say uncertainty, investment, and reincorporation. Each one is a topic of its own.

Secrets and twists are good examples of uncertainties. Conflict is a third, which is why we see so many games having combat systems. You don't have to have conflicts to weave a good plot though, even if it's a common belief.

Investment can come in several different ways. Uncertainty is one of them, where it (hopefully) sparks curiosity to find out more. Making an effort to discover builds up the investment. Contributing



and taking a part in the game also builds investment. Having your choices made meaningful is yet another.

Reincorporation is something that Keith Johnstone talks about in *Impro*, but you can also find it in Dan “Community” Harmon’s Story Circle. You can add new things all the time, and that will bring uncertainty, but it’s not until you start to reincorporate what you previously experienced that the feeling of the story coming to an end begins.

And then you’ve got narrative techniques, themes that excite the audience, and similar things that are components of a good story. Like I said, it’s a hard question to answer. I began to think of some of my own successful experiences, and I wonder what things I use that I cannot see.

## Conclusion

I would say it depends. Sequential play is used to create a sensation for the players, and there you can control a lot through cementing and shifting. I should say a fish tank is instead about making the players’ decisions important by showing the consequences of their actions. The sandbox is about exploration. And finally, you’ve got collaborative storytelling where you thrive in creativity and the feel of togetherness.

So creating an emotional experience varies depending on what the players get from playing with you. The important part is to be able to mash story and game together, but also consider the players as a component in the game system and take them into account.



## Useful Links

- [Story Circle](#)
- My thoughts about [how Impro can be useful](#) for roleplaying games
- [Fish tank](#) (which you know about by now)
- Some more ideas about [combining story and game experience](#). (Journey is a perfect example of this.)



# How Would You Bootstrap Your World?

That's the question I asked in the GM Tips group, and there were several interesting responses.

Here's the original request I made:

*How would you bootstrap your world? I am creating a world for a new RPG campaign with my friends. The game rules have some links to the world, such as gods grant certain powers, cultures offer certain traits, etc.*

*I don't have time for weeks and months of detailed world building, as my friends would hang me to wait that long to start playing. So I'm wondering if there are methods or models for creating the basics and then iterating over time.*

And here are the tips from the GMs:

Use this completely fun mini-game before the main event. It's called [Dawn of the Worlds](#) and is free.

Use a pre-made setting that is light and portable to whatever rules you're using. For example, Beasts & Barbarians for Savage Worlds, Legend of Steel for Barbarians of Lemuria, or the "Point of light" ones. This saves tons of prep time to get started, but offers more than enough room to insert your own stuff piece by piece when necessary.



Plan out the culture pretty well. Make notes like NPCs for places that surround where the PCs are adventuring. This will tell you basic cultural norms. When the characters meet someone from that culture, you know what his culture is. Then adjust the NPC based on how well he would fit in.

Just define a small area with a single town or similar. Keep the PCs local for a while. Expand on it as they explore and when you get time between sessions. Make stuff up when put on the spot.

Build a story that would reduce the need for travel outside the starting culture, but start exposing them to touches of other parts of the world as you can.

Let the players do some of the defining as you go along. They decide to go to a town, so you ask “OK, what sort of town?” Let them throw in details and riff off that. If they define things in a way too favorable to them, throw in a “yes but.”

- Everyone in this town considers wizards to be gods.
- “Yes, but they sacrifice their gods at midsummer, and that’s tomorrow.”
- “There’s a diamond mine!”
- “Yes, but the dirt there is poisonous, which is why no food grows there, and why the zombies have moved in.”

There is an RPG called *Microscope*. It lets you play out a timeline for a setting and is great as a first session if you want players to influence it. It’s also interesting to play as a game in itself, and a great way to let players shape the tone of the world without them knowing too many details of what they’re going to meet.



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After you have the main themes, creation myths, races, geography, and overall history set up, ask players what they are most interested in doing. That helps you focus on a place and time. Then encourage players to help build up information. For example, one might create myths for her character's people. Another might create the calendar.

\* \* \*

Thanks to these bright GMs for their tips: Andrew Knighton, David Tannen, Dirk Collins, Jeffery Ingram, Josh Pearce, Marcus Burggraf, Robert Neaves.



# Random Table: So You Get Drunk at the Tavern...

At least one character in my new campaign likes to get hammered. Between adventures or while resting up between events, the PCs like to hit the tavern, chat with the locals to get new rumors, gamble, and drink.

Inspired by the [Hubris Carousing Table](#), I've created one of my own for random consequences when PCs choose to drink too much...

1. One-night stand with a half-orc. (Alternate: rival, enemy, least desirable partner.) 1-2: They are engaged. 3-4: They become parents in nine months. 5: PC acquires disease. 6: Enraged spouse eventually hunts PC down.
2. Became a drinking buddy with someone who shared an important secret. PC has forgotten a key piece of information though, and just remembers enough fragments to track down the secret if they work at it.
3. PC revealed a terrible secret to someone. Pick the worst person who could learn that secret. 1-2: PC doesn't remember who they told. 3-4: They remember who but don't know what they told. 5-6: They remember everything.
4. Picked a fight with someone they shouldn't have. 1-2: PC wins. 3-5: PC loses, wakes up with half hit points. 6: A draw, PC at 1 hit point.
5. PC sang a terrible song that offended almost everyone, including someone they'll regret offending.



6. PC and a drinking buddy broke into a place and stole something valuable. 1-2: Buddy has the loot. 3-4: PC has the loot. 5: Loot was buried in a place PC remembers. 6: Loot was buried in a place PC doesn't remember.
7. PC offended a witch, who cursed them.
8. PC bought the house several rounds. Total cost: 10d10 gp.
9. PC made a bet with someone they don't want to cross and lost. They must now perform a humiliating chore or act in public.
10. PC and 1d4 drinking buddies carried back to the tavern something large, something heavy, and something that belongs to the 1-2: Mayor, 3-4: Villain, 5-6: Archbishop.
11. PC woke up in puddle of vomit. 1-2: They also puked on someone else last night. 3-4: Vomit contains fingers. 5-6: It's not their vomit.
12. PC got a tattoo. 1-2: It's cool. 3-4: It's of a secret crush. 5-6: It's a unicorn.
13. PC got rowdy and was arrested. Must pay 10x10 gp fine for release.
14. PC was robbed and is missing the most valuable thing that was in their possession last night. 1-2: They have no memory of when it happened. 3-4: They remember when and the general circumstances. 5-6: They know who did it.
15. PC woke up naked and tied to a bed. 1-2: It's his bed. 3-4: It's not his bed. 5-6: It's in a monster lair.
16. PC woke up in the stocks in the city square.
17. PC woke up in the woods near town, naked. There's a dead, half-eaten carcass nearby, and there's blood on the PC's face and hands. 1-2: It's a deer carcass. 3-4: It's a skunk carcass. 5-6: It's a humanoid body.



18. PC woke up with his head stuck in a soup bowl.
19. PC joined a secret cult. 1-2: The cult is crazy but harmless. 3-4: The cult is crazy but dangerous. 5-6: The cult is dangerous, well-organized, and well-connected.
20. PC gave all his available money to a crazy scheme. 1-2: Money and schemer are long gone. 3-4: The schemer succeeds and returns in d4 weeks with 200% repayment. 5-6: Schemer returns in 1d4 days for more money and a strong quest hook.

Many results on this table are nasty. To make this fair, players must confirm with me their PC is getting drunk, and they'll know a table roll is coming up in the morning.

Thanks to Joseph Teller and Tor-Ivar Krogsæter for contributing ideas.



# How to Make Undead Scary

A little while ago I shared ideas on [how I'll make undead fun again in my new campaign](#). After years of GMing skeletons and zombies, I want to shake things up.

In response, several readers wrote in with great suggestions on the three themes I presented:

- Mission
- Culture
- Mechanics

Here are their ideas - maybe they will add some ghoulish spice to your campaign, as well.

## Infection & Spawning Ideas

*Andrew Y.*

As a method of evolving the undead, I like the idea of infection and spawning. I don't know exactly what you had in mind, but here are a few ideas.

### 1) Infection Evolution

More powerful undead can infect lesser undead. As in, a vampire can turn a zombie into a vampire thrall with a bite, or mind control, or



whatever. And slimy tentacle ghouls can lay their slimy eggs inside a vampire and turn it into a clutch of baby slimy tentacle ghouls.

Of course, zombies (now that they're intelligent enough to act as NPCs) don't want to be vampire thralls, and vampires don't want to be slimy tentacle ghouls/nests/breakfast buffets.

## 2) Spawning Evolution

Undead grow in power as they spread their curse or disease. A vampire with one thrall is little better than a zombie, but a vampire with one hundred thralls is a match for a soul-sucker shade. But any vampire thrall that gets its own vampire thralls gains that power for itself, it doesn't all funnel to the original sire.

And intelligent undead will be just as jealous and wrathful as mortals, so they won't just pool all of their resources under a single figure, at least, not on purpose.

## 3) Source Evolution

What if your undead were being driven, not just by a handful of powerful leaders, but by a natural (or unnatural) phenomenon? So, the undead evolve with time, but not necessarily with age, as dragons do.

A zombie spawned on Day 1 will have  $x$  power. On Day 5, that zombie will have  $x+4$  power (or  $5x$  power, whatever the pace is), but a zombie spawned on Day 5 will also have  $x+4$  (or  $5x$ ) power, even though it is freshly spawned and not yet "finely aged," because all of the undead are evolving based on the growing power of the phenomenon-source.



## 4) Ritual Evolution

The undead are static beings, in spite of their seemingly dynamic existence (being formerly dead and all). To evolve, they must individually undergo long, strenuous rituals that rip their rotting flesh to engorge their stiffened muscles, burst their decaying blood vessels as pure magical energy courses through them, or remodel their very skeleton as spines and spikes grow from spurs along their spines and arms.

## Create Energy Zones

*Joel Roush*

I thought about your undead evolution problem. Perhaps an interesting way to go is to have the low-level undead grow more powerful.

According to the D&D mythology, the undead are suffused and energized by energy from the Negative Plane. I conclude that the more negative energy present, the more powerful the undead.

As the undead horde of zombies and skeletons kills its way through the countryside, they create more low-level undead. As a result, the amount of negative energy present is greater. Therefore, the original horde of skeletons and zombies becomes augmented by this energy, strengthening them. Zombies get faster, skeletons earn extra attacks, etc.

So, not only is the undead horde greater in number, there are also “elite” undead among them. This is also a nice way to keep the fights interesting as your PCs get higher in level.



This strengthening can take on the form you mentioned in your blog post, evolving them into higher forms of undead - ghosts and such. For me, I'm not into this as much because I like the D&D mythology for the function and purpose of each type of undead creature.

For instance, ghosts are bound to specific location, a wight is made from a person of great vanity and desire who calls out to a demon upon his or her death, and a wraith is made from a person of great evil.

I think it's important to keep the different flavors of undead distinct so they can be used for different storytelling purposes.

## Think Long-Term

*Ashley*

I love your undead tips - they've inspired me and I think I have something special to run for my group next time we get together. I want to note two areas I see potential challenges with:

### 1) Giving Every Undead A Voice

Part of the mystique of the undead is the faceless, shambling horde. Sure, maybe the zombies will have differences between them as individuals (it's practically required now that one is overweight, one has long fingernails, and one is very strong, etc.) but the potent part of undeath is **“they don't listen, they don't care, and they don't stop.”**

You've got to be careful how you stick your personalities in - if you end up with a cowardly skeleton or an artiste ghoul, it either needs to be a plot point (“Maybe this one will help us!”) or else it needs to



somehow keep the theme of alien, unyielding, familiar, grotesque death.

However, and this is what inspired me: what if all of them do have a voice... and then the players realize they've been running into the one lone type which doesn't? Maybe someday they'll find out why ghouls only scream and never speak.

## 2) Game Balance

A mild note of caution on giving undead the ability to infect PCs with undeath, especially at low levels: it will raise the challenge of the encounter, possibly to an unbeatable level, if you don't do it carefully.

Even if it's just "don't roll a 1 on this save", someone's going to roll a 1 - and it'll probably be the party paladin or cleric, with my luck! If things go badly, you might end up with the players protesting, "But I don't want to play a skeleton for six levels!"

Some ideas for low-level consequences that hopefully keep the ick without the potentially expensive consequences:

### *Longer-Term Stuff*

When the character dies, he'll become a zombie, skeleton, or whatever bit him. Doesn't have to happen right now. Some players might be bothered by this. Some might not care. Either way, it removes the immediate "must go spend a lot of gold on a cure" impetus.

And it gives you the option of making no cure available - the players might just have to try not to die for the rest of the game, while engaging in the sorts of derring-do players usually perform, the



whole while with the knowledge they might turn on their friends if something happens.

Kind of dark, but it might be what your group likes.

## **An Unhealthy Connection To Death**

The character starts having nightmares, prophetic visions, seeing ghosts, etc. Useful to deliver plot points if you like a little supernatural in your info-sharing. No obvious way to remove it, but since it's passably useful (though under your control) the players probably won't try to remove it.

The important thing is not to forget you've cursed the bitten player(s). Nothing's worse than getting a character-altering boost and having everyone at the table forget about it!

## **A Benefit Of Some Sort**

The character now has a nose for the undead, his wound itches when they're around, etc. One could even grant a specialized ability of some sort. Track (Undead) might be amusing to see on a sheet.

Perhaps give it a downside (though not enough to make one of those "must find a cleric to remove this curse!" things). Maybe the undead seek the character out and try to persuade him to their side. Maybe he sees dead stuff all the time and it's really gross. Maybe he wakes up with a hit point or two less every night or his healing rate slows slightly.

## **PCs Can't Get Infected**

They're already dead and they just don't know it yet, or they've got the favor of the god of death, whatever. If you do this, make sure



to send lots of henchmen and NPCs their way to get infected right before their eyes, and don't tell them they don't get infected - make them roll for it, and when they roll 1s, pass them notes that say "Nothing happens... YET."

Keep the tension alive as long as possible, and if they start to question, let them dig into it as a matter of plot. This might not be such a good idea at higher levels, where True Resurrection is just a few gold away, but at lower levels, it might save your game. **Never let the outcome of the campaign rely on a single die roll.**

Just be sure you have a plan to remove this mystical protection once they hit the point where infection no longer holds appropriate terror for them. "Oh crap. Wee Jas says she can't protect us anymore, we're beyond the reach of her power."

## As Big As The Sum Of Its Parts

For the evolution idea, have the skellies visibly reconfigure themselves into bigger, badder monsters at the beginning of each fight with the PCs. They're intelligent, they presumably know how the other skellies died (give them little undead rats for spies), and they'll work to prevent themselves from dying in the same way.

The image of skeletons tossing each other rib bones and clacking their bones together to form massive, four-legged beasts as they prepare for the PCs is enough to make *my* skin crawl, at least!

Alternatively, take stats of a bigger, more powerful monster and apply them to the description of the weaker monster. Maybe the ghouls now have four attacks because they've sewn arms to themselves. Maybe the zombies are getting faster and smarter as the night wears on.



What will really make the players' skin crawl is the moment when the weaknesses start disappearing. "Crap! It's immune to fire!"

## They Absorb Others

*Manolo Sampaio*

There are creatures called Arcbound in *Magic: The Gathering*. They are more constructs than creatures. When one dies, the parts that make him can be transferred to the others on the field.

If you are planning to create a leader, why not use necromancers to heal the dead as the priests heal the living? And by this I mean, undead would take down targets to absorb what make them powerful... wings, extra limbs, more muscle.

Perhaps they are also continuously decaying, so they would need more and more parts to endure time.

## Less Is More

*Michael Garcia*

I have been thinking of the undead theme a lot lately, because my latest campaign (I have two running at present), which just started, will give them a main role. We're doing AD&D circa 1986 or so, and one villain in the region is a modified death master (from a *Dragon* article).

In one way, I agree with you. I want something more than the stock monsters (zombies, ho hum). On the other hand, I definitely do NOT want flying undead zombie dragon-minotaurs. My players and I love



the classic feel of “Night of the Living Dead,” and I want to give it to them.

The problem is that the monsters are so old and predictable. So I will put a twist on them, and cause them to evolve as you suggest. Yet the feel of the campaign will be much more realistic. Sometimes less is more (and this is one of those times).

I think I might approach undead evolution as follows:

First, the corpse will be animated like a zombie, but it will also be infectious from the start, so physical combat (or even contact) with it is dangerous. In the beginning, its bite is the real danger. As the corpse festers (after a few days), it may be able to scratch and infect PCs (claw attacks).

Side benefit: When a PC previously wounded by a claw attack now sees a claw attack can infect and kill, he will no doubt wonder if he is infected. Eventually, mere contact with the corpse’s infected fluids or blood may even infect PCs if they are splashed with the guts during combat.

Perhaps if they do more than 6 points of damage on one, they must save against poison (or perhaps they must save versus poison if they deal 4+ with an edged weapon or 6+ with a bludgeoning weapon).

Finally, when the creature’s guts liquefy, it may spawn a different creature entirely (a la “Aliens”), perhaps by using a PC or other human as a host. I have been dropping hints of some wyrm-like creature “pale as a grave worm.”

I have purposely blurred the wyrm/worm distinction, partially to raised doubts and confusion, but also to foreshadow some vile creature they may face. I imagine some ancient underground



creature (which is also the focus of a local cult) to be the source of the zombie infection. Perhaps it spawns little worms by means of the above evolution, though I'm not yet sure what purpose these have.

These zombie-things will not be stock monsters (that will cause confusion and doubt). They will evolve (only enhancing the confusion and doubt). Contact in any way will put PCs at risk (making them hesitant to engage... as befits a horror movie). This subtle approach should retain the desired horror atmosphere (that flying minotaurs and other high fantasy tend to destroy).

As for intelligence... this is tough. I think undead were originally so horrifying because intelligent people have been transformed into mindless (and sometimes cannibalistic) things. Giving them back their intelligence makes them less scary, not more. There are exceptions (vampires and ghosts), but smart skeletons are not scary to me (they're just brittle bad guys).

To preserve the gist of what you wrote, I will have the death master be intelligent (18 intelligence). Perhaps he can direct the actions of the undead, giving them no real intelligence, but a frightening appearance of group thought. For example, the zombies all stop their random meandering around the fields, turn as one toward the PCs, and simultaneously lumber toward them. That could be creepy.

On a related note, years ago I took my first stab at Gothic horror. I had some zombies in the cellars beneath this Dracula-esque castle on a cliff. I had done a serious build-up in true Gothic horror style, and these were the first supernatural creatures the PCs were encountering.



In the end, they were just zombies, but the atmosphere was thick. I needed them to find a certain item, and they suspected it was down there. Where to hide it?

I decided that since the undead were results of the villain's brainwashing experiments, there could exist a few that "went really bad." So in one of the underground cells, I had a zombie that was frantic and strong, slamming itself against the bars like a mental patient. This tiny twist horrified the players (much to my surprise and delight).

Though they had worked out a systematic way to kill zombie after zombie in that cellar, they all balked at going into that room.

PC to PC: "You want us to go IN there with THAT thing? Hell, no!" It was hilarious.

When they did enter, I decided I needed to capitalize on this. I doubled its hit points and attacks. It took three of them to manhandle this thing, and it dealt them savage blows before succumbing. They found the statue they sought, but they were so creeped out they beat a hasty retreat rather than stick around searching for treasure.

Even better, it raised serious questions. What the hell was that? Where did it come from? What is it doing down there? Are you telling me no one KNOWS it's down there?

The whole episode cast suspicion on all the good guys living in the castle, and it also raised the tension level. Great memories!



# Make It Uneven

*Jeremy Brown*

In *Mystara*, I believe it was, there was a type of double undead that appeared to be zombies, but when you killed them, they returned within like 1d3 rounds as a wraith rising from the decaying corpse. This made for a very nasty encounter, and a surprisingly difficult one for higher level players who discounted mere zombies.

As to how to increase your threat level throughout the game, I recommend not to increase it. Instead, make it uneven.

Create scripted areas and situations party level or lower. But create other areas of the campaign deliberately too tough. Give the PCs free reign. They will quickly learn to do research, gather information, cast divinations, and do whatever it takes to know what kind of combat they're walking in to and how to give themselves an edge. In the kind of campaign you described, I think this is a more realistic and faster way of handling difficulty.

The scripted railroad track-laden scenarios still ramp up with party level. But if the party goes to Joe's Bar at 4th level and gets their asses kicked, go to Joe's Bar at 7th level and gets their asses kicked, and then at 10th level finally survive the experience, it gives the PCs a lot of "Wow, we've progressed" moments. Further, if they kick Joe's Bar's ass at 9th level because of clever planning and forethought, it makes them feel good.

When I ran my horror campaign, there were two situations that illustrated this well. At 2nd level, my party entered a house with a monster that nearly performed a TPK. The party went back at 4th level, and again, near TPK. They did research, and took steps to



protect themselves. They went back at 6th level and discovered there were two of the monsters, not one. Finally, when they defeated the twin perils, they were happy. I was too. I had recycled the same area and the same monster for four different encounters.

The second situation involved a haunted water tower. The first two times the party went there they encountered only ghostly manifestations of two boys. However, once they stirred up the major evil entity of the town, the third time at the tower they encountered one of its servitors, a chuul. The chuul almost performed a TPK. My party, getting smart, bought fishing tackle and a spear gun. They used a heavy fishing net to entangle the chuul and then the spear gun to help kill it. They felt deeply vindicated by this maneuver, and it helped them to see the campaign world wasn't static.

You could do the undead as an increasing plague or infection. Perhaps the easiest way to do it would be just to make infection resistance more difficult over time.

Another way would be to make infection a simpler mechanic, akin to the massive damage save of d20 modern. If a character ever takes their constitution score in damage they have to save versus infection. This isn't likely to occur until higher levels, so you can make the difficulty nasty.

One last thing: if you want undead to truly be horrific, besides infection, consider using some form of fear or madness. The Adamant Entertainment system in the back of their *Victorian Monstrosities* book works well for this. Or you could adapt the system from *True 20*. Both are simple, fast to run, and use simple saving throw language to determine success.



# Kamikaze Ghouls

*Paul Simmons*

Have you thought that skeletons could strip the flesh off corpses, then return to their enclave to have it grafted on their bones, thus evolving?

You could also use the “Black Cauldron” as a method for zombies to evolve. Two or three sacrifice to create a greater undead.

Ghouls could require a Kamikaze sacrifice that raises them as ghosts.

# There Can Only Be One

*Gary Williams*

As far as evolution goes, why not XP or the equivalent? They get points for kills, but also points for story actions and successes, bypassing traps, and living through PC actions. How bad is it if the PCs are trying to exterminate a group but if they miss any, those get stronger?

Another idea, out of *The Chronicles of Prydain*, is to have the undead in bands, and as you kill members, the rest get stronger? If you do it right, the PCs could be responsible for creating an unstoppable juggernaut.

Combine the prior idea with a Highlander scenario, “There can be only one!” and you have a recipe for an all-out undead war.



## A Sorcerous Band

*Phil Hickey*

If you recall the children's fantasy series *The Chronicles of Prydain*, in addition to the Cauldron Born (who were essentially almost unkillable zombies) there were the Hunstmen of Arawn Death-Lord.

These were evil men bound together in a sorcerous band, and whenever one of their number was killed, the remaining ones in the band became that much more powerful, which made it dangerous to kill them (obviously).

Maybe some undead are somewhat similar in that they are created as a group (perhaps having been the former bodyguard of a slain king, a group of wizards, a holy order, etc.) who are even linked together after death, in such a way that killing one of them results in the growth of power of the rest of the group.

Just a thought, brainstorming and all that.

Good luck with your campaign.

## Abyssal Element

*Naoise McHugh*

I don't know if you've heard about *Shadow of Mordor*, a recently released PC RPG/hack'n'slash. Anyway, I think that's where the idea originated, but it's called the Nemesis system. Basically, any time an enemy escapes from the PCs, it gains a little bit of depth.

So, where *Shadow of Mordor* takes a goblin grunt who happens to get away from Talion (the PC) and makes it into a chief, the next time Talion encounters that goblin, in your undead situation, you



could have a generic mindless skeleton survive fighting the PCs and gaining the intelligence to be called a ghoul, now with a name and memories of its encounter with the PCs.

Were I running it (and I may give something similar a try), I'd lash some abysmal element onto one or more of the PCs, which starts reanimating corpses. Limited exposure to it makes the zombies evolve, if they get away before the party massacres them. To add a little bit more depth, I'd wait until the PCs had sold a few artifacts containing the elements, so as to make sure they couldn't just destroy their own artifacts and be done with the problem.

## Make An NPC Class

*Heiko Mueller, Berlin, Germany*

Thank you for the undead ideas. I also like to make them dangerous again and surprise my players.

For evolving them I see it unrealistic (oh, what word in a fantasy RPG) to alter skeletons to zombies, zombies to ghouls, and on this way for evolution.

I would prefer to level them up but keep their initial stance. So an evolved skeleton still looks like a skeleton but sports 1 HD more, +1 on attack and AC. At Level 4 they may get incorporeal. At Level 6 they might drain levels.

So there might be an undead class or template for NPCs, where all these abilities are described like in PC classes, according to the game system used, handling attack, AC, saves and special abilities.

For gaining levels, I think best is to base it on kills. Depending on undead level, distinct kills are needed to advance. Real kills. Not



bringing someone to -1 HP. So these do not stop if a PC or NPC falls to the ground. They continue until they are really dead. That's the fuel they are longing for! A level gain also puts them back up to full HP.

A first level undead (e.g. Skeleton) needs 2 kills to get level 2. A second level undead needs 4 kills to get level 3, doubling every next level. For a vampire it is tough to level up, for the minions it is much easier.

People killed by these evolving undead lose more than their life. Their life force is consumed on the kill. So raising them is more complicated, more expensive, and riskier than normal kills by normal enemies.

Think of a horde of level 1 skeletons attacking a farmer village. The PCs, even when at level 5, have to hurry to defeat them before they kill many townspeople and grow stronger. :)

## Spirit-Bound

*Chuck*

Perhaps instead of all undead being intelligent, you make just the leaders possess this unusual talent. The grunts might still be mindless corpses.

I'm thinking intelligent undead must have some sort of spirits bound to their bodies. For some, perhaps an ancient mage who learned the forbidden art of Spiritbinding imprisoned them. For others, perhaps they were exposed to some source of spiritual energy, such as a rift in the astral plane or a magical item bound with more than one spirit.



Some spirits may even have voluntarily bound themselves into a corpse or item of power.

And powerful magical items and artifacts are in fact items that have been infused with a once autonomous spirit, created by the same necromantic rituals that bind undead.

Evolved undead are those that have absorbed the spirit of another being, such as a living person, a magical item, or another undead. When an undead absorbs enough energy of its own, it can then imbue a corpse or item with that energy to create or strengthen a thrall or bound item, at a cost of weakening its own spirit. Mighty undead almost always carry powerful magical gear.

## Desecrated Areas

*Joe Z*

I am running a campaign that has undead as one of the main types of antagonists. So I happen to have some tricks and methods for evolving undead.

I don't let undead change types unless there is a thematic "upgrade" already in the books (ghouls to ghosts, for instance, wraiths to specters). Instead I use "advanced" templates or add extra hit dice.

Undead are powered by negative energy. They don't eat or drink or sleep. So, to make undead more powerful, you give them more negative energy. What I use as the justification is the *desecrate* spell. It's an area of cursed earth that makes undead powerful. I use this as a foundation for a cursed location that over time causes undead to grow in power. Desecrate attunes that area to negative energy, making it stronger and more easily available.



Once there, an evil priest can use his various harm spells to infuse the undead with negative energy, accelerating the process. You did mention having undead with intelligent leaders, right? Well, these locations would need some sort of focus... so either a spellcaster or some sort of focus/MacGuffin to make them work.

The longer one of these sites is allowed to infuse the undead, the more powerful they become. So, this allows you to tailor the power level to the PCs. The last one of these locations will usually be the one that's been around the longest and so the most potent and nasty undead will be found there.

This also gives the players a sense of satisfaction as they take down not just some random undead but the cursed site that makes them. It also gives them hints and clues as to what to look for... for others like them.

## Roleplay It

*Bryan Crosswait*

I think undead advancement should be roleplaying-based. You mentioned skeletons and zombies will become NPCs. How about companies, squads, and platoons?

The undead are separated, either based on who and what they were in life (an entire platoon of soldiers killed specifically so they can fight in death) or in death.

This creates some fun opportunities:

*The 3-Legged Dog Squad.* Losers of this undead army, front-line shock troops never meant to “live” too long, led by a ghoulish determined to show his leadership skills will eventually pay off. Even though the



ghoul suffers defeat after defeat, he manages to gather around him a group of ragtag irregulars that eventually get "promoted". But being more than monsters, now these ghastrs and ghouls have a unique power or two, something to throw the PCs off and add character. An insignia or badge is a must, as is some lovable/hated character tropes - think *Inglorious Basterds*.

On the flip side, you have the *Elite Troops*, a division or battalion expected to do well from the word go. These guys are tough. And while they started out like everyone else (zombies and skeletons), muscle memory and training helps them rise to the top. The twist is, their leader and his commanders rise to match the PCs as they grow. They are Lawful Evil, they live (unlive?) by a code, they respect tough opponents, they salute accordingly. They are, in a way, the dragon-rider that killed Sturm in the *Dragonlance* books. Like everyone else, they also have a badge. The players know what they are facing when it helps the story. Certain mid-level leaders will become apparent over time (Gragnock likes to ambush, Lyndon leads from the front, at least for the first three rounds, Zorn and his devil-dogs use missile weapons to great advantage).

By using badges and symbols, players will get to know who is who. As the leaders manage to escape to fight another day, the PCs will begin to identify them. The players will get to plan while the baddies do too. Now everyone is plugged in, the players and NPCs are plotting alike, and as the players level so do those that lead the legions the players have thrown themselves against.

The final battle(s) will seem like a pre-ordained event, a homecoming of sorts, until the players encounter their first surprise and realize these undead are actively thinking and have the players in their cross hairs.



# Acheron Brandy

*DM Atticus*

Is your undead settlement relatively tolerant of the living? If I'm not mistaken, most undead according to D&D lore despise the living to the point of murdering them on sight. So why not introduce some alchemy in the form of a scheming drug peddler? Humanoid settlements definitely have issues like these lowlifes.

The alchemist creates a potion or consumable goo. Let's call it Acheron Brandy. It gives people horrifying mutations like extra limbs, whip-like tongues, eyes on all sides, incorporeal-at-will powers, life-draining skin, etc. However, the undead who receive this goo have been targeted because of either their station or usefulness, as the last dose the dealer gives them also enslaves them to a particular type of mind control, maybe off of a command word.

Watch [this cutscene from Bioshock](#) (a major spoiler if you ever plan to play it, but it's a good idea to use and abuse).

The now enslaved and hyper-mutated undead serve as assassins and obstacles for the party, controllable by the alchemist and perhaps whomever hired him to go through all this trouble. The undead begin to evolve more and more as the party mills about the town by the day, or by the encounter. Make them feel like they can't just spend all day shopping for a designer mithril waffle iron by having some of those recently slain undead that jumped them in a back alley return with extra parts sewn or grown on them, and make it a recurring encounter! If the party finds a way to slay them for good, throw in a few more with different abilities that test the party's prowess in different ways (the plagues you mentioned in the article would work nicely for sure!).



You could roll a d% for this type of encounter starting with a certain number (let's say 15%) and add on 10% every time they go from place to place, resetting it to the base number after each encounter.

Another idea is to have the undead evolve into higher tier undead because the party's very presence in an undead town causes it. Much like mice wandering into a house full of cats, the undead are tame until they see living flesh, which make the gluttonous ones (I'm looking at you, ghouls!) turn mad for fresh meat. Some may visibly try to resist the urge so the party understands it's not just typical undead doing what typical undead do, but rather their presence alone causes problems here.

You could also have a town that remains civilized only because of magic or alchemy that sates those supernatural urges to devour flesh and gives the mindless undead some sentience too. Though when the party arrives, they soon find out the undead are slowly leaning towards those typical tendencies because the magic that kept the undead civil has been tampered with or stopped altogether. The party will have a fire under their butts to complete their adventure when all the friends they've made begin turning on them out of lack of self-control.

Also, I think it would be cool to have an undead with some kind of fungus growing in them that gives them unique powers, like spores for hallucinations, control over other creatures (and undead), etc. The fungus is the one doing the controlling and spreading around of its own kind. Perhaps this could be the plague you mentioned in the article?



# Four Ideas

*KindredWolf*

## **Idea #1: Plotting**

Create a stronger undead by applying the “Entropic Creature” template from the Planar Handbook (pg 122-124) (Level Adjust +2).

Use the Necrosis Carnex from MM4 pg 104 with the above template for added oomph.

I would run intelligent undead as field commanders and spies in an RP-heavy game where the end results of failed missions or encounters on the PCs’ behalf would allow the undead to attain specific military/cultural growth points.

For example: Main low level villain defeated... but the unwholesome site becomes a desecrated evil place without further PC intervention, allowing the villain to return as undead.

Above-ground random encounters start including more underground type creatures. (Umber hulks, bullets and purple worms are being controlled or manipulated into new areas and disrupting local underdark environs to create a necropolis.)

Clue the PCs into the disruptions through underdark NPC interactions.

Branch out from there with various plots and devices to hook and snare the PCs.

Branches in plot each carry consequences that might bite the PCs in the back, sometimes taking several adventures to fully realize. Perhaps bolstering the city guard at the gate during a nighttime



attack allows a vital NPC to die or run away (no longer accessible in a later fight). Taking the time to properly disperse an undead's remains allow its multiple lesser henchmen to get away and wreak havoc through the countryside - causing the local military to be unavailable for the final fight. Directly influencing the mayor to leave office and become a professional whatever results in worsening town conditions due to the new mayor being a pawn of the big bad evil guy.

Assign new sub-commanders at specific party levels, maybe removing old ones (use them up as a means of party harassment or plot development), and perhaps boost or hinder the enemies when certain party goals are achieved/failed. This is slightly different than the above plot branches - running independently of plot points.

## **Idea #2: Monster Template - Antipodean**

Can be applied to any undead creature whose life is based on negative energy.

Creature subtype changes from Evil to Good, any aura and energy effects the creature has based on negative energy are now based on positive energy - healing instead of damaging living creatures (and damaging instead of healing undead).

Uncontrolled mindless undead will actively avoid an Antipodean. Free-willed undead will seek to actively destroy an Antipodean.

You'd have to use a little imagination when creating an Antipodean Vampire. Perhaps its draining bite becomes a kiss of life?



### **Idea #3: Ritual Enhancement**

Certain rituals created or discovered allow battlefield enhancements to everything undead (like an entropic field, linked undead health pools, negative level slam attacks, turn resistance, etc.).

Rituals can be disrupted, stolen before use, falsified, sabotaged, or modified further by a ritual of the PCs' own.

### **Idea #4: Mirrored Evolution**

Give the big bad undead guy a direct soul link to one or more of the PCs (think Harry Potter), but it directly affects what class, level, or power the big bad guy and his minions have.

Perhaps a Mirror of Opposition is what spawned the villain to begin with, and revelation of this fact would cause lots of reputation loss for the party.

BTW - I've had this idea in the back burner zone for a loooong time: the big bad is a Lich (perhaps a former living rival) who found or created a mirror of opposition and has already defeated her own duplicate, thus placing her phylactery jewel as the top center piece of the mirror's frame. Would be extra fun if the lich/PC specializes in mirror magic.

## **A Consumable Resource**

*Scott*

Maybe there's a special resource that must be consumed somehow, like life-force or gold. And if it's based on a special resource, the PCs might even be able to control or slow it down (and others might try to speed it up) somehow.



Or you could work it so the change is inevitable, based on the phases of the moon for instance. Once the PCs are aware of it, they know how much time they have and will be keenly aware as time runs out. Perhaps at every new moon, all the undead advance one stage. That gives the PCs plenty of time between evolutions, maybe partially being taken up by travel or endangered by other important obstacles or obligations.

Borrowing from the previous idea, perhaps different factions of extremely powerful wizards or druids exist that could be convinced to speed up or slow down the phases of the moon? In this case, they might create even more adventures, some of which may be impossible to complete by combat (the Circle of Nine can be convinced to temporarily alter reality, for a price, but they can't be attacked or threatened into doing anything!). This might spawn more adventures (the price is the ancient MacGuffin of Doom that must be recovered).

Additionally, what will the gods think of such things? Maybe each deity will sponsor a champion to see the evil plan fail or succeed (thus keeping it "fair"), creating built-in character concepts for PCs and NPCs.

The more I think about it the more I want to run it!

## Ghoul Friends

*Brent Davis*

The last Savage Worlds game I ran was a fantasy city-based thing. In the undercity (mega dungeon) there were ghouls. The ghouls were ruled by The Baron. I took a lot of inspiration from Lovecraft, in that a Greater Ghoul could assume the form of anyone he (or she)



has eaten a significant portion of. They also gain a portion of the knowledge of whomever they eat. I figure in a level-based game they could have forms per hit die.

Lesser ghouls were like D&D ghouls, with paralyzing touch and infection if killed by one. I had it where if a character took a wound per SW rules then they had to roll to fight off disease. To become a Greater Ghoul they had to eat people. The more they ate, the stronger and wiser they became.

The Baron had a pact with the King of the City State. The ghouls were NOT allowed to kill anyone. They could only eat “unclaimed dead” that had been left for more than three days. The Sewer Patrol knew of and protected the ghouls, as long as the pact was kept. The first time the PCs encountered the ghouls (a pack of lesser ghouls), the creatures cowered away and hissed about “the Pact, the Pact” and wouldn’t fight back until a few were slain. Then it became no-holds-barred mayhem because SW ghouls have hella high Agility.

Brought before The Baron, he explained the Pact, sort of. I kind of took a bit from the Vampire/World of Darkness type games with a sardonic undead thing that looked like a handsome teenage boy. The Baron alluded to food or something to convert the PCs if they slew any more of his subjects and told them to get out of his area of the undercity. My twisted mind had the idea of the milk of a female ghoul forcibly fed to the character to “peacefully” convert someone to being a ghoul.

Anyway, after that a female ghoul was encountered in one of the dance clubs of the city in the form of a woman the PCs had tried and failed to protect. She came pretty close to seducing one of the PCs. Not sure what kind of repercussions THAT might have had... ghoul



infection maybe? I did have the clue that, no matter what, a ghoul always smells faintly of death. I figured they level up just like a PC. Doing whatever ghoul society things would gain them experience points, and eating people to gain knowledge and powers.

It did make a more dangerous monster out of something my ex-D&D players thought of as a pushover.

There was also a faction of ghouls who had split away from the Baron and were involved in the manufacture of a narcotic called “the Blue.” It’s a euphoric hallucinogen that slowly turned the user in to a ghoul, slowly and painfully as they started to rot and have leprosy-like symptoms. It’s a fine blue powder. Coincidentally, the color of ghoul milk is blue. The drug was being distributed by the city guard, through a married troll couple who lived in the undercity. They had a “pet” young boy they used to catch children to eat.

## Flesh Currency

*James Singaram*

I thought of a possible mechanism for advancing undead. In a similar way to how souls grant power to fiends, flesh could grant power to undead. All undead would have the capability to cast a Flesh Harvest Ritual on humanoids and beasts slain within the last ten days. For each minute, one unit of flesh is collected, up to a maximum amount determined by the target’s size:

- Tiny - 5
- Small - 20
- Medium - 50
- Large - 200



- Huge - 500
- Gargantuan - 1000

The ritual would preserve the flesh harvested with necrotic magic to prevent decay. Harvested flesh would be used for currency with undead as well a system for advancement. All undead would have a second ritual, Consume Flesh, that would allow them to merge flesh with their body at a rate of 1 unit per minute. Undead would then advance through the ranks by how much flesh they have cumulatively grafted onto themselves.

- Skeleton - 0 (all undead start here)
- Zombie\* - 50
- Ghoul - 200
- Ghast - 500
- Mummy or Wight - 1000 (undead's choice)
- Vampire Spawn (if Mummy) or Wraith (if Wight) - 2500
- Vampire (if vampire spawn) - 5000
- Lich (if vampire) - 15000

At a cost of 250 flesh a Mummy may be transformed into a Wight, or vice versa.

Weapon and skill proficiencies are retained upon advancement. For example, a zombie would be able to wield weapons after advancing from a skeleton.

Flesh could also be used to create more specialized undead, taking one minute per flesh consumed in the ritual.

- Shadow (Wraith only) - 100
- Specter (Wraith only) - 200



- Will-o'-wisp (Wraith only) - 500
- Banshee (Wraith only) - 1000
- Flameskull (Vampire Spawn, Vampire, or Lich) - 1000 + humanoid skull
- Revenant (Vampire Spawn, Vampire, or Lich) - 1000 + humanoid body, decays after one year
- Flesh Golem (Vampire Spawn, Vampire, or Lich) - 2500
- Demilich (Vampire or Lich) - 10000 + ashes of a slain lich\*
- Dracolich (Lich only) - 25000 + skeleton of a dragon

\* *Phylactery destroyed*

All undead created through these rituals are bound to the undead that created them. There is no limit on how many creatures an undead can raise, giving rise to entire armies created over centuries.

All undead above ghastrs are able to create a skeleton using a fresh corpse. There is no cost in flesh to raise a creature; however, the flesh on the corpse cannot be harvested before or after the ritual. The time taken is two minutes per available flesh on the corpse. For instance, a mummy could raise a recently slain human by casting a 100-minute ritual. No flesh would be collected or consumed during this process.

Undead follow a hierarchy in a similar fashion as devils. Lesser undead would collect flesh for and carry out the will of their leaders, who would in turn reward skill or loyalty with flesh and advancement. A lich would rule over an entire undead realm with a dozen or so vampire underlings. Each vampire would lead a city, assisted by a half dozen vampire spawn and upwards of twenty wraiths. Vampire spawn and wraiths would both lead mummies



and wights, who would in turn command ghastrs. They would direct ghouls. With only the faintest spark of intelligence, zombies and skeletons would be at the bottom of the ladder.

Ghastrs and higher undead would deal with disobedient or treasonous underlings by using the Flay Flesh ritual, taking one flesh per minute cast from the target undead, possibly demoting the victim in the process. Skeletons and zombies possess neither the cunning or inclination to cheat their masters for their own progression, so such measures would primarily be used against higher undead.

Because demotion is a real possibility for undead who fail their master, some commanders will flay their underlings to advance themselves and complete their objective. Having its flesh stolen is the only time an undead feels pain. Upon being demoted to a skeleton, an undead will lose all memory of its previous existence. These memories will be missing even if the undead advances in the future. Because of the violent nature of this ritual, only 50% of flesh taken is salvageable.

Certain undead enlist mortal followers in their armies. Often these mortals appear slender and gaunt. To prove their loyalty, they are required to make a flesh sacrifice to their master. In addition to providing useful skills, such as spell casting, they do not require payment in flesh and are more easily able to infiltrate mortal settlements. In times of need, these mortals can be harvested for flesh.

Some undead prefer a peaceful existence over that of domination. In these rare circumstances, undead will seek out alternative methods of flesh collection. Cattle farms and fishing ships crewed by skeletons are not unheard of. More advanced undead might



seek employment in a morgue where they can steal flesh from their clients. In exceptional cases, advanced undead will live with subterranean humanoids, such as kobolds. In exchange for the colony's dead, they provide magical support in times of need and alleviate the need for corpse disposal pits.

All listed undead above were created using the 5E MM.

## Check Rolemaster

*Alex Ulmer*

You might want to check out Rolemaster's treatment of undead. They use many levels of the same basic undead type (5 or 6 skeleton levels). As the undead gain strength, they also gain powers. Rolemaster also says the stronger undead drain constitution points. In a d100 system, draining 1-5 points per round doesn't kill the PC quickly, but it does drive home the point that the constitution drain will be deadly in the long run. For a D20 based system, you might increase the time before the drain happens, maybe points lost per minute instead of per round.

Another thought would be to have monsters imitate undead. In my campaign, I have a band of goblins that prey on grave robbers, using a puppet ghost, chains, and moaning horns. They selectively target victims one at a time, picking them off. The goblins use the dark of night and tombstones to hide their actions and gain cover.



## Evolve Through Death

*Mark of the Pixie*

I have used a slightly different method in one of my games: undead get more powerful when they are destroyed. Doesn't work well on the lesser undead, but a wight (weakest of the higher undead in my game) who is killed can later come back as a spectre or a wraith (both more powerful types of undead). If the soul of the person is so strong it can come back from death, then odds are it can do it again.

## Go Mythic

*Paul Frische-Mouri*

I too wanted to have an evolution mechanic that would make the lesser zombies still a threat. My solution is using the Pathfinder Mythic rule set. I'm treating the zombies as being reanimated and sustained by a magical disease that will be the source of their mythic powers. Perhaps the PCs share a genetic anomaly that allows them to resist the transformation, or they discover an ancient antidote in the crypts of the castle that halts the progress of the disease but doesn't leave them completely unaffected. Either way, the players will be infected early on as the city is quickly overtaken. Their mythic progression represents the disease evolving in them, and thus will be the tracker for the rest of the infected (think Resident Evil).

For the lower minions I'm planning on making a progressive template. For a few tiers it will be universal in adding some buffs to the base creature. But it soon begins to branch into different "species" of undead creating fast zombies, strong zombies, smart zombies, zombies with extra limbs, zombies that explode, zombies



that cast random magical spells, flying zombies, invisible zombies. I plan on making a table and rolling for the templates used. This means each encounter could have some nasty surprises if the players aren't careful and don't scout.

The big bads will have their own tiers in addition to the templates. What I hadn't considered until your email was the idea of having these different species creating a society. This opens up so many possibilities! I could see clan wars or even civil wars sprouting from this.

And since the undead will be animated from a disease and not from negative energy, positive energy will not harm them (and might actually heal their wounded, dead flesh). This is my explanation as to how the disease spreads so easily, catching those wielding positive energy completely off guard as they are overwhelmed by undead that defy all their training! Should be a good initial surprise to the party.

Have you ever used any kind of sanity rules? I haven't but would like to incorporate that with the PCs and NPCs as the destruction of their way of life and the horrors of the evolving undead weigh on them.

*Reply From Johnn:* Just in a Cthulhu game. We went crazy pretty fast.

A simple mechanic would be a pool based on PC WIS score. After any horrific event, PCs make a save. If they fail they get +1d3 Insanity. If Insanity ever matches WIS the character is insane but can be healed. If Insanity exceeds WIS the character is permanently insane.

Then I would create several adventure-based triggers for healing Insanity, like elven glens and halfling parties and magic pools. Maybe an ancient potion or two.



I would also make an insanity table that allows players to continue playing their insane PC, but like the Confusion spell where a roll determines how a PC behaves temporarily, a roll on the Insanity table determines PC actions for awhile. Also add some triggers so the player knows when insanity rolls can be expected.

Hope this helps!



# How To Deal With Idea Overwhelm

*Johnn Four*

This issue is full of a ton of ideas. I get overwhelmed when I read articles like this or when I find long forum threads full of awesome. How do I grapple with all these ideas, put them into some kind of order, and integrate them into my campaign? Here's my iterative process.

## Step 1: Set Up Your Idea Container

Paste all the content and ideas into MyInfo, Evernote, OneNote, or tool of your choice.

Create a container for these ideas so they are separate from your other notes and you can find them quick.

- In **MyInfo**, create a parent document in the tree and file your ideas underneath as child documents.
- In **Evernote**, create a Notebook for your campaign and create new notes in it tagged "Idea".
- In **OneNote**, create a Page in a Section of your campaign's Notebook, and paste ideas into themed sub-pages as you go.



## Step 2: Paste Ideas In

Copy the article, posts, or content into your ideas container. Also paste in the URL or make a note about the source in case you want to refer back to it later. For example, “Undead Ideas RPT #629”. Then make all the text *italic*. I do this so I know the text isn’t my writing (for copyright, attribution, etc.). It also helps separate my thoughts, which is important for a later step.

## Step 3: Read & Comment

With a good, findable, and reliable spot for all my ideas created, and text pasted in from an article and italicized, next I read through the text and write ideas inline as I go.

I keep my ideas in regular text, not italicized. You could make your text bold, red, or whatever you like to identify it as your writing.

As I read, I write any ideas that come to mind below the text that inspired me. So eventually the article is a bunch of alternating text, with the original article interspersed with my thoughts and reactions and ideas.

If there are long passages I don’t find useful or inspiring, I delete them. You don’t have to do this, especially if you want to preserve all the original text. But I do this to shorten up my docs, as I’m focused more on the ideas I produce from this exercise than on keeping a library of articles.

Comments I make include ideas that pop into mind as I read, thoughts on how I’d integrate the ideas into my campaign, and who or what the idea might get attached to.



For example, if an idea is good for a PC, I'll write the PC's name at the start. "Roscoe: undead pick HIS pockets." In my current campaign, Roscoe is a rogue, so it was an amusing idea to me.

I might also "tag" ideas with NPC names, locations, "history", region names, "treasure", and any other labels that might apply. This just gives me an idea later on where my head was at with the idea. "OK, past Johnn, how were you thinking of applying this to the campaign? Oh, this is a trap idea - got it."

In addition, I can search by keyword or tag now, and find ideas by topic fast. For example, I can just search for "Trap:" or "Roscoe:" and hit search again and again to cycle through all related ideas.

## Step 4: Iterate & Crunch

I'll keep doing pass-throughs from top to bottom of the article and flesh out my notes and ideas more as I re-read each time. Ideas that suck I delete or leave alone. The best ideas I highlight or add even more details to.

As I iterate and refine worthy ideas, I make notes about crunch needs. At the end of each note or idea, I'll write something like, "Class: XYZ" or "NPC: ABC". This means I need to do some game design and create rules or crunch for these particular ideas. I don't need crunch for history, plot, or kingdom ideas, but if the idea is for, say, an NPC that might see combat, I'll need a full combat stat block for them.

In other words, I flag stuff that needs prep so I don't get caught mid-game. I will also add background colours to idea labels and crunch tags. Plot and encounter hooks get highlighted in yellow. NPCs in pink. Fluff and history in orange. Treasure in gold. Etc.



In addition, as I re-read and update good ideas, I'll start weaving in campaign details, especially pronouns. Names of people, places, or things the idea relates to.

## Step 5: Integrate

OK. I've now got a doc full of great ideas. And I know which ideas are the winners. Next, I have to decide what to do with them. There are three options:

- Leave them in this doc for future inspiration
- Copy them into standalone campaign notes for future use
- Integrate them with existing campaign notes to help flesh out my campaign right away

Some notes I'll leave in my Ideas Bucket because they have no better place right now. When I get stuck, I will read through my Ideas Bucket for inspiration. There's always something there, so this is a fantastic resource I build up for myself over the life of the campaign.

Other notes will be awesome future campaign additions, but they aren't needed yet. So I just file these into my 5 Campaign Buckets (Gazetteer, Cast of Characters, Quartermaster, Plots, Rules) ready for gameplay when needed.

And last, ideas that build on stuff I've already created get added to existing notes. I'll "pile and file" first, then go back if I have time and integrate, re-write, or update the info to include the new developments.

This way, with these three tasks done, I have my ongoing ideas bucket in its own area of my campaign information - an R&D lab where I snarf stuff from the internet, use it for inspiration, and see



what bubbles up as useful or interesting for the campaign. Then I have future content ready for use when needed. And then I have refinements and additions to existing canon so my campaign info is always up to date.

\* \* \*

This sounds like a lot of work, but that's because I broke the process into steps to explain it all. It feels pedantic, but really I'm just using stuff from Roleplaying Tips and other sources to fuel ideas for my campaign. I write ideas down as they come to me, flesh them out a bit, and then slot them into my campaign notes.

There's a big added benefit to this approach as well. As I read, write, re-read, and refine, I'm cramming more stuff into my long-term memory. I find I often don't need to refer to my notes during games with this stuff, because I've gone through it and processed it a few times. This means I ad-lib and improv much better, and I GM faster because I don't need to look stuff up as often in my notes.

So even though it's fun getting inspired by great articles and ideas from others, it's also fun having this stuff in your brain's back pocket to summon up on command whenever you need ideas.



# Gambling Table: 1d20 Card Game Events

*Johnn Four*

A character in my campaign is addicted to gambling. So I made this table up for him. Maybe you can use it in your game too.

1. Magical cheating (dice enchanted to roll certain numbers, cards are enchanted to change face, partner working the table & “sending” card hands held to one of the gamblers).
2. Pickpocket works the table.
3. Rumours, gossip, and news. 1-2: False information. 3-4: True information for current adventure. 5-6: Hook for new adventure.
4. Item is offered as a bet. 1-2: Cursed, stolen, forged, or malfunctioning item. 3-4: Relevant to current adventure. 5-6: Hook for new adventure.
5. Something swoops through a window and tries to snatch up the pot. 1-2: Wild animal. 3-4: Summoned creature. 5-6: Familiar.
6. The City Guard bursts in! 1-2: Gambling is illegal here. 3-4: They make an arrest. 5-6: They want dealt in - and they're sore losers.
7. One of the players goes into a trance and forecasts the future for one of the players at the table. 1-2: It's bad news. 3-4: It's false news. 5-6: It's good news or a solid clue.



8. A PC has a lucky winning streak. However, other gamblers are making this happen to make a fortune on side bets when the winner gets fleeced.
9. A casual comment at the table is interpreted by another player as a deadly insult.
10. Stickup men crash the card game, knowing there will be lots of money on the table. Everyone assumes one of the other players tipped them off, and a wild, multi-sided fight ensues.
11. Someone throws a gem, ring, or identifiable item into the pot that comes from a hoard the PCs are searching for, or which is strangely familiar to one of them.
12. A local variation of the game requires players to play while getting progressively drunker. Someone cheats and uses a magical form of toxin resistance.
13. Someone figures one of the player's tells. 1-2: The PC has the tell. 3-4: It's between two NPCs. 5-6: The PC spots an NPC's tell.
14. A card from a divination deck is drawn instead of a standard card.
15. You can bet immaterial things like years, love, joy, or talents this one time.
16. The money the PC wins is fake.
17. One of the card players dies. 1-2: Heart attack. 3-4: Natural causes. 5-6: Poisoned/assassinated.
18. This isn't a card game, it is a ritual of a secret cult. If the PC wins, something bad happens to the city. If the PC loses, it's a bad event for the PC. If the PC folds, bad event happens to an ally.
19. One player is a doppelganger.



20. A player bets something awful. 1-2: A slave. 3-4: The antidote to a poison he put on the money during previous hands. 5-6: A talking skull.

Thanks to the following for their great ideas: Ivan Sorensen, Kabuki Kaiser, Brett Slocum, James Holloway, MoonSylver.



# Last Words From Johnn

## How To Avoid Prediction Railroads

Quick tip: Players like certainty. They try to pin you down about the future with divinations, tarot readings, prophecies, and other means.

You can avoid getting into a fixed path with this simple trick.

Whenever it's used, just change the word "prediction" to "forecast".

It works for weathermen every time.

## Freelance Traveller Reviews Faster Combat

Timothy Collinson vivisects my book, *The Game Master's Guide to Faster Combats*, for the *Freelance Traveller* zine. It's the most detailed review of my course yet. His main question is, are the lessons and information of value to Traveller and non-D&D GMs?

His answer is in this PDF, starting at page 21. [<http://bit.ly/freelance-traveller-fc-review>]

Also, if you are a Traveller GM, you can get all the back issues of the *Freelance Traveller* zine here (it looks like a fantastic resource). [<http://bit.ly/freelance-traveller>]



## New Books On My Shelf

The postman brought me something grim, gritty, and dangerous this week.

Dungeon Crawl Classics just hit my mailbox and it looks like a great, old school game.

Character creation is fabulous. The premise is you start with 0 level characters. Farmers, peasants, and commoners who are somehow involved in risky adventure. Perhaps their Baron has recruited them for a dangerous mission, or they've shipwrecked on a mysterious island and must band together to survive, or their village is attacked and they are the sole survivors and homeless.

Each player gets a few characters and tries to help as many survive as possible. By the end of the intro adventure, only the strong or lucky are left, and these become first level PCs with a class and your standard PC abilities.

This approach is like gaming your character's backstory. It's low fantasy and gritty, which I'm finding a nice break from the high fantasy stuff I've been consuming in recent years.

Anyway, thanks to Noble Knight Games for the fast shipping and excellent packaging of my used edition. The book came through with nary a scratch.



# Campaign Design Diary

Freedom, Integration, and Story

*Johnn Four*

My campaign design diary today clocks in at almost 6,000 words, or nearly triple what I aim for in a feature article. But rather than splitting it up into parts, I'm sending the whole thing to you today as November's and December's Patron Exclusive combined.

This article will also be included in the Roleplaying Tips book for December, along with this month's other articles, all in one easy place for your future reference.

With this today's tips I have a small announcement to make - the name of my new campaign.

I think most GMs name their campaigns. But since our D&D 5E trial has now become a full-fledged campaign, I want to stop calling it our "5E game" and give it a more evocative title.

Once we're done the Starter Kit adventure, *Lost Mine of Phandelver*, I'll be transporting the PCs out of the Forgotten Realms and into a new world, which will be the official setting of the new campaign.



# And The Name Of My New Campaign Will Be....

Duskfall!

Duskfall is a ruined city on a long-forgotten continent discovered by explorers just a few years ago. It has many mysteries and dangers, so settlement has been risky and tentative to date. That's where the PCs come in.

Duskfall also has many, many treasures to give up for the brave and foolhardy. That's also where the PCs come in. :)

The city spans the banks of a deep, winding river in the heart of a dense, dark forest. It is over 2000 years old. Several civilizations have used its ruins to live, enchant, and war.

Each culture has left wondrous discoveries, secret places, and dangerous legacies stacked upon the ancient cultures before it in the ground, in the river, and in the surrounding lands.

There is much to discover, as no one knows what lies beyond the few acres of the urban ruins. There is much to fear for the same reason - and that terror, which feeds the settlers' dark dreams each night, is justified.

## Design Is Important

I have thought a lot about what I want Duskfall to be. It's part campaign, but it's also part inspiration for Roleplaying Tips. I want to make something you can steal ideas from liberally for your own campaigns. I also hope to get tips and ideas back from you as I journal the campaign's progress in the newsletter.



So the setting and campaign have a couple of audiences to intrigue and entertain.

And today's article is about how I'm approaching the design of Duskfall to make it my best-ever campaign, and to have even more fun at every game.

I hope sharing my Duskfall design thoughts will help you with your own campaigns.

This is just the start. I'll continue to explore Duskfall in play and in design with Roleplaying Tips fans as the campaign wends deeper into the ancient ruins and the dangerous lands that hide them.

Duskfall is in its nascent planning stages right now. I only have vague ideas about what it is and what I want it to be. Notes fill a few pages in notebooks and Evernote. Links, images, and articles also eagerly accumulate for inspiration.

But before I even started dreaming and researching, back in the summer, I sketched out my recipe for how I will approach this campaign's creation. Fresh off the heels of publishing the Campaign Seeds and Campaign Creation Guide books, plus having just done a bunch of research for the newsletter, I had a specific design approach in mind for Duskfall.

What follows is my plan – my recipe – for creating an epic new campaign from scratch.

## Who Will Have More Fun?

I'm starting with the audiences and who I want to entertain, inspire, and have fun with.



And it turns out Duskfall has four audiences to please, in this order:

- Game Master
- Players
- Readers
- Customers

## **Game Master**

If I am not inspired, I won't want to build the world, design the adventures, and prep for games. That means more cancelled sessions, less enthusiasm, and an almost guaranteed mid-campaign abort next year.

It was awesome gaming Riddleport through to its epic conclusion. I want to experience that again.

A friend and reader also planning a campaign put it well to me yesterday when we had a quick online chat: "Yeah, I am planning out areas and stuff behind the scenes, but I won't actually run the campaign unless I can be the consistent one in the campaign, lol."

That is a great mindset. Be the standing stone, the driver, and the leader of the group, always ready to get some gaming done.

It pays to know thyself and what makes GMing fun for you so you can embed those elements into the campaign. Design your own rewards!

## **Players**

The second audience is the group. I asked my players at the end of Riddleport what they wanted next. The answer was more of the same. More fantasy, D&D, factions, NPCs, dungeon crawls, intrigue, cool magic items and treasure, combat, and roleplaying.



One player's comments were quite interesting: "A city game is great as long as the party is focused. I don't want to waste game time debating what we should be doing next each time. So give us some kind of guidance to keep the adventures going."

And another player said during coffee one day, "Johnn, just tell us what to do. I'm here for the guts and glory!"

What I'm hearing with these comments and other, similar ones made repeatedly in the last few weeks is my group doesn't want to debate endlessly on plot. They want to focus on the adventure and get into encounters to keep gameplay moving along.

They are all great roleplayers, and they enjoy good party discussions in-character. But Riddleport did cause a lot of "OMG what do we do now!?" type of long discussions. The open sandbox created many options, which resulted in many ideas, points of view, and conflicting opinions on strategy.

My group wants to experience more story and debate less about it. They want more great gaming moments, especially awesome character moments.

I hear this and will make this part of my design.

## **Roleplaying Tips Readers**

Much feedback has poured in saying to keep up with the session reports. Readers like to hear how the campaign is going along.

Unfortunately, the feedback does not go more in-depth. I'm not sure if you'd like focus to be just on the story, or if you like the out-of-character stuff that goes on, or if you like the occasional self-analysis I do on sessions.



Maybe it's a combo, or perhaps there's another element you like I haven't listed or don't realize.

Let me know if you have any additional feedback about session reports in the newsletter.

From my perspective, I enjoy writing them as session logs. It creates a campaign journal for reference, which I found helpful during Riddleport. I often went to my session reports in the newsletter to recall events rather than my GM notes, lol.

Also, writing out session log style helps me remember more about the campaign, which means faster and more consistent GMing.

## **Customers**

I would like to turn Duskfall into one or more products some day.

I will be creating at least one adventure for it, as that's a product I promised to Gamer Lifestyle members in 2013 (Gamer Lifestyle is a course I periodically open to teach people how to break into the RPG industry and publish their campaigns, worlds, and RPG creations.)

I also run Roleplaying Tips as a part-time business, and my campaigns always serve as fantastic inspiration when I'm writing books and courses.

What do customers want? Well, last year I ran an adventure product reader survey. It received hundreds of responses and I spent hours parsing through all the data and feedback.

Three clear themes emerged, which I'll share shortly.

Bottom line for me though is, gaming and fun is top priority. If there's an option to turn Duskfall into a Kickstarter or product in



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the future, that's a bonus. But the GM, players, and Roleplaying Tips readers come first.

## The Three Campaign Meta Themes

Out of the intensive adventure research from my Roleplaying Tips reader survey, three themes kept popping up. One of the questions was, "What bugs you about published adventures?" and nearly every answer had one or more of these three themes:

- **Freedom** and non-linear adventures. No railroads please.
- **Integration.** Content you can use in your own worlds and campaigns.
- **Story.** Interesting plots and gameplay. Inspiration.

It was amazing how freedom, integration, and story made up 95% of the responses! Readers stated this in various ways. For example:

*"I ran the Pathfinder adventure paths for ages until I finally got fed up with them and started writing my own (mostly thanks to a subscription to Roleplaying Tips which keep coming out with good ideas!). I've put my gripes about the Pathfinder modules above, but one thing they do really well is have a good story. Usually an epic story. Sure, they're not very good at tying the pieces together neatly, but the kernel of an epic story is there."*

*"Also, I like a hybrid of sandbox and train-track adventures. If it's a complete sandbox I find people tend to eventually lack direction and give up, but if it's too linear they object. Pathfinder tends to vacillate so strongly between the two that I get frustrated with both."*



And:

*“Vastly unbalanced crunch, logic holes/design flaws I have to work around (worse: on the fly!), poor character backgrounds, and stereotyped or by-the-numbers story design. Failing to treat NPCs as “real people” with backgrounds, motivations, alliances and resources to match their power/influence.”*

*“Anyone can throw some numbers together and index a map. Those adventures are a dime a dozen (well, maybe in 1940’s dime equivalents). I’m sure you can create a compelling story with fascinating, believable characters and include dynamic, exciting encounters.”*

And:

*“Most are too linear and don’t provide much choice for the players as to what to do after the start of the adventure.”*

*“The other challenge is that they tend to be too setting specific, which makes them hard to adapt to a custom campaign. It is fine to have them set in a particular campaign, but if everything hinges around specific parts of the campaign that are extremely difficult to scrub the names off of and rebrand based on my own campaign versions, then the adventure becomes a great idea but too much work to use.”*

We can see the three themes strongly represented in those comments.

The thing is, I want story, integration, and freedom as a GM too! And my players already expressed a desire for two of those themes, as well.



And because the survey was only answered by Roleplaying Tips readers, I know these themes directly represent their wishes, too.

So, if Duskfall fulfills great story, easy integration with other settings and campaigns, and freedom for GMs and players, each audience is served and a rousing campaign also gets gamed.

## Brick By Brick, Hex By Hex

To accommodate the three meta design requirements, Duskfall will take on a Lego-style design. Here's how.

- I will create the pieces as standalone game elements (Freedom)
- I will provide suggestions and opportunities for interactions between the pieces (Integration)
- And I will provide at least one critical path or meta-plot (Story)

The players can do what they want. They can explore, become merchants, intrigue with factions, roleplay, fight. They can do whatever they want but with one constraint: **they need to stay within the region.**

## Colour Between The Lines, Please

I won't put impenetrable mountains, forests, and oceans around all the map edges to keep the PCs trapped inside. No rocks fall and everyone dies. They can technically wander deeper into the lost continent or sail back to their homeland.

But as a tacit agreement with players, their characters will stay motivated to stick around and adventure. Whether it's politics,



treasure hunting, power-mongering, questing, simulating, or other mode, it matters not to me. As long as they stay in the region.

This means I can focus my planning. I can eat the elephant one bite at a time, as they say. And I can re-use the game pieces I create over and over to save me prep time and add depth to the story, until they're destroyed or otherwise rendered unplayable.

## Sans Tracks

By asking my players to help with this, I don't have to railroad them. It's their choice, as part of the campaign's make-up, to play within the sandbox. And by asking them this up front, they can play this out from the beginning, by adding the proper character motivations, backgrounds, relationships, and details to ensure they get what they want from the area and campaign in general.

If instead I popped this on them as they neared the edge of the sandbox, for example, it might be a problem. A character or player might have become invested in seeing what's on the other side. Or they might not like the sudden and arbitrary new restriction.

Instead, this all gets framed up as soon as the PCs reach Duskfall, and expectations get set so we understand the boundaries and opportunities from the beginning.

This also means you can integrate the setting in whole or in part into your worlds and campaign easily. Duskfall lives on a lost continent within a thick forest. Those are only soft requirements, on purpose. You can put Duskfall anywhere you like within your world. It'll fit. And the plots I have in mind are self-contained. You don't need a certain location, villain, or situation to be able to run Duskfall.



However, there will be lots of ways you can tie in existing campaign elements to what Duskfall will offer.

Flipping things around, you can steal all the ideas from Duskfall without major interruption or inconvenience to your campaign because they will be localized. You can globalize what you like, connect what you like.

And it's possible because the site is self-contained and the Lego-style design approach I'm taking. You can make anything with Lego. :)

Likewise, you can add or remove NPCs, locations, items, and events as you see fit for your different campaign or your version of Duskfall, because that's how Lego works.

## The Game Pieces

I've just mentioned the core game pieces I'll be prepping for the campaign. Here they are again:

- NPCs
- Locations
- Items
- Events

### NPCs

Different factions compete for limited resources as they try to expand their territory in the ruined city and its surrounding lands. They try to gather resources like food and water and raw materials, and defend their borders.



At the centre of these factions will be the PCs' faction, trying to eke out an existence and improve their lot. In my world, the Empire initially sent troops, craftsmen, pioneers, and explorers over by ship to settle the lost continent.

They discovered Duskfall and set up camp there, taking over the ruins of a small keep on the edge of the city and fixing it up. Then the ships stopped coming. Now the settlement is on its own. It must not only compete for resources with the other factions, but try to make peace and alliances where possible, and figure out what the other factions are up to.

Some factions will be aware of the major plot arc and quests it spawns. Some will not.

Neglecting the plot means a faction has little chance of making certain discoveries, earning various rewards, and "leveling up" their settlements. That doesn't mean a faction can't go in and steal a major new discovery or sabotage a new advantage. Instead, it means it will be harder to do that as the campaign winds on and the strongest grow even more powerful.

With this design, still described in abstract terms here, there are many opportunities for cool NPCs and roleplaying. Plus, each faction can present a tasty villain and various lieutenants to hate and foil. And there will be conflicts galore.

Should the PCs get involved, they can become peace brokers, be spies and join the intrigue, or be secret weapons. Whatever they want.

I will ask players for another design constraint here. I will ask them to **be loyal members of the Empire faction**. At least, to start. This again helps narrow my planning, and I can focus more on developing Empire NPCs at the beginning.



As the game plays out, if the PCs switch sides or become neutral, that's ok. I just need a little support at the start to help me plan and prep easier, and anticipate with greater accuracy various party choices and actions.

\* \* \*

I will save additional details on NPC and Faction design for future tips articles. TPK Patrons voted Factions as a topic for the newsletter, so keep your eyes peeled for faction tips in RPT on that front.

My question for you now is, do you see the design pattern at play here? Can you see the Matrix, the GM's hand in how there will be plot despite major character freedom?

- We've created an environment where several game pieces are present (the factions).
- The pieces all share something in common to tie them to the campaign (competing for scarce resources to survive).
- The pieces can all participate in and affect the major plot arc (explore and discover).
- The pieces and plot matter to the PCs (defend the Empire's settlement, keep up with plot developments or become relatively weaker).

You can take this pattern and plunk it into your existing campaign right now if you want.

- **Step 1:** Figure out the factions
- **Step 2:** Figure out the common thing they compete after
- **Step 3:** Hook them into your plot
- **Step 4:** Put the PCs in the middle with table stakes



I love NPCs. They are at the heart of all my campaigns now. Even if a campaign is just a megadungeon, NPCs and factions will form the skeleton of the meta plot for me.

## Locations

I am coining Duskfall a CityCrawl campaign.

It's a urban sandbox hexcrawl within the ruins of an ancient city.

Duskfall sprawls both horizontally and vertically.

Each faction has claimed a portion of the ruins as their territory. But the ruins are expansive enough that these settlements only account for 25% of the area. The rest of the city is largely unexplored. Therein lies opportunity for exploration and adventure!

If the PCs choose, they can leave the safety of their keep (and this is the Chaos Keep I was talking about in earlier Roleplaying Tips issues – it's a setting within the setting – more on that in the future) and venture into the unexplored hexes on the map. They can go block by ruined block, exploring the buildings left standing. Some buildings will offer single encounters. Others will be 5 Room Dungeons. And a few will be large dungeons.

The party will encounter expeditions from the other factions this way, too. Some factions are still undiscovered to the Empire. Other factions are strange, mysterious, and sometimes dangerous.

As I mentioned, the city has had several civilizations occupy it. Each culture had its own architectural style. Some built towers. Others built ziggurats. Some dug tunnels. Each civilization added its own style of locations to the city. And these offer not just horizontal exploration opportunities, but vertical ones too.



Beneath Duskfall are several strata of tunnels and buildings, built and buried over time. PCs who dare descend deep into the ground will battle strange creatures, uncover lost artifacts and dangerous secrets, and discover one or two disturbing factions making their way to the surface with evil plans.

And if the party wants to go up into the pyramids, towers, and other tall structures above ground, they'll find lots of adventure there too.

But wait, there's more. If the PCs leave the city, there's the surrounding forest to explore. While settlements are just starting to clear very small portions of the forest near the edges for wood, plants, and animals, the forest is pretty much unexplored and a giant unknown to all. Naturally, there are many things to discover - and run from - within the gloomy area.

There's also the river. Upstream, downstream, in, and beneath the river are more adventures to face. A couple more factions, lots of monsters, lots of cool encounter locations. A little treasure, too.

Outside the forest is, well, an entire lost continent....



With this design, the many ancient cultures have created a variety of adventuring sites. Plus the wilderness beckons. And the continent awaits discovery.

For your campaign, I am hoping you could add a lost continent without many integration problems. It's the most flexible design approach I could think of.

If you want to stick with The Known World, find a spot where a ruined city could exist and remain unexplored for a long time. For



example, in the heart of a forest too dense and dangerous to civilize yet. Nearby nations would choose easier pickings for expansion.

The river is optional. It's a way for me to get the PCs past a point of no return. Well, actually, in my campaign an ocean serves that purpose, and the forest and river make it very difficult for all factions to just expand elsewhere. Plus, the lure of the CityCrawl and finding ancient treasures and powers keeps them in the area, fighting it out.

I have also not defined the factions yet. And that's on purpose, because you don't need those details to use this design pattern. You just create a site where multiple cultures or civilizations have dwelled over various ages.

This gives you a believable way to add different architecture and types of adventure locales. If you want pyramids, have such a culture be one of the city's past inhabitants. If you want Middle Eastern type buildings, no problem, that's another culture who lived in the city for an age. Greek architecture? Aztec? Spanish? Keep adding layers.

Again, the goal here is freedom and integration. Take major civilizations from your world's history and camp them out in the city for awhile. Let them leave their fingerprints on the ruins.

We also have our choice of terrains here. Duskfall offers players dungeons, wilderness, water, sky, ruins, and civilized locations to explore. Up, down, all around. They can CityCrawl their hearts out, or they can just stay in Chaos Keep and explore the secrets that exist there. A setting within a setting.

## Items

I think of items a couple different ways. First is equipment and supplies versus treasure. Second is mundane versus magical.



## **Mundane**

In Duskfall, the Empire's settlement has several craftsmen. These folk will supply the PCs with equipment upgrades, standard equipment, and specialty items as listed in the game rules. In my world, the Empire is commerce oriented, so even though Chaos Keep is far from the motherland, trade still happens via coin exchange. This is also true for a couple of the other factions.

Also, coins are made from pure metals (modern currency and past currency, as a house rule). So certain factions will take coins as payment just to get the precious metal for various purposes.

I'll double prices listed in the rules to represent lower supply in the settlement. There are only a limited number of craftsmen. And early in the campaign, this will help make mundane treasure more valuable, both as PC acquisitions and as saleable items either to Chaos Keep folk or to other factions.

If PCs ask to buy unusual or rare items, I'll roll for availability:

- 1-3: Item not available
- 4-5: Item available in Chaos Keep
- 6: Item available only from another faction

In this way, mundane treasure becomes special. Even at high levels, if the PCs find a box of well-made tools, they can help Empire folk a lot with such finds. This will hopefully be quite rewarding for the party, even when money gets to matter less to them.

## ***Magic Items***

There might be one or more magic item crafters in Chaos Keep. For sure there will be in other factions. I've always liked offering healing



magic, spellcasting, and one-off items for purchase for PCs to spend treasure on. It's a nice way to offer tactical choices, a rewarding feeling of upgrades (from mundane to magic), and treasure siphon without it feeling like a penalty.

Magic capabilities will make other factions more dangerous and a source of treasure.

Magic offerings offers diplomacy, trade, and intrigue options if the PCs lean that way.

For magic items as treasure, the location and NPC design gives plenty of ways to make this happen. However, I also plan to add different magic item types to the campaign over time. Things like socketed items (gems become power sources and currency), legacy items (PCs bond with an item and they both grow in power), and ritual items (recharge and super-charge with proper sacrifices).

With multiple cultures buried in the ruins, again we have a nice way to integrate such items into the campaign when the time is right. These become surprises and special rewards, instead of just yet another +1 sword, or just another thing out of the standard magic items list in the rules.

I'm also planning a black market that buys and sells magic. I prefer magic to be rare in my campaigns, for a grittier sword & sorcery feel. Rather than players finding umpteen magic items over the course of their adventures, I'd like them to become aware of the black market and trade in weaker magic for more powerful items. A bit of campaign recycling means a smaller amount of items in play overall. This also creates a bit of competition over availability and prices, which means more natural treasure siphoning, cool conflicts, and more intrigue.



I don't know who runs the black market yet. It might be one of the factions, a faction in its own right, or something dark tied to the plot to be revealed later in the campaign. Give everything a secret, right?



Duskfall does not depend on equipment or magic scarcity. If you want to go four colour fantasy, power levels scale no problem. There's nothing in the design that needs low or high magic, low or high wealth. At some point, money can only do so much. You can only grow gardens so fast, log the forest at a maximum rate, explore at certain speeds. Whether you have long or short adventuring days, the setting doesn't care.

Even if you have so much magic and prosperity that the settlements thrive, they will still compete and conflict over territory, discoveries in the ruins, and the major plot arc.

I just prefer low fantasy, so that's the flavour of my design. But you have the freedom to integrate Duskfall in whole or in part at whatever power level you like.

## Events

Events have a special place in my GMing heart. I feel slow because I've only recently joined the party on this design approach in the last couple of years. They are a fantastic way to do campaign design and session planning, so I'm going to break Events into their own section here.

Events are encounters, which are the building blocks of adventures and game sessions. Three death knights and a treasonous secret in a room? That's an event when the PCs enter. When two armies



clash - that's an event. When the PCs try to negotiate peace between kings, that's an event too.

If it's an encounter - past, present, or future - it's an Event.

Not everything is an event. Narrating over the course of five minutes the PCs' journey through a war-torn wilderness is not an event, for example. There was no encounter there. Just monologue and description.

Let me know if this is unclear.

Every event has four components:

- Date & Time
- PCs & NPCs, Monsters, or Foes
- Location
- Conflict

There's an optional fifth component: Items.

Let's dig into each of those event elements.

### ***Date & Time***

An event is not theory. It's something that has actually happened or is happening right now.

It can also be a **potential** something that will happen. This is a key anti-railroad GMing tool worth noting. More on it in a bit.

In all these cases, there's a time element.

Past events are known as **Background** if you did not play it out. Else, they are part of the **Campaign Log**.

Current events are called **Encounters**.



Future events I call **Plot**.

By giving each event a date and time stamp, you can organize them into chronological order and make sense of them. And when you put them in order, you have Story!

### *PCs & NPCs, Monsters, or Foes*

Events need action. Action needs resistance. NPCs, monsters, and “foes” are your source of resistance and challenge in encounters and events.

I put “foes” in quotes because the PCs might struggle against nature, time, a trap, or some other opponent not technically an NPC or monster.

As long as some thing, force, or agency creates an uncertain outcome for the PCs, we have a sufficient foe.

### *Location*

Every event needs a place. It’s required by physics. :)

Some locations have sub-locations that might be easier to think of as just one place.

For example, a small group of connected caves. When the PCs arrive, all cave inhabitants react and coordinate together. In this case, I’d consider this one location, not a separate location per cave.

A location to me is something I’d govern with a single combat or initiative roll. Or, if the PCs leave it, the encounter would be considered over. That to me defines the boundaries of what a location is.



Also, for Background and Plot events, it's OK to name regions, cities, dungeons, or big places as locations. Unless exact coordinates are critical to understanding an event, you can go with bigger areas.

### ***Items***

In addition to people and places, events might have notable things. Magic items, artifacts, treasure, special equipment, plot devices, and such.

I do a poor job of adding interesting items to events. That's one of my GMing goals for next year - to design better items and treasure. Specifically, minor mundane and magic items.

Anyway, items add great details to events to make them more challenging or memorable.

## **Build Events With Lego**

Let's put all these tips together now into how I'll actually design and manage Duskfall.

With the Lego approach, I'll start by designing a bunch of the game pieces independently.

### **Create The Lego**

I'll create factions, NPCs, monsters, items, and locations. Most will be standalone. I'll also use anything cool I find in my game books or online. It all goes into the Lego box.

This makes my design and prep job a whole lot easier!



Because now I can just build standalone game pieces whenever I have time. I don't have to worry about integration or plot at this point. I'm just making ingredients.

For NPCs, I'll start with figuring out a few factions. Then I'll create faction leaders. The leaders will likely become villains, but they could become allies if the PCs game it that way.

Then I'll create minor NPCs. I'll raid my NPCs pile from MyInfo. (I put all my past campaign NPCs into MyInfo for later re-use.)

I'll also create independent NPCs as ideas come to me. I always like wizards and sorcerers doing mysterious things in their towers, for example.

I'll also draw a rough map of Duskfall and place the factions. Then I'll sketch out a map of the city. And I'll start pinning locations to it.

And any special items that come to mind, I'll make notes on and flesh out.

After awhile, I'll have a big (sand)box full of game pieces ready to use!

## **Combo Into Events**

Once my box gets filled enough, I'll start creating events.

I'll do a Timeline, and note important Background events.

Then I'll do a Plot line, and prep seeds for future events that will possible become encounters.

And using Loopy Planning, I'll create current events to be Encounters for next session.



What I want to draw to your attention here, in case I've described this poorly, is you are not designing anything very linear here. It's all anti-railroad.

You are also not committing to over-planning anything. This approach will make maximum use of my limited prep time. Game pieces I don't use next session will be there for future sessions. I can add and destroy any game pieces whenever either through gameplay or through Plot without worrying about ruining a linear story progression.

To prep for sessions, I just need to focus on having game pieces likely to be used ready for use.

And here's the keystone to the whole thing:

**During sessions, I only need to manage Events.**

Reacting to the PCs becomes figuring out what event will trigger next because of PC actions.

If gameplay stalls, I'll whip up an event based on my Loopy Planning.

Like a chef in his kitchen, I only need to grab a few ingredients, mix them together, and throw them into the oven with the PCs to cook.

In my experience, events form on their own. I don't have to try very hard to create them. It's usually the PCs going somewhere or doing something that triggers events. And when that happens, I just need to grab the game pieces involved and start the encounter. I don't have to worry how things will end, or force things in any direction. That takes a huge load off my back. I'm just cooking up events based on ingredients the PCs draw in themselves.

\* \* \*



This whole approach makes the game flexible for everyone.

It takes a lot of stress off me, and saves me a lot of time, because I just need to create the Lego pieces. The PCs will take care of most of the plot for me.

With the exception of the overall plot arc, which I'll talk about in another article, I don't need to steer things in any particular direction. **So I can just focus on creating and polishing the game pieces.**

With a box slowly filling with great game pieces, I can be a nimble GM, confident I can react to just about anything.

At the big picture or meta level, I'm asking my players to stay within the sandbox for me, so I can be more efficient and effective with the Legos I make.

And the nature of Duskfall's design means I'm really just responsible for creating city ruins and what might be in those ruins => NPCs, Locations, and Items. That's pretty simple and doable given my tight schedule.

I also feel this design approach gives any type of gameplay the PCs want. Dungeons, politics, wilderness, exploration/hexcrawling, combat, roleplaying, intrigue, resource gathering, puzzles.

Last, I feel this design approach will please all four audiences. I'm excited about running this campaign. And hopefully my players will enjoy gaming it, and Roleplaying Tips readers will enjoy reading about it. From a product point of view, the campaign is sure to inspire.





Thanks for reading! I know this was a long article. Once you get it in book form, hopefully it'll be easier to re-read, highlight, and bookmark.

Let me know if you have any questions about anything in this article or how it might apply to your own GMing.



# Credits

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