

ADVENTURE TYPES

For fifty years publishers big and small have published thousands of adventures to run in our tabletop roleplaying games, with millions more homebrewed by game masters to run for their groups. These adventures span multiple universes, taking characters to the very furthest reaches of the collective human imagination.

Some work better than others.

We're not going to get lost in the infinite planes of possible adventures – we're going to spend the next few chapters discussing specific adventure types. These adventure types commonly appear across multiple RPGs and for good reason – they work. Each adventure type focuses on a few key goals:

- They're easy to get our heads around. We understand their intent and structure.
- They offer freedom for our players and their characters to make meaningful choices and evolve the scenario in ways we wouldn't predict.
- They let us focus our prep and yet are open and flexible enough to build unique and fantastic adventures.

Few adventures fall cleanly into a single adventure type. Chapter 5 discusses how most sessions we prep don't follow into any particular adventure type or end up being a mash-up of several adventure types. It's still worth understanding each type to see what they offer and how each differs from the others.

Adventure types usually don't fit perfectly into a *session*. Instead, some sessions might include components from multiple adventure types and some adventure types might span across multiple sessions. A session might start off with some roleplay and intrigue, then turn into an overland journey, and then into a dungeon crawl. Another few sessions might stay in that dungeon crawl until their big combat-focused boss battle. Adventure types give us a meaningful structure to understand how these structures for gameplay can work at the table.

A FOCUS ON LAZY CHOICES

Many different RPGs and different GMs have differing opinions on how to run these adventure types (or where they are indeed types at all). In the following chapters we take an opinionated

approach built around this philosophy: the structure we choose gives us the best output for the effort. This philosophy is something we strive for. Almost certainly we won't get it perfect. But that philosophy – that we seek the easiest solution to bring open-ended improv-focused structures to our tabletop RPGs – is the one we're aiming for.

BUILT FOR MEANINGFUL CHARACTER CHOICE AND AGENCY

Good RPG adventures offer interesting choices to your players and agency to the characters to make those choices. Too often we hear about adventures where the characters *have* no choice. They're less involved in an ongoing story and just go along for the ride. "Railroads" these are often called – no matter what options you pick, you're going only one way.

Each of the following adventure types break out of these rails to give the characters (and their players) agency to choose different paths, take different directions, and change the story based on the choices they make.

A COMMON APPROACH

The following chapters break down adventure types in common ways:

Understanding the Adventure Type. Each chapter begins by describing this adventure type and what separates it from the others.

Prepping the Adventure Type. This section discusses how to prepare this adventure type using the eight steps for lazy GM prep.

Running This Adventure Type. This section describes the typical process for running this type of adventure at the table.

Common Pitfalls. This section describes common pitfalls with this type of adventure and how to avoid or mitigate those pitfalls.

ADVENTURE TYPES

Here's a summary of the adventure types we cover in the chapters ahead.

Scene-based Adventures. A common adventure type in which the characters navigate a series of scenes and situations. Scenes can take them through one or more locations, dealing with individual situations and talking to NPCs, facing monsters, or exploring a location while

attempting to complete one or more quests. Think of this as a “default” adventure type.

Dungeon Crawls. Adventures that primarily follow the characters as they explore ancient ruins, old crypts, decaying castles, or other places mostly abandoned by intelligent inhabitants. Dungeon crawls are a common scenario in which characters crawl through these ruins, fight monsters, and collect treasure often while seeking to accomplish a goal.

Infiltration and Heists. Adventures in which the characters infiltrate an inhabited location, often using stealth or subterfuge to avoid confrontation. Like dungeon crawls, infiltrations and heists focus on a location. Unlike dungeon crawls, infiltration and heist adventures have a greater focus on the goal, the characters approach, the evolving behavior of the inhabitants of the location, and complications that arise.

Investigations and Mysteries. Adventures that follow the characters as they uncover information, often in several places and with several NPCs. Investigations put a heavy focus on secrets and clues, ensuring that the characters learn what they need to follow through with the adventure regardless of their path of investigation.

Overland Exploration and Travel. Adventures in which the characters journey from one place to another. Such adventures can be short – focusing on a single encounter as the characters travel – or longer as the characters choose from several paths and destinations through a series of hexes (a hexcrawl) or paths between locations (a pointcrawl).

Roleplay and Intrigue. Adventures that focus primarily on interacting with NPCs, finding out information, and convincing NPCs to follow a particular path or goal. While roleplay and intrigue adventures focus heavily on character-to-NPC interaction, they can include elements of exploration and combat as well.

Combat. Adventures that primarily focus on the characters facing one or more battles or multiple waves of combatants in a big battle.

Defense. Adventures in which the characters defend a location – setting up defenses, working with NPCs, or seeking to thwart their attackers before defense is needed.

Mashups and Undefined Adventures. Adventure types that don’t fit the common models above or that include elements of multiple adventure types.

Don’t Get Caught Up on Names or Definitions

Don’t get too caught up in the names and definitions of these adventure types. You may have a different way to break up these types of adventures, how to label them, what separates them, and what sorts of materials and preparation they include. That’s totally cool. I hope you’ll still get value from the material you find in these chapters. Worry less about the labels and definitions and more about the approaches and advice you find and how it can help support your own adventure types.

WHEN DO YOU CHOOSE A MODEL?

You might choose which model to run for your adventure in a couple of ways. First, your next session might already be headed in a particular direction and you realize this upcoming situation fits one of the models. Maybe you’re group is headed towards an old ruin to pick up a key they need to open the door to a locked vault. Sounds like a dungeon crawl! Or your group is headed across the land from one city to another. Sounds like exploration and travel!

Other times you might not yet have a scenario in mind and can go through the models to see which one might be fun. Has your group spent a lot of time delving into dungeons? Might be time for an investigation and mystery or maybe roleplaying and intrigue. Have you spent a lot of time in big conversations and negotiations? Might be time for a combat-focused session.

Use the models as a menu of options if you don’t yet already have something in mind or read through the models to see what you can add or what problems you might avoid for adventures you’re already planning to run.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- The following adventure types give you well-tested adventure models around which you can build your own fantastic adventures.
- These models are built on the best practices for defined structures, flexible approaches, and player agency.
- Adventure types include scene-based adventures, dungeon crawls, infiltrations and heists, investigations and mysteries, overland exploration and travel, missions and quest

chains, defense, roleplay and intrigue, combat, and mashups and the undefined.

- Each chapter describes these adventure types, how to prep them, how to run them, and what common pitfalls you might into and how to avoid them.
- Choose a model when it fits closely to the scenario you plan to run or use the models as a menu of options when you don't yet have one picked out.

SCENE-BASED ADVENTURES

Scene-based adventures are the default adventure type of the eight steps of lazy GMing. In scene-based adventures, the characters navigate a series of scenes, each with their own situation going on and hooks that draw them to the next.

There's a lot of overlap between scene-based adventures and other adventure types like investigations and mysteries, overland travel and exploration, and roleplay and intrigue adventure types.

Scene-based adventures might be linear – one scene leads to the next – or there might be several different scenes that might take place after the previous. Scenes have goals and choices that lead the characters from one scene to the next.

Each scene also often takes place at a location with inhabitants and the characters learn secrets and clues while interacting with the scene. In some scenes, they fight monsters, receive rewards, or both. Thus, scene-based adventures often cover all eight of the eight steps.

You can find an example of the eight steps applied to a scene-based scenario in appendix \$ – Scenario 1: The Relic.

SET SCENE GOALS

Scenes need a clear reason for being – a reason the characters bother to follow through with the scene. Scene goals are smaller in scope than the goal of an entire session, quest, or adventure. The characters in a given scene have something they want to accomplish.

Here's a list of twenty goals for any particular scene:

1. Convince someone of something.
2. Research or recover unknown information.
3. Defeat a foe.
4. Rescue someone.
5. Navigate a confrontation between two other groups.
6. Uncover a secret.
7. Steal something.
8. Find a secret passage.
9. Stake out a location.
10. Get information out of a reluctant spy.
11. Negotiate the purchase of a magic item.
12. Resupply for a coming adventure.
13. Gain a new ally.
14. Plan a heist or infiltration.
15. Defend a location.
16. Find or plant evidence.
17. Spy on someone.
18. Convince a reluctant ally.
19. Follow someone without being detected.
20. Meet a new potential ally.

Some of these scenes seem to fit into the other adventure types described in later chapters but sometimes they have a simpler structure where one scene leads to the next.

45 MINUTE SCENES

For an easy rule of thumb, assume any given scene in a typical RPG takes about 45 minutes. Some scenes are shorter and some are longer but this rule of thumb helps pace out how many scenes you might cover in a given session. If you're running a four-hour game, prep five or six scenes and be ready to run only four of them. If it's a three-hour game, you'll need four or five scenes but might only get through three.

If you're trying to pack everything into a set time period, be ready to cut scenes from the middle so you don't skip the exciting conclusion of your session. See more details in chapter \$ – Running Single Session Games.

FOCUS ON DECISIONS AND ACTIONS

It's easy for scenes to play out in front of the characters without offering the characters anything interesting to do. Instead of pre-defining scenes, think of each scene as a situation – something's going on that the characters can get involved with. Here are some important questions to ask yourself for each scene you prepare:

- What's the setup?
- What's the situation going on here the characters get involved in?
- What choices can the characters make in this scene? What actions can they take?
- What are the characters doing here? What's their goal?

Build scenes so the characters have something to do. Purely informational scenes aren't very interesting and end up focusing on the GM just saying a bunch of stuff while players look bored,

shuffle around on their character sheet, or start looking at their phone.

PREPPING SCENE-BASED ADVENTURES

Scene-based adventures are the default adventure type when none of the other adventure types seem to fit. Here's how we might focus our eight steps on scene-based adventures.

Characters. For each of the characters, think about what can draw them into the scenes you're considering. What secrets might they learn? What might draw specific characters into a given scene? What options are available for them? Write down hooks that can draw characters into the scenes to come.

Strong Start. What scene starts things off? What happens that draws the characters – and the players – into the scene? How do the characters get involved? What connects this strong start to the rest of the scenes you're going to prepare? Write down the first scene that begins the session you're going to run.

Scenes. This is, obviously, the big step for scene-based adventures. Don't go overboard, however. You don't need multiple paragraphs per scene. Write a sentence or so for each scene that defines its place in the upcoming session. Write down what you need to run the scene and connect it to the others. Think in particular about the goal of the scene and the choices the characters have in any given scene.

Often characters might have multiple paths they can take. Don't go overboard with a huge network of possible scenes. List possible options for the scenes to come and feel free to break up potential scenes into NPCs, monsters, secrets, locations in the rest of your prep notes so you can put them together as needed.

Secrets and Clues. Write out secrets and clues as you would for any session. What are ten possible secrets the characters could learn while navigating these scenes? Sometimes a secret is clearly focused on one particular scene. Other times, secrets might be discovered in any given scene.

Fantastic Locations. Scenes take place somewhere. You can note locations and details in the scene description or list them in their own separate "locations" section if you think situations might change at given locations. Because we're focusing on a few large scenes, consider including three significant features for a

given location that the characters might notice or interact with during the scene.

NPCs. Scene-based sessions often involve NPCs. Like locations, you can jot down and highlight NPCs in your scenes step or put them in their own separate list if there's more details you want and if an NPC might show up in different locations. Don't go overboard on the details. Write down what you need to run the NPC and improvise the rest.

Monsters. If scenes include monsters you can write down the monster's name and page number in your scenes step or list them in a separate "monsters" section. If a scene has some random chance for a monster and you want a short random monster list, the monsters section of your notes is a good place to put it.

Rewards. The characters might pick up treasure or other rewards in a scene. Players certainly like treasure for their efforts. Drop in a list of potential treasure and rewards the characters might pick up as they navigate these scenes.

RUNNING SCENE-BASED ADVENTURES

As a default adventure type, we run scene-based adventures as we would any typical session in our game of choice. The session begins with the strong start to hook the players into the session. Get as quickly to "what do you do?" as you can to bring the characters into the story and ensure they're not just acting as observers. Ensure players are aware of their goal for any given scene. Feel free to just tell them if they're not getting it. Remember, players only grasp about half of what you describe.

When running scene-based adventures, keep the names of the characters in front of you and ensure every character gets time in the spotlight. When in doubt, go around the table asking players what their characters do.

When you reach the end of a scene, move the characters on to the next scene if it's known or lay out the options in front of the players to choose where they go next.

Then you're on to the next scene.

SCENE-BASED ADVENTURE PITFALLS

Avoid the following pitfalls when running scene-based adventures.

No Choices to Make. It's easy for a scene to fall into pure narrative from the GM. We have things

we want the characters to know so we set up a scene where an NPC tells them a bunch of stuff. These scenes lack choices, though. There's nothing to do. Avoid this pitfall by ensuring the characters have choices in front of them – different approaches they might take to change the outcome of a situation. Use second-person narratives to give players information their character would know. "Because you're a paladin of the Three Sisters, you have experience with the Archkeepers and their desire to shepherd new travelers into the city."

No Action. Even if characters do have agency in their approach to a scene, sometimes it's all talk – asking questions to get answers without anything really happening. Adventurers what to do stuff. Ensure there's something to physically do in a scene. Not everything needs to be a fight but it's worth asking the question of "what would a barbarian do in this scene?"

No Clear Goal. Sometimes we set up scenes because they sound cool but there's really no purpose to them. There's nothing to actually accomplish that matters. The characters ride through the scene like they're watching a movie. Ensure there's a clear goal for each scene. What's the purpose of the scene? What do the characters gain from it? What value does it have for the rest of the story?

Too Linear a Structure. It's easy to come up with five scenes, link them together, and run them one after the other. A series of scenes can make the whole session feel linear. If there's no choice and no outcome other than going to the next scene, what agency did the characters really have? Even if you do have a linear set of scenes, ensure that the outcome from each scene matters for the larger story. Make sure scenes include decisions to make, actions to take, and results from the decisions and actions of the characters.

complicated and keep scene descriptions to three to five sentences.

- Ensure scenes have a clear goal – a reason for the characters to engage in the scene.
- Expect any given scene to take about 45 minutes. Some may take longer and some might be shorter but it's a good general rule of thumb for most games.
- Prep scene-based adventures using the eight steps of lazy GM prep. If desired, include elements of the other steps in your "scene" description such as locations, NPCs, or monsters or break them out to help you improvise scenes as you run your game.
- Avoid common pitfalls such as having no clear decisions or actions for the characters, not having a clear goal for the scene, or having too linear a structure that doesn't change based on the actions of the characters.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Scene-based adventures are a common "default" style adventure in which the characters navigate several scenes throughout the session.
- Scenes include locations, NPCs, monsters, secrets and clues, and goals.
- You might have a linear set of scenes in which each leads to the next or a scene might have several optional paths to follow-on scenes. Don't let your flow of scenes get too

DUNGEON CRAWLS

In dungeon crawls, the characters explore locations room by room, facing challenges, combatants, and NPCs along the way. The characters often seek to accomplish a goal while delving into a dungeon – sometimes simply to acquire wealth. Inhabitants of dungeon crawls often include unintelligent creatures, independent intelligent creatures, or small groups of intelligent creatures. Unlike infiltration and heist adventures (see chapter \$), the larger behavior of the inhabitants of a dungeon isn't usually as important, nor is the need to engage in continual subterfuge. Dungeons typically play out room by room as the characters navigate the location.

What Is a Dungeon?

For this book, we're going to define dungeons as any multi-room environment the characters tend to navigate room-by-room. Often dungeons are derelict or decrepit, having been something else before their eventual ruin. The main difference between a dungeon and other multi-room locations we might run, perhaps during an infiltration or heist adventure, is that the occupants in a dungeon aren't typically all under one faction and the gameplay tends to follow the characters traveling from room to room dealing with focused challenges instead of taking an overall stealthy approach towards a larger goal.

Dungeon crawls offer an excellent combination of a refined area you can focus on with your prep and an adventure type providing lots of options for your players to choose their path. Dungeons offer lots of choices in a refined space with a high focus on action.

PREPPING A DUNGEON CRAWL

Since dungeon crawls often focus on locations, it works well to start with a map that fits the theme of the dungeon you're going to run. See "Developing Fantastic Locations" in chapter \$ for more details on picking maps and selecting locations.

The map you choose depends on the type of dungeon you're running. Here's a list of common dungeon locations:

1. Ruined watchtower
2. Decrepit crypts

3. Crumbling keep
4. Ancient cairn
5. Giant statue
6. Dank caves
7. Festering sewers
8. Unholy temple
9. Forgotten mines
10. Haunted mansion
11. Decaying dungeon
12. Derelict ship
13. Unstable wizard's tower
14. Sunken passages
15. Infested hive
16. Lightless subcellars
17. Fetid cisterns
18. Mouldering library
19. Cramped tunnels
20. Fallen palace

To save time and energy use existing maps instead of drawing your own and don't spend too much time looking for the perfect map. Instead, grab the first map that suits the overall theme of the dungeon you plan to run.

Many of the maps in appendix \$ can be used for these dungeon types.

Here's how you can tailor the eight steps to support dungeon crawls.

Characters. Think about what each character brings to a dungeon crawl. What abilities help them deal with the denizens here? Do the characters have any abilities that help them more easily navigate or reconnoiter the dungeon? What might each character know or learn about the dungeon they explore? Think about the characters in the context of the dungeon you're going to run to help you build a dungeon that's fun for you and your players.

Strong Start. If you're at the beginning of an adventure or quest involving a dungeon crawl, you can choose a few ways to start strong and get the characters into the dungeon. Here are ten strong starts to inspire your own introduction to a dungeon:

1. Denizens of the dungeon attack a local village.
2. Someone comes looking for adventurers to save their loved one lost in the dungeon.

3. A premonition brings harrowing visions to one of the characters showing dangers coming from the dungeon.
4. The characters find a dead treasure hunter with a map to the dungeon.
5. A sinkhole opens up beneath the characters sending them into the dungeon.
6. The sky shifts ominously and a nearby sage explains that the only thing to prevent a coming doom is the recovery of an artifact in the dungeon.
7. The characters receive a letter from a friend describing the dungeon and the associated required quest.
8. One of the characters has a vision of a powerful weapon kept deep within the dungeon.
9. A local kid dares the characters to enter the dungeon and recover an old coin from its forgotten treasury.
10. A haunted spirit begs to be released – her corrupted form seething in the depths of a nearby dungeon.

Often dungeon crawls last more than a single session of play. Here are ten suggested strong starts when the session begins with the characters already in a dungeon:

1. Monsters attack.
2. The characters discover a hidden chamber providing respite.
3. The characters hear creatures lurking nearby.
4. Part of the dungeon collapses revealing new passageways.
5. A lost explorer stumbles into the characters.
6. The characters witness a nosy spirit.
7. One of the characters springs a trap.
8. One of the characters notices frescoes hidden behind the dust of the wall.
9. The characters discover their food is spoiling.
10. The characters hear roars deeper in the dungeon.

One of the easiest tricks for a strong start in a dungeon is to end the previous session right

before a confrontation with some enemies. Ending before a fight gives you a clear strong start for your next game and keeps players excited for what's to come.

Scenes. Trying to outline every possible scene in a dungeon isn't useful for dungeon crawls. We don't know what direction the characters take while exploring the dungeon. Instead, note the big scenes you know will take place during the dungeon crawl. This might be limited to the dungeon entrance and the boss room if there is one or any other major chamber critical to the goal of the adventure.

Write down the characters' goal for the dungeon crawl in your scenes step and reiterate it often to the players so they don't forget why they're here. Dungeons are dangerous places. Normal people wouldn't go into places like this without good reason. What's that reason?

Secrets and Clues. Secrets and clues add flavor and valuable information to dungeons. Abstracting secrets and clues from their method of discovery means you can drop in the right secret at the right time and right circumstances as the characters explore the dungeon however they choose. Dungeons offer lots of ways to discover secrets and clues including:

1. Ancient mosaics, reliefs, or frescoes on the wall
2. Dusty tomes
3. Whispering spirits
4. Lost treasure hunters
5. Crumbling statues
6. Talkative opponents
7. Shrines to forgotten gods
8. Engravings on ancient weapons
9. The style armor worn by crumbling skeletons
10. Carved texts on sarcophagi or gravestones

Fantastic Locations. Instead of putting down details for every room in our dungeon, keep a short list of chambers in your locations notes. You don't have to fill out every room but every major room can help. You also don't need details for each room – only the big notable rooms. Even then, two or three interesting features is often enough.

For an even lazier trick, jot down a list of *potential* chambers and improvise each room as you run the crawl. This saves you from having to

identify every room in a large dungeon and instead paves the path as the characters explore the dungeon.

See the list of potential chambers by dungeon location in appendix \$ for inspiration when you're having trouble thinking up potential rooms in a dungeon.

Include Three Entrances

Include three possible entrances into your dungeon and give the players enough information to locate those three entrances. Then let them decide which entrance they want to use. Often the three choices break down to: a guarded front entrance, an entrance higher up requiring flying or climbing, and a hidden entrance full of unknown dangers. This model of multiple entrances works well for any large location – not just dungeon crawls. Including three entrances gives the players agency over their approach to a dungeon and ensures you have no pre-disposed notion how the characters approach the dungeon.

NPCs. List any important NPCs the characters might meet in the dungeon in your NPCs section. Include helpful NPCs in dungeon crawls, not just enemies. Otherwise the whole dungeon can feel like a slog of one battle after another (see upward and downward beats in chapter \$). Here's a list of potentially helpful NPCs the characters might run into during a dungeon crawl:

1. Wary ghosts
2. Wounded allies
3. Tricky thieves
4. Turncoats
5. Intelligent magic items
6. Talking paintings or statues
7. Divine voices
8. Greedy mercenaries
9. Rival adventurers
10. Talking books
11. Friendly intelligent monsters
12. Pacifist undead
13. Animated musical instruments
14. Talking dolls
15. Illusions
16. Projections
17. Psychic intrusions
18. Escaped prisoners
19. Lost explorers
20. Friendly servants

Monsters. Write down a list of monsters the characters might find in this dungeon. Number this list if you want a short random-encounter list (including friendly NPC encounters). Don't worry too much about how many monsters there are. You can improvise the number of monsters to suit the situation or the beats and pacing of the game while running it (see Pacing and Beats in chapter \$). Choose the number and types of monsters that make sense for the environment of the dungeon – some should be less powerful than the characters and some might be more powerful as long as it makes sense and the characters have options to deal with or avoid them. Often the deeper one delves into a multi-level dungeon, the more dangerous the monsters. See appendix \$ for a list of common fantasy monsters by dungeon level.

Rewards. Write down treasure and rewards the characters might find in the dungeon. You can place a single treasure hoard in a single location or split it up among several rooms.

RUNNING A DUNGEON CRAWL

When running a dungeon crawl, begin with your strong start like normal. Then reinforce the characters' goal and get them into the dungeon. Dungeon crawls often have a specific process:

Marching Order. Ask how the characters arrange themselves to travel through the dungeon. Who's up front? Who's in the back? Write down a visible list or arrange miniatures and tokens so you and your players can keep track of the characters' marching order as they travel through the dungeon.

Lighting. What lighting do the characters use to illuminate the dungeon? Even if light is plentiful (and that's a big if for some RPGs), what the lighting means for stealthfully traversing a dungeon is a big consideration. Ask the players what light sources they're using and who's carrying it.

Dungeon Turns. You might want to implement a general rule that exploring areas of a dungeon takes place in 10 minute turns. Investigating a door for traps, picking locks, looking for secret passages, searching a room - you can group each of these activities into ten minute turns. As turns go by, you can tick forward a clock (see chapter \$) or roll for random encounters if desired. Speaking of...

Random Encounters. Whatever system you choose, you might want to keep the pressure up

by rolling for random encounters. Rolling 1 on a 1d6 (for less common encounters) or a 1 or 2 on a 1d6 (for more frequent encounters) might tell you that something is coming – maybe this something got wind of the characters, maybe it's just stumbling by, maybe it's not here yet but it's coming. Ensure your list of random encounters isn't just combatants – include non-combat encounters as well such as the list of NPCs above or use the list “upward beat” encounters listed further ahead.

Exploring the Dungeon. Characters may choose many different paths when exploring the dungeon. Instead of building specific scenes in each chamber in a dungeon, use your lists of locations, secrets and clues, NPCs, and monsters to improvise scenes as they come up. Your lists from the eight steps give you the flexibility to decide how the denizens of the dungeon behave given the actions of the characters and to choose situations you think offer the most fun for the game.

Boss Chambers. Dungeons often include a boss room or chamber in which the characters face a particularly dangerous foe near the end of their exploration. This scene is worth preparing ahead of time, with an interesting location and useful features for the characters to navigate, multiple types of monsters, maybe multiple waves of monsters, and other details to fill it out. For more details on big boss battles, see the Combat adventure type described in chapter 5.

DUNGEON CRAWL PITFALLS

Here are a few common dungeon crawling pitfalls and how you can deal with them:

Too Linear. It's tempting to build dungeons as a series of connected rooms with only one path through them. This limits the characters' options to select their own path and removes one of the big advantages of dungeon crawls – the ability to offer several different paths and still have a single focused location. Mitigate this pitfall by offering several entrances into the dungeon and several paths to navigate it once the characters are inside.

No Meaningful Choices. Without any useful information, a choice between two passages is no real choice at all. If you give the characters the option of three identical doors, that's no different than a single random chance. Give the characters enough information to make meaningful choices about each possible direction. Here are several

ways to give useful information to characters about what direction to choose:

1. The air current is different one way than another.
2. There are temperature differences.
3. Fresh tracks lead one way or another.
4. Different condition of the halls – one might be falling apart while another is well maintained.
5. Previous explorers left markings.
6. There are different sounds one way than the other.
7. One path isn't mapped while another is.
8. There are differences in lighting.
9. There are strange markings on the floor towards one entrance.
10. The air smells less foul one way than another.

Too Many Downward Beats. Dungeons can feel oppressive and frustrating if you run one hard battle right after another. The dangerous nature of dungeons makes it easy to run a series of downward beats (see Upward and Downward Beats in chapter 5). Ensure you include a mixture of easy and hard battles and include non-combat encounters. Here are several non-combat “upward beat” encounters you can include in a dungeon crawl:

1. Meeting a fellow dungeon explorer
2. Finding escaped prisoner
3. Meeting a friendly spirit
4. Finding a secret chamber useful for a rest
5. Finding a pool of healing liquid
6. Getting the drop on some bad guys
7. Running into weak but overly-confident monsters
8. Locating spy-holes to other chambers
9. Finding a hidden cache of treasure
10. Finding an already-sprung trap

A Lack of a Clear Goal. Sometimes players forget why they've bothered to go into such dangerous places or feel like they never had a good reason to delve into a dungeon in the first place. Ensure the players and characters have a clear goal and quest worthy of the dangers a dungeon poses and reiterate that goal often – at the beginning of each session and more often if

needed. See the list of quest goals in appendix \$ for ideas.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Dungeon crawls offer the opportunity for high action, meaningful choices, and a focused design that aids both players and GMs in having a great time.
- “Dungeons” can be lots of places – often derelict ruins of some sort, Dungeons focus on the characters traveling from room to room and dealing with individual challenges instead of a larger infiltration-style adventure.
- Dungeons are built on locations. Choose a good map with multiple entrances and multiple paths for exploration. Ensure it includes secret passages and secret rooms to discover.
- Customize the eight steps of lazy GM prep to fit the dungeon you plan to run.
- Run dungeon crawls with a focus on marching order, lighting, and dungeon exploration turns. Spend extra time on boss chambers if needed.
- Avoid common dungeon pitfalls like linear designs, a lack of meaningful choices, too many downward beats, and a lack of a clear goal.

INFILTRATION AND HEISTS

Infiltration and heist adventures focus on the characters sneaking or otherwise entering locations they're not supposed to be in often with a goal of subterfuge, theft, or assassination. Infiltration and heist adventures differ from dungeon crawls in that there is usually one large group of inhabitants at the location preventing the characters from easily accomplishing their goal. Unlike dungeons, inhabitants at the location for an infiltration and heist adventure are more dynamic – moving from room to room, reacting to the actions of the characters, or changing their behavior based on other circumstances.

WHY INFILTRATION AND HEISTS WORK WELL

Infiltration and heists are the perfect scenario for the GM to set up the situation and then let the characters navigate it. We GMs aren't sure what the characters are going to do, how they're going to do it, or what the results may be – making the discovery of the outcome just as entertaining to us as it is to the players. Like dungeon crawls, infiltration and heists offer lots of character agency but still have enough focus for us GMs to meaningfully prep the adventure ahead of time.

PREPPING AN INFILTRATION AND HEIST

While dungeon crawls focus on the location first, infiltration and heists focus on the goal first. Goals for infiltration and heist adventures might include:

1. Stealing something
2. Putting something back
3. Gathering information
4. Killing a villain
5. Kidnapping someone
6. Helping someone escape
7. Planting evidence
8. Poisoning someone
9. Locating something
10. Stopping a ritual
11. Conducting a ritual
12. Replacing someone
13. Destroying something
14. Fixing something
15. Sewing chaos
16. Falsifying information
17. Blowing something up
18. Awakening something
19. Trapping someone
20. Learning a truth

Unlike dungeons, the locations for infiltration and heists adventures aren't always old ruins but instead might be well-maintained locations. Locations for an infiltration or heist adventure might include:

1. a castle
2. a manor
3. a temple
4. a ship
5. a thieves den
6. a subterranean hideout
7. an recently-built fort
8. an occupied village or town
9. a wizards tower
10. a cavernous grotto
11. a opulent palace
12. an abandoned warehouse
13. a prison
14. an old keep
15. a guildhouse
16. a guardhouse
17. a beast's lair
18. a museum
19. a library
20. a theater

With the goal and location identified, tailor the eight steps to fit your infiltration and heist adventure.

Characters. Which characters are particularly well suited for these types of infiltrations? What might the characters know ahead of time? Do they have any special spells or abilities like invisibility, polymorph, or arcane eye that change how you prepare the scenario? Go down the list of characters and think about what they might know and how they might approach this scenario.

Strong Start. What is the instigating factor that gets the characters involved in the infiltration or heist? Does an NPC bring them the quest? Did something happen that requires the characters to go on this mission? Here are several ways to start strong at an infiltration and heist adventure:

1. The characters' quest NPC gives them the mission.
2. The characters capture a spy.
3. Someone anonymously drops off information about the location and quest.
4. An NPC alerts the characters of the short timeline tied to the quest.
5. The characters rescue an NPC with information on the location and quest of the heist.
6. One of the characters has a vision of the outcome should they not fulfill the heist.
7. The characters receive an invitation to the location of the heist.
8. A sage known to the characters reveals the goal of the quest through their divination.
9. Assassins sent by the boss of the location attack the characters.
10. The characters learn an item or person they seek has been captured by the inhabitants of the location.

Scenes. Scenes typically differ for infiltration and heists adventures compared to other adventure types. The scenes of infiltration and heists often include:

- The strong start which gives the characters the info they need about the location and quest.
- Planning the infiltration or heist by the characters and players.
- Any scenes of preparation after the plan.
- Running the heist itself
- The complication or twist (see "Twist" under "Running an Infiltration or Heist" further head)
- The escape and conclusion

We can add details to our scene descriptions but probably don't need too much. Don't write paragraphs of text when a sentence or two will do.

Secrets and Clues. Characters may learn several secrets and clues during their preparation for the heist and during the heist itself. These secrets might include:

- The composition of the inhabitants of the location.

- Information about the guards and inhabitants and their behavior.
- History of the location of their quest objective.
- Any timing issues they need to worry about.
- Different routes they might take to get in and get out.
- Locations of secret passages or rooms.

During their preparation and the heist, characters may learn secrets in several ways including:

1. Talkative guards or servants
2. Notes left on a desk
3. Peep holes into other rooms
4. Journals or diaries
5. Confessions whispered at an altar
6. Interrogated NPCs
7. Rival thieves
8. Speaking with the dead
9. Paintings, statues, or tapestries
10. Arcane divination

Fantastic Locations. Like dungeon crawls, the location we choose has a big effect on investigations and heists. Also like dungeon crawls, we want locations with multiple possible entrances such as underground sewers or passages, a main door with maybe a back door or two, and possibly a way in from above. These different entrances gives the characters and players several choices for their approach. Like we described in dungeon crawls, including multiple entrances prevents us GMs from plotting too much of the adventure since we can't predict which approach the characters take.

Maps for keeps, manors, castles, villas, and other more room-oriented locations work well for heists. There's a greater risk with heists that inhabitants of a location become alert if the characters make too much noise than in more wide-spread dungeon locations. Appendix \$ includes several maps that can work for infiltration and heist adventures.

Like dungeons, we don't have to write down too many details for each room in a larger location for an infiltration and heist adventure. One or two words for each room is enough and you can likely get away with a list of unassociated common rooms and apply them where they make sense as you run the game.

NPCs. The characters are likely to run into NPCs when infiltrating a location. These NPCs could be

villains, neutral characters, or even allies. You don't usually need more than three to six such NPCs – outlining their names, brief description, and a goal or motivation.

Monsters. Instead of random encounter lists like we have for dungeons, our monsters list can focus on the overall inhabitants of the location. We can then break up groups of inhabitants and spread them out across the location. Some may be sleeping. Some may be outside the location. Some may be on guard duty. Sometimes the characters know the number and type of opponents they face and can choose their best approach. Often you'll use humanoid-type monsters – write down the page number of their statistics in your notes.

Rewards. While engaging in the heist, characters may find some nice loot to snag. Keep a list of possible treasure and divide it up into one or more locations as desired – either planning out rewards ahead of time or improvising their discovery as the characters explore the location.

RUNNING AN INFILTRATION AND HEIST

Once you've run your strong start and hooked the characters into the investigation and heist adventure, we fall into a different set of processes than we use for typical adventures. Here are the phases of our infiltration and heist adventures.

Planning. First, the characters and players plan their approach. Give your players all the information their characters would have which might include a full or partial map of the location, a list of inhabitants, a reiteration of the goal, and any other information they might need. You can spend up to about an hour on this planning but don't let it go much longer. Eventually it's time to actually go on the mission and players can get frustrated if too much time is spent on planning. Often careful plans turn into chaos pretty quickly during an infiltration or heist.

Preparation. Once the plan is established, the characters might engage in some preparation. This can include reconnaissance, purchasing equipment, doing more research, casting any preparatory magical spells, meeting NPCs, or anything else the characters want to do before they engage. Don't spend too much time on this part either. You and your players all want to get into the action. If time is getting tight, let the players know that, if they forgot anything, they can bring it up during the heist and you can "flash back" to them having gotten it – assuming it was

something reasonable they would have thought of before the heist begins.

The Heist. Now we're into the action. The characters begin their heist and you decide how the world reacts. For heists, you don't want everything to succeed or fail on a single check. Instead, you can use a concept from *Blades in the Dark* and *Powered by the Apocalypse* RPGs called "clocks". A clock is essentially a multi-state indicator of something like how alert the guards are or how far along a ritual is. Every tick of the clock takes it closer to the maximum. For example, a location might have five stages of alert. If they don't think anything is happening, it stays at zero. As things begin to escalate at the location, it might go up one or more times. If it's at the full amount, inhabitants at the location are on high alert. Using a multi-state clock like this prevents any one bad roll or bad decision from ruining the whole heist. See "Clocks" in chapter 5 for more details.

Otherwise, you run your infiltration and heist the same way you normally would – describing the situation and adjudicating the actions of the characters into the results.

Flashbacks. The heist-based RPG *Blades in the Dark* includes a mechanic we can use in just about any heist-based adventure run in any system – the Flashback. While the heist is underway, a player can call for a flashback, jumping to a scene that took place before the current situation. They might flash back to an earlier scene where they bribe a guard, plant some extra lockpicks in a hidden spot, or buy the right piece of gear they need right now. Such flashbacks might have a cost such as succeeding on a particular ability check or using some other resource for your RPG. Flashbacks have the added advantage of cutting down long prep time since players know they can flash back should they have forgotten something during the preparation phase.

Twists. At some point in the heist, you might decide to throw in a twist. A twist changes the situation, complicating things for the characters or even, perhaps, making things easier. If you're in the middle of the infiltration or heist adventure at the beginning of a session, you can use twists as a strong start to your new session. Otherwise you can drop in twists whenever you want.

Here are several example twists:

1. A servant walks in on the characters
2. Drunken guards stumble in

3. The boss of the location unexpectedly arrives.
4. Someone sets something on fire.
5. The target of the heist moves.
6. Another rival group of thieves attacks.
7. Part of the location collapses.
8. A dragon attacks
9. A caged beast or bound demon breaks free.
10. The owner of the manor wanders in on the characters.

The Escape. How the characters get out of the heist is almost as important as how they get in. You may want to ensure the players considered their escape during their preparations but how it plays out might go completely differently. Give the players a good chance to escape, recognizing that in the chaos of the situation, the inhabitants at the location don't behave optimally and the bad guys are as likely to make mistakes as the characters.

INFILTRATION AND HEIST PITFALLS

Despite their flexible and focused nature, infiltrations and heists can run into several pitfalls.

Too Much Planning. Often players want to optimize their approach so well that they get caught into circular conversations and over-planning taking up too much time. Such plans also often fall apart anyway when it comes to the heist's actual execution. Mitigate this pitfall by setting a maximum amount of time for the plan, facilitating the conversation so the discussion continues to be productive, and reinforcing that the players can use flashbacks should they forget to do something they wish they had done later. You can also summarize and write down their plans if they're not already doing it.

Too Quick to Fail. Your players and their characters may not act like the perfectly oiled stealth machine you and they had in their minds. Sometimes they make bad choices or roll poorly. It's easy to let the whole heist unravel after such choices are made. Avoid this pitfall by using clocks to let bad events escalate gradually instead of all at once. Give your players and their characters some leeway and remember that the inhabitants at the location of a heist also make poor choices and have poor luck too.

Too Much Chaos. A lot of things can happen and all that careful planning can go out the window if a single servant runs off screaming down the hall. Entire heists can fall into chaos easily if we're not careful, ruining all the planning before it even got started. Avoid this pitfall by letting the situation stay close to the plans the characters had before dropping in the twist too early.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Infiltration and heists follow the characters as they plan and execute a mission to sneak into a location to accomplish a goal.
- Infiltrations and heists focus on an goal and the location they plan to infiltrate.
- Infiltrations and heists work well because they give players lots of agency to approach the mission but have enough of a framework for the GM to feel comfortable with prep and play.
- Customize the eight steps of lazy GM prep by focusing on what the characters bring to the heist, planning the location and its inhabitants, and tailoring your list of scenes around the outline of the heist.
- Run heists with a strong start, a planning phase, a preparation phase, the heist itself, a potential twist, and the escape.
- Avoid common pitfalls like too much planning, too much chaos, or the heist being too quick to fail.

INVESTIGATIONS AND MYSTERIES

In investigation and mystery adventures, the characters travel through locations and interact with NPCs in order to **learn something**. The characters might seek to uncover murderers, investigate subterfuge, unravel plots, or expose spies. The characters can take many potential paths to seek the goal of their investigation and we GMs must ensure the paths they take are fun to follow and lead to a satisfying conclusion.

Here are twenty possible goals for an investigation or mystery adventure:

1. Uncover a murderer
2. Uncover a spy
3. Locate a hidden magic item
4. Uncover a secret cult
5. Learn the location of a secret ritual
6. Locate a hidden destination
7. Uncover secret plans
8. Expose corrupt nobility
9. Learn about a forgotten god
10. Learn the origin of a mysterious figure
11. Identify a network of spies and saboteurs
12. Learn of the hidden organization layered beneath a larger one
13. Find out why an event happened and who orchestrated it
14. Learn the vulnerability of a powerful foe
15. Learn a villain's secret identity
16. Learn where someone escaped to
17. Learn where someone is being held
18. Learn who orchestrated a violent attack
19. Identify a kidnapper and where they hold the victim
20. Identify the weak points in an enemy alliance

MORE SPONTANEOUS THAN PLANNED

GMs might not start out by planning out an investigation or mystery adventure. Instead, the circumstances of the larger campaign might lead the characters down the path of seeking to learn something. Presupposing the path of an investigation or mystery adventure often leads to railroading the characters down one path. Instead, investigations and mysteries often work

better when they build from the activities and interests of the characters and players. Investigations and mysteries might also lead to other adventure types such as dungeon crawls, infiltrations and heists, and roleplay and intrigue adventures. You might weave the characters in and out of investigations and other adventures depending on how the campaign plays out.

WHY INVESTIGATIONS AND MYSTERIES WORK WELL

When planned well, investigations and mysteries give the characters agency to hunt down valuable information along several possible paths and keep players interested in the evolving storyline. Investigations and mysteries can take the characters to several interesting locations and include roleplaying, character interaction, and even combat.

PREPPING INVESTIGATIONS AND MYSTERIES

Investigations and mysteries focus heavily on secrets and clues and NPCs. They tend to focus less on monsters, locations with lots of rooms, and treasure.

When we prep an investigation or mystery adventure, we focus first on the mystery itself. What is the mystery? What information do the characters seek? What's the truth? What really happened and what must be discovered? The rest of our prep focuses on these questions and answers. If we don't know the truth of the mystery, we can't plan the rest of it.

Here's how we might focus the eight steps around investigations and mysteries.

Characters. Note any connections between characters and the central truth of the mystery. What might the characters know up front? What NPCs might they know to reach out to? What secrets might they already know about tied to the rest of the investigation?

Strong Start. A strong start for an investigation or mystery adventure might be the instigation of the core event. Do the characters find a dead NPC? Does someone burst into the bar with a dagger in their back? Do they get a secret message from someone on the inside of a dangerous cult? If the core plot hasn't yet been revealed, the strong start is a great place to reveal it.

If the characters already know the core mystery to be solved, we can use strong starts in other ways. Here are ten possible strong starts for sessions beginning in the middle of an investigation:

1. An NPC comes in with new information.
2. An opposing group sends toughs to dissuade the characters.
3. Something blows up.
4. Someone falsely accuses the characters of the very crime they're trying to solve.
5. Another murder is revealed.
6. An ally of the characters was attacked.
7. An enemy switches sides.
8. A character remembers an important clue.
9. The characters find a hidden message.
10. The villain they're investigating comes calling.

Strong starts are a great way to reset the baseline of an ongoing investigation or mystery. Strong starts can give new information to the characters if you feel like they don't have enough or are going off track.

Scenes. The fun of an investigation and mystery is that the characters and players can investigate things in several different ways. Thus, the scenes outline in your prep may not happen in order or happen at all if the characters take a different path. Scenes are, however, a great place for you to focus on likely scenes, locations, situations, and encounters that might happen – even if they happen out of order. We might think of scenes as layers of an onion getting peeled back as the characters discover further and further truths.

Secrets and Clues. This is the big step for investigations and mysteries. Secrets and clues are the information the characters discover that leads them to revealing the core information at the center of the mystery. Secrets in investigations and mysteries might be multi-layered. We don't have just one secret revealing the whole truth. We can have several secrets the characters might pick up, each giving pieces of the truth. Here are some examples:

- The cult known as the Children of Ibraxus have hidden members in the nobility of the City of Arches.

- A councillor on the Golden Council was caught accepting a bribe from a masked figure. He doesn't know who it was.
- Guston Summervine is a member of the Golden Council but hasn't been to the meetings in several weeks.
- Elvenia Summervine runs lavish costume parties at their villa in the noble's quarter.
- The bribed councillor was a regular at these costume parties.
- Guston's aid, Thrake Windwhisker, has connections to the Black Hand. It's rumored he's buying psychedelic herbs for his master.
- Guston isn't a member of the Children of Ibraxus. He's simply addicted to psychedelic herbs.
- The Summervines hire their own security – some guards were previously identified as members of the Children of Ibraxus.
- During their parties, several partygoers tend to disappear for hours at a time and can't be found anywhere in the house.
- Elvenia Summervine is a member of the Children of Ibraxus and runs secret meetings in the hidden chambers beneath her villa.

From these, you can see the layers of the plots and connections. Each secret gives the characters a little more information until they have enough to learn the final secret.

Abstracting secrets and clues from their method of discovery works well for investigation and mystery adventures. You don't have to worry about which path the characters take to investigate the situation. If it's reasonable that they'd learn a clue along the path they take, they can learn it. You can change the nature of a secret to fit the way it's revealed. An NPC might reveal a secret one way – a hidden diary might reveal it another.

Fantastic Locations. Investigations and mysteries often take the characters to several locations. For these locations we can write down the location name and three notable features of the location that might matter when it comes to the investigation. Are there secret ways in? Is there a back room the characters might want to get into? Are there places in a location where secrets might be hidden? Jot those down.

NPCs. Like secrets, NPCs often matter a lot in investigations and mysteries. List the NPCs that

matter to the central plot of the mystery and their role in it. Like secrets, we can move NPCs where it makes sense instead of dictating where they show up. Often the name of the NPC and their role in the mystery is enough information but fill in details you need to roleplay them at the table.

Monsters. Monsters are usually less of a focus in investigations and mysteries but it's not uncommon for the characters to get attacked by something in more action-focused RPGs while conducting investigations. List potential combatants here with page numbers for their stat blocks so you have them handy.

Rewards. Rewards also aren't often a big factor in investigations and mysteries but players still appreciate finding loot while conducting their investigation. Plan out rewards the same way you would for any adventure.

RUNNING A INVESTIGATIONS AND MYSTERIES

As mentioned earlier, sometimes investigations and mysteries happen as part of larger adventures and thus have less structure at the table. Mysteries might even be interwoven in the scenes from other adventure types.

A big factor in running investigations and mysteries is ensuring the characters gain enough clues to keep following the path without so many clues that they completely figure out the mystery too early – unless it's appropriate to do so. Don't hold your cards so close to your chest that players don't have the ability to figure things out. Ensure you have a resilient investigation and mystery by asking if the game can go on even if the characters learn the secret early on. What if they guess who the mystery murderer is right away? Does it break your game?

We can help ensure the core mystery isn't revealed too early in our games by following the same model TV serials use – don't give out enough information early to figure out the mystery. Don't put the murderer in front of the characters until you're ready for them to be discovered. If the murderous butler is in the first scene, be ready for the characters to suspect them right away. Instead, don't even mention that there *was* a butler until you're ready for them to make that leap.

Balance carefully between giving the players enough information to piece together the story and not so much information that they unravel the whole adventure before it even starts.

INVESTIGATIONS AND MYSTERIES PITFALLS

Here are a few investigations and mystery pitfalls and how to mitigate them.

Forcing the Story. Often GMs have the idea to mirror the story of a mystery novel, TV show, or movie but the characters in those stories come from the same brain that created the mystery in the first place – the creator. Instead, during our games, we have several other brains at work – those of our players – each coming up with their own plans and theories and they've experienced a lot of the same fiction we have. Thus, GMs tend to force the story – not letting the players legitimately unravel the mystery. Mitigate this pitfall by ensuring that the characters can investigate the mystery in several ways and be ready for them to leap ahead to the conclusion if the right information is there. Like a good cop drama, knowing who committed the murder isn't the end of the story. Sometimes it's about proving it or even finding them, should the villain go on the run.

Burying Information. If we don't split our secrets and clues out from their method of discovery, characters might take the wrong path with no hope of actually uncovering the mystery. If there's only one way to learn the truth and the characters don't go down that line of investigation, there's no hope for them. Mitigate this pitfall by ensuring that, whatever path the characters take, they can learn what they need to learn to unravel the mystery.

Putting Enemies Too Close. There's a temptation to put the instigator of a mystery in front of the characters early to make the surprise all the more exciting when the players discover it was that guy they met earlier all along. Players often figure this out sooner than you'd hope. Keep your villains and instigators out of the line of sight of the characters until you're ready for them to be discovered. Likewise, avoid quest NPC betrayal. Don't have one of the characters' trusted allies turn out to be the bad guy. Quest NPC betrayal breaks trust with your players and can make it feel like the characters' whole adventure was in vain. Read more about the dangers of quest NPC betrayal in chapter 5 – Common Adventure Pitfalls.

Too Little Action. Sometimes the exploration and roleplay of an investigation or mystery lacks action. In more combat-focused RPGs, players often expect some form of combat, even in

adventures that focus on NPC interaction and exploration. Avoid this pitfall by finding ways to throw combatants at the characters so your players can enjoy the combat-side of their RPG while possibly learning interesting clues that flow into the rest of the mystery. Possible combat options in investigation and mysteries include:

1. Henchmen of the hidden boss
2. Rival investigators
3. Crooked thieves
4. Escaped monsters
5. Enemies unrelated to the mystery
6. Animated guardians
7. Summoned demons or devils
8. Cultists of the villain
9. Summoned animals
10. Corrupt authorities

Too Many Red Herrings. GMs sometimes think it's fun to include false paths of investigation but players often barely grasp half of the information we reveal anyway. Don't add so many false paths that your players spend a lot of time following lines of investigation that go nowhere. Instead, give the characters information or even false information that further clarifies what the true path is.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- In investigation and mysteries, the characters investigate clues, meet NPCs, and explore locations focused around a central mystery.
- Investigations and mysteries often form spontaneously during other adventures rather than being planned out ahead of time.
- Investigations and mysteries work well by giving the players lots of potential paths of investigation, piecing together clues as they go.
- Focus your prep on secrets and clues, NPCs, and locations when preparing investigations and mysteries. Build layers of secrets the characters peel back to learn the truth as they go.
- Balance the amount of information the characters discover during their investigations to maintain a fun pace – enough to keep them moving forward but not so much that they uncover the plot too early.

- Don't force the story, bury useful information too deeply, put secret villains into the spotlight too early, or offer too many red herrings. Ensure you include some fun combat encounters to keep your more action-focused players happy.

OVERLAND EXPLORATION AND TRAVEL

Overland exploration and travel adventures typically follow the characters as they journey from one location to another or explore an overland region. Sometimes this journey is as simple as following a single path from one town, village, or city, to another. Other times it's a journey across a complicated network of paths and landmarks or follows the process of traveling across a map one hex at a time.

Different RPGs handle overland exploration and travel in different ways. Some games, like D&D, have *several* possible ways to run exploration and travel. We're not going to cover every potential travel system in depth. Read the travel rules of your chosen RPG to understand the RPG's approach and then tune it to fit your own desires and that of your group.

In this chapter, we'll look at three common approaches for exploration and travel: a single encounter along a journey, hexcrawls, and pointcrawls. We'll focus primarily on the "single encounter along a journey" style since it supports all three types and likely other travel systems as well.

Appendix \$ includes lists of landmarks, overland paths, underground paths, and weather. Use these lists to fill out your own exploration and travel adventures.

Which Travel System Should You Choose?

Of the overland exploration and travel options discussed in this chapter, the single situation between two points is the simplest. The single-encounter situation offers meaningful choices for the characters while also adding a remarkable event to the journey. For larger journeys, point crawls give you a relatively easy way to offer different paths with notable locations along the way. Use hex crawls if the characters are exploring uncharted paths, if specific distance matters to your game, or if your system of choice focuses on it. RPGs that focus on hex crawling as their default travel system often include specific rules and processes for their execution. Study those rules and modify them to suit your taste. Whatever your style of travel, the guidelines and tools in this chapter can help you build interesting situations along the way.

SINGLE ENCOUNTERS ALONG THE JOURNEY

Focus on a single rich encounter along the traveled path between two locations for an easy (lazy!) way to handle overland exploration and travel. If the characters travel from the village of Peat to the City of Arches, they can run into an encounter along the way to mark the journey. A single encounter along a journey avoids having to prepare a lot of material for a given journey and still puts some focus and meaning on the journey itself.

For this single encounter we can include several elements that make the encounter unique:

- A monument to set the stage and backdrop of the encounter.
- Weather for some added texture.
- Inhabitants at the location.
- A situation occurring or having already potentially occurred at the location.
- A hook to get the characters involved.

You can find lists for monuments, weather, NPCs, monsters, motivations, and more in the lists found in appendix \$.

Choose a single encounter along a journey when the journey primarily focuses on traveling between two major locations.

AN EXAMPLE SITUATION

Here's an example situation built from various lists found in appendix \$.

Our characters are traveling from the City of Arches north into the Revland Marches to reach the Village of Heron's Stride. During our prep we pre-roll a situation the characters might get involved in.

Rolling on the weather list, we find a light rain coming down.

The characters approach a smoky ruined abyssal altar sticking out of the swamp (rolled up from the effects, conditions, origins, and monuments lists).

There, several bugbears battle a nest of cockatrices – some of which turned several of the bugbears into stone (rolled twice on monster lists).

Regardless, the bugbears look like they're getting the upper hand on the cockatrices (a roll on an oracle die points to the bugbears'.

advantage – see chapter \$ for more on the oracle die).

The characters see that the bugbears wear the symbol of the horrific demon prince Karigulon around their necks (a roll on our custom faction list).

Two of the bugbears carry an old chest they dug out of a hole in the ground in front of the altar while another drags a tied-up hunter towards the altar (both chosen from the activity list).

This example includes weather, a monument, two sets of monsters engaged in battle, and two potential reasons to get involved: treasure and rescuing a hostage. How the characters engage in the situation is up to their players.

This situation has more of a combat focus but the bugbears could instead be followers of a less violent god, giving the characters the option of fighting alongside the bugbears or otherwise aiding them against the basilisks.

NON-COMBAT SITUATIONS

Many times situations can involve friction points *without* combat as the only recourse. A dwarf merchant and his bodyguards could take insult at a traveling priest's very vocal beliefs that the dwarf's god is actually husband to the priest's own goddess and it's up to the character to de-escalate the situation instead of leaning towards violence.

Here are ten example situations that don't focus on combat:

1. Someone has fallen into an ancient trap and needs help.
2. Merchants are being robbed by bandits far less powerful than the characters.
3. Well-connected corrupt knights demand a ridiculous toll.
4. Two dangerous beasts engage in battle.
5. A mage's ritual at an ancient monument has gone out of control.
6. A group of faeries causes mischief around the characters.
7. A being from another world is lost and has no memories of their arrival.
8. A living spell threatens travelers.
9. A grumpy merchant's wagon has broken down.

10. Young adventurers are messing with a dangerous artifact.

Player-Driven Situations

Here's a trick from 13th Age and other RPGs: ask players to describe parts of the journey. You can open up the world a bit, describing the overall journey the characters undertake and then ask players to describe a situation that happens along the way. You might ask another player to describe how the characters overcome the situation or deal with it. Don't call out specific players who may not be comfortable being put on the spot but you can open it up to the group and see who brings something forward.

HEX CRAWLS

In hex crawls the characters travel by moving from one hex to another. Typically, each hex on a regional map is 6 miles edge to edge and, assuming a normal travel pace in normal terrain, characters can travel roughly four hexes in a day of travel. The travel pace and terrain covered can change the difficulty and pace of travel. Each hex may be populated with creatures, monuments, adventure sites, and other elements.

Many different fantasy RPGs include rules and processes for hex crawls and it's worth the time to understand that RPG's system. You can use the ideas behind the single-encounter situation to populate a hex with an interesting event when the characters travel through any given hex.

Choose hex crawls when the characters are exploring an uncharted environment or when your game has a focus on specific distances, travel speed, food, water, and other details.

Build What You Need

You may be tempted to fill out a large map with lots of hexes, locations, paths, and the details of each. Instead, focus on what you know you need to offer meaningful choices to the players. Then fill out the path the characters take as they go. If you offer three potential paths the characters might take to get from one location to another, ask which path they plan to take near the end of a session so you only need to fill out the details of that branch instead of all three. Like the rest of the material in this book, focus on prepping what you need to run your next session and put options in front of your players so you know what you'll need to prep for the session after that.

POINT CRAWLS

Instead of worrying about specific measures of distance, point crawls focus on locations and the paths between them. Think of point crawls like dungeon crawls with notable locations instead of rooms and paths instead of hallways. Sometimes pointcrawls are simple — two locations connected by a path being the simplest. Other times point crawls can be a large web of multiple branches, secret paths, loop backs, and all the components of engaging dungeon maps (see chapter \$).

GMs can populate notable locations or paths with interesting situations described earlier.

Point crawls work well by offering meaningful choices to the characters when choosing a path to take. They might take the more well-trod roadway to their destination but risk being discovered by their enemies or might take the less traveled paths through the forest and risk encounters with wild creatures. When building point crawls, include compelling reasons to choose one path over another so players can make meaningful choices.

Choose point crawls when you want to offer several potential paths between several locations along a longer journey and want distance and time to be more abstract.

CHARACTER ROLES

When running overland travel and exploration adventures, the characters often take on particular “roles”. When the journey begins, you can ask players which roles their characters take on for the journey. During travel, characters might perform checks to see how well they perform on their role, potentially changing how the journey takes place.

Different RPGs and supplements often offer a variety of roles for characters. We’ll focus on three examples, along with potential benefits or detriments should they do well or poorly in their role. You might apply mechanical benefits or detriments or you can simply go with the in-world description of the results of their efforts – wet boots aren’t fun whether they have a mechanical effect or not.

Pathfinder. One or two characters work to ensure the group stays on the right path for their journey. Should the pathfinder do well at their task, they might provide one of the following benefits to the group:

1. Reach their desired area faster than expected
2. Locate a safe place to rest along the way
3. Find a hidden location with a treasure parcel
4. Locate an interesting monument
5. Find an easier path than proposed
6. Find high ground to get a wide view of the area
7. Draw an accurate map other groups may covet
8. Find a grove with fresh food and medicinal herbs
9. Find a healing spring
10. Find a scenic camping spot

Should things go poorly with the pathfinder’s check, the group might receive one of the following detriments:

1. Accidentally travel into a hostile area
2. Can’t find a safe place to rest
3. Enter a geographically perilous location
4. Must loop back repeatedly, demoralizing the group
5. Travel through nests of vermin
6. Travel past a dangerous lair
7. Stumble into terrible weather
8. Travel through boot-sucking mud or swamps
9. Travel through extremely hot or cold area
10. Get routed by a powerful creature

Scout. Scouts keep an eye out for hostile creatures. Should the scout perform well, the group might gain one of the following benefits:

1. Sneak up on an enemy
2. Find an interesting creature to hunt
3. Locate a creature with a needed magical component
4. Find a stash of hidden treasure
5. Find unprepared enemies
6. Find a path around powerful enemies
7. Find advantageous terrain
8. Locate monsters chasing non-combatants
9. Find a hidden fortress
10. Locate a blessed monument

Should the scout perform poorly, the group might suffer one of the following detriments.

1. Wander into an ambush
2. Stumble upon hostile foes
3. Fall into a deep hole
4. Spring a trap
5. Lead the characters into dangerous terrain
6. Stumble into an unholy monument
7. Embarrass the party in front of feyfolk
8. Get chased by a powerful beast
9. Stumble into a haunted graveyard
10. Get lost, requiring another character to find you

Provisioner. Provisioners, sometimes referred to as quartermasters, ensure the group preserves food, stays hydrated, and travels safely. Should the provisioner do well, the characters might gain one of the following benefits:

1. Use less rations than normal
2. Cook a fine feast
3. Brew a potion
4. Find a forgotten store of treasure
5. Construct a healing poultice
6. Give others extra energy to travel faster
7. Find lost adventuring gear
8. Repair something broken
9. Fix armor or boots
10. Gain the equivalent of a blessing

Should the provisioner do poorly, the characters might suffer one of the following detriments:

1. Someone gets sick
2. The campfire explodes
3. The characters food spoils, losing some number of provisions
4. The food is infested with vermin
5. One or more of the characters gets a toe fungus
6. Poorly managed food attracts a beast
7. Makes a healing potion that's actually poison
8. Cooks a terrible meal
9. No one sleeps well
10. Everyones' boots get wet and won't dry overnight

You might include other possible roles too such as a leadership role, a morale role, a tracker who

hunts for particular monsters or game, or a pack master who carries heavy loads.

CAMPING

Overland exploration and travel adventures often include moments and opportunities to camp for the evening. Some RPGs include procedures for camping – finding food, setting up camps, setting up watches, and the like. Other games leave that up to you and your players. Here's a quick set of procedures for camping you can include in most RPGs:

- The characters find a suitable camping spot
- The character find something to eat and eat it
- The characters set up watches for the night – often one or two characters for each of three watches
- The characters rest for the evening
- The characters awaken and continue their journey.

You can use the order of watches determined by the players to narrate scenes taking place overnight. They might not always encounter something at night but might witness something happening nearby. A dragon could fly over a mountain to the east. They could hear something large lumbering in the wood at night. You can use the same procedures for determining any random encounter and whether the characters witness it in time to do something the same way a scout might look for dangers along the road.

You may want to include "campfire tales" during such scenes, described on Chapter \$, in which each of the players describes what their character is thinking about or talking to the other characters about along the journey. Such campfire tales give players a better feeling for the other characters and gives you a stronger idea what the players themselves are thinking about.

PREPPING OVERLAND EXPLORATION AND TRAVEL ADVENTURES

Here's what to consider when preparing for overland exploration and travel using the eight steps of lazy GM prep.

Characters. What roles might the characters take during the journey? What information might a character know about the journey or the locations through which they might travel?

Strong Start. What happens as the session starts? What can they learn about their journey ahead of time? Avoid strong starts that don't lead the characters to the journey they're planning to take. Use strong starts that get them underway.

Scenes. If your overland exploration and travel adventure is roughly linear, you can outline the big situations the characters might get involved in along the way. One scene for each location or one along the path between two major locations is often enough to fill out the story of the journey.

Scenes in overland exploration and travel adventures typically include weather, a monument or landmark, NPCs or monsters, and a situation going on when the characters arrive.

Secrets and Clues. Some GMs commonly complain that random encounters during travel are often disconnected from the larger story going on in an adventure or campaign. Secrets and clues help alleviate this issue. Write out your list of ten secrets and clues and expect to use them to flavor landmarks, monuments, NPCs, monsters, and discovered treasure found during overland exploration and travel scenes. Secrets and clues are your way to make otherwise disconnected scenes make sense in the larger story.

Fantastic Locations. Landmarks and monuments found along the journey act as set-pieces and backdrops to the scenes and situations the characters engage in. They're also fantastic vehicles for secrets and clues. Inspire yourself with random lists of monuments or locations, like those found in appendix \$, and use custom faction lists for your own campaign and world to detail these landmarks with contextually useful information from your campaign. Include interesting and useful details with each location as described in chapter \$ (Develop Fantastic Locations).

For point crawls, also include *connectors*. Connectors are the paths the characters take to get from one landmark or monument to another. Often these connectors are interesting on their own – narrow paths along cliffs, strange forest paths marked by glowing mushrooms, caverns filled with the skulls of the dead, and so on. You can find example location connectors for both overland and underground travel in appendix \$.

NPCs. What interesting NPCs might the characters meet along their journey? Fellow travelers, travelers in distress, flavorful locals, and other interesting NPCs add opportunities to roleplay along journeys. If you're building a

random encounter list for your overland exploration and travel adventures, ensure you include friendly encounters on top of all the nasty monsters.

Monsters. What monsters might the characters run into during their journey? Many GM-focused books include lists of monsters by environment. Go through these lists and find a handful of monsters you think fit the journey. List them here (with page numbers or links to stat blocks to make your life easier). Roll on random monster lists twice to throw two groups of monsters together develop an interesting situation when the characters arrive.

Rewards. Loot, treasure, secret documents, hidden knowledge, and other draws can get the characters interested in engaging with a situation when they arrive. Consider showing the characters what rewards they might acquire if they get involved. This gives players a choice to either bypass the situation or get involved to get the reward.

RUNNING OVERLAND EXPLORATION AND TRAVEL ADVENTURES

At the beginning of an overland travel and exploration session or scenario, the GM asks players to choose their given role: pathfinder, scout, or quartermaster (and any other roles you might choose or that are built into your chosen RPG). Often there are fewer roles than characters meaning that some characters can assist others in a given role.

When the characters conduct their journey, the GM often asks players to roll checks based on the role their characters took to determine how well they perform their duties. Based on the results, the GM can narrate how the journey takes place, add any difficulties they run into, or describe how easily they traverse the terrain while leading into the next encounter along the journey.

When planning situations along the path, the results of the characters' checks in their given role can change their approach to a situation, adding fun variables to how the situation plays out.

OVERLAND EXPLORATION AND TRAVEL ADVENTURES PITFALLS

Common pitfalls for overland and exploration adventures include:

Too Much Travel. Travel can get tedious if it goes on for too long. Some published adventures include exorbitant amounts of travel. It's hard to stay connected to a larger plot and storyline if session after session focuses on travel. Avoid this pitfall by ensuring journeys between destinations aren't too long or include meaningful situations or whole adventures along the way. This breaks travel up between more meaningful adventures. You can also shorten travel with things like dimensional gateways, flight, vehicles, and other options for faster travel. Finally, you can simply "jump cut" to the destination ("after three weeks on the road, you arrive at the city of Berdusk.")

Too Linear. It's easy to follow a single path for a journey but such paths don't offer meaningful choices to characters. A single path is fine if you're just traveling between two locations, but if a journey is long, a linear path doesn't offer interesting choices. Mitigate this pitfall by offering two or three different paths the characters can choose from with useful information to inform their choices. Include secret paths to give characters other interesting choices (players almost always take the secret path!).

Too Many Downward Beats. Travel can turn into a slog if there are too many combat encounters in a row or the characters get hit with one problem after another. Travel shouldn't feel like a chore. Mitigate this pitfall by including encounters where the characters surprise their foes, find interesting and useful places along their journey, meet non-hostile NPCs, and gain benefits from the efforts they take. See chapter 5 for more information on upward and downward beats.

interesting situation at a notable landmark along their journey.

- Build single-encounters along a journey with weather, a monument, inhabitants, a situation, and something to draw the characters into the situation.
- Use single encounters along a journey when the characters travel from one point to another.
- Use hex-crawls if distance and resources matter or if the characters are exploring uncharted environments.
- Use point-crawls when you want to offer several potential paths with several connected points along a larger journey.
- Include travel roles for the characters such as pathfinder, scout, and provisioners. Ensure you having meaningful results for the success or failure of their job.
- Mitigate common travel pitfalls such as journeys taking too long, being too linear, or having too many downward beats.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Overland exploration and travel adventures focus on the characters as they take longer journeys from one place to another.
- There are many different types of travel in various RPGs. Examples include single-encounters along the journey, hex crawls, and point crawls. Some RPGs have their own travel systems while others leave things open for GMs to choose.
- Single-encounter journeys are one of the easiest types of overland exploration and travel adventures – the characters run into an

ROLEPLAY AND INTRIGUE

In roleplay and intrigue adventures, the characters primarily interact with NPCs – mostly (but not always) without direct physical confrontation. Roleplay and intrigue adventures can operate much like infiltration and heists without the actual need to infiltrate a location (but not always, see mashups in chapter 5). Roleplay and intrigue adventure can also overlap with investigations and mysteries depending on the goal. Often the goal of a roleplay and intrigue adventure is to learn something. Other times it's to teach something or shape something – to manipulate others towards a goal.

Unlike harder-defined adventure types like dungeon crawls, infiltrations and heists, investigations and mysteries, and overland travel and exploration – we might not strictly define an adventure as a roleplay or intrigue adventure. Instead, our adventures might lean in on roleplaying to different degrees. The boundaries of a roleplay and intrigue adventure aren't as strictly defined.

WHY ROLEPLAY AND INTRIGUE ADVENTURES WORK

Roleplay and intrigue adventures work well because, like other adventure types, the characters and players have a lot of agency to interact with the world – particularly with roleplaying. Playing the roles of characters and how they interact with NPCs is a huge part of roleplaying games and this type of adventure focuses on that aspect. Like dungeon crawls, the characters can choose many different approaches but within a defined framework we GMs can get our hands around – the NPCs the characters are interacting with and the goal of their interaction.

Here are twenty situations and backdrops that lend themselves to intrigue and roleplay adventures:

1. A faerie ball
2. A city-wide festival
3. Several noble houses in a single city
4. A pantheon of disagreeable gods
5. Camps of warring factions in a region
6. A dragon's lair and a nearby city
7. A royal court
8. Shops surrounding the site of a murder
9. A military keep

10. A local court and trial
11. The region of the aftermath of a disaster
12. A reclusive settlement with strange traditions
13. A school of magic
14. A royal court bureaucracy
15. A war council
16. The guild houses of several merchants
17. The hideouts of several competing criminal gangs
18. Several opposing churches and temples
19. A lawless camp or town on a rich resource
20. One or more ships

WHAT'S THE GOAL?

When preparing and running a roleplay and intrigue adventure, define a clear goal and clarify it to your players. Here are twenty possible goals for a roleplay or intrigue adventure:

1. Convince someone of something
2. Learn information you don't know
3. Plant secret information
4. Uncover a traitor
5. Learn the location of someone or something
6. Acquire an important artifact or powerful magic
7. Drive a wedge between political factions
8. Strengthen a bond between opposing factions
9. Prepare a group for war
10. Set up a diversion
11. Change a political hierarchy
12. Arrange a marriage
13. Set up a ruse
14. Weaken opposing defenses
15. Strengthen local defenses
16. Form an alliance
17. Expose a damning truth
18. Depose a ruler
19. Transfer secrets between parties
20. Increase one's reputation

Defining a clear goal ensures that roleplaying scenes have a purpose and focus. It's not just meaningless conversation. Like the goal of a heist, clarify the goal to your players – even if it's a

player-driven goal - and reiterate it regularly so players remember the reason for their actions and discussions. You don't have to get fancy – just tell them the goal.

Mix the settings and backgrounds listed above with clear goals to build interesting roleplay and intrigue adventures.

PREPPING ROLEPLAY AND INTRIGUE ADVENTURES

Here's what we might consider when preparing the eight steps for our roleplay and intrigue adventures:

Characters. What hooks exist between the characters and the NPCs they're likely to interact with? What secrets might they know up front? Write down these connections and bring them up with your players when the timing is right. Some characters may have direct roles in the pursuit of the goal of the adventure or have direct connections to the NPCs. Other characters might focus on a supporting role but it's still worth defining them.

Strong Start. What catalyst draws the players into the intrigue? The strong start might be the start of a ball or a big display inside or outside a palace. It might be a fireworks display over the party the characters are attending. Something happens to start things off. What is it?

Scenes. You won't know every scene in your roleplay and intrigue adventure but you might know the big ones. What events likely come to pass regardless of what the characters do? Is there a final confrontation somewhere in the adventure? Jot down what scenes you think might take place and let the rest form fluidly from the choices and actions of the characters.

Secrets and Clues. Secrets play a huge role in roleplay and intrigue adventures. Some secrets might only be known by specific NPCs. Other secrets might be about particular NPCs. Secrets are the currency of roleplay and intrigue adventures. They are the treasure of these encounters. The characters learn secrets and give others away. You may want to go beyond the standard 10 secrets here since a lot of them might get dropped quickly. Like investigations and mysteries, you might have layered secrets – several secrets leading to a larger plot point.

Fantastic Locations. Roleplay and intrigue adventures take place somewhere. What are these locations like? What features do they have? The location in which these adventures take place

aren't often sprawling megadungeons but there might be several rooms or chambers of note with interesting features to paint the picture.

Locations in roleplay and intrigue adventures serve more as the backdrop to a play than an interactive battle arena but it's worth spending the time on the details to paint that picture.

NPCs. NPCs are hugely important in roleplay and intrigue adventures. Who are they? What do they want? What do they have that the characters want? Put down the information you need in order to improvise and roleplay that NPC when they face the characters. Don't outline a whole flowchart of possible interactions. Instead, get into the head of the NPC and be ready to think as they think and react as they would react given their interactions with the characters. Use the NPC generators in appendix \$ for inspiration to build out your NPCs. Use NPC portraits to connect NPCs to a physical representation your players can see.

Monsters. There may not be a focus on combat in an intrigue and roleplay adventure but some groups like to have some action in their roleplay adventures. What hostile situation might occur during your roleplay and intrigue adventure that leads the characters to draw steel? Write down some monsters they might face when the timing is right. Here are twenty possible combat encounters in your roleplay and intrigue adventures:

Rewards. Handle rewards the way you would for any typical adventure. It never hurts to have treasure parcels on hand in case one of the characters gets light-fingered in the lord's office but you don't have to do something special with rewards for roleplay and intrigue adventures.

RUNNING ROLEPLAY AND INTRIGUE ADVENTURES

Unlike other adventure types, there isn't a fixed structure for running this adventure type. Set the stage and let the characters interact with the NPCs.

Keep an eye on the pacing and spotlight of your investigation and roleplay adventures. It's easy to let things begin to stall out and the pacing to drop since conversation tends to dominate the activities in adventures like these. Be ready to move things forward when things begin to stall. It's also easy for more roleplay-focused players to dominate the spotlight in roleplaying adventures.

Go around the table and ensure everyone gets a turn.

Be ready to drop in a combat encounter if it's time for some action. Like the importance of having interesting NPCs to talk to in dungeon crawls, it's important to have some physical action prepared for roleplay and intrigue adventures. Otherwise, your more action-focused players might check out.

Avoid introducing too many NPCs at once. Three to five is probably good as an upper limit. Add more as other NPCs fall off stage. The introduction of NPCs is highly dependent on the situation. If the characters go to a fancy ball, they might mingle with lots of NPCs. If, instead, they're chasing clues across a city, they only have the NPCs at any given location to interact with.

Be ready to restate the goal of the adventure should you and your players get lost in the intricate weave of the conversation.

It's important that the entire goal of a roleplay or intrigue adventure not be blown on a single bad approach or bad role. Like infiltration and heist adventures, you can use a "clock" to keep track of a series of successes or series of failures, letting the attitudes of those they deal with improve or decline in smaller steps than a single bad roll. See "Clocks" in chapter 5 for details.

ROLEPLAY AND INTRIGUE ADVENTURE PITFALLS

There are several potential risks when running roleplay and intrigue adventures and several ways to deal with them.

Not Enough Action. By their very nature, roleplay and intrigue adventures lack physical action. For some players, it doesn't matter how interesting the conversations are – adventure RPGs are about adventure. Offset this pitfall by including scenes of physical action. Here are twenty ways to add some action into a roleplay or intrigue adventure:

1. Assassins attack the characters
2. Kidnappers grab a vital NPC
3. A rival group attacks
4. A trapped monster gets loose
5. A guardian construct goes berserk
6. A hidden rival uses the moment to attack
7. Thieves and robbers break in
8. A summoned demon appears
9. Ghosts or specters crawl from the depths

10. Someone gets possessed
11. A gang of toughs crashes the party
12. A genie or efreet gets free from an artifact
13. Cursed paintings come to life
14. Summoned hell hounds attack
15. Weapon and armor displays animate and attack
16. A guest reveals herself as a hag or dragon
17. A rival faction engages in a sneak attack
18. Someone mistakenly reads a cursed scroll
19. The floor collapses and skeletons crawl out
20. An elder horror attacks

Slow Pacing. It's easy to let the flow of conversation go on too long and the pacing of the whole adventure begins to lag. Because roleplay and intrigue adventures are already slower in pace than more action-focused adventures, keeping an eye on pacing is ever more important. Mitigate this pitfall by continually moving the direction of the adventure forward. Use a physical timer if you want for new events to take place where it makes sense. Watch the body language of your players and recognize when it's time to push forward. Ensure everyone's getting their time in the spotlight.

Too Complicated. For big roleplay and intrigue adventures, it's easy for the players to get lost in the details of all the NPC and all the interactions. Players only grab about half of what you're describing. Mitigate this pitfall by keeping a continual eye on what the players remember and what they're keeping track of. Keep a handle on the number of NPCs and the number of interconnected plots during roleplay and intrigue adventures so players don't lose track. Don't expect your players to remember every detail of their interactions or the webwork of plots.

Losing Track of the Goal. It's common for players to lose track of the goal of the adventure when conversations get started and roleplay takes over. Mitigate this pitfall by continually reiterating the goal of their quest both in and out of character. Make it clear when the line of their investigation isn't heading the right way.

It All Goes Bad at Once. If you're too reliant on a single interaction with a single NPC, the whole goal of the adventure can fall apart on a single bad roll or a bad approach. Avoid this pitfall by requiring several successful interactions and offering several failures before the whole situation goes bad. Use "clocks" as described in

chapter 5. The attitudes of the NPCs they interact with can improve or decline over several interactions instead of just one.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Roleplay and intrigue adventures follow the characters as they seek a goal by interacting with NPCs. Goals can include learning something, convincing someone of something, and many others.
- Roleplay and intrigue adventures give the players lots of agency to learn what they need to learn through interaction with NPCs yet are bound by their goal and the NPCs they interact with.
- Focus on the goal of a roleplay and intrigue adventure so players know what they seek and don't just talk for the sake of talking.
- Focus on secrets and clues and NPCs when preparing for intrigue and roleplay adventures. These two steps have a heavy part to play in this adventure type.
- Be wary of roleplay and intrigue adventures having too slow a pace. Be ready to drop in scenes of action and combat for your more action-focused players.
- Keep things moving forward and continually reiterate the goal. Ensure you give enough of the spotlight to each of your players and use a "clock" so entire interactions don't go bad on a single bad roll.

COMBAT

Sometimes our quests, adventures, and scenarios focus on combat. Combat adventures might focus on big multi-wave boss fights, or a series of battles in several locations with small connections from one to another. Combat-focused sessions might occur at the end of a longer defense adventure (see the Defense adventure type in chapter 5) or as the final boss fight in a dungeon crawl (see chapter 6).

Adventures focusing exclusively on combat should be rare. Instead, combat often plays a role in other adventure types. Pure combat sessions might occur when a larger story leads to an entire session of big battles.

WHY COMBAT ADVENTURES WORK WELL

Lots of fantasy RPGs focus on combat mechanics so having big chunks of an adventure focus on combat gives characters the chance to show these abilities. Combat-focused adventures are also action packed. There's little downtime wondering what's going on. Battles typically move the story forward at a good clip. Well designed combat environments give characters several different approaches to the battle and a variety of monsters keeps the battle dynamic and interesting. Typically there's a good deal of character agency to choose how to approach battles.

Some folk-heroic RPGs focus less on combat – treating combat as a fail-state for engaging in a more dynamic situation. These games are less likely to push the characters towards combat, instead giving the characters chances to evade or negotiate their way out of a battle. If you're running an RPG with less of a focus on combat, this adventure type may not come up very often. Still, there may be tips here to help more folk-heroic fantasy RPGs.

TYPES OF COMBAT ENCOUNTERS

Combat encounters are the building blocks of combat-focused adventures. Some combat-focused adventures follow a series of sequential battles while others focus on a large continuous multi-wave battle. Here are several common combat encounter types.

Smaller Battles with a Single Type of Opponent. Some combat encounters have the characters facing several opponents of the same

type. The characters might run into a pack of wolves, several veteran mercenaries, or three ogres for example. Such encounters typically fill in spots between more meaningful battles – hallway fights or fights in smaller rooms before a big final battle. Single-opponent-type encounters might be easy or moderately difficult but are rarely deadly encounters.

Run Easy Battles

In high-heroic fantasy RPGs with a greater focus on the combat capabilities of characters, GMs are often tempted to ensure every battle provides a challenge to the characters. Instead, get comfortable running easy battles where players can enjoy watching their characters demolish their foes. Be ready to run such battles with simple tokens or miniatures and simple maps so you don't spend a lot of time on the setup and teardown of the combat arena. Easy battles are a great time to run battles in the Theater of the Mind (see chapter 5 for tips on running theater of the mind combat).

Larger Battles with Multiple Types of Opponents. Larger fights often contain two or three types of opponents such as powerful up front brutes and sneaky ranged attackers or spellcasters in the back. Such combat encounters often include interesting terrain or interactive objects (see examples further in this chapter). These bigger battles are often more meaningful encounters or boss fights where a boss is protected by their minions in a reasonably detailed location.

Multi-wave Battles. Sometimes big battles evolve as they go – bringing in new waves of combatants. In more mechanics-focused RPGs like D&D 5th Edition, such multi-wave battles work well to bring a powerful threat to the characters later in a battle – protecting this threat from getting too easily overwhelmed as soon as it shows up. Here's a quick and easy model for four potential waves in a multi-wave battle. You need not choose all four waves – choose two or three for a nice crunchy fight.

- Phase 1 where the characters face an equal number of equally powered foes.
- Phase 2 where the characters face a smaller number of more powerful foes.
- Phase 3 where the characters face a large number of much weaker foes.
- Phase 4 in which the boss monster shows up.

Such powerful battles often require careful tuning on behalf of the GM to ensure they don't completely overwhelm the characters and should generally only be used for higher power characters to begin with. You can tune multi-wave battles by determining how quickly one wave follows another. If the characters are having an easy time, increase the speed in which one wave follows another. If the characters are having too hard a time, space out the next wave to give them time to recover.

COMPONENTS OF GREAT COMBAT ENCOUNTERS

Since combat adventures focus on combat encounters, we want to make these encounters as fun and interesting as possible. Here's a checklist of things we might include in one or more combat encounters. An encounter doesn't have to include *all* of these things, but a handful can make a typical encounter into something unique.

- Opponents
- Terrain
- Interactive Elements
- Alternative Success Criteria

Opponents. Including two to three types of opponents in an encounter gives your players interesting targets to choose instead of just attacking "ogre 3". Include a mixture of big heavy hitters, sneaky skirmishers, and ranged attackers. Many RPGs include solid lists of monsters to choose from.

Terrain. Include interesting elements of terrain in your battle arena such as difficult terrain, high vantage points, pits, statues or pillars to hide around, and elements of dangerous terrain like acid or lava. Ensure these terrain features don't just inconvenience the characters but give the characters interesting options. Players love throwing bad guys down deep pits.

Here's a list of twenty combat-oriented terrain features:

1. Fiery braziers
2. Spiked pits
3. Crumbling pillars
4. Rough terrain
5. Spikey brambles
6. Acid pools
7. Deep crevasses
8. Shadowy alcoves

9. Upper balconies
10. Cracked bridges
11. Broken staircases
12. Sinister spores
13. Magical darkness
14. Antimagic fields
15. Unstable magic zones
16. Thick fog or smoke
17. Crowds of people
18. Swarms of biting insects
19. Poison clouds
20. Cliff edges

Interactive Elements. Interesting battle arenas can also contain objects the characters or monsters can interact with. These interactive elements give offer options to the characters should they choose to use them. Ensure you give players enough information so they can make a meaningful choice of using these features over their own character options. Here's a list of potential interactive elements in a combat encounter.

1. Blazing torches
2. Arcane monolith
3. Barbed ballista
4. Swinging chandeliers
5. Shelf of unstable ingredients
6. Crumbling statues
7. Arcane crystals
8. Vats of acid
9. Lightning rods
10. Iron maidens
11. Spinning blade traps
12. Firebreathing statues
13. Poisoned spears
14. Unsprung traps
15. Heavy decorative axes
16. Unstable stalactites
17. Radiant or necrotic spheres
18. Glyphs of warding
19. Crossbow turrets
20. Soul-stealing gems

Like terrain features, ensure these interactive elements can be used by either characters or monsters to add new variables to a combat encounter.

Alternative Success Criteria. Not all battles require an end-state where one side fully defeats

the other. There may be options and situations in which a battle ends before every opponent is defeated. Here are twenty ways a battle might end without one side being completely wiped out.

1. Defeat the boss
2. Escape with a prisoner
3. Destroy one or more monuments or artifacts
4. Steal something and escaping
5. Disrupt a ritual
6. Allow a ritual to complete
7. Destroy a powerful weapon
8. Cause the area to fall apart
9. Cross an area
10. Escape the area
11. Wait for reinforcements
12. Convince minions to turn on their leader
13. Wait for an event to take place
14. Wait for an artifact to power up
15. Break a protective barrier
16. Turn one force against another
17. Hold off enemies so others can escape
18. Redirect enemies from another target
19. Break enemy morale
20. Open or close a portal

THE CONNECTIVE TISSUE BETWEEN ENCOUNTERS

In larger combat-focused adventures, something draws the characters from one place to the next. This draw might be a timed event – the characters must make it to the portal chamber before the evil wizard draws in a powerful demon or uses the portal to escape into another world. Other times a small set of corridors connects large chambers, each of which contains a likely combat encounter. Such small event-focused dungeons should be more rare than larger dungeon crawls (see chapter \$) which offer more character agency in directions and approach. Multi-wave encounters likely follow a more dynamic situation. At each stage in the battle, something larger might be going on causing the next wave of the encounter to take place.

PREPPING COMBAT-FOCUSED ADVENTURES

Here's how we might focus the eight steps of lazy GM prep around combat-focused adventures.

Characters. What combat features do each of the characters bring to the battle? What abilities do characters have that players enjoy using? Consider what creatures you can use that showcase these character abilities (a concept we call lightning rods, described in chapter \$). Clerics love blasting big piles of undead with turn undead. Wizards love blowing away hordes of weak monsters with fireball. A warlock might love banishing big dangerous monsters with weak wills using banish. Look at what the characters bring to the battlefield and design the encounter to give them a chance to shine and still provide a fun challenge.

Strong Start. There are fewer strong starts than a big battle. Combat brings characters right into the action. If it makes sense for your combat-focused adventure, start with a battle. You might not want to start with a dangerous fight up front – instead choosing one of relative medium difficulty to get characters warmed up but not eat all of their resources they might need for the rest of the adventure.

Scenes. Our list of scenes might consist of each of the potential combat encounters the characters might get involved in. Typically, in combat-focused games, these scenes are linear. If there are options or choices, we're likely running a different kind of adventure where combat is an option but so are other types of scenes (see dungeon crawls in chapter \$ and mashups in chapter \$). In more event-based combat adventures, our scenes might follow a series of events that take place as the adventure progresses. Scenes in combat encounters typically include a location and opponents but other circumstances might be worth jotting down.

Combat encounter scenes might be more focused and pre-planned than the more improvisational scenes we build at the table in other adventure types. For example, if we're running a big boss fight with multiple waves of combatants, it's worth spending the time to prepare it. For smaller battles, though, we might keep our locations and opponents in their proper steps.

Secrets and Clues. It's easy to lose track of the rest of the story when focused on a series of

combat encounters in an adventure. During prep, write down ten possible secrets the characters may learn during these battles. These secrets might be observations the characters witness during the battle, things they remember during the fight, things their opponents say or reveal, information revealed from the arms or armor of their opponents, or any other tidbits they might pick up. Secrets and clues wrap mechanics-heavy combat sessions with fiction and lore that move the story forward.

Fantastic Locations. The environments where our battles take place can be as important as the combatants. When building out battle arenas, take note of the location and the notable features it might contain. Use the lists of terrain and interactive objects described earlier for inspiration to add features to your locations the characters and monsters can use during the battle.

NPCs. Combat-focused adventures might only have one or two notable NPCs outside of villains. You can note them here as you would for any other adventure.

Monsters. Typically we keep a list of monsters that might show up in a given session but with combat-focused adventures we tend to have a better idea which monsters show up in which scenes and locations. You can note them here, in your lists of locations, or in your list of scenes. Review monster stat blocks before your game so you know what they bring to the battle.

Rewards. Great victories deserve great rewards. Note possible rewards the characters might acquire after vanquishing their foes as you would for any other session.

RUNNING COMBAT-FOCUSED ADVENTURES

When running combat-focused adventures, set the stage of each encounter both in the fiction of the game and in any special mechanics the players should know about based on the environment, interactive objects, or special end-states. Clarify the specific mechanics of complicated battles so players can make informed decisions.

When running battles focus on both the tactics of the game and the narrative fiction, describing what happens in the world based on the way the dice roll.

Otherwise, running combat-focused adventures is much the same as running any sort of

adventure for the system you choose. There are no special character roles or procedures beyond what your chosen RPG provides.

COMBAT PITFALLS

There are several potential pitfalls when running combat-focused adventures.

Too Much Combat. I know, this pitfall seems strange given we're talking about combat-focused adventures but it really is a pitfall. Too much combat can drain players instead of excite them. Avoid this pitfall by including scenes of exploration and roleplaying if you can find an opportunity for it – even in adventures that mostly focus on combat.

Too Many Hard Battles. Too many hard battles in a row can make players frustrated and hopeless. Avoid this pitfall by including a mixture of easier and harder battles. Set up encounters so players can enjoy the combat abilities of their characters, mowing down piles of minions or controlling big brutes. Run some battles with fewer weaker monsters so players don't feel like every battle is designed to push them to the edge.

Circumventing Character Abilities. When characters gain significantly powerful abilities, GMs sometimes feel the draw to negate such abilities when running threatening battles. Players hate to see their hard-won capabilities negated. Avoid this pitfall by showcasing cool character abilities and increasing the threat of challenging combat encounters in other ways – often with more monsters or higher power monsters. Look for ways to challenge characters and protect bosses from the often focused wrath of the characters in ways that don't remove character agency.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Combat-focused adventures tend to follow the characters through a series of battles or one great big battle that might take an entire session.
- Entirely combat-focused adventures should be rare. Usually combat is one type of scene or phase in longer adventures that also include roleplaying and exploration.
- High-heroic mechanics-focused RPGs often have lots of combat-focused mechanics players can choose from and enjoy. More folk-heroic RPGs might not focus on combat the same way.

- Combat encounters might include smaller battles with one type of monster, larger battles with several types of monsters, or huge battles against multiple waves of combatants.
- Mix up several variables to make combat encounters feel unique including special terrain, interactive objects, different types of monsters, and different goals for the encounter.
- Consider the connective tissue leading from one combat encounter to the next. Do events progress things forward or do paths lead from one combat-focused chamber to the next?
- Pay attention to scenes, locations, and monsters when preparing combat-focused adventures.
- Pay attention to tactics but continue to narrate and focus on the fiction of the game when running combat-focused adventures.
- Avoid common pitfalls by running combat-focused adventures rarely. Mix up easy and hard encounters so the whole adventure doesn't feel like a slog. Avoid negating powerful character abilities and instead showcasing those abilities while finding ways to challenge them in other ways.

DEFENSE

In defense adventures, the characters defend a location from a large oncoming force. I like to think of this as the “Seven Samurai” adventure type, named after the famous Akira Kurosawa film. Though this adventure type isn’t common, its versatility and flexibility warrant its inclusion in our toolbox of adventure types.

WHY DEFENSE ADVENTURES WORK WELL

Defense adventures, like infiltration and heist adventures, offer a great deal of character and player agency within a refined space we can get our hands around during prep. Defense adventures can go lots of different ways, letting us GMs enjoy them as they play out and still offering clear areas where we can set the stage during our preparation. You can think of defense adventures as sort of the opposite of an infiltration or heist adventure.

Like other adventure types, defense adventures follow a structure:

- Planning for the upcoming attack
- Preparing for the upcoming attack
- Optionally reconnoitering the coming enemy
- Defending the location
- The big finish

THE DEFENSIBLE LOCATION

Defendable locations are the cornerstone of a defensive adventure. What location are the characters defending? How will they defend it? Here are twenty potentially defendable locations:

1. A keep
2. A village or town
3. A defensive position on a hill
4. A section of a city under siege
5. A ramshackle house
6. A section of a larger dungeon
7. An old wizard’s tower
8. A thieves’ den
9. A ruined castle
10. A fey grove
11. A summoning circle
12. A farm
13. A floating island

14. A temple
15. A watchtower
16. A contested bridge
17. A warehouse
18. A ship
19. A factory
20. A prison

Each location has specific characteristics that make it an interesting location to defend. When you select a location, ensure it has options to make it defensible. Some of these elements may be natural, others may have been constructed previously, and some the characters themselves construct in preparation for an attack.

Here are several elements that can make a location defensible:

1. Natural ridges or cliffs
2. Streams or rivers
3. Piles of debris
4. Palisades
5. Rock walls
6. Lava rivers or walls of flame
7. Haunted terrain
8. Sand dunes
9. Pits or a crevasse
10. Fallen statues
11. Collapsed buildings
12. Broken stone walls
13. Magical traps
14. Trenches
15. Magical walls
16. Broken vehicles
17. Glacial walls
18. Iron fences
19. Animated guardians
20. Natural plateaus

WHO ARE THE ATTACKERS?

Once we have a location in mind, we can think about the attackers. Who threatens the location? Here are twenty potential attacking groups for defense adventures:

1. Undead armies
2. Cultists of a fell god
3. Bloodthirsty humanoids
4. Bandits seeking money or power
5. Ancient animated armor

6. Shadowy spirits of the netherworld
7. Unseelie fey
8. Ogres and giants
9. Opposing armies
10. Monsters strangely unified
11. Unleashed aberrations
12. Demons or devils
13. Hired mercenaries
14. Bestial predators
15. Pirates
16. Elemental attackers
17. A wizard's summoned army
18. Evil lizard or serpent-folk
19. A hag's creations
20. Trolls and swamp dwellers

PREPPING A DEFENSE ADVENTURE

Here's how we can tailor the eight steps for lazy GM prep around defense adventures.

Characters. Think about what the characters bring to a defense adventure. Do they have particular skills, spells, or capabilities you want to consider when setting up the scenario? Don't try to circumvent their powerful abilities. Instead, try to find ways to let them use their powerful abilities and still have an interesting and challenging defense scenario. Think also about how the characters tie into the story of the defendable position and those who live there. Is this the home town of one of the characters? Do the characters have some tie to the location's history? Are they a sworn enemy of the attackers? What connects the characters to the coming assault?

Strong Start. What draws the characters into the defense adventure? Are they approached by villagers who beg them for help defending against marauding bandits? Do they feel the manifestation of a dark curse sending shadowy riders towards a nearby castle in three days time? Did they witness the oncoming army early? You might introduce scouts from the invading force or escaped prisoners to show the characters what's going on. What scene shows the characters the stakes of what's to come?

Scenes. We can't plan out each scene in an invasion but we might have a loose outline based on the structure of a defensive adventure:

- The strong start that draws the characters into the defense of the location.

- Planning the defense.
- Possibly scouting or infiltrating the invading force's home base.
- The actual assault.
- A final confrontation with the big boss.
- The aftermath.

We don't know the details of many of these scenes, since so much lies with your players' choices, but the outline above gives you some idea of the structure.

Secrets and Clues. There's lots of value to a good list of secrets and clues for our defensive adventures. These secrets might include:

- What's the story of the attackers? Why are they attacking?
- What secret do the residents of the defended position hide?
- What history exists of the defending location? What was it before? Who made it?
- What faction or religious affiliation do the attackers and defenders have?
- Were any battles fought here before? Are there any statues, monuments, or cenotaphs of these heroes? Did they leave old weapons behind?

Like in the rest of our adventures, secrets and clues bathe our scenario in a rich tapestry of history, lore, alliance, and motivations to make it unique.

Fantastic Locations. We're going to focus heavily on the location to be defended. A map you can give to your players helps them plan their defense. You may also need maps for the attacker's home base in case the characters decide to go there for some recon, to cut down on the enemy's forces, or stop the attack before it ever begins. This might turn your scenario into an infiltration or heist adventure (see chapter 5) instead of a defensive scenario, but that works too!

NPCs. Who leads the defenders? Is it a town elder or a high priest? Are there ghosts inhabiting the location with useful information they might give to the characters? Are there any prisoners who escaped from the attacking force? Who leads the attacking force? Do they have a herald? The NPC section is the place to note all of the most notable figures on both sides of the assault and any other NPCs who might have information useful to the characters.

Monsters. Instead of a random table of monsters, list the details of the attacking force. How many of what types of opponents are in the assault? Often this force is much larger than the characters alone can hope to defend against. That's the point of setting up and defending the location and assigning defending forces outside of their own capabilities during their planning phase. Here's an example list of opponents for a low-level defensive situation:

The Red Nails Bandits

- 1x Bandit captain – Nokiros the Red (pg 27)
- 4x Ogres (pg 231)
- 8x Toughs (pg 307)
- 12x Scouts (pg 270)
- 36 x Bandits (pg 27)

You don't have to decide how these opponents attack until the actual game, but it helps to know how many of what types of creatures the enemy forces have to decide how to allocate them depending on how the situation plays out.

Rewards. What treasures do the attackers have in their lair or what do they bring with them? What treasures do the defenders give to the characters if they succeed? Jot it down here.

RUNNING A DEFENSE ADVENTURE

Running a defensive adventure usually falls into stages:

1. The players plan their defense
2. The players allocate resources to defend the location
3. The attack begins
4. The spotlight stays on the characters as they battle attackers
5. The GM narrates what's happening in the other locations
6. There's some type of big final event
7. There's an aftermath

Defensive adventures have a different flow than most typical adventures. Like infiltrations and heists, defense adventures begin with a planning phase – one in which the players discuss their strategy and assign resources to defend particular areas. Sometimes their strategy might not involve defense at all but attacking their attackers in their own home ground. You can use the list of adventure locations in appendix \$ to inspire your ideas for the attackers' home base.

Part of planning the defense includes allocating resources to defend parts of the location. This might be spells the characters cast, traps they set up, ways they arrange the environment, and potentially training and allocating other defenders to the areas the characters themselves cannot defend. Give the players lots of agency to plan their defenses in creative ways.

Once the stage is set, the battle begins. Run the adventure as the attackers come in and react to the defenses of the characters. You can fall back to an oracle die (see chapter \$ for more on oracle dice) to add randomness to the oncoming attacks and let the characters get directly involved in defending the location. Alternatively, you can have the larger battle mirror the successes or failures of the characters in their specific situations.

Some RPGs and some GMs like to have some type of system to manage the larger battles going on in defense adventures. A lazier way is to handle larger battles off-camera and focus on the characters and what they're doing. You can roll dice to determine if attackers or defenders have an advantage over the other or let the characters' own victories cascade into the rest of the story.

An Oracle Die for Defense Adventures

Using an oracle die basically has you roll a die to determine an outcome. An easy way to do this for defense adventures is to roll a d6 to determine an outcome. On a 1-3 one thing happens, on a 4-6 something else happens. You can add or subtract one to this range if one thing is more likely than another. If the characters do a good job preparing an environment and training defenders, you might say that the battle swings their way on a 3-6, only starting to fall the other way on a 1 or 2.

DEFENSE ADVENTURE PITFALLS

There are several ways a defense adventure might go wrong. Here are a few.

The Location Isn't Easily Defendable. It's hard to protect a village with no walls and no natural barriers. Attackers can come from any direction and no matter where the characters put themselves or any other defending forces, the attackers can simply pivot to a new direction. Avoid this pitfall by ensuring there are natural or artificial barriers to block access from one direction or another. See the list of defensible elements earlier in this chapter.

The Battle Gets Too Complex. There are a lot of moving parts in a defense adventure. If you or your players hang on too tightly to the specific numbers of attackers and defenders, the spotlight of the game shifts away from the characters and focuses too much on the larger battlefield. While some games include rules for such mass combat scenarios, it may not be ideal for character-focused RPGs. Avoid this pitfall by explaining to your players that you'll be focusing on them and what they're doing, and who they're fighting while describing the larger battle in the narrative. Use an oracle die to shake things up if you want to.

The Characters Split Up. Players may want to spread their forces around during a big battle like this, thus splitting their party up. Beyond being a dangerous choice for the characters, splitting the party also dramatically increases the complexity of the situation. Avoid this pitfall by letting players know their characters should stay together and their defenders are capable of holding their own on their own. It's ok to break out of character and explain to your players why splitting up is a bad idea and may make the scenario less fun.

The Defenses Don't Help. It's possible that, depending on how the characters set up their defenses and the type of force the attackers have at their disposal that the defenses simply don't hold up. Excellent barricades won't stop a dragon from breathing on your home base. Avoid this pitfall by making it clear to the characters what sort of attackers they can expect and what sort of defenses they have at their disposal to defend. Ensure their defenses aren't so good that there's no way the attackers pose any threat but ensure their defenses come into play as well.

- When preparing defense adventures, focus on the location. Prepare a map you can give to your players so they can choose their defensive strategy. Include lists of the attackers and important NPCs. Bathe the whole scenario in interesting secrets and clues to make it unique.
- When running defense adventures, begin with a planning stage including physical defense and training and allocating defenders. Then run the battle with a spotlight on the characters while you describe the rest of the situation in the background. Use an oracle die when needed to determine how things are going elsewhere in the battle.
- Avoid pitfalls such as locations that aren't easily defended, running a scenario that's too complicated, splitting up the characters, or having the characters' defensive plan fall apart during the battle.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- In defense adventures, the characters defend a location from attackers. This is a classic "Seven Samurai" style of adventure.
- Defense adventures give players a lot of agency to stage their defenses (or even attack the attackers ahead of time) while still giving GMs focused boundaries for their prep.
- Defense adventures focus on the area to be defended (or the attacker's own home base), the defensive capabilities of the location, and the attackers.

ADVENTURE MASHUPS AND THE UNDEFINED

\$ Do we need this chapter or is it better handled in chapter 24?

We've covered several defined adventure types that fit common fantasy adventure scenarios but most full adventures don't likely fall perfectly into just one type. An RPG session might start off with some roleplaying and intrigue, then move to some overland exploration, and then into a dungeon crawl. Depending on where your session begins and ends, your session might bleed across two or three different adventure types.

That's fine. These adventure models are intended to give you adventure frameworks you can piece together into your own larger adventures.

Think of these adventure types as phases of RPG gameplay, procedures to follow, frameworks to build upon, or modes of play – focusing on how the structure of these types of modes change depending on what's happening in the game.

Some adventures also don't fit into *any* of these types. Our sessions and adventures can be free-flowing improvisational works created by us and our players as we explore the story in front of us and never fit cleanly into roleplay and intrigue, infiltrations and heists, investigations or mysteries, or combat or defense adventures.

Often, though, sessions come *close* to these types and components from our sessions overlap with components of the adventure types.

Below is a list of the various components of the adventure types so you can grab the component or structure that best suits your actual game.

SCENE-BASED ADVENTURES

- A series of individual scenes, running roughly 45-minutes
- Individual scene and scenario goals
- Scenes focus on decisions and actions
- One scene leads to the next

DUNGEON CRAWLS

- Dungeon locations
- Engaging dungeon designs with multiple entrances, multiple paths, elevation changes, and secret rooms and passages.
- Friendly dungeon NPCs
- Marching order

- Lighting considerations
- 10 minute dungeon turns
- Random encounters
- Physical location exploration with meaningful choices
- Short room descriptions for lots of rooms
- Room lists and themes to improvise locations

INFILTRATION AND HEISTS

- Infiltration and heist goals
- Open knowledge about the location
- Infiltration planning phase
- Dynamic behaviors of hostile and non-hostile forces.
- Detection clocks
- Introduced complications
- Escape routes

INVESTIGATIONS AND MYSTERIES

- Intended discovery of a mysterious truth
- High focus on secrets and clues
- NPC knowledge and backstories
- Previous situation timelines
- Multiple paths to a single conclusion

OVERLAND EXPLORATION AND TRAVEL

- Single-encounters between locations
- Weather, monuments, inhabitants, situations, hooks
- Hex crawls when distances and resources matter
- Point crawls to build a network of paths and locations
- Travel roles – scouts, pathfinders, quartermasters.
- Successes and failures for each role

ROLEPLAY AND INTRIGUE

- Roleplay situations and locations
- Roleplaying goals
- NPC backstories
- Reputation clocks

COMBAT

- Combat types: small, large, mutli-wave encounters

- Encounter location designs
- Combat encounter design: opponents, terrain, interactive elements, alternative success criteria
- Detailed location, multi-wave boss-battles

DEFENSE

- Defensive locations
- Potential attackers
- Defensive planning
- Potential attack on enemy locations
- Larger-scale battle adjudication

Jump back to each chapter to learn more about these specific elements of larger adventure types. Choose the ones that fit your current session to mash up your own custom adventure type.

THE PURPOSE OF THE ADVENTURE MODELS

Adventure models give you useful, flexible frameworks to build fantastic scenarios for your players. They're *not* intended to limit you in any way. Don't feel like you have to build your scenario around a model that doesn't fit the situation in your game. Instead, use these models to help you get your hands around a scenario and recognize its structure. You might realize the adventure you're about to run matches well with an infiltration and heist adventure so you can use the framework and models to help you with your prep and execution of the adventure.

Likewise, when a session *doesn't* fit into a model, don't feel like you have to force it into one. Instead, take the components and structures from an adventure model helps your next session when they're useful. Or, if your session doesn't fit *any* of the models, you can default back to the eight steps and build around the scenario you have in mind.

Adventure types are frameworks to *empower* your creativity, not limit it.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Most actual scenarios don't fit cleanly into just one adventure model.
- Use the processes and components of the adventure types that fit closely to the scenario you're going to run.
- Mix and match features of several adventure models for more complex scenarios.
- Know the main features and structures each adventure model provides. Build scenarios from those features.
- Adventure models aren't designed to constrain you – they give you useful and flexible structures you can use to prepare and run your games.

QUEST MODELS AND THE SIMPLEST QUEST MODEL

\$ Should quest models come before adventure types?

The next three chapters discuss “quest models”. While adventure types give us structures to build adventures and sessions, quest models lead to adventures and connect adventures together as the characters seek to accomplish goals leading from one session and adventure to the next. The quest models lead the characters to your adventures built from the components of the adventure types in chapters \$ through \$.

What Is a Quest?

For the sake of this book, quests are any motivation that draws the characters into adventures. Quests can be as straight forward as an NPC asking characters to go somewhere to do something (as described below) or something fuzzier, like a rumor overheard at a bar or passed along from a fellow traveler. Quests can derive from secrets and clues. Players themselves can define quests the minute they hear something and decide to act upon it. Thus, instead of us pre-defining quests, we can grab onto quests the players themselves come up with – we simply codify and clarify them.

THE SIMPLEST QUEST MODEL

A simple quest model might use the following format:

An NPC asks the characters to go somewhere and do something.

Though simple, this quest model extremely powerful. Thousands of published adventures follow this model – sometimes leading to large campaigns or single-session adventures. Fill out the blanks of this quest model by asking these questions:

- Who is the NPC?
- What is the location?
- What is the goal?

Each of these three questions might spawn a longer list of questions and details. The NPC might have several traits we want to fill out: their name, species, background, affiliation, mannerisms, and goal. Review the lazy GM prep step of “Outline Important NPCs” in chapter \$ or the NPC generator lists in appendix \$ to inspire your creation of NPCs.

The location needs a map, some history, chamber features, inhabitants, and a location in the world. Review the lazy GM prep step of “Develop Fantastic Locations” and use the location lists in appendix \$ to fuel your ideas. Use the maps in appendix \$ if you’re stuck for a map. Reorient or re flavor these maps to your heart’s content.

If the characters are traveling to the location of their quest, we might want a scene along the way to reinforce some of the background of the adventure – another group of explorers seeking the same goal might be getting ambushed by hostile monsters, for example. See the outline in chapter \$ – “Overland Exploration and Travel” – for lists of potential encounters along the journey.

For the goal, we need to know the details of what the NPC asks the characters to do. The scene goals in chapter \$ (scene-based adventure types) and the quest goals in appendix \$ can help fill out these details.

The “someone asks you to go somewhere and do something” quest model is extremely simple but refined enough to help you fill in some blanks and run great unique adventures.

QUEST MOTIVATION

One component potentially missing from the simplest quest model is the characters’ motivation. What drives the characters to want to accomplish this quest? There are three big motivations we can apply to most fantasy RPG games:

- **Greed.** The characters want money, treasure, or other tangible rewards.
- **Wonder.** The characters want to explore the unknown and uncover the world’s secrets.
- **Heroism.** The characters want to protect the weak and make the world a better place.

Include hooks for one or more of these motivations and most characters have a solid reason to accomplish the goal of the quest.

Beyond these three motivations exist many smaller ones. Below is a list of twenty motivations to drive characters to go on adventures. You’ll notice some similarity between quest goals and character motivations – sometimes they directly overlap with one another.

1. Protect people
2. Destroy a dangerous evil force

3. Get revenge
4. Acquire a powerful magic item
5. Protect a village, town, city, region, or world
6. Earn money
7. Gain political power
8. Build an alliance
9. Lay the dead to rest
10. Rescue someone
11. Kill a villain
12. Depose a tyrant
13. Destabilize a tyrannical government
14. Establish a new leader
15. Recover lost lore
16. Uncover powerful magic
17. Gain control of a location
18. Prevent the rise of an evil force
19. Escape from somewhere
20. Uncover a mystery – learn the truth

MORE COMPLICATED QUEST MODELS

Other quest models aren't as simple as an NPC asking the characters to go somewhere and do something. Some quest models *seem* solid but often break down in actual play. We'll cover resilient quest models in chapters \$ through \$ – quest models that give characters agency in the story and still give you a framework to focus your prep. We'll also cover fragile quest models in chapter \$ – quest models that *seem* like good ideas but often break down when facing our players at the table.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Quest models differ from adventure models – quest models link adventures together, drawing the characters from one adventure to another.
- The simplest quest model follows the format of “someone wants you to go somewhere and do something”.
- Quests need character motivations – what drives the characters to accomplish a quest?
- More complicated quest models give characters agency to decide their course and still give the GM structure to focus their prep. Other fragile quest models break down when they face our players at the table.

3-2-1 QUEST MODEL

The 3-2-1 Quest Model is a simple way to put a variety of quests and options in front of the characters (and their players) and cycle out quests they *don't* want to go on.

Here's how it works.

Put three quests in front of the characters. Each quest should have enough information to let the players make a meaningful decision. Is this the type of quest they want to go on? Does it have the sort of gameplay they're interested in? Does it move forward the part of the story they're interested in moving forward? Usually two or three sentences are enough prep to put a quest in front of the characters. Here are several examples of potential quests from the *City of Arches* sourcebook:

- Roselyn Zeshe wants the characters to investigate members of the Children of Ibraxus, a demon-worshipping cult, said to be performing a dangerous ritual in an uncovered chamber in one of the crypts of the dead.
- Garland Willowmane has had strange premonitions of a being of power rising up from the depths of a ruined tower outside the City of Arches. She wants the characters to investigate this threat and defeat it if it poses a risk to the city.
- Joselyn Halfcloak, officer of the Golden Knights, learned that a splinter group of the criminal organization known as the Black Hand recovered a dangerous artifact from a vault in the Lower Reaches. Now multiple sinister groups seek the item. Joselyn wants the characters to recover the artifact before it disappears among the criminal elements of the Lower Reaches.

With three quests in front of the characters, they choose one of these quests to go on next. When they're done with that quest, the two remaining quests are usually still available and they can choose their next one. When they return, instead of finding the last quest, they have three *new* quests. The remaining quest is tossed out – either having been accomplished by someone else or no longer being relevant.

The 3-2-1 quest model gives players lots of agency over the sorts of quests they take on and which quests they're not interested in while not

putting too much burden on the GM to come up with deep ideas all the time.

Just Tell Them

When you put quests like these in front of the characters, the players likely want to know what type of game this is going to be. Instead of getting fancy with the quest description, you can just tell your players what sort of adventure it is: “this quest is more of a dungeon crawl” or “this quest has a fair bit of roleplaying and intrigue”. Think about the adventure models discussed in chapters \$ through \$ and build quests around different adventure types. Then let your players know which quests fit which adventure type so they know what they're choosing to do. This trick of “just tell your players” is a powerful one. Sometimes it's just easier to explain to your players what's going on or what options they have instead of constantly trying to stay in-character and in-world.

CHOOSE QUESTS NEAR THE END OF A SESSION

Ask your players to choose quests near the *end* of a session so you don't end up needing to prep three different options. If players choose one of three quests at the *start* of a session, you suddenly need to have all the materials you require to run the quest they chose. Instead, when they choose at the end, you know where they're going to go next session and can focus your prep on the session they chose. Feel free to break out of the story of the game to ask the players what they're likely to choose next.

NO BAD PATHS

Avoid setting up multiple quests with correct or incorrect paths. Don't set the players up with potentially wrong decisions for the quests they choose. Ensure all the quests you put in front of the characters move the story forward. If you include side quests, make sure you let your players know that choosing such side quests will not screw them over with a main quest later.

Also avoid situations where no matter what quest they pick bad things happen because they didn't choose the other two. Players can quickly become frustrated with a campaign if they feel like every choice they make puts them two steps back on the quests they *didn't* choose. Dial back the urgency of quests so players can make

meaningful decisions without feeling like they made the wrong choice.

Once in a while, adding urgency to a quest is ok, but don't make it a regular thing. Make sure the players have agency to choose the path they want to take and make progress in the story.

SEEK GROUP CONSENSUS

\$ Too long?

Ensure you facilitate the discussion and choosing of a quest among your players. Don't let one voice get drowned out by everyone else. Ensure all views are heard, call for a vote, and ask if everyone is ok, as players, with the decision. If a quest choice has a big impact on the game, it's worth working with your players to ensure everyone's ok with the answer in the end and no one feels like they were left out of the decision they didn't agree with. It's ok for characters to disagree with a path as long as, as players, they're ok with the decision. If not, it's worth continuing the discussion to find a more agreeable path for all the players at the table. Ensure your players work together to ensure everyone's voice is heard and options weighed before they make their final decisions.

HANG ON LOOSELY

\$ Do we want to cut this? Some say its implied in the rest of the book already.

The 3-2-1 quest model is a handy model but don't hang on too strictly. Like all of the tools and guidance in this book, you're free to modify it and manipulate it based on your preferences and those of your players. Maybe you have four quests instead of three. Maybe you carry over the final quest a couple of more quest rotations if it's something important enough to hang onto. The 3-2-1 quest model helps you give meaningful options to your players without putting too much of a burden of prep on you but it doesn't need to be restrictive for you or your players. Modify it in a way that makes sense for the game you're running.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- The 3-2-1 quest model is a flexible model that gives players meaningful choices without adding extra prep.
- The model works by putting three quests in front of the players. They choose one and go

on it. When they return, the remaining two quests are available and they choose the next one. When they return, the final quest is thrown out and they find three new quests in front of them.

- Ensure players choose quest options near the end of a session so you can focus your prep on the quest they choose. It's ok to break character and ask players to choose a quest even if they're in the middle of their current quest.
- Make sure all quests are relevant with no wrong answers. Ensure players aren't punished for choosing the "wrong" quest or not selecting the "right" quest. Dial back the urgency on quests so players make progress regardless of the quests they choose. All options should be viable.
- Ensure all players have a voice in choosing a quest. Facilitate the discussion and ensure your players are all on board even if their characters may not be.
- Hang on loosely. Modify the 3-2-1 quest model to fit the game you're running.

THREE OF FIVE KEYS QUEST MODEL

A common quest model for fantasy roleplaying games focuses on the characters acquiring a number of “keys” in order to accomplish a goal. It might be literal keys required to open a door to some final location. It might be items that need to be put together in order to accomplish some other goal. An example deep in the history of D&D is the Rod of Seven Parts, an artifact from way back in 1976 – a powerful artifact broken into seven pieces that need to be brought back together for the artifact to return to its power.

For the sake of discussion, “keys” can refer to any item required to move a quest forward and, for the sake of this particular quest model, several such keys are required to move the larger story forward.

Here are examples of keys and quests:

- Four keys are required to open a vault containing a powerful artifact.
- Seven parts of an artifact must be brought together so the artifact can be used to stop a powerful evil.
- Six pieces of a map must be found to build out the whole map to a hidden treasure vault.
- Three artifacts must be found and studied to learn the location of a hidden vault.
- Five masks must be brought together to open the gateway of the queen of dragons.
- Ten idols must be found to place into cutouts on a door so the door can be opened.

THE “ALL OR NOTHING” COLLECTION QUEST

A “collect all the keys” style of quest has a problem. It’s often brittle. If things don’t go a certain way, the whole quest can be derailed.

If the characters are alone in recovering these artifacts, there may no problem. They go through the quests and recover the keys. When they have them all, they accomplish the goal.

The brittleness occurs when *another* group also seeks these keys or tries to *prevent* the characters from acquiring them. If it’s the villains seeking the keys, the players might realize they can stop a villain’s plan simply by destroying or hiding any *one* of the keys. You can’t summon the queen of

dragons if you only have four of the five masks, so destroying one mask prevents the villain’s whole plan.

I call this style of brittle quest model the “all-or-nothing collection quest”. Whoever seeks these keys must have *all* of them or they have *nothing*. It only takes the loss of one such key for the quest to fall apart. Maybe a villain gets one key and runs off. Maybe the characters get one of the keys and destroys it. Now the quest – and the story – is over.

Instead of an “all or nothing” collection quest, we can build a “three of five keys” quest model that prevents this fragility.

HOW THE THREE OF FIVE KEYS MODEL WORKS

Instead of the main quest requiring all five keys from either the characters or the villains – they only need *three* of the five keys to succeed. It could be *any* three of the five keys. Now the characters (or the villains) need to recover *three* of the keys to thwart their opponents.

This model means it takes a lot more work to stop one side or the other from accomplishing their goal.

What if you only needed four of the seven parts of the rod of seven parts to put together a working form of the rod? Now either group can accomplish it and it becomes much harder for one group to stop the other from getting the parts they need.

You can build this model for any odd number of keys:

- Two of three keys
- Three of five keys
- Four of seven keys
- Five of nine keys
- Six of eleven keys

and so on.

ALTERNATIVE VILLAINOUS PLANS

There’s another solution to the brittle “all or nothing” quest model as well – an alternative villainous plan. Sometimes if you have villains seeking the same keys as the characters and the characters get the upper hand, the villain’s can’t catch up. Instead of building a chase for the keys, the villain might have an alternative plan to accomplish their goal – but at a greater cost. Here

are twenty possible alternative villainous plans to accomplish a goal *without* acquiring the same keys the characters seek:

1. Make a pact with a devil
2. Sacrifices themselves
3. Sacrifices their followers
4. Sacrifices something they love
5. Finds another key or set of keys
6. Conducts a life stealing ritual
7. Makes a deal with a rival
8. Finds another path
9. Goes after something the characters love
10. Allies with a more powerful being
11. Creates a fake key
12. Moves at a dangerous pace
13. Takes a big risk
14. Digs a new entrance
15. Attempts to destroy the thing
16. Seeks an alternative route
17. Goes after an alternative artifact
18. Infiltrates through a parallel world
19. Sends in an army
20. Seeks the Forbidden Way

Not every plan makes sense for every situation but one of these alternatives might keep the villain's quest moving forward should the characters thwart the villain's main plan across a campaign. Ensure such alternatives have a cost for the villain. The villain prefers to collect all five keys but because the characters already have three of them, the villain has to do something else – make a fake key, find an alternative entrance, sacrifice their followers, make a pact with a powerful devil, or something else.

Giving villains a backup play keeps your larger campaign quest flexible and resilient without taking away agency from the characters. The characters still accomplish their goals and set the villain back but the campaign doesn't end just because the characters found one key and destroyed it and now the vault of the artifact is sealed forever.

Avoid Stealing the Key Back

One common solution to the heated competition for the collection of keys is to have the villains steal or capture a key back from the characters. Be careful with this approach. Don't force it if it doesn't make sense. Ensure the characters can defend their key and thwart the approach. Don't

force a situation where the characters had no chance to defend their key. Your players will definitely smell a rat if they think the only way for the story to go forward is for them to lose a key and think you forced the issue to go that way. Instead, have the villains come up with an alternative plan.

MOVING THE DOORWAY

There's another fragile piece of these types of "collect the keys" quest models – your players may realize they don't need to collect the keys at all. Instead, they can just hang out at the locked door and wait for the villains to come to them, keys in hand. Let's say both the characters and villains hunt down keys to open an ancient vault so they can acquire a powerful artifact held within. Why bother hunting down these keys at all? Why not just set up camp at the door, wait for the other group to do all the work, and attack them when they try to get in?

There are a few solutions to avoid this problem:

- No one knows where the door actually is until they acquire enough keys to find it.
- The keys themselves have power the other side won't have if they don't collect them themselves.
- There are several possible ways in and the characters can't defend them all.
- Another group *also* seeks the item in the vault and has another way in (like breaking in from another plane of existence).
- Something is happening *inside* the vault that must be stopped in time, regardless of the other group getting the keys or not.

When designing a big multi-part quest like this, ensure the whole quest can't fall apart if the characters simply wait for the bad guys to do all the work.

AVOID A SINGLE PATH OF FAILURE

When building these larger multi-part collection quests, ensure you don't build in a single point of failure where either the characters or the villains can thwart the whole plot of the adventure with a simple solution. Players are smart – much smarter than the characters in a book or TV show that follows a single plot line. Players think asymmetrically. They think perpendicularly. And there are more of them than there are of you. Be

ready to have multiple paths for both the characters and the villains to seek their end-game so both groups have to continually shift and evolve to keep the story moving forward.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- All-or-nothing collection quests are brittle but can work as long as only the characters seek the keys.
- If two groups oppose one another in collecting five of five needed keys, one side can thwart the other by withholding or destroying even just one.
- Make collection quests resilient by requiring *some* of the keys – three of five, four of seven, five of nine and so on. Now each group has to collect the majority of keys to stop the other – not just one.
- Alternatively, or in addition, ensure rival villains have an *alternative* plan – one they'd rather not take but can take to fulfill their quest.
- Ensure that the doorway of your quest goal doesn't become the bottleneck, so the characters can't just let the villains do all the work while they sit at the door waiting to rob them.
- Avoid a single path of failure in your larger quests. Give the characters and villains multiple paths to a larger victory.

FRAGILE QUEST MODELS

Resilient quest models like the simplest quest model, the 3-2-1 quest model, and the three-of-five keys quest model keep the characters focused on a larger goal, give them agency to choose their path, and come up with their own plans to accomplish their goals.

This chapter discusses *fragile* quest models – models that fall apart when the actions of players break or circumvent a larger quest chain or force the GM to force the characters down only one particular path. The “all or nothing” collection quest described in chapter 5 is one such fragile model. This chapter contains several others.

SOMETIMES THEY WORK

You might read some of these fragile quest models and think of circumstances where they worked out just fine or *could* work out just fine. There are always exceptions, of course. But sometimes getting fragile quest models to work isn't nearly as easy as simply avoiding them for more robust quest models and adventure frameworks that give you, your players, and the game more flexibility driven by the decisions of the players and the changing circumstances during the game. Ask yourself if it's really worth trying to rework a fragile quest model instead of choosing one you know offers greater resilience.

THE MAIN PROBLEM OF FRAGILE QUEST MODELS

Fragile quest models often have one common problem – they expect, and sometimes force, the characters to follow a certain path. GMs running fragile quest models expect and require the story to go only one way. When things don't turn out like they expect, these GMs face two bad choices: *forcing* the characters back to the path or having the entire adventure fall apart because of an unexpected path. You'll notice this trend of single expected paths in all of the fragile quest models discussed in this chapter.

GOOD FICTION DOESN'T MAKE GOOD GAMING

Many GMs try to build adventures from the plots of their favorite books, TV shows, movies, comics, and other fiction. Such fiction is very different

from our tabletop games, however, because absorbing these types of fiction isn't interactive. We can't change the decision of a protagonist in a piece of fiction. We're along for the ride.

In an tabletop RPG, we have several players driving the direction of the story as it unfolds at the table. They're making decisions we might not have considered. This is why our games run well when GMs set up the situation and let the characters choose how they approach it. We aren't forcing a plot when we didn't have a plot prepared to begin with.

We can acquire great elements from our favorite fiction for our games, but it isn't their stories. Instead, we can take characters, locations, themes, and situations from our favorite fiction – elements and building blocks that turn *into* stories as our games progress with our players.

Now on to the fragile models.

THE BETRAYING NPC

Wouldn't it be cool if it turned out the NPC who has been giving quests to the characters all this time was secretly the bad guy?

No. No it would not.

Betraying quest NPCs are all-too-common in published adventures and suffer from the main problem of fragile quest models: they expect the characters don't find out or the whole adventure falls apart. Worse, *when* your players find out they've been duped by a betraying NPC, they'll never trust your NPCs again. Here's a simple question that shows the fragility of this quest model:

What happens if the characters find out early?

Often large adventures built on NPC betrayal have the core problem of fragile quests: either the characters don't know the NPC is going to betray them and can't find out or the whole adventure falls apart. Why would the characters go on all of these quests if they knew the person giving them the quest is a bad guy?

There are several alternatives to the betraying NPC but we'll focus on one: the sinister NPC. What if the characters *know* the NPC they're dealing with is sinister or untrustworthy? Would they still work with them? Does your quest and adventure path still work? Can the characters act as undercover agents? Maybe they double cross the sinister NPC. You can't know and that's the fun of it. If they know their quest NPC is shady, the players have information to make choices about who to work with and why.

Replace betraying quest NPCs with shady NPCs the characters *know* they can't trust.

THE FORCED CHASE

Chases are a common model for scenes and encounters in fantasy RPGs but they have a fundamental problem – it *has* to be a chase. What happens if the characters don't bother to chase the quarry? What happens if the quarry moves too fast or too slow? If the characters use all their capabilities, can they end the chase too early? What happens to your adventure, session, or quest if the quarry is captured right away or not captured at all? If you don't have good answers to these questions, you have a fragile scene coming on.

Chases work better when they happen organically during the adventure, not as something pre-planned by the GM. Sometimes chases just happen. Villains run away and characters chase them down. Adjudicate such scenes as they occur instead of planning them out ahead of time. Use improvisational tools like progress clocks (see chapter 5) to track how chases are going and be ready for chases to end quickly or never succeed. Let players use all of their characters' capabilities to conduct, circumvent, or thwart the chase and feel good about the outcome.

Run chases as they occur – don't plan them out ahead of time.

THE FORCED CAPTURE

Sometimes GMs think it'll be cool to have the characters get captured and need to escape. It's one thing if an adventure begins with the characters already captured as their strong start, but something else if you have to *force* their capture as part of the quest. Because being captured is critical to the story, the characters and players really have no agency. Often GMs set up such fragile situations by sending overwhelming forces against the characters, planning to knock them all out or force them to surrender. Players *hate* this. They'll know it was forced. They know they never had any choice in the matter. And they'll resent everything that comes afterwards.

Sometimes the characters get captured as part of the evolving story of the game. Maybe the characters lose a battle and, instead of the villains simply killing all of the characters off, the bad

guys capture the characters and throw them in a cell. That's different. It's not a *forced* capture – it's the circumstances of the situation. The characters had a shot at *not* being captured.

Don't build a quest that requires the characters to get captured.

THE ESCAPING VILLAIN

Sometimes GMs are tempted to give the characters a shot at a villain, knowing the villain can simply escape at any point. If the characters aren't aware that the villain can escape, it's a big let-down when all the work they do to take down the villain fails.

For certain villains, it makes sense that they can escape. Liches can't be destroyed without destroying their soul vessels. Vampires have to be hunted down to their coffins. Wizards and powerful spellcasters can create simulacra. Telegraph such capabilities so players know why they couldn't defeat the villain they just faced.

Better yet, give the characters an advantage after forcing the villain to escape. Did they acquire a new powerful artifact from the battle? Did they learn vital information? Did they learn tricks about the villain they can take with them into their final battle? What advantage did the characters gain forcing the villain to flee?

Telegraph a villain's potential escape so players aren't resentful when a villain gets away when defeated.

SINGLE SOLUTION PUZZLES

Some GMs really like puzzles in their RPGs – pillars that must be turned a certain way or strange glyphs on doors that must be decided to enter the area. Some players also like facing and solving puzzles.

Others don't.

Puzzles with only a single solution risk driving your entire adventure to a stand-still.

Instead, offer alternative solutions to puzzles that don't require figuring them out. Can the barbarian simply smash through the door with enough force? Are there spells one can cast to get past the puzzle-locked door? What alternatives exist?

Include several possible solutions for any given puzzle.

Do We Need Puzzles?

I question the value of puzzles in most RPGs to begin with. Who locks their door with a Sudoku?

Why would the builders of an ancient tomb want to give access to those who can decide how to organize a bunch of tiles? Instead, the circumstances in the game – the story that evolves as the characters interact with the world – that’s the puzzle I want to see solved. The larger puzzle of deciding how to infiltrate an occupied fortress or break the tyranny of the Dragon Empire is more interesting than who can aim four mirrors a certain way to open a door.

LOSING YOUR STUFF

Along with the forced-capture, being forced into a situation where the characters lose their stuff feels bad. Players *hate* losing their stuff – magic items, character powers, important items required for a quest, or artifacts they went through the trouble to acquire. Losing stuff often accompanies other fragile quest models like the forced capture or the all-or-nothing collection quest. These other fragile models might not stay on track if the characters keep something they acquired, so GMs find ways to have the characters robbed so they can get the story back on track.

Like the forced capture, it’s ok if a character loses something organically during the game. Villains might make a play to steal something from the characters and succeed – but it only works if the characters stood a good chance of being able to prevent it.

Be careful taking away the characters’ stuff. Players hate it.

SINGLE-SOLUTION MYSTERIES

Mysteries are a common model for many RPGs and often become fragile. Mysteries in RPGs fall apart when there’s only one solution of the mystery and the characters don’t find it. Such single-path mysteries are inherently fragile. Either the characters follow the one right path to the end of the mystery or they don’t ever solve it. GMs with fragile mystery adventures also may *prevent* the characters from learning something too early to keep the game going. What happens if the characters figure out who the murderer is in the very first scene of a murder mystery? What do you do then?

We’ve discussed mysteries thoroughly in chapter 5 (Investigations and Mysteries) but the short solution is to ensure that information the characters seek can be found in multiple places with multiple techniques and that, should the

characters figure out the mystery early, there’s still interesting things to do. Good cop shows and suspense novels sometimes make it clear who the murderer is right away – but catching them is a different issue!

Avoid single-path mysteries. Use secrets and clues to let the characters unravel mysteries along several different paths.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Fragile quest models often take away character agency so they follow a single path through the story or risk the entire storyline falling apart.
- Fragile models can work but ask yourself if it’s better to try to rework a fragile model or simply choose a more resilient quest model.
- Stories from fiction rarely work well in an RPG because our games aren’t passive forms of entertainment. Instead of stories, take characters, locations, themes, and situations from fiction and let the story evolve during your game.
- Betraying quest NPCs break the trust between GMs and players and either force the characters to not learn of the betrayal until the “right moment” or risk unraveling the entire adventure.
- Forced chases require characters to chase a quarry at just the right speed – not either capturing the quarry too early or too late.
- Forced captures push characters into captivity, often requiring they lose an overwhelming battle. Players can tell such battles are forced and resent it when the outcome is set against them.
- Telegraph when a villain can escape after being defeated so players don’t feel robbed of their victory.
- Avoid fragile puzzles by ensuring you offer several paths for success. Also, why would someone lock their treasure vault with a crossword puzzle?
- Players hate losing their stuff and can tell if having something stolen from them was vital to the storyline.
- Mysteries with only one solution break down if the characters never find that path. They can

also break down if the characters figure out the mystery right away.