

The Dungeon Master Experience

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

If you're interested in learning more about the world of Iomandra, check out the [wiki](#).

—Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins



[Christopher Perkins](#)

Christopher Perkins joined Wizards of the Coast in 1997 as the editor of *Dungeon*® magazine. Today, he's the senior producer for the *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS Roleplaying Game* and leads the team of designers, developers, and editors who produce D&D RPG products. On Monday and Wednesday nights, he runs a D&D® campaign for two different groups of players set in his homegrown world of [Iomandra](#).

Surprise! Epic Goblins!

2/17/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

The adventurers are 22nd level, and crewing a ship heading west across the Dragon Sea.

The Maelstrom is a swift vessel powered by an elemental ring of water (an idea pilfered from the Eberron campaign setting). One of the adventurers, a genasi swordmage, was recently relieved as captain of the Maelstrom so that he could lead a special ops mission for his mentor and benefactor, Sea King Valkroi. (You might recall that the same thing happened to Captain Picard in the ST:TNG episode, [Chain of Command](#).)

Three days ago, the Maelstrom survived a run-in with three enemy ships sent by a rival Sea King. Having weathered that storm, the Maelstrom has resumed its westward trek toward the party's ultimate objective.

En route, the adventurers catch sight of a lone vessel heading in the opposite direction. Corpses are lashed to the other ship's hull, and its sails are stained crimson with blood. The adventurers confronted a ship like this once long before, during the heroic tier, when goblins raided their island home. Clearly this blood-sailed vessel belongs to the Kingdom of Sanghor, a savage island nation of goblins far to the west.

That's right. Goblins. At 22nd level, no less.

Our heroes would've been inclined to leave goblin ship alone but for two reasons. First, the party's ranger spots a cage being dragged alongside the goblin ship at sea level. Within the cage, he sees a prisoner struggling to stay above water. Second, the ship is openly plying the trade lanes and is clearly a threat to passing tradeships. The noble heroes decide to storm the ship and rescue the caged prisoner.

What ensues is a rollicking shipboard battle against an enemy the heroes never expected to fight at their level.

REASONS FOR THE ENCOUNTER

This goblin ship encounter was meant to provide context for the larger campaign world. I created the side trek to remind my players (and their characters) that there's far more going on in the world of Iomandra than "the quest at hand." The goblin ship's ability to slip past Dragovar patrols tells the heroes something meaningful about the world—that the Dragovar navy has lost control of the Dragon Sea. The war to the west (against a former imperial regency fallen under horrors from the Far Realm) has taken its toll on the imperial fleet, and the goblins of Sanghor are seizing advantage of the situation.

But there was one more reason for the encounter. This one-night diversion was also crafted to remind the heroes **how powerful they have become**. The hobgoblin captain (Mulk, a level 8 soldier) was literally a pushover—he got thrown off his ship by a magical whirlwind in the first round of combat. The goblin mage (Zazz, a level 7 controller) was snuffed out before he could monologue. The bugbear shocktroopers were swept aside like dust bunnies.

One might expect players to get bored fighting weak enemies and scores of minions—and yet this became one of the campaign's most memorable encounters. Like many DMs, I enjoy watching my players squirm and wrestle with conundrums, but giving the heroes an (occasional) overwhelming

advantage presents a refreshing change of pace, particularly when they don't see it coming from a mile away.

All that being said, I still had some surprises in store for them. They say good things come in threes, so here we go:

Surprise #1: Boom Goes the Dynamite! The goblins filled their cargo hold with kegs of alchemical "black powder," rigged to blow up the ship if things went horribly awry. After Captain Mulk got the heave-ho, the goblins decided the time was nigh. And they would've succeeded too—if it hadn't been for the party's pesky halfling rogue, Oleander. After the goblin demolition squad inadvertently set off three powder kegs and filled the lower decks with blinding smoke (a trick I used to foreshadow the imminent destruction of the ship), Oleander jumped into the smoke-filled hold; once there, he used his formidable Bluff skill to impersonate Captain Mulk, telling the demolition squad to forgo the black powder and get their flea-bitten hides on deck (whereupon they were promptly killed).

Surprise #2: Advantage, Goblins! I decided not to make attack rolls for the goblins because there were so many of them. Basically, the goblins had no effective attacks. In place of an attack roll, a goblin could deal 15 damage automatically to one enemy it had combat advantage against. This made the tactical combat more interesting and forced the heroes to stay mobile, and it also felt right for goblins.

Surprise #3: Minions are the BOMB! Given the goblins' propensity for alchemical experimentation, it seemed perfectly reasonable that Captain Mulk would have a squad of "exploding goblins" tricked out with bandoliers of alchemical fire flasks. Any damage dealt to a tricked-out goblin minion would cause it to explode in a close burst 1 centered on itself, dealing 15 fire damage to all

creatures in the burst . . . including other rigged goblins. Clearly the best tactic was to take out the goblins from afar—but a tall order on the confined and crowded deck of a ship!



By the end of the session, the heroes had not only dispatched the goblins but also rescued the caged prisoner who, it turns out, was first mate of another ship that the goblins had attacked and plundered. Naturally, he presented the heroes with a quest—to transport his ship's stolen cargo safely back to the raft-town of Anchordown—and thereby earn the favor of another Sea King.

One can only speculate what might happen to the heroes in the course of completing this seemingly straightforward side quest....

LESSONS LEARNED

In any case, here's what I learned from the goblins encounter:

- ◆ **Never underestimate the appeal of kicking ass. Players need to feel powerful once in a while, particularly at high levels.**
- ◆ **If you want your campaign world to feel like a living, breathing place, let the players encounter things below their level.**
- ◆ **Even low-level monsters can surprise the heroes with clever tactics and a never-say-die attitude (just consider the history of asymmetrical warfare). Don't be afraid to use them, particularly as minions, and don't be afraid to mess with their stats.**

Until the next encounter!

Previously in Iomandra . . .

2/24/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

It's 6:15 PM. The players are gathering around the table, having just returned from picking up dinner. As is customary with the group, one of the players has bought my dinner and delivers it with an expression that I take to mean, "Here's your dinner, Mister DM Sir. Please be kind tonight." I smile, say thank you, and begin casting a ritual that has served me well for years, and which I now share with you.

*This ritual is neither arcane nor divine. In fact, it's something I learned from watching episodic television. Many of the things that define my DMing style come from watching lots of serialized TV. Shows such as *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica* immediately spring to mind, and you'll see me referring to them from time to time in this column.*

The ritual in question is called Campaign Recap, and it always begins with the same three words:

PREVIOUSLY IN IOMANDRA

You've seen this before: Previously on *Lost*. Previously on *Battlestar Galactica*. Any television show that carries the baggage of a complex mythology and features an ensemble cast needs this ritual to remind the audience how far their story's come. In this instance, the audience is my gaming group, and as much as I like to

think that every one of my game sessions is unforgettable, that simply isn't true.

The Campaign Recap ritual begins thus: At the top of a sheet of lined paper, I write today's date and the name of tonight's adventure (which I oftentimes refer to as an episode) followed by a short list of bullet points. Each bullet point recounts, in the past tense, something that occurred in a previous session (not necessarily the last session) that might be significant to tonight's game. The bullet points are carefully thought out, and I try to limit them to a handful. Sometimes in my haste to jot down these notes, I get the order mixed up, so after writing down the bullet points I number them in the order in which I intend to recount them.

At this moment, the player characters are in the middle of an adventure entitled "Death Incarnate," having found themselves in the city of Io'drothtor searching for the lair of a dracolich named Icristus. Icristus used to be the dragon overlord of the massive island upon which Io'drothtor is built. (In the backstory of the campaign, Icristus was slain by a steel dragon named Krethmidion and his brood.) But enough history; let's get back to the ritual at hand.

At the end of last week's session, the heroes fought their way into the dracolich's lair; the session ended with Icristus rising from a pool of lightning-charged water to confront the interlopers. As the players

devour their dinners and begin speculating on the outcome of tonight's session, here's what I write down:

"DEATH INCARNATE" (1/19/11)

Previously in Iomandra . . .

- ◆ Alagon had the names of five blasphemous undead creatures burned into the fingers of his trigger hand by an emissary of the Raven Queen. In order to fulfill his epic destiny and take his place by the RQ's side, Alagon must track down and eliminate all five targets, one of which is a dracolich named Icristus.
- ◆ The heroes learned that Icristus was brought back from the dead years ago by an arcane sect called the Kalak Shun: outcast dragonborn wizards who practice necromancy. They also discovered that Icristus can control and command the otherwise benign ghosts that haunt the streets of Io'drothtor, effectively using them as spies.
- ◆ The heroes confronted a high-ranking member of the Kalak Shun in his tower. After slaying the necromancer and interrogating his apprentice, the heroes activated a magical portal called the Throat of Tharzuul, which led to Icristus's secret redoubt below the city.
- ◆ The heroes arrived at a subterranean elemental node serving as Icristus's lair, only to discover that the dracolich was not alone! Attending him were 4 Kalak Shun advisors mounted on dracoliches that were once Huge steel dragons—the slaughtered brood of Icristus's hated rival, Krethmidion.



As soon as I speak the words "Previously in Iomandra," a hush falls over the gaming table. The off-topic conversations end abruptly, and the players become all ears. This happens every time, without fail.

After speaking the words, I begin stringing together my bullet points into a rough narrative. The whole recap usually takes about a minute. I don't worry about adding detail because I trust that the players' memories will begin filling in the gaps automatically. The recap simply sparks their memories and puts the players in the right frame of mind to start the session.

Some DMs rely on their players to provide the recap. Having tried it as a DM and experienced it as a player, I think that's a mistake. Left to their own devices, players will often focus on the wrong details, or get the facts wrong, or phrase the recap in a way that doesn't reinforce the atmosphere you're trying to evoke. The recap is the DM's best tool to get the session started on the right foot, and to immerse players in the moment.

The recap focuses only on the details that are pertinent to the story at hand. Most of the bullet points in the example above tie to a specific player character: Alagon, a revenant ranger played by Andrew Finch. The Wednesday group has eight players, each with their own character arc, but it's Alagon that's really driving this particular session. The recap gives the players a sense of what they can expect out of tonight's game: a big fat fight against five dracoliches. For Alagon to achieve his epic destiny, Icristus must be destroyed. Simple as that.

While this particular session focuses on combat and one character's arc, the adventure as a whole is a tangled weave of many different plots, including a story revolving around the party's deva warpriest discovering secrets from a past life, the search for a missing party member, and the theft of a mystical set of tomes that chronicle the rise and fall of a kingdom wiped from history by Vecna. These are no less important to the players than Alagon's quest to prove himself to the Raven Queen, and next week's recap will probably include bullet points reminding the players where things left off with these other facets of the campaign.

One of the cool side benefits of this approach? If and when you decide to chronicle the events of your campaign, say, in a wiki, you need only refer to your binder or notebook filled with page after page of bullet points touching on the highlights. I've come to rely on my own recaps for just this reason.

LESSONS LEARNED

Recaps kick off 99% of my gaming sessions. However, I can think of plenty of good reasons not to use recaps. The #1 reason is to intentionally jar or disorient your players. I remember one session that began with the words "Roll initiative!" It worked well because the players weren't expecting the sudden springboard into combat. We had ended the previous session at the beginning of a climactic encounter, the

players had the whole week to discuss tactics, and I could sense they were jazzed to start rolling dice. The recap wasn't necessary, and frankly I wanted to keep things moving at a breakneck pace.

Like all good rituals, mastery comes with repetition. If the Campaign Recap is something you'd like to experiment with, keep in mind the following:

- ♦ Begin each session jotting down bullet points about "what's gone before."
- ♦ The Campaign Recap sets the tone for the session. Present the Campaign Recap yourself, and keep it short. Don't worry about covering all the bases. Hit the highlights, and let the players' memories fill in the gaps.

Until the next encounter!

I Don't Know What It Means, But I Like It

3/3/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

The campaign has taken a dark turn. Having just attacked an island base belonging to their hated enemy, Sea King Senestrigo, the adventurers return to their ship with the spoils of victory. Yet upon their return, they find the ship adrift, its crew gone.

A thorough exploration suggests that the crew has been abducted. A strange sending stone discovered in the captain's cabin confirms their fears—through this device, the heroes are contacted by another campaign villain who's been shadowing their vessel, waiting to strike. He offers the heroes a trade: Their missing crew in exchange for a powerful relic the heroes have sworn to protect, an item which the villain desires above all and which, in the wrong hands, could cause great calamity. The question is, will the heroes agree to this exchange, knowing that surrendering the item will have serious repercussions? An intriguing dilemma...

... but not the focus of this particular article.

You see, there's also a "B story" unfolding at the same time concerning Bruce Cordell's character, a tiefling star pact warlock named Melech. Several sessions ago, a powerful star entity known as Caiphon branded him with a strange tattoo: that

of a toothy black maw, slowly growing larger and larger over the course of the campaign. And in this most recent session, Melech received a gift from yet another star entity called Nihil, who imprinted upon Melech's mind a powerful ritual allowing him to summon "starspawn serpents" (inspired by the *Monster Manual 3*'s serpents of Nihil, page 186). Bruce doesn't understand why his character is receiving gifts from these star powers, or what he's supposed to do with them.

And frankly, neither do I. Which brings us to the true subject of this article.

A good campaign, like a good stew, has many ingredients. Some ingredients add flavor to the campaign, others give it texture. Sometimes the ingredients are so subtle as to go unnoticed, and that's fine. Not everything you throw into the campaign is going to make a splash. The players will pick up on some elements, while others are quickly forgotten. Campaign building is an art, not a science. It all starts with ideas. I get ideas for my campaign all the time, and the first question that comes to my mind once I get an idea is: How can I fit this into the campaign? The answer is always the same: I just throw it in the pot and see what happens. Which brings us back to the title of this article:

I DON'T KNOW WHAT IT MEANS, BUT I LIKE IT.

Whenever I get a cool idea that I think is worth exploring in my campaign, I throw it into the mix—provided I can think of at least one character in the party whose story arc would benefit from its inclusion. By “benefit,” I don’t mean to suggest that the character necessarily becomes more powerful as a result. The ultimate goal is to add stuff to the campaign that makes the characters and their situations more interesting and fun to play. It’s also a great way to give your campaign extra layers or depth.

Let’s consider Melech’s situation: Many months ago, I had an idea based on the fairly common experience of someone waking up one morning to discover he or she had a tattoo, but no memory of how it got there. (If that hasn’t happened to you personally, it’s probably happened to someone you know—just ask Alias, from *Curse of the Azure Bonds*) This was an idea I wanted to include in my game. At the time, Bruce’s character was being overshadowed by the story arcs of other characters, and I wanted to give Bruce something to sink his teeth into while waiting for some of these other arcs to play out. So, without a lot of forethought, I gave Melech a magical tattoo that appeared out of nowhere. Here’s the actual tattoo, written up as a magic item:

Tattoo of the Horizon Star Level 20

The mark of Caiphon, the horizon star, resembles a toothy maw that widens and grows as the wearer draws closer to his doom.

Lvl 20 125,000 gp

Wondrous Item

Requirement: You must have the Fate of the Void pact boon.

Property

When you spend an action point to take an extra action, all enemies in a close burst 5 centered on you take 10 radiant damage and are blinded until the end of your next turn.

Curse: When you fail a death save, you take damage equal to your level.

The curse is a nice touch, don’t you think? It keeps the tattoo from being a simple power-up. It also conveys the flavor of the idea, that “an evil star power gives Melech a gift he can’t refuse.”

At the time, I had no clue what the tattoo meant or how it would factor into the campaign. I included it simply because I liked the idea. Several weeks later, I was thinking about one of my major campaign villains—an eladrin star pact warlock hell-bent on releasing a bunch of evil star entities from their celestial prisons. It occurred to me that these same evil powers might be secretly courting Bruce’s character, also a star pact warlock. Maybe they think he’s destined for greatness. Maybe the gifts are a form of temptation. Maybe the star powers plan to devour my villain and groom Bruce’s character as his replacement. At this point in the campaign, I’m still not exactly sure how it will all play out; a lot of it depends on Bruce and what happens to his character in the coming months. For now, the only thing I know for sure is that evil star powers have their eye on Melech . . . and that’s enough to keep Bruce both excited and terrified.



LESSONS LEARNED

As the DM, your biggest challenges are keeping the players immersed in the story of your campaign, and making the campaign world a place the players like to visit week after week (or however often you meet). It's also your job to surprise and delight them. One ironclad way to accomplish these admirable goals is to give players stuff to think about (and, by extension, stuff for their characters to think about). If you have an idea that fascinates you, don't wait for the right opportunity to include it. Just include it, and let time and your players sort it out.

If the idea ends up going nowhere, the players probably won't care (or even notice), but if it ends up going somewhere, your players will look upon you as a storytelling genius.

Here are the important takeaways:

- ♦ **Don't squirrel away your ideas. Use them, even if you're not sure how to get the most out of them.**
- ♦ **Ultimately, it's the players who decide what flies and what doesn't in your campaign. So look for a way to connect your cool idea to one or more of the characters, preferably in a way that the player(s) might enjoy.**

Until the next encounter!

My Campaign: The TV Series

3/10/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

The party has reached the apex of an episode of the campaign entitled "Nythe-Saleme." The adventure takes place on an island ruled by the pair of purple dragon sisters, Nythe and Saleme (hence the name of the island and the episode)—but there's more to them than meets the eye. The sisters hold the answers to many secrets, including the whereabouts of the Dragovar emperor . . . whose disappearance is one of the biggest mysteries of the campaign.

Think of any serialized TV drama of the past decade that features a good-sized cast of characters. If you're stuck, I'll name a few off the top of my head: *Lost*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *The Sopranos*, *Deadwood*, *True Blood*, *Mad Men*. Now think of all the story characteristics those shows have in common with D&D campaigns you've created or imagined creating. I'd contend that the similarities are astonishing.

The truth is, if I hadn't wormed my way into the gaming industry, I'd probably be most happy working as a TV producer. I tend to think of my D&D campaign as a dramatic TV series for the following reasons:



- ♦ My campaign has an ensemble cast of characters.
- ♦ It has episodic adventures, some of which are built around a larger mythology, while others have a more stand-alone feel.
- ♦ The episodes link together to form the “guts” of my campaign narrative, while simultaneously allowing for individual character development and, when it happens, character death.

In fact, the only real difference I can ascertain between a D&D campaign and a serialized TV drama is that, unlike a TV show, a D&D campaign isn't likely to be televised. (Having said that, I dare someone to prove me wrong. I will pay tribute and homage to anyone who actually manages to turn his or her D&D campaign into a TV series.)

One of the payoffs for thinking about your campaign as a TV series is that you'll have an easier time remembering what's important: the characters and their ongoing development. That's why the players play in your campaign. It's what makes designing adventures so much fun. It's about the journey of the characters and the bad things and hilarious s**t that happen along the way.

Here are three tricks to help you get into the mindset of treating your campaign as a TV series:

TRICK #1: KEEP A RUNNING EPISODE GUIDE.

Fans write episode guides for their favorite series all the time. Why? Because it's fun. The episode guide chronicles all of the events that have transpired thus far. As you begin assembling your campaign episode guide, treat each adventure or play session as a separate episode, give them a number and a name, and write a short summary (no more than one paragraph!) of what happened. It's okay to leave out specific details of who-did-what-to-whom. It's okay to end on a cliffhanger. And it's perfectly okay to take a longer adventure and break it up into smaller episodes. (TV series do this all the time. It's called “Episode, Part 1” and “Episode, Part 2.”)

Your episode guide can be any format, although wikis are ideal for this sort of thing. Because I run two separate campaigns in the same world, I keep separate wikis for my [Monday night](#) and [Wednesday night](#) games.

At the end of each one-paragraph episode write-up, include a “Notes” section where you can dump miscellaneous information worth keeping track of. I often use this space to mention important NPCs by name, recount weird occurrences and character actions that have little to do with the plot, and other wacky stuff.

In the right-hand column a sample write-up from my Wednesday night episode guide, modified slightly to make it comprehensible to those unfamiliar with the details of the Iomandra campaign.

EPISODE 149: CAVES OF THE KRAKEN CULT, PART 1

Campaign Date: 10 Lendys 1475

In the back of an underground warehouse, the heroes discover an illusory wall concealing a secret network of caves infested with aberrations. The heroes make their way to a cavern occupied by half-mad kraken cultists guarded by hungry chuuls. Deimos (played by Chris Youngs) insinuates himself among the cultists and lures them into an ambush. The party then confronts the chuuls and remaining members of the cult. After a pitched battle, the heroes decide to withdraw and recuperate.

On their way out, they run afoul into a gang of Horned Alliance thugs led by Suffer, a tiefling with a whale-sized attitude problem. The heroes flee back into the caves. There, they find another exit connected to the Stone Rose Brothel in the city's dwarven district. Once back in the city, they take refuge at the Temple of Bahamut—and come face-to-face with the Horned Alliance's second-in-command, Prismeus, who makes them an offer they can't refuse.

Notes: Divin (played by Curt Gould) nearly dies after falling into a watery vortex at the bottom of a deep shaft. Divin calls to Melora for aid, and because he earlier placed some treasure on her altar, Melora answers his call, taking the form of a watery leviathan that lifts him up out of the vortex.

TRICK #2: THINK OF YOUR CAMPAIGN IN TERMS OF SEASONS.

A season of a campaign might span any number of levels. My players have long-term commitments to my campaign, so I went with three seasons, each one spanning a tier (heroic, paragon, epic). If that works for you, steal the idea. If your game group is less stable, consider making your seasons shorter.

At the beginning of each season, I ask each player to give me a list of three things he or she would like to see happen during the season. These might be character-specific, or might be larger in scale. When my Wednesday group hit epic tier, I recalled that Rodney Thompson had a couple memorable things on his list: He wanted his character to transform from one race into another, and he wanted the heroes to participate in at least one full-scale naval battle. Stuff like this is very helpful, once you begin using Trick #3.

TRICK #3: IMAGINE WHERE YOUR CAMPAIGN IS GOING, AND CONCOCT FUTURE EPISODE IDEAS.

Once your episode guide is up-to-date, start writing 1-sentence descriptions for a bunch of episodes that haven't happened yet. This is what I call campaign projection; it's an opportunity to imagine what might happen in the weeks and months ahead, based on where the campaign's heading and the likely outcomes and consequences of the characters' actions up to this point. TV producers do something similar when they sit down to plot out upcoming seasons of

their shows; they identify the stories they want to tell, and how best to develop their ensemble cast and "pay off" audience expectations. For your campaign, think of the ensemble cast as the characters in your game, with the players as your audience.

Here are some episode one-liners I wrote for the Wednesday game, many of which were inspired by the actions and ideas of my players:

The Red Shoals of Dkar

(Armos episode) The hunt for Fathomreaver leads the heroes to an elemental domain ruled by greedy pirates and bloodthirsty politics. (Aside: This idea was actually inspired by an article that Bruce Cordell wrote for *Dungeon*, so props to him!)

Master of the Maelstrom

(Deimos and Vargas episode) The heroes confront their nemesis, the pirate warlord Vantajar, on the high seas.

Impstinger Must Die

(Deimos episode) Sea King Impstinger is accused of launching a savage attack on a Dragovar settlement.

Defective

(Fleet episode) The characters are reunited with their warforged companion, but there's something different about him.

Constellation of Madness

A celestial event alters reality, allowing heroes from the Monday campaign to interact with heroes from the Wednesday campaign.

I've fleshed out the first three one-liners on this list in anticipation of actually running them as adventures; the rest are half-baked ideas that might or might not ever unfold. Some of these represent

natural steps forward, or sudden twists in the major campaign arcs playing out this season; others are stand-alone adventure ideas that will hopefully inject some new villains and surprises into the campaign.

Some of your ideas for future episodes will get knocked off by better ideas. Others will die for reasons beyond your control; for example, a player (around whose character the idea was based) might drop out of the game. A few ideas might perish for logistical reasons. I really like the "Constellation of Madness" adventure idea; however, mixing and matching players from my two campaigns is a scheduling nightmare. Consequently, as cool as this idea sounds, it might not be as feasible as originally conceived. That said, I love the title and will definitely find a way to use that, if nothing else.

Don't be afraid to include future episode one-liners in your published campaign wiki. It's okay for the players to read them—desirable even. Here's why: It's fun to tease players with stuff that might happen, and just like teasers for a TV show, it excites them to think about the possibilities. It's worth noting that the ideas you flag as character-specific episodes shouldn't really focus on a single character; this should only serve to remind you that certain episodes help to advance specific character arcs. Show me a player who hates it when the spotlight shines on his character, and I'll show you a tarrasque that can fly!

LESSONS LEARNED

To summarize: Imagine your D&D campaign as a TV series, with the heroes as your ensemble cast and the players as your audience. As the producer of this series, it's your job to imagine where the campaign is headed and what journey each character must make toward the inevitable finale. Sometimes your campaign will get cancelled prematurely, because it loses its audience; there's really nothing you can do about it except start over (and maybe target a new audience).

Here are some things to keep in mind if you decide to approach your campaign as a serialized TV show:

- ◆ Think of your campaign in terms of episodes and seasons.
- ◆ Create a campaign episode guide.
- ◆ Write one-liners for future episodes to help you imagine where the campaign's headed.

Until the next encounter!

Instant Monster

3/17/2011



MONDAY NIGHT.

Our heroes are 23rd level, fighting mind flayers aboard an illithid vessel on the Dragon Sea. The mind flayers are tied to one of the campaign's big story arcs involving a war between the almighty Dragovar Empire (ruled by dragon-born) and the upstart Myrthon Regency, a vassal state of the imperial commonwealth that has declared its independence. It's a familiar tale with a D&D twist.

Around 11th level, the heroes learned a major campaign secret: The Myrthon Regency was being influenced by mind flayers and other forces from the Far Realm. Knowing that most mind flayers fall in the level 18-20 range (in 4th Edition), my players started getting nervous by the time they reached 16th level. For my part, I'd expected mind flayers to start showing up around 19th or 20th level. As it turns out, through no fault of the players, the Monday night heroes really didn't get around to fighting their first mind flayers until now.

One of the dangers of running a complex campaign is that it's easy for the party to become involved in certain unfolding stories and not others. By the time mind flayers were back on the menu, the heroes had gained a bunch of levels. Consequently, the monsters I'd planned for them to fight were now several levels below the party average. Solving this problem demanded special DM ninja skills... and took a lot less time than you might think.

Welcome to the microwave dinner approach to monster design! By the end of this column, you'll have a new DM superpower: The ability to create a monster of any level "on the fly" in 2 minutes or less.

And by "create," I mean "customize." As much as I love creating new monsters from scratch (my favorite D&D activity, in fact, outside of actually running a game), it's usually unnecessary. Most players sitting on the other side of the DM screen can't tell the difference between a monster you've created from scratch and an existing monster that's been modified to suit your needs—so you should only create

monsters from scratch when you have the time or want to try something weird.

This article presents two simple and effective ways to customize a monster:

- ◆ **Take a monster and adjust its level.**
- ◆ **Turn a monster into another monster of the same level.**

THE PERKINSIAN APPROACH TO ADJUSTING A MONSTER'S LEVEL

My approach to adjusting a monster's level isn't mathematically perfect, but it serves the needs of most DMs. The ultimate goal is to tweak a monster so that it's level appropriate and doesn't cause players to shout "WTF!" during the game. This approach has three easy steps.

For each level you add or subtract:

- ◆ **Increase or decrease the monster's defenses and attack bonuses by 1.**
- ◆ **Increase or decrease the monster's hit points by 10 (x2 for elites, x4 for solos). If you're feeling finicky, make that 6 for artillery and lurkers, 8 for controllers, skirmishers, and soldiers. Just remember, this exercise is about easy math, not pinpoint accuracy.**
- ◆ **Increase or decrease the monster's damage by 1. If you're making a minion, its damage is usually around 4 + one-half the monster's level (minion brutes deal about 25% more damage on top of that).**

Don't bother adjusting the monster's **initiative modifier**, **skill modifiers**, or **ability score modifiers** unless you're a stickler for detail; these sorts of changes have little discernible impact on a monster's combat performance (at least, from the players' point of view). If the encounter warrants it, increase or decrease these values by 1 for every two levels you add or subtract, and be done with it.

Here's the **dolgaunt monk** from the *EBERRON Campaign Guide*, and the dirt-simple level-adjusted version I used in the mind flayer adventure sprung on my players:

Dolgaunt Monk		Level 8 Controller
Medium aberrant humanoid (blind)		XP 350
Initiative +9	Senses Perception +7; blindsight 20	
HP 86; Bloodied 43		
AC 22; Fortitude 20, Reflex 21, Will 20		
Speed 8		
⚔ Tentacle (standard; at-will)		
Reach 2; +13 vs. AC; 2d4 + 5 damage, and the target is grabbed. The dolgaunt monk can't grab more than two creatures at once; see also <i>clutch of death</i> .		
⚔ Fist (standard; at-will)		
+13 vs. AC; 2d6 + 5 damage.		
⚔ Inexorable Drag (minor; at-will)		
Targets a creature grabbed by the dolgaunt monk; +12 vs. Fortitude; the monk slides the target 2 squares.		
Clutch of Death		
A dolgaunt monk can grab with up to two tentacles at a time. While grabbing an enemy, it can act normally, but it can't use that tentacle for another attack. Enemies can attack the tentacle. An attack that hits the tentacle doesn't harm the dolgaunt monk, but it causes the tentacle to release the grab. The tentacle's defenses are the same as those of the dolgaunt monk.		
Vitality Leech ◆ Necrotic		
A target that begins its turn grabbed by the dolgaunt monk takes 10 necrotic damage, and the dolgaunt monk gains 10 temporary hit points.		
Alignment Evil	Languages Deep Speech, Goblin	
Skills Acrobatics +14, Stealth +14		
Str 17 (+7)	Dex 20 (+9)	Wis 17 (+7)
Con 14 (+6)	Int 11 (+4)	Cha 12 (+5)

DOLGAUNT JAILER

(use Dolgaunt Monk, *EBERRON Campaign Guide* p.203)

Level 21 Controller

HP 216/108, AC 35, Fort 33, Ref 34, Will 33

+13 to attacks and damage rolls

THE PERKINSIAN APPROACH TO TURNING ONE MONSTER INTO ANOTHER

As Jack Burton—er, I mean—Chris Perkins always says, you can't judge a monster by its level. At least, most players can't. What makes a monster memorable is its "shtick"—in other words, the one or two powers and/or traits that truly define what the monster does. As long as you're happy with the monster's attacks and powers, it doesn't matter where the rest of its stats came from.

First, find a monster of the **role** and **level** you need—preferably one that has at least one attack power or trait worth keeping—and do the following:

- ◆ **Give the monster a new name.**
- ◆ **Ignore any of the monster's powers or traits that are inappropriate or undesirable.**
- ◆ **If you're feeling creative (and only if you're feeling creative), give the monster a new trait or power—and by "new" I mean something you've invented on a whim or something lifted from another critter.**

Having trouble finding a monster of the appropriate role and level? Try surfing the “creatures by level” charts at the back of every 4th Edition monster book we’ve ever produced, or better yet, use the *D&D Compendium* online tool.

I’ll be the first to admit it: This approach to monster customization is the D&D equivalent of stealing someone else’s homework, erasing that person’s name and writing your name on it instead—appropriate behavior for your home campaign only!

Here’s the **infernal girallon** from the *Monster Manual 3*, transformed into a **foulspawn terrorhulk** for my Monday night campaign:

Infernal Girallon	Level 22 Brute
Large immortal beast (devil)	XP 4,150
HP 249; Bloodied 124	Initiative +18
AC 34, Fortitude 34, Reflex 30, Will 32	Perception +16
Speed 8, climb 6	Darkvision
TRAITS	
☼ Threatening Claws ♦ Aura 1	
Enemies within the aura grant combat advantage.	
☼ Burning Soul (fire) ♦ Aura 2	
Any enemy that starts its turn within the aura takes 10 fire damage, or 20 fire damage if the girallon is bloodied.	
Combat Climber	
The infernal girallon does not provoke opportunity attacks by climbing.	
STANDARD ACTIONS	
⚔ Claw ♦ At-Will	
Attack: Melee 2 (one creature); +26 vs. AC	
Hit: 3d12 + 10 damage.	
⚔ Claw Flurry ♦ At-Will	
Effect: The alpha makes the following attack four times.	
Attack: Melee 2 (one creature); +26 vs. AC	
Hit: 1d12 + 8 damage.	
⚡ Burning Ichor (fire) ♦ Recharge ☼ ☼	
Attack: Close blast 3 (enemies in blast); +24 vs. Reflex	
Hit: 3d10 + 15 fire damage, and ongoing 10 fire damage (save ends).	
Skills Acrobatics +23, Athletics +24	
Str 27 (+19)	Dex 24 (+18)
Con 19 (+15)	Int 3 (+7)
	Wis 20 (+16)
	Cha 12 (+12)
Alignment chaotic evil Languages —	

FOULSPAWN TERRORHULK

(use *Infernal Girallon*, *Monster Manual 3* p.103)

Level 22 Brute

—Replace the *burning soul* aura with a *psychic ooze* aura (deals psychic damage instead of fire damage, but otherwise identical).

—Replace the *burning ichor* power with a *psychic ichor* power (deals psychic damage instead of fire damage, but otherwise identical).

—Delete the **Combat Climber** trait.

THE “TWO-FANGED STRIKE” OF MONSTER CUSTOMIZATION

If you feel like flexing your DM ninja skills, try using both approaches on one monster. Here’s an example of a monster that I wanted to include aboard my mind flayer ship, but was the wrong level and a bit too complex for my tastes. A dolgrim warrior is basically two goblins fused together, and I wanted my version to be a minion with traits that preserved the monster’s shtick. The traits I ultimately gave the monster were “inspired” by the racial powers of elves and halflings. The end result:

DOLGRIM PEST

(use *Dolgrim Warrior*, *EBERRON Campaign Guide* p.203)

Level 21 Minion Skirmisher

HP 1; AC 35, Fort 33, Ref 32, Will 33

+17 to attacks, 13 damage/attack

—Replace the **Double Actions** and **Combat Advantage** traits with:

Weez Awesome: Whenever it makes an attack roll, the dolgrim rolls twice and uses the higher result.

Weez Still Alive! (immediate interrupt; at-will)

Trigger: An enemy hits the dolgrim with an attack.

Effect: The triggering enemy must reroll the attack against the dolgrim and use the second roll, even if it’s lower.

Dolgrim Warrior	Level 4 Skirmisher
Small aberrant humanoid	XP 175
Initiative +6	Senses Perception +3; low-light vision
HP 53; Bloodied 26	
AC 18; Fortitude 16, Reflex 15, Will 16	
Vulnerable 5 psychic	
Saving Throws +2 against charm and fear effects	
Speed 6	
⚔ Club (standard; at-will) ♦ Weapon	
+8 vs. AC; 1d6 + 3 damage.	
⚔ Crossbow (standard; at-will) ♦ Weapon	
Ranged 15/30; +8 vs. AC; 1d8 + 1 damage.	
Double Actions	
At the start of combat, the dolgrim warrior makes two initiative checks. Each check corresponds to one of the warrior’s brains, and the warrior takes a turn on both initiative counts. The warrior has a full set of actions on each of these turns, and its ability to take an immediate action refreshes on each turn.	
Dolgrim Tactics (immediate reaction, when missed by a melee attack; at-will)	
The dolgrim warrior shifts 1 square.	
Combat Advantage	
A dolgrim warrior deals 1d6 extra damage against any creature granting combat advantage to it.	
Alignment Evil	Languages Deep Speech, Goblin
Str 17 (+5)	Dex 15 (+4)
Con 13 (+3)	Int 9 (+1)
	Wis 13 (+3)
	Cha 9 (+1)
Equipment light shield, club, crossbow with 20 bolts	

LESSONS LEARNED

Use your newfound DM superpower freely and often, until it becomes as easy as breathing. Mastery comes quickly—in very little time, you’ll be able to customize monsters “on the fly” while still keeping your players on their toes. The truth is, you should never have to create a monster stat block unless you really want to. Don’t believe me? Take any monster stat block that’s been published and do the following:

- ◆ **Write down the monster’s name and a page reference.**
- ◆ **Make a “short list” of the custom changes you want to make to the monster.**
- ◆ **Run the monster using the old stat block and your “short list” of notes.**

Your players will either believe that you’re running a monster right out of the book, or they’ll think they’re fighting something new. Either way, they’re overjoyed—and you didn’t kill yourself in the process.

Until the next encounter!

Point of Origin

3/24/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

Three years ago. The Iomandra campaign has just gotten underway. The characters have converged on Kheth: a small, politically insignificant island in the middle of the Dragon Sea... an island with many secrets yet to be revealed.

Chris Youngs is playing a tiefling warlock named Deimos, who was shipwrecked on the island as a child nearly two decades ago. Little does Deimos know that the shipwreck was no accident, nor does he realize that the Dragovar Empire wants him dead. Neither Chris nor his character know that Deimos was, as a child, subjected to an arcane experiment that trapped the spirit of an ancient dragon-sorcerer inside him—or that he was sold off by his grandmother, the leader of a powerful tiefling thieves’ guild called the Horned Alliance. Over the next several years, these secrets will come to light, and the full story of how Deimos came to the island will be known.

Every campaign starts somewhere. A tavern in Waterdeep. An isolated village. A ship wrecked upon the shore of the Isle of Dread. These are backdrops against which we first meet the characters—the heroes of the campaign. At this point, the campaign world is a complete mystery to the players, and the only things they can relate to are their characters. For this reason alone, it behooves the Dungeon Master to take some time before the campaign begins to create hooks that tether the heroes to the setting . . . origin stories that make the characters feel intrinsic to the world.

Once I’ve chosen a starting point for my campaign, but before play begins, I like to inspire my players to

consider their characters’ origins... get them thinking about where their characters came from. I’m less concerned about how the characters found one another; that bit of artifice usually isn’t important, since most players are willing and eager to accept that fate or circumstance has brought their characters together. However, it’s been my experience that players have trouble coming up with origin stories because their understanding of the world is so limited. (This is less true if you’re running a campaign in a world with which the players are intimately familiar.)

All characters had lives before they became adventurers—at least, that’s the underlying conceit of character themes (first introduced in the *DARK SUN® Campaign Setting* and carried forward in other 4th Edition products published since). While character themes are terrific and I heartily encourage DMs to permit them in their campaigns, published themes can’t account for the specific stories you’re aiming to tell in the course of your home campaign. Consequently, I like to create origin stories that my players can choose from, if they’re stuck for ideas.

After I decided to start my campaign on a small island, I spent a rainy Sunday afternoon writing up a bunch of different origin stories that my players could choose from. (It wasn’t required that they do so. In some cases, my players already had an origin story in mind and I just needed to figure out how to fit it in.) This activity turned out to be a great exercise, because it forced me to think about different ways to bring characters together and connect them to events that were about to unfold.

Here’s what I gave to my players as they were creating characters for the Iomandra campaign:

YOUR ORIGIN STORY

The campaign begins on the isle of Kheth, which begs the question: Are you a native of the island, or did events conspire to bring you here? Following are some likely origin stories for your character. Once you've chosen or concocted a story for your character, you can begin to hash out the details with the DM.

You're Tyrak'n Born

You are a native of Tyrak'n, the only settlement on Kheth. Your family lives in town and either fishes, forages, tends a modest garden, or runs a small business. You are friends with just about everyone in town, although you've probably forged a very close bond with at least one local citizen.

Racial Possibilities

- ♦ If you are a half-elf between the ages of 17 and 25, you may choose to be the son or daughter of Magistrate von Zarkyn, giving you a fair amount of local clout. Your father is a shrewd leader and has taken great pains over the years to appease the island's green dragon overlord and uphold his grandfather's good name. Your mother is warm and funny in private, but surprisingly aloof and formal in public. You fear that there's something important she hasn't told you or your father . . . a secret she's likely to carry to her grave.
- ♦ If you are a halfling between the ages of 17 and 25, you may have had a troubled older or younger brother named Jynt who disappeared four years ago. Jynt broke the law when he persuaded two other local youths (a human boy named Jesper and a half-elf girl named Vazia) to join him on an expedition to the ruins atop Serpent Hill. No one is allowed there by order of the magistrate. Jynt and his

friends never returned, and the magistrate refused to send a hunting party to find them.

You're a Shipwrecked Orphan

Nineteen years ago, a ship called the *Morrow's Folly* crashed on the island of Kheth during a freak storm. The only survivors were the captain—a half-elf named Denarion Morrow—and several young children, yourself included. You were very young at the time (2-5 years old then, making you 21-26 years old now), and you don't remember anything. You and the other children were adopted by the local townsfolk and raised as natives. Although he's not much of a father figure, Captain Morrow has been watching over you all these years, but still claims that he can't remember anything that happened before the shipwreck. You have no clue where you came from, or who your real parents are. You're friends with just about everyone in town, although you've probably forged a very close bond with at least one local citizen.

Four years ago, three of your friends (a troubled halfling boy named Jynt, a curious human lad named Jesper, and a half-elf girl named Vazia) left town to explore Serpent Hill, even though locals are strictly forbidden to go there. They never returned. Captain Morrow urged Magistrate von Zarkyn to send a patrol to locate them, but the magistrate refused. The two men haven't spoken since. Jesper and Vazia were also survivors of the *Morrow's Folly* shipwreck, and Captain Morrow regrets not going after them himself.

You're Forsaken

You were born and raised elsewhere, brought to the island of Kheth by ship, and, for whatever reason, left behind. Hoping to find your place in the community, you've probably forged a close bond with at least one of the local citizens.



Racial Possibilities

- ♦ If you are a dragonborn, you may be the son or daughter of parents who were exiled from Arkhosian soil. One or both of your parents may have been pirates or outspoken opponents of the Dragovar monarchy. In either case, they probably figured you'd be safer on a small, backwater island of little consequence to the rest of the Dragovar empire.

- ♦ If you are an elf between the ages of 24 and 30, you may choose to be the son or daughter of Lady Thariel von Zarkyn from a previous marriage. Your father is a wealthy ship captain named Torel Winterleaf who recently made some powerful enemies. Three weeks ago, you were spirited out of Io'calioth (the Dragovar capital) by your father's servants, smuggled aboard the tradeship *Lantheon*, and sent to stay with your mother for your own safety. You never got a chance to say goodbye to your father, and your mother didn't exactly welcome you with open arms. It's been 23 years after all, and your sudden arrival has created unrest in Von Zarkyn Manor. For his part, Magistrate von Zarkyn seems to be handling the situation quite well, particularly since your mother never told him she had a child with her previous husband.
- ♦ If you are a tiefling between the ages of 17 and 25, you may choose to be the niece or nephew of Lucius Vezetus, the friendly proprietor of the *Talisman*. You were born and raised in the slums of Io'calioth, and several years ago your parents brought you to see "Uncle Lucius" as a child and left you with him without explanation. Although he makes you do chores around the tavern, your uncle has been very forgiving of your irksome adolescent antics. When asked about your parents, he merely frowns and grumbles in Supernal.

None of the Above

Perhaps you've come to Kheth for entirely different reasons. As a result, you may or may not have forged strong ties with the community. Some brief suggestions are listed below:

- ♦ Someone you care about was arrested ten years ago by Dragovar authorities and sent to the prison island of Mheletros. You believe this person was imprisoned wrongfully, and the key to clearing his or her good name rests with a missing sea captain named Denarion Morrow . . . whom you've finally tracked to the backwater town of Tyrak'n on the island of Kheth.
- ♦ You swindled or double-crossed a sea captain named Lydia Taralan, only to discover afterward that she was working for Sea King Senestrigo. Upon learning the truth, you fled aboard the hammership *Lantheon*, headed for Tyrak'n. You've opted to lay low until things blow over. Hopefully by then, you'll have found some protection . . . or some way to make amends.
- ♦ The church of Avandra has sent you to Tyrak'n to assist the local priest, Sister Alyson. She specifically requested "someone gifted with an adventurous spirit." Alyson believes that certain townsfolk are blessed with an adventurous nature that will soon manifest, but they need Avandra's assistance to survive their travails. You are the one Sister Alyson hopes will help these other adventurers "safely walk the dark path."
- ♦ You had a vivid dream about a silver dragon. It asked you to travel to the island of Kheth and locate a man named Johias Ilum. The dragon in your dreams sounded real enough, and also claimed that the rewards for your success would be great.

LESSONS LEARNED

One of the joys of running a campaign is watching the players learn its mysteries. However, at the start of the campaign, everything is a mystery. One of the ways you can tell the players a little bit about the world and build anticipation for what's to come is to give them origin story ideas that you can connect to some of the bigger stories of your campaign.

Case in point, Chris Youngs was looking for a hook to tie his tiefling character to the world of Iomandra, and he liked the "You're a Shipwrecked Orphan" idea quite a bit. He also liked the idea that Deimos would form a close bond with Lucius Vezetus, the tiefling proprietor of the *Talisman*. They were, after all, the only tieflings on the island.

You only need a handful of origin stories, and the time you invest in their creation will pay off in spades over the course of the campaign. Here's why I love creating them:

- ♦ Origin stories make the heroes feel like living, breathing elements of your campaign world.
- ♦ Origin stories come with pre-built hooks for adventures. Let the events of the past inform the events of the future.

Until the next encounter!

A Moment in the Sun

3/31/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

As happens from time to time, three of my eight players are absent, so this game session is a bit more intimate than usual. The combats move quickly and seem a lot more dangerous, probably because I'm not the kind of merciful DM who adjusts encounters to account for absent players!

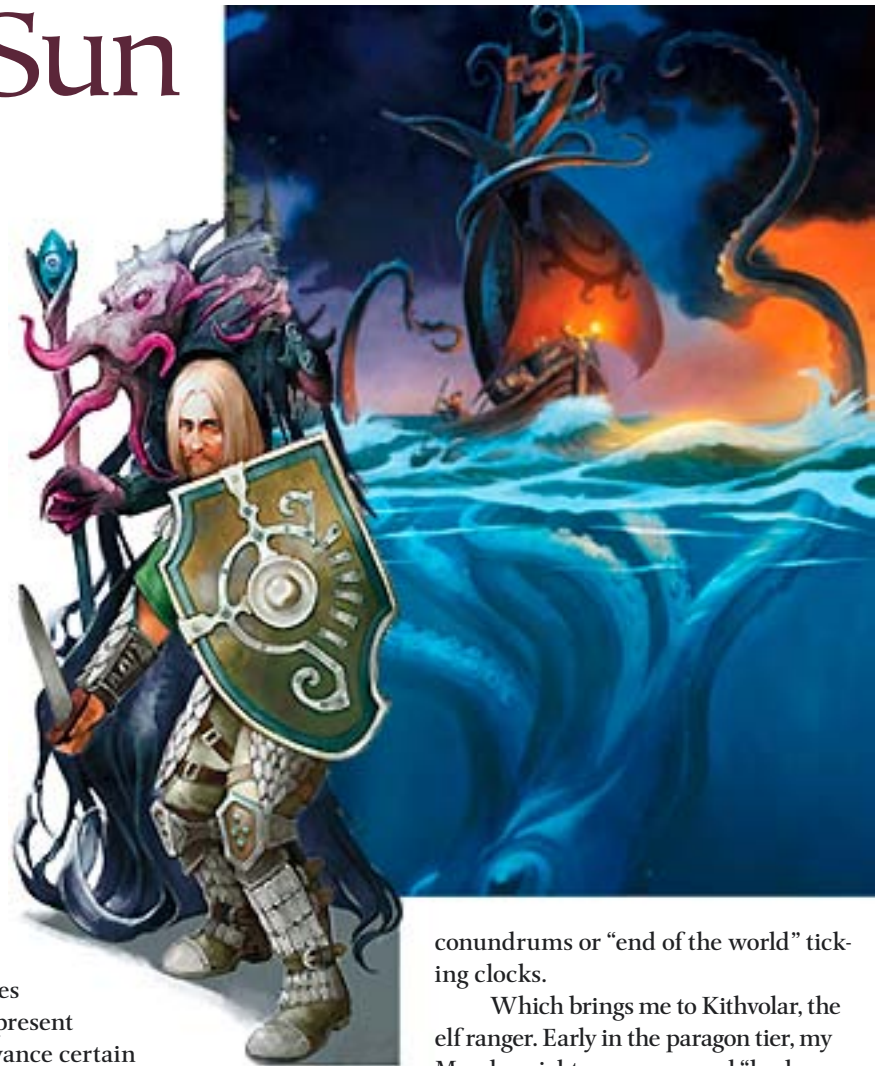
Fortunately, one of the attending players is Jeff Alvarez. By day, Jeff is the VP of Operations at Paizo Publishing, but on Monday nights, he transforms into the elf ranger Kithvolar: a whirling dervish of gut-spilling destruction who deals obscene amounts of damage. Tonight is Kithvolar's moment to shine—Jeff is about to learn that he's not in complete control of his character, and that something vile is living in his brain....

A quick aside: This article was inspired by a question posed at a PAX East seminar called “The Rat Bastard’s Guide to Running Long Campaigns.” Experienced DMs will find the point of this article rather obvious. If your reaction to the article is “No kidding,” then you’re well ahead of the curve. However, as with all things, that which is most obvious is often most ignored, and countless campaigns and players have suffered because experienced DMs have forgotten what I’m about to share with you.

In an [earlier article](#), I recommended treating your campaign like a TV series. If you analyze some of the best dramatic series in recent history, you’ll see that individual episodes generally focus on plot, character, or both. When Mulder and Scully are exposing the government’s cover-up of alien-human hybridization, they’re in a plot-driven episode of *The X-Files*. When they’re investigating the abduction of Mulder’s sister or dealing with the fact that Scully has cancer,

they’re in a character-driven episode. Sometimes these two things cross: When we learn that Mulder’s sister and Scully’s cancer are part of a worldwide conspiracy, things get really twisted. When the *Battlestar Galactica* crew is trying to escape from Cylon-occupied New Caprica, we’re talking plot, but we also have moments in which different character arcs are expanded: Saul Tigh’s discovery that his wife is a Cylon collaborator, Kara Thrace’s attempts to escape imprisonment, Lee Adama’s “battle of the bulge,” and so on.

I have three overarching (i.e., world-shaping) plots that form the foundation of my campaign. However, I’m always looking for opportunities to do “character episodes”—to present individual quests that help advance certain character arcs and give objectives that are personal. Again, TV series do this all the time; if all the *Battlestar Galactica* crew did was fight Cylons week after week, the series would get tiresome, and we’d stop caring about the characters. When push comes to shove, it’s the heroes that are most important, not convoluted plotlines or crafty villains or ethical



conundrums or “end of the world” ticking clocks.

Which brings me to Kithvolar, the elf ranger. Early in the paragon tier, my Monday night group opposed “kraken cultists” lurking underneath the city of Io’galaroth. The adventure culminated in an encounter with some aberrant horrors, during which Kithvolar fell unconscious. Amid the chaos—and unbeknownst to the players—a mind flayer implanted a critter in the elf ranger’s brain before slinking back to the Far Realm.

Flash forward several game sessions: The heroes are in the creaking bowels of Anchordown (a floating “raft town”), assaulting a nest of aberrations. Strangely, none of the creatures seem to be attacking Kithvolar, and the players have no idea why. Also, Kithvolar sees disturbing things the other characters don’t, such as tentacles crawling inside the walls.

Flash forward several more game sessions: The thing in Kithvolar’s brain has matured. It takes control of his mind and uses him to assassinate the trusted adjutant of a Dragovar military general, throwing the empire into chaos. A simple ritual is enough to remove the critter in his brain, but the more interesting questions are how will Kithvolar react to being used as a pawn, and can he make amends? Jeff’s character is standing at the epicenter of the action, and Kithvolar will help set the tone and direction of the campaign going forward.

Every character deserves a moment in the sun.

Sometimes the moment comes unexpectedly when a character does something particularly cool and memorable, or when something surprising happens to that character. However, a good DM doesn’t wait for these moments. A good DM also prepares for them. As I prepare for a session, I ask myself, “Which character is this ‘episode’ about?” It’s okay to be proven wrong—after all, you can’t always predict what’ll happen once the players convene and the dice start rolling! I remember planning an entire Monday game around Bruce Cordell’s character . . . which was great, except that Bruce couldn’t make it. (That was the infamous session in which Bruce’s character was decapitated.)

Before you run your next game session, ask yourself which character gets the spotlight . . . and then see how right you are. Week after week, if you discover that the answer is the same one or two characters, consider that a warning sign: Not all of your player characters are getting their moment in the sun.

Giving each character “equal time” isn’t easy. It’s something I personally struggle with. Some

characters naturally become more integral to the campaign than others. However, here’s some good advice if you have underdeveloped characters: Ask the players to send you three things they would like to see happen in the campaign. Once you have their lists, take one idea from each player and work it into an upcoming adventure. Then ask yourself, “How might this affect that player’s character?”

LESSONS LEARNED

Static heroes do not a great campaign make. If you want your D&D campaign to thrive, its heroes need to evolve. Your more sophisticated players will demand it, but even players with a relatively shallow investment in the game don’t like being treated as supporting characters or fifth wheels for very long.

For me, the greatest challenge of running a long campaign is keeping all of the players invested in what’s happening. Toward that end, I try to keep the following in mind:

- ◆ **A campaign has an ensemble cast of heroes. Make sure they all get time in the spotlight, and keep the spotlight moving!**
- ◆ **Every character gets an arc, including the player who doesn’t really crave one.**

Okay, enough about the heroes. Next week, let’s embrace our “inner evil,” talk about amazing campaign villains, and compare notes.

Until the next encounter!

The Dastardly Duo

4/7/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

The characters, now 15th level, have reached the midpoint of the campaign. To celebrate this achievement, I decided to involve them in something truly world-shaking. The time had come to give them a flavor of evil they’d never tasted before.

Enter Kharl Mystrum and Nemencia Xandros.

Kharl and Nemencia have three qualities that make them stand out: First, like all truly evil villains, they believe that their actions are justified. Second, they’re incredibly lucky. And third, like two sides of a coin, they can’t really exist without one another.

If *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (the TV series, not the loathsome movie) taught me anything, it’s that two villains are better than one. It was proven in Season 2 with the vampires Spike and Drusilla, reaffirmed in Season 3 by Mayor Wilkins and Faith, and then sorely missed in subsequent seasons. (If you want to make a case for the “brilliant pairing” of Rutger Hauer and Paul Reubens in the *Buffy* movie, knock yourself out. Preferably with a sledgehammer.)

Like Spike and Dru, the “dastardly duo” in my Wednesday night campaign are lovers, which mostly serves as a plot device to explain why they’re together

but also gives their relationship an added layer of realism and complexity—particularly when the cracks start to form. They're both human, born into noble families suffering under the tyranny of the dragon-born-dominated empire that rules most of Iomandra. Determined to shatter the imperial hold over their regency, Kharl and Nemencia have stolen their parents' fortunes to spend on a massive elemental citadel held aloft by a 1,000-foot-high cyclone of water. Once they've obtained the citadel, Kharl and Nemencia plan to wipe out the imperial fleet at Io'calioth and run roughshod over the island city. It might seem crazy in your campaign, but it fits perfectly into mine.



It's very easy to hate a pair of spoiled rich kids who want to trade their silver spoons for platinum, and blow obscene amounts of money because they feel trodden upon.

The heroes first become involved with them when they attend a secret auction of elemental weaponry; the last item up for grabs is the elemental citadel. It's here when the heroes meet Nemencia, who seems pretty harmless and out of her league . . . until she bids 25 million gp on the citadel in question. At that time, it's not clear what her intentions are—the players are initially led to believe she's representing her father, a powerful baron with a sterling reputation.

At the conclusion of the auction, Nemencia is more than happy to offer the heroes a tour of her new citadel, convinced that they share her disdain for the empire. However, it soon becomes clear that her intentions are far from noble. When the heroes try to wrest the crown from her, she crashes the citadel into the sea. Using a talisman obtained earlier in the campaign, the heroes travel back in time, effectively escaping a TPK. (Time travel: a fun if tricky plot device that I hope to discuss in a future article.) The heroes get a second shot, but instead of turning on Nemencia, they remain aboard the citadel and wait for an opportunity to betray her.

Before the heroes can act against Nemencia a second time, Kharl appears. That's when the heroes realize they're facing two villains, not one. The added complication is that Kharl is not alone: He's joined by a flight of mercenary dragons bribed into defending the citadel. What to do? The heroes first try to play the two lovers against one another; when that fails, they try to convince the dragon mercenaries to betray the lovers, and very nearly succeed. When Kharl finally becomes aware of their scheme, the battle's joined! As the citadel cuts a swath of destruction through Io'calioth's harbor, Kharl and Nemencia hold out for as long as possible before making their escape.

What makes Kharl and Nemencia especially memorable (apart from their countless flaws), is their longevity. Since the first fateful meeting, they've crossed paths with the heroes on three more occasions:

- ♦ **Weakened and wounded from their ordeal aboard the citadel, Kharl and Nemencia are captured by agents of the Dragovar empire. The heroes feel sorry enough for the lovers to extricate them from their predicament. Once out of harm's way, Kharl and Nemencia betray the heroes and nearly get them killed before escaping once again.**
- ♦ **The heroes learn that the Dragovar empire has posted a 2,000,000 gp bounty for the capture of Kharl and Nemencia. The heroes finally catch them aboard Kharl's ship, but when the vessel is overrun by githyanki pirates, the heroes are forced to surrender the lovers to save their own skins.**
- ♦ **After their vessel is destroyed by a Far Realm mine, the heroes seek another time-travel talisman to undo the sequence of events that caused their ship's destruction. They discover a drow NPC who has what they need, and also learn that the drow is conducting secret business with githyanki pirates. Once they learn that the pirates have released Kharl and Nemencia into the drow's custody, the vindictive (and somewhat more jaded) heroes hunt down and kill the two lovers out of spite, forcing the drow to use his time-travel talisman to undo the event. When they try again, the heroes discover that Kharl and Nemencia have been spirited away, and the talisman's power has been spent. The heroes' fleeting victory turns to bitter irony as their thirst for vengeance has cost them the very item they sought.**

LESSONS LEARNED

The saga of Kharl and Nemencia isn't something I planned from the get-go. I fully expected them to be dead by now. Everything that's happened so far is the result of hundreds of decisions and dice rolls, combined with calculated efforts on my part to have them resurface in unexpected ways. They've become the archetypal two-headed villain of my Wednesday night campaign. At some point, I'll share with you another villainous archetype that's become the bane of my Monday night group . . . but that's another story!

The theme of "dastardly duo" appears frequently in literature, film, and TV. Partnered villains are better than singular villains for so many reasons: They act as mirrors for one another, they can be turned against one another, and they remind the players that villains also have relationships that can be explored and exploited. Perhaps most importantly, if one of them dies, the other can carry the torch.

Kharl and Nemencia have taught me three other important lessons worth mentioning here:

- ♦ **The best villains are like the heroes: They don't know everything, they make mistakes, and they have a knack for turning disadvantage into advantage.**
- ♦ **The best villains are the ones the players can interact with.**
- ♦ **If you want to keep your villains from getting killed, try making them more valuable alive than dead, or make the consequences of their deaths severe and readily apparent.**

Regarding the second point, there's an inherent risk that comes with giving heroes "face time" with your carefully crafted villains. More often than not, the villains will perish before achieving any true level of infamy, but for every nineteen that die before their time, there will be the twentieth villain in whom the gods show favor, the villain (or dastardly duo) that survives long enough to make the heroes' lives truly miserable.

Regarding the third point, imagine what would happen if my players suddenly learned that Kharl and Nemencia had become heroes of the people—symbols of unity among humans fighting for independence against the "ruthless" Dragovar empire? What would happen, I wonder, if the heroes murdered them in cold blood?

Until the next encounter!

—Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

She Eats Babies!

4/14/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

The heroes are mid-paragon tier and enjoying a love/hate relationship with a guild of tiefling thieves and cut-throats called the Horned Alliance. Over the course of several adventures, they've thwarted a major operation, killed several high-ranking members of the guild, and dealt the guild a severe financial blow. Now they find themselves in the cellar of The Dead Crow, a tavern in Io'calioth that serves as a front for the Horned Alliance, standing across the dining table from the guild's supreme leader: a grandmotherly tiefling named Dorethau Vadu. What better opportunity to bury the hatchet and let bygones be bygones—the heroes have other fish to fry, and so does the Horned Alliance. Enough blood has been shed, and neither side is eager to escalate the violence. More importantly, the heroes have information that Dorethau desires, and she has information useful to them.

Both sides agree to an information exchange. However, before the exchange begins, a servant places a covered platter in front of Dorethau. She rubs her fork and knife together expectantly as the platter lid is removed . . . revealing a cooked dragonborn baby.

The Monday night group was horrified.

To understand the point of this article, one must first understand the Horned Alliance. This tieflings-only club of miscreants and malefactors operates something like the Mafia—it wants to mind its own business (however criminal) and be left alone. That

said, the tieflings in my campaign are a shattered race; their empire was wiped out by the dragonborn empire, and in Dragovar society, most tieflings are regarded as third-class citizens.

Over the course of several levels, the heroes crossed swords with a number of Horned Alliance tieflings. There was Suffer, the brutal tiefling thug who spoke with a Brooklyn accent; there was Zaidi Arychosa, the aria singer and wealthy dilettante; there was Zaibon Krinvazh, who lived on a ship called the Hellstrike and collected the flayed bones of his adversaries; and there was Prismeus, Zaibon's crafty tiefling lieutenant with the acid-scarred face.

For the supreme leader of the Horned Alliance, I needed someone more memorable than all of these other tieflings combined—someone with the smarts, the temperament, and the prescience to run a widespread organization yet who also embodied the Horned Alliance's abject hatred toward the Dragovar Empire. Dorethau Vadu is old, wise, and not about to pick a fight with a bunch of people who slay monsters for a living. The Horned Alliance is her house, its members are her children and grandchildren (metaphorically speaking). She would be likeable and admirable except for one thing.

She eats babies.

This wasn't some randomly assigned fetish. It makes perfect sense in the context of the campaign; one thing the heroes know is that the Horned Alliance detests the ruling dragonborn empire, so how do I embody this hatred in the guild's leader? The answer is perfect in its awesome evilness: Dorethau Vadu employs thieves to kidnap dragonborn babies and then eats them! When the idea came to me, I was walking my dog in the woods. Reggie, my three-legged silky terrier, gave me a quizzical look when I shouted "She eats babies!" and immediately sent myself a text message so I wouldn't forget. (Like I'd forget something that cool!)

The juxtaposition of the grandmotherly figure with the image of the cooked baby told the players everything they needed to know about Dorethau Vadu—and at this point, the negotiations were over. The looks on my players' faces said it all: There was no doing business with this woman—she had to die.

As a DM, I sometimes make the mistake of relying too much on dialogue to make my villains compelling, but players are quick to dismiss evil monologues, insults, and hissed invectives. They're just words, after all. What my players remember about Dorethau Vadu aren't the words that came out of her mouth, but the baby that went into it.

Actions always speak louder than words.

LESSONS LEARNED

I'm not suggesting that you add infanticide to your campaign as a means to shock your players. What worked for one villain in my campaign won't necessarily translate to villains in your campaign. The dragonborn baby stunt merely illustrates that the heroes need to see the villains do bad things in order to appreciate what they're up against. Simply knowing the bad guy is evil isn't thrilling enough.

There's a throwaway line spoken in the film *Quantum of Solace* to remind us that heroes, in large part, are judged by the strength of their enemies ("They say you're judged by the strength of your enemies"). Well, truth be told, everything I know about creating villains I learned from James Bond novels and films—and my villains' "strength" is determined by the extent they're remembered long after they're gone. For you, it might be the villain who "brands" his captives, the villain who betrayed one of his own to save himself, or the villain who wears a cloak made of the stitched faces of his slain enemies.



- ♦ A villain needs only one good gimmick to be even vaguely memorable—be it a deformity, a white cat with a diamond collar, a razor-rimmed hat, or something equally obvious.
- ♦ Villains are defined by their deeds and quirks. It only takes one deed or quirk to make a lasting impression.

Next week I'll present the winning entries from last week's [BEST VILLAIN EVER!](#) contest, and then we'll leave villains alone for a while to talk about what wonderful things can happen to a campaign when a player leaves the group.

Until the next encounter!

Best Villain Ever

4/21/2011

Normally I'd kick things off by describing some thrilling event or happenstance from my home campaign, but we're breaking format this week to bring you the three winning entries from the [Best Villain Ever contest](#). Thanks to everyone who submitted an entry!

When I began analyzing why I liked these particular villains, I realized each one was a textbook example of a villainous archetype: There's the villain born out of the heroes' backstory, the villain hiding in the heroes' midst, and the good-aligned creature turned evil. Many of the contest entries fell into one of these three classic archetypes, though there were other archetypes represented as well: the world-destroying super-villain, the vengeance-driven villain, and the benefactor-turned-villain, just to name a few.



Are these three truly the best villains ever? That's ultimately for you to decide. I chose the villains that resonated with me personally; had you been the judge, you might've gravitated toward different things. However, all of the submissions did have one thing in common: Each villain was a deeply embedded element of the campaign, not just some disposable bad guy.

Dragen Blackstone, Warlock Knight of Vaasa

Here's an example of a villain the heroes are expected to despise from the get-go. Dragen's deeds are directly responsible for the situation in which they find themselves, and their reasons for hating him are hard-coded into their backgrounds.

I admire a DM who can pit the heroes against a villain far too powerful for them, allow the villain to prevail without ending the campaign, and offer players the promise of sweet, sweet revenge. Dragen doesn't need a black hat or a white cat to get the heroes' attention. The day the heroes finally meet Dragen on equal footing promises to be the high point in the campaign!

Also, the Warlock Knights of Vaasa are just plain cool.

DRAGEN BLACKSTONE, WARLOCK KNIGHT OF VAASA

My “Best Villain Ever” is from my home Forgotten Realms campaign. He is a Warlock Knight of Vaasa named Dragen Blackstone. The players crafted backstories for their characters, and a couple of them made up stories that involved their homes being destroyed when they children—but they weren’t really specific about the regions they were from. I decided to make them from the mountains surrounding Vaasa and tied them together by the common thread that their villages were all destroyed by Dragen. Their first run-in with Dragen was while they were still very low level, and he knocked them unconscious and left them for dead, lying in the dirt. A wandering shaman (a new player joining the campaign) discovered them and healed their wounds. The shaman was also very familiar with Dragen—his tribe was constantly avoiding the Warlock Knights. My players will have many run-ins with Dragen’s henchmen before they are powerful enough to get their revenge.

The best twist of the campaign is that one of my players thought he’d be clever and not create a backstory for his character. He told me his character woke up in the mountains with amnesia and has no recollection of his past. As the story unfolds, he will learn that he used to be one of Dragen’s henchmen!

—Bill Buchalter
Indianapolis, IN

THE PORTER WHO MIGHT BE KING

The best villain we ever had in a game was a hired porter for the party. He was a kind, wiry old man who shared fatherly advice and told great stories around the campfire. The party loved him... until one night when the party uncovered a powerful artifact they had retrieved from a lich and decided to camp outside the dungeon immediately afterwards. In the darkest hour of night, offering to watch over the camp while the party slept, the kindly old porter killed the PC with the artifact while he slept and disappeared into the night. What they didn’t know was that the old man was once a cruel king who had been dethroned at a younger age and now had a way to get back what once was his.

—Aaron Scott
Sioux Falls, SD

The Porter Who Might Be King

“Curse your sudden but inevitable betrayal!”

The villain who lurks among the heroes is a great premise... difficult to pull off but incredibly gratifying when executed well (no pun intended). Sometimes a betrayal comes out of left field—usually when the idea occurs to the DM late in the game—but I think this one was planned from the very start, and that’s awesome. Bravo!

I often tell new DMs not to drink from the “betrayal” well too often. You can’t have NPCs betraying the heroes at every turn; it makes the players suspicious of everyone (best-case scenario) or just plain

angry (worst-case scenario). I’m a big fan of the “villain in our midst,” but if your players have been stung in the past, it’s wise to drop a few clues before the big reveal. That way, when the players think you’re screwing them over, you can point back at the clues and say, “Au contraire!” (or whatever they say in South Dakota).

Havok the Betrayer

I like challenging players’ expectations, and a classic D&D example is the evil-aligned metallic dragon. This isn’t a new idea, but it’s often overlooked. My campaign includes a polymorphing silver dragon with evil ambitions; he’s not nearly as capable or dangerous as Havok, and I confess that I’ve used him as comic relief on occasion (I recall a time when the dragon—as he was taunting the heroes with a villainous monologue—landed on a wooden platform that couldn’t support his weight).

HAVOK THE BETRAYER

The best villain we ever had in a game was a hired porter for the party. He was a kind, wiry old man who shared fatherly advice and told great stories around the campfire. The party loved him... until one night when the party uncovered a powerful artifact they had retrieved from a lich and decided to camp outside the dungeon immediately afterwards. In the darkest hour of night, offering to watch over the camp while the party slept, the kindly old porter killed the PC with the artifact while he slept and disappeared into the night. What they didn’t know was that the old man was once a cruel king who had been dethroned at a younger age and now had a way to get back what once was his.

—Aaron Scott
Sioux Falls, SD

Havok has the added virtue of being a monster as opposed to a two-armed, two-legged villain. Monsters are underused as major campaign villains, in my humble opinion. If a gold dragon can hold the heroes' interest for multiple levels or even tiers of play, imagine what could be done with an evil treant hell-bent on purging the natural world of civilization, an iron golem imbued with the sentience and ambition of its evil creator, or a beholder crime lord.

Havok the Betrayer rekindled my desire to flip through the *Monster Manual* in search of the next big bad guy in my campaign, and that's why he made the cut.

LESSONS LEARNED

Would I pilfer these villains for my own campaign? You bet. A campaign can never have enough good villains—I truly believe that. Aside from their admirable characteristics, the Best Villain Ever contest winners reminded me of three important things:

- ♦ **Villains (even smart ones) make mistakes. Sometimes that includes not killing the heroes when they have the chance!**
- ♦ **Not every villain needs a world-shaking agenda to be cool.**
- ♦ **Villains come in all shapes and sizes.**

It's a bit of a digression, but Boraxe (one of our community members) has some wonderful DM advice embedded in his forum sig, which I'm paraphrasing here: *Dangle lots of plot hooks in front of your players. Anything they do not bite can come back and bite them later.* I think the same advice applies to campaign villains. You never know which villains will rattle the players' cages, so the trick is to keep inventing new ones.

Until the next encounter!

Man Down!

4/28/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

I was sad when Trevor Kidd, one of my players, told me he was leaving Wizards of the Coast—he was moving to Iowa to be closer to his wife, attending med school. Trevor's character, a dragonborn paladin named Rhasgar Vormund, had an amazing story arc tied closely to the events of the campaign, and I had big plans for him. Now all of my plans were suddenly dashed... which forced me to come up with a new, better plan that would allow Rhasgar to exit gracefully as well as propel the campaign and the other characters forward.

Here's everything you need to know about Rhasgar to understand the point of this article: He was born into the noble caste of Dragovar society, but his family was disgraced by powerful rivals (House Irizaxes and House Narakhty). Rhasgar ended up adopted by the Temple of Bahamut, while his younger brother Naxagoras ended up on the streets. Rhasgar became a dutiful servant of Bahamut and a sworn defender of the faith, eventually joining forces with the party in order to help the Dragovar Empire find its missing Emperor (as well as protect it from various looming threats). Once in a while, he crossed paths with Naxagoras, who had fallen in with a bad crowd and sworn a vow to Tiamat to avenge their family's disgrace. On multiple occasions, Naxagoras's thirst for revenge placed him and his brother in direct conflict with the two noble families responsible for their father's death and mother's suicide. Meanwhile, Rhasgar tried everything he could to persuade Naxagoras to abandon his oath to Tiamat.



Over the course of several levels, Rhasgar obtained a solid lead concerning the Emperor's whereabouts, but other quests (and his brother's antics) continually got in the way. Then a window of opportunity suddenly opened, and Rhasgar persuaded his companions to accompany him to the island of Nythe-Saleme, where the wreckage of the Emperor's flagship had been sighted. . . .

To the other players in the group, Trevor's character was the "friendly face" of the Dragovar Empire—an honorable dragonborn through and through. He reminded them that the empire wasn't as corrupt as the DM sometimes made it out to be. Trevor's departure not only meant the group was shrinking (from 8 to 7 players) but also that the party was losing its moral compass. And I was losing not only a great role-player but also a character whose ties to the Dragovar Empire fueled a lot of great storytelling.

When a player leaves the group on good terms, my DM skills are put to their greatest test, for it's my job to make sure the departing player's final session is an amazing, emotional experience for the whole group. In a long-running campaign such as mine, every player deserves an appropriately spectacular send-off—to deny a glorious finale would've been negligent and disappointing, and a good DM never leaves the players feeling disappointed.

In January, I co-hosted a DM seminar at **D&D Experience** in Fort Wayne, IN. One of the seminar attendees shared an anecdote from his campaign in which he had one player leave the group and another player join in the same session. In his final session, the departing player sacrificed his character to save the life of the new player's character. This simple act of heroism created a bond between the new character and the remaining party members, all of whom were touched by their comrade's noble sacrifice. I practically wept at the ingenuity of it, even though the outcome had been somewhat orchestrated by the DM and departing player.

I wanted something equally impactful. Due to forces beyond my control, I had only one game session to wrap up Rhasgar's story and plan a graceful exit. The day before the game, I made a list of all of Rhasgar's unresolved plot hooks and quests:

- ◆ **Find the Emperor and return him safely to the throne.**
- ◆ **Deal with House Irizaxes and House Narakhty.**
- ◆ **Reconcile with Naxagoras.**

All three of these quests were originally meant to carry Rhasgar through the epic tier, and I had spaced them out accordingly.

I ended up discarding my original plans and instead focused on how I was going to tie up Rhasgar's story in 4 hours of game time. Shortly before the game, in a moment of subdued panic, I made a list of events that would happen during this farewell session:

- ◆ **The heroes find and rescue the Emperor and his entourage, who are trapped in stasis on the island of Nythe-Saleme.**
- ◆ **The heroes escort the Emperor back to the capital, and he rewards them. They are named "princes of the empire" and given parcels of**



land. They witness firsthand the impact of the Emperor's sudden, glorious return.

- ◆ **Upon hearing of the wrongs inflicted upon Rhasgar's family, the Emperor awards Rhasgar the estates of his rivals and tasks him with bringing the Irizaxes and Narakhty leaders to justice. Rhasgar and Naxagoras confront their hated enemies, one of whom wields their father's sword. Retrieving the stolen sword is the symbolic gesture that finally unites the two brothers. Naxagoras's bloodlust is satisfied, and Rhasgar gains a powerful friend in the Emperor.**

Originally the Emperor wasn't on the island. However, I now decided to make him a prisoner of the island's overlords—a pair of wizards named Nythe and Saleme who used magic to disguise themselves as purple dragons. The sisters' political agenda is pure contrivance and beyond the scope of this article—what's important is that they live inside a flying citadel that, in the course of the evening, rose out of a

volcanic caldera, flew across the open water, and plunged into the sea, nearly wiping out the entire party. (A mass fly spell cast by Rodney Thompson's character saved the day.)

At 9 PM, three hours into the game, I realized there wasn't enough time to run separate combat encounters with House Irizaxes and House Narakhty, so I decided on a whim that Kaphira Narakhty would execute her entire household and take her own life instead of allowing an enemy to spill her blood. Moreover, rather than allow her family's fortune to fall into Rhasgar's hands, she would use it to hire assassins to avenge her death. (Instead of posthumously hiring them, I suppose that makes it prehumously; in any case, how's that for setting up a future encounter?) That left Tyzaro Irizaxes. I don't usually let NPCs steal the limelight, but I did allow

Rhasgar's brother to score the final blow against the evil dragonborn noble and reclaim his father's sword. As for Rhasgar, he decided to spare the life of Tyzaro's daughter, Taishan, and even allowed her to retain a small portion of her father's estate—one final noble act brilliantly improvised by Trevor in the moment.

LESSONS LEARNED

Sometimes when a player leaves, the campaign stalls. The onus falls on the DM to make the most of it—to reassure the remaining players that the campaign will go on . . . and that it's still full of surprises!

As much as I'll miss Trevor, his departure has already propelled the Wednesday game forward. What will happen now that the Emperor has returned, I wonder? Will Kaphira Narakhty make good on her threat to avenge her family's destruction? How will the other players fare without their faithful moral compass? I see dark times ahead, but only time will tell.

Here's what Trevor's sudden departure taught me:

- ◆ **Nothing's more important to a campaign than the stories of the player characters.**
- ◆ **Improvisation is the key to survival—both for the DM and for the campaign.**

Next week I'll talk about maps, which I love, and share a few DM mapping tricks. [The Best Villain Ever!](#) contest was well received, so expect another in the not-too-distant future as well.

Until the next encounter!

Big Map Attack

5/5/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

The Emperor of the Dragovar empire is missing! The heroes chase a lead to a small island dominated by an extinct volcano and populated by hill giants. The giants pay homage to the island's gold dragon overlord, Zeryndroth, even though the dragon was turned to stone many years ago.

The huge petrified dragon stands proudly atop a rocky outcropping south of the hill giant village, and every morning the giants leave a cornucopia of fresh food offerings at its feet. With Zeryndroth indisposed, a black dragon named Caustalanth has moved into seaside caves set into the northern cliffs of the volcano . . . but she's not yet powerful enough to impose her will upon the hill giants and assert herself as the island's new dragon overlord.

There's more to the island than meets the eye, as my players will soon discover. In order to find out what happened to the Emperor, the heroes will undoubtedly confront the hill giants, investigate the petrified remains of the dragon overlord, explore the hilltop cairns in the giants' cemetery, and perhaps even negotiate Caustalanth's caves to reach the volcano's caldera. With so many possibilities, I felt it was important to provide my players with a map—and how I build maps is the subject of this article.

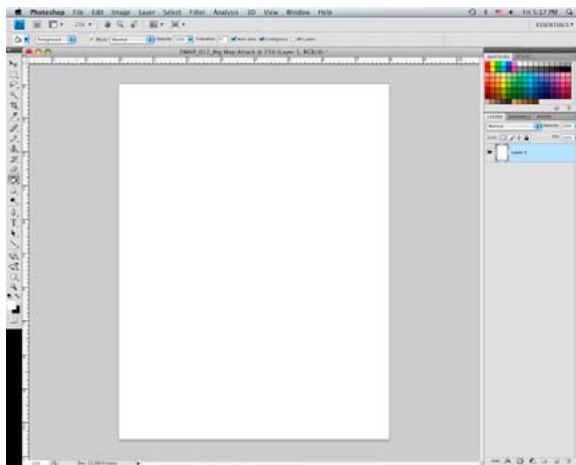


My maps are not photorealistic; they're inspired by the works of David "Diesel" LaForce, a cartographer from TSR who did a lot of the early cartography for *Dungeon* magazine (not to mention several old TSR adventures). My maps tend to be very clean and utilitarian, but they also have an organic hand-drawn quality that mapmaking software has trouble emulating.

Sometimes I draw maps the old-fashioned way: freehand on graph paper. On this particular occasion, I'm using Adobe Photoshop CS4 and giving you an over-the-shoulder glimpse into my map-making process. This is not intended as a Photoshop tutorial, and I should warn you: I'm not a Photoshop whiz. However, you'd be amazed what you can do in Photoshop with just four tools: the **pencil**, the **eraser**, the **paint bucket**, and the **type tool**.

Step 1. Say Hello to Photoshop

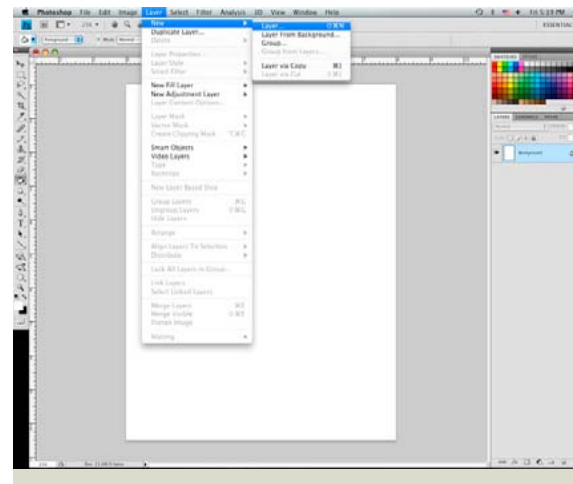
I open a new file in Photoshop. This is my canvas, and I want to make sure the map fits on a single sheet of 8.5" x 11" paper. This map won't need a grid, so I use



the **paint bucket** tool (left column) to paint the background white. It's like I'm starting with a fresh sheet of blank paper!

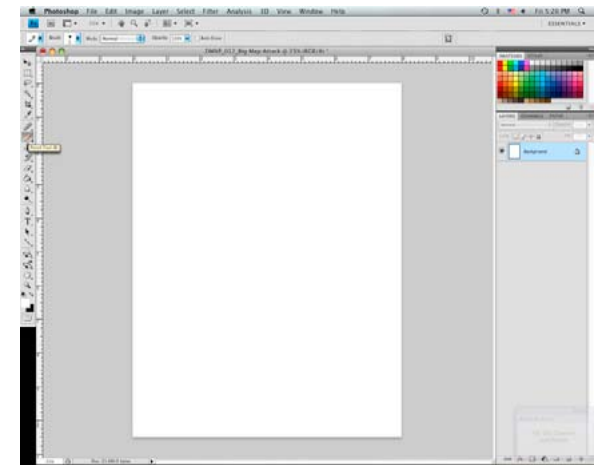
Step 2. Use Layers

I like to build my maps in layers. Each new map element I create gets its own layer. That way, if I need to make changes to one layer of the map, I can do so without affecting the other layers.



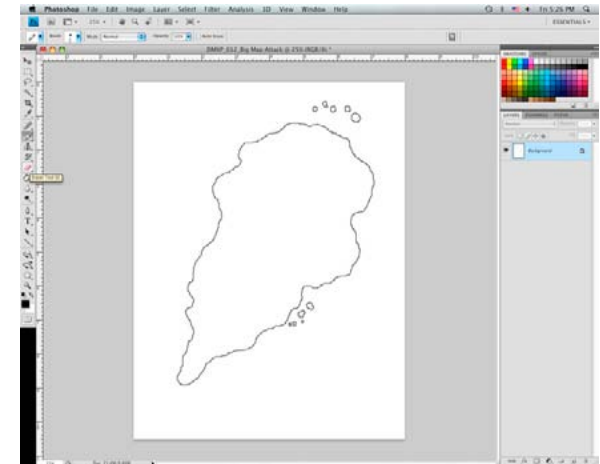
Step 3. Grab My Pencil

My **pencil** is embedded in the toolbar on the left side of my screen. Most of the map will be created using this simple hand-drawing tool.



Step 4. Draw, Erase, Draw, Erase

Using my mouse and the **pencil** tool, I draw a rough outline of the island on the Background layer. I've set the pencil width to 5 pixels, which has a nice line weight. Drawing with a mouse is hard; sometimes the lines don't look exactly right. So, I use the eraser tool



(in the left toolbar) to erase the sections that offend me, and then redraw those sections until I'm happy.

Step 5. Build the Volcano

The volcano on the island will be represented by a series of concentric contour lines, each one representing an increase in elevation of 100 feet. These “rings” are drawn with the **pencil**. It's tedious work that will pay off later.



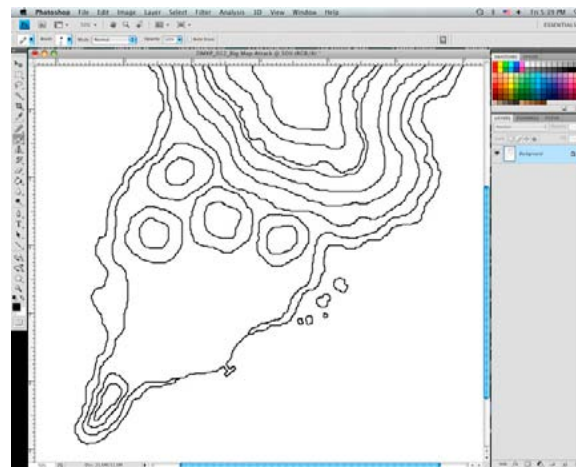
Step 6. Add Cliffs

Using my **pencil** and **eraser** tools, I carefully extend the 100-foot cliffs around the rest of the island, except for a short section to the south. I make sure there are no gaps in the linework, so that I don't run into problems when it comes time to paint sections of the map with color.



Step 7. Add Hills

This is an island inhabited by hill giants, so I figure it needs hills! I draw several low hills at the base of the volcano, as well as a rocky rise at the southern tip of the island where the petrified dragon is perched.

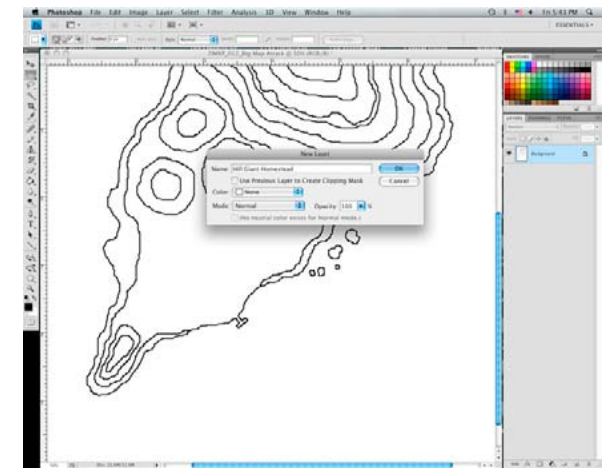


Step 8. Add a Dock

Using the **eraser**, I erase a small bit of the island outline. Then I use my **pencil** to draw a stone dock protruding from the island. If it doesn't look right the first time, I erase it and try again. Up to this point, everything has been drawn on one layer.

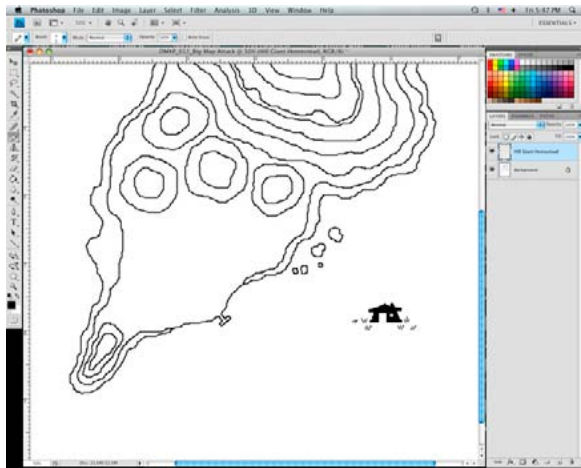
Step 9. Create a New Layer

I'm ready to start adding details to my map. I create a new layer and call it “Hill Giant Homestead.”



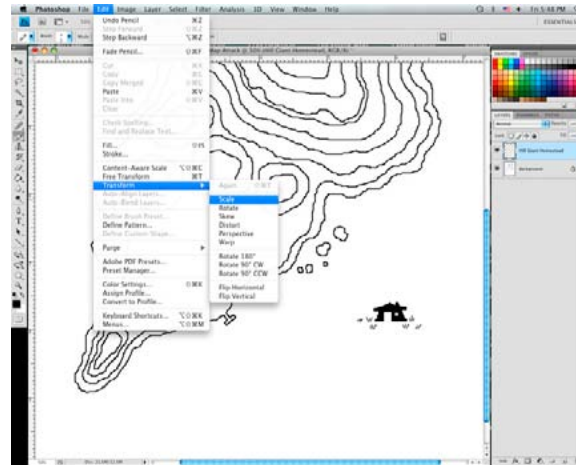
Step 10. Draw a House

My layers appear in the toolbar along the right side of the screen. Using my **pencil** and mouse, I draw a hill giant homestead anywhere on the map; because it's on a separate layer, nothing I do will affect the rest of the map. I draw the house bigger than it will appear in the final, so that I can get the detail I want. It looks like something the Flintstones might build, but which seems appropriate for a hill giant dwelling.



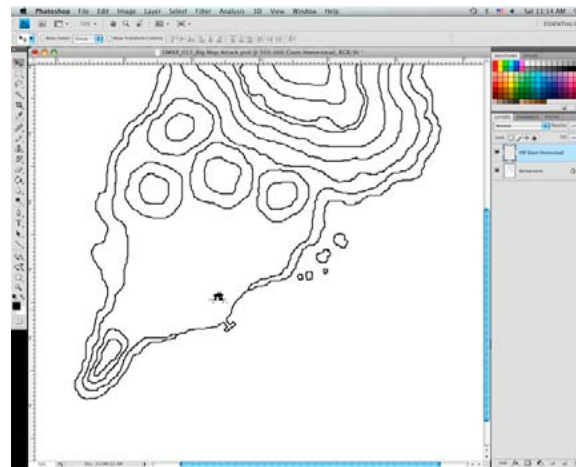
Step 11. Shrink the House

To shrink the hill giant house so that it's the appropriate size, I use Edit > Transform > Scale (as shown).



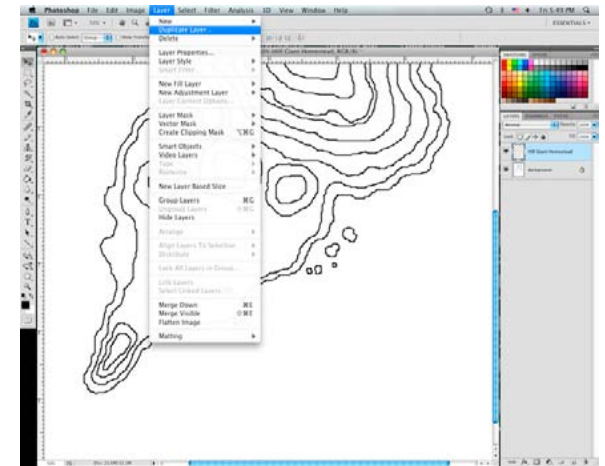
Step 12. Place the House

Using my mouse, I "click and drag" the resized house so that it's where I want it. I can do this because the house is on its own layer, separate from the rest of the map.



Step 13. Duplicate the House

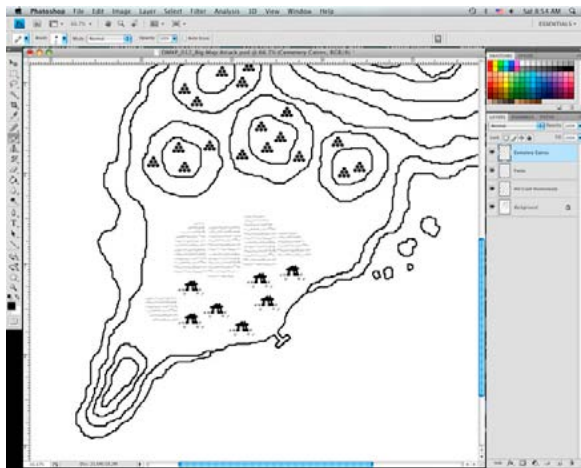
Because I'm lazy, I'm not going to draw different hill giant houses; I'm going to copy and paste the same one over and over using Layer > Duplicate Layer. Each time I duplicate the Hill Giant Homestead layer, I get a new house that I can "click and drag" wherever I want using my mouse.



Step 14. Make a Hill Giant Cemetery

The giants bury their dead under rocky hilltop cairns. The cairns are created exactly the same way as the giant homesteads: I create a new layer, build one cairn using my **pencil**, shrink it down to the appropriate size, duplicate the layer over and over, and “click and drag” each new cairn into place.

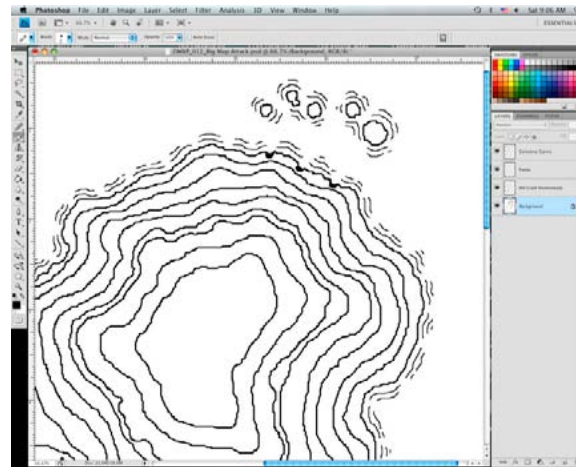
On a whim, I use the same trick to create farm fields around the hill giant homesteads. I create a new layer, draw five rows of wavy lines using my **pencil** (set to 1 pixel width), and then duplicate the layer multiple times. Once the lines are placed, I use my eraser to “cut the corners.”



Step 15. Make Waves and Caves

Believe it or not, my map is 75% complete. Time to add some details, specifically a row of caves along the northern cliffs and some water lines around the entire island. I want to make these changes to the Background layer, so I make sure that’s the layer I’m working on (see the right toolbar).

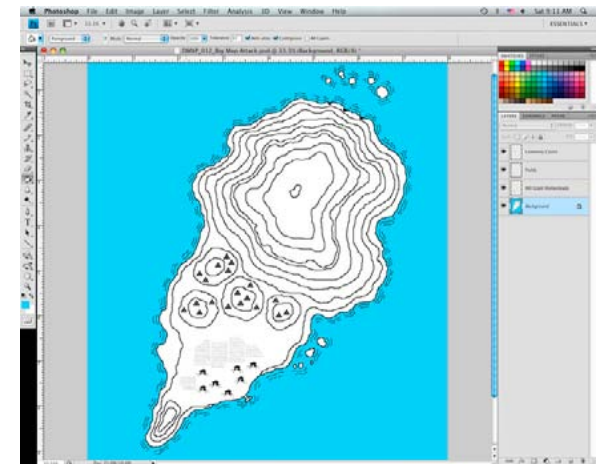
The waves and caves are made with my **pencil** (set at 3 pixels). The waves in particular look better if the linework is a bit thinner than the outline of the island.



Step 16. Just Add Water

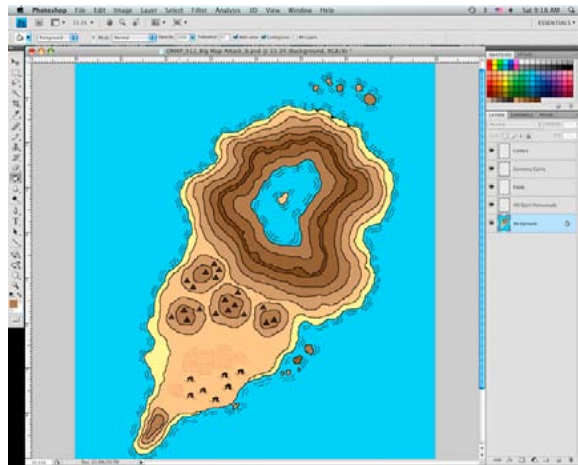
Before I apply color, I save my map. That way, if I screw something up, I have an unpainted version to revert to. My color palette is in the top right corner of my screen; I’m going to limit myself to the colors offered here.

I want to make sure I’m applying color to the correct layer (in this case, the Background layer). I select the shade of blue I want and use the **paint bucket** tool in the left toolbar to fill in the desired area. If there are any breaks in the outline of my island, the paint will flow into areas I don’t want, so I’m careful to check my linework. If I use the **paint bucket** and the color doesn’t fill the desired area, I can undo it (Edit > Undo, or Command-Z on my Mac) and try again.



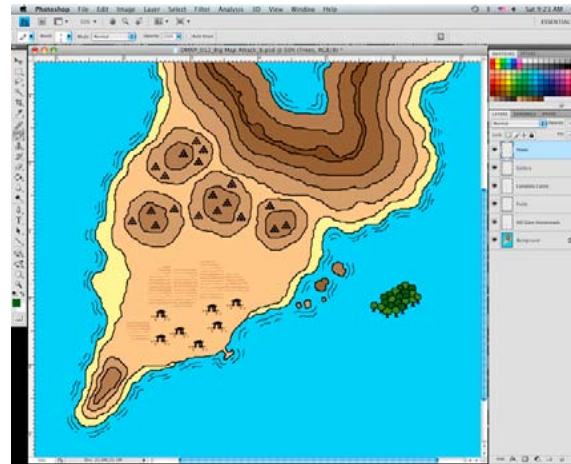
Step 17. Paint by Numbers

The **paint bucket** is a poor man's coloring tool, but it serves my needs. I select different shades of yellow, orange, and brown to represent the various elevations and then use the **paint bucket** to apply those colors to specific layers. For instance, the blue water in the caldera is on a different layer than the blue water surrounding the island.



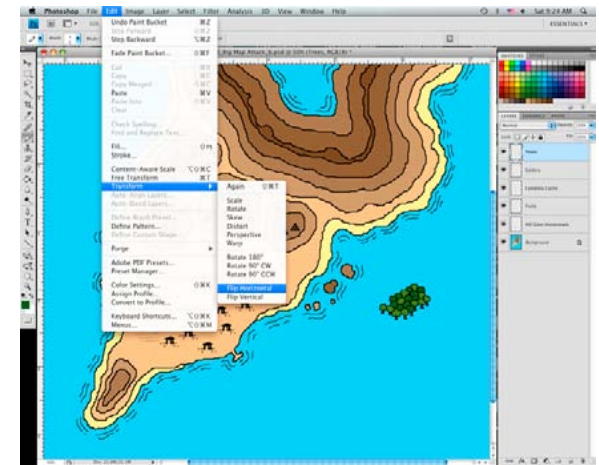
Step 18. Add Pretty Little Trees

I forgot the trees! No problem—I create a new layer, then draw and paint the trees wherever I want on the map.



Step 19. Transform the Trees

I not only want to shrink and relocate the trees but also flip them horizontally, so that they fit in the specific area of the island I have in mind. Once again, I use Edit > Transform. The “horizontal flip” tool is an easy way to make your map elements feel less cookie-cutter. In the accompanying diagram, the two smaller stands of trees are basically two identical layers, one of which has been horizontally flipped!



Step 20. Build the Beach

I use the **pencil tool** (set at 1 pixel width) to make stipple marks along the western shore, giving it a sandy appearance. Then I create a new layer, use my pencil and **paint bucket** to draw one palm tree, duplicate that layer six times, and then use my mouse to move the seven palm trees where I want them.

Step 21. Add Elevation Tags

We're almost finished. Time to add text to the maps. To make the elevation clear to my players, I add text tags to the various elevation lines (+100 ft., +200 ft., and so on). To make the text more visible, I apply a “glow” around the text using Layer > Layer Style > Outer Glow. Not all of the text on the map needs this treatment, just the text that would be hard to read otherwise.

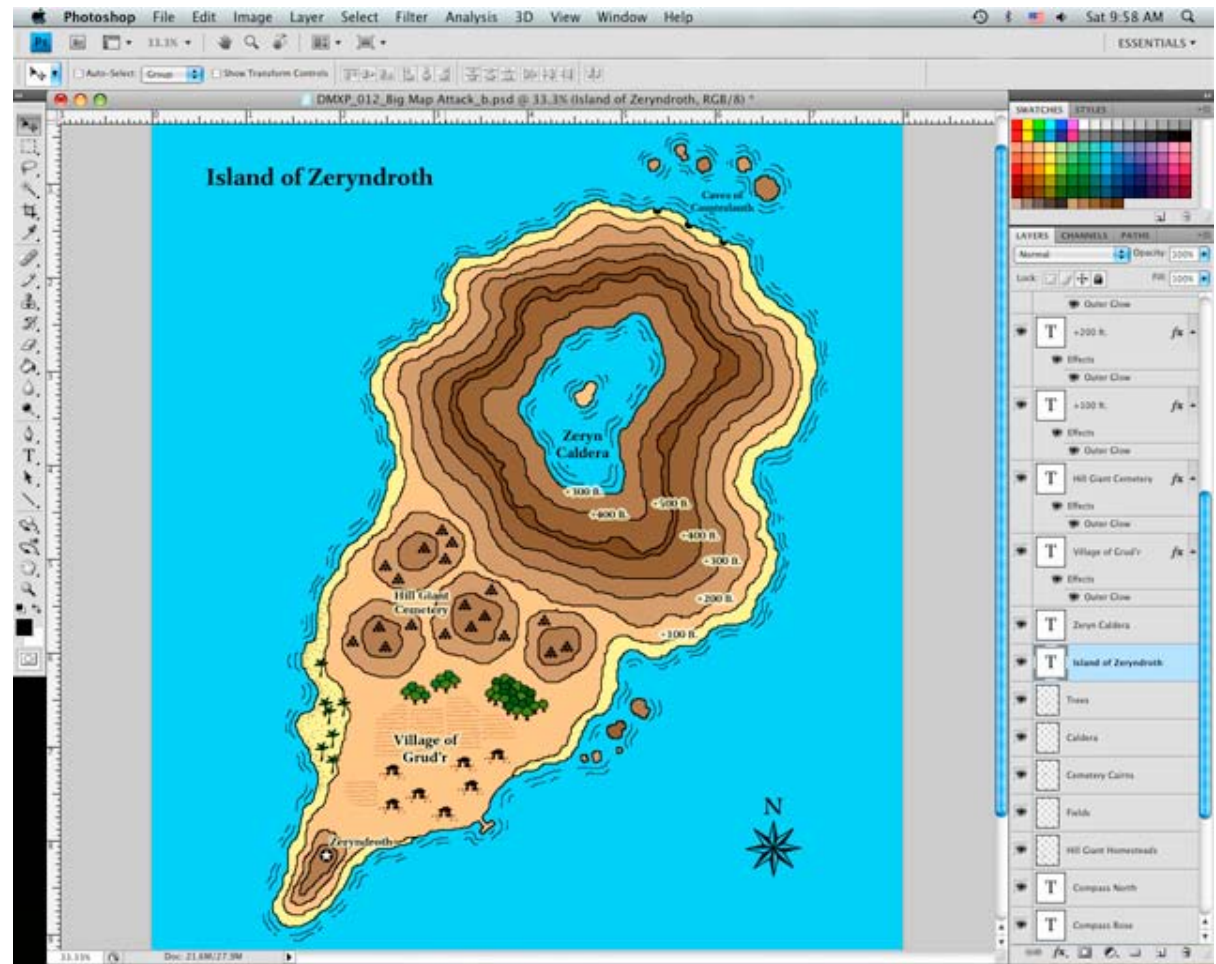
Step 22. Save and Enjoy!

I use a traditional D&D statue icon to represent Zeryndroth, the petrified gold dragon. This symbol is part of the Zapf Dingbats font family, as is the star-like symbol I use for the compass rose. Like all of the tags, they're added to the map as separate layers using the type tool ("T") in the left toolbar.

With the tags in place, the map is complete. I save the file.

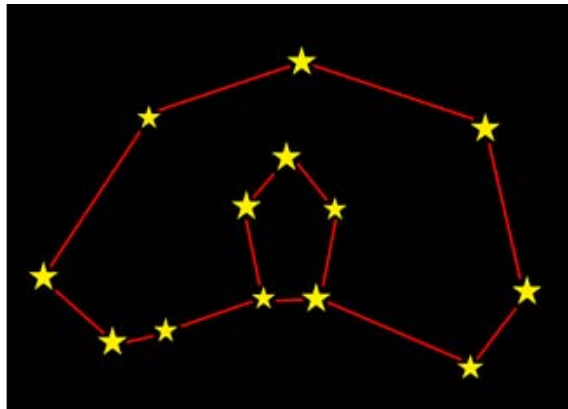
At some point, remind me to show you the tools I use to build maps for the ships that crop up in my nautical-themed campaign.

Until the next encounter!



Constellation of Madness

5/12/2011



MONDAY NIGHT.

The heroes convene aboard their ship, the Maelstrom, before embarking on their next epic quest. That's when Melech, Bruce Cordell's character, notices something strange in the night sky: three unfamiliar stars peering just above the southwestern horizon.

In the days that follow, more strange stars come into view, until the entire constellation of thirteen is visible. The starry array resembles a dragon's eye, and the writings and ramblings of ancient mariners and astronomers speak of an evil constellation that appears only when summoned—a constellation with the power to warp the very fabric of reality. Some call it the Dragon's Eye. Others call it the end of the world.

Believing that an evil eladrin warlock named Starlord Evendor has summoned the constellation for his own fell purposes, the heroes travel to the Dragovar capital. There, they confer with Lenkhor Krige, a dragonborn archmage who leads the Shan Qabal, a powerful sect within the arcane caste. Lenkhor is someone in whom the characters have placed their trust. Yet by the time they arrive, reality has been altered in such a way that the archmage is no longer around to help them. To further complicate matters, the heroes have no memory of ever meeting Lenkhor, which means my players must put all previous encounters with Lenkhor out of their minds.

Welcome to my weird world.

My campaign is like a snow globe. Sometimes it needs a good shake.

Buried in my original campaign notes is the following bit of lore: *Long ago, the world of Iomandra was home to a multitude of powerful dragon-sorcerers. Their mastery of magic made them undisputed rulers of the world. One by one they died, and with them their great magic. Present-day dragons, more driven to acquire gold and property than arcane power, believe these ancient wyrms ascended to the heavens, becoming the stars in the night sky.*

The above passage was the inspiration for an epic-level adventure called "Constellation of Madness," in which a major campaign villain with ties to the Far Realm summons a constellation that has the power to alter reality. What really excited me about this

idea was the prospect of temporarily swapping players in my Monday and Wednesday night groups, and the Dragon's Eye constellation was the plot device I intended to use to make it happen. Unfortunately, my players' schedules made the swapping exercise impractical; however, I refused to abandon the alternate reality idea entirely. After twenty-three levels of adventuring, my players understood all too well how the world worked—so what better way to turn things upside-down and change some of the fundamental truths of the campaign!

From the outset, my campaign was built around the three-tiered structure of 4th Edition. The heroes spent the entire **heroic tier (levels 1-10)** exploring one small island and learning bits and pieces about the "larger world."

Paragon tier (levels 11-20) was all about leaving the island and exploring what the larger world had to offer. The heroes became embroiled in politics. They meddled in the affairs of others while chasing their own dreams. They got a ship and plied the Dragon Sea in search of new adventures. By the end of the paragon tier, they'd touched on every major campaign arc and understood the world pretty well.

Then came **epic tier (levels 21-30)**, during which one expects all of the major campaign arcs to wrap up. However, epic tier is more than just "the end of plots." It's also the perfect time to challenge the players' perceptions of the world, and turn the campaign on its head. Like the final season of a television series, anything can happen and nothing is sacred.

Keeping my players engaged for 20+ levels isn't easy. Hell, sometimes it's hard to keep myself engaged, let alone them! With the heroes halfway to 24th level, my players have grown accustomed to their characters and each other, and think they know all of my sly DM tricks. To keep things exciting, I must be willing to take some big-money risks and shock the players with unexpected twists.

YOU MAY ASK YOURSELF, WELL, HOW DID I GET HERE?

“Constellation of Madness” does just that—it throws the heroes into an alternate reality where certain things that used to be true no longer are. It creates weird situations in which the players become aware of something that their characters don’t know—and that, my friends, is the definition of roleplaying. Case in point: One of the major campaign villains is a dragonborn wizard named Hahrzan. Throughout the paragon tier, the heroes clashed with Hahrzan on several occasions, even killing him twice before realizing he had a secret cloning lab. But in this new reality, he’s leader of the Shan Qabal in place of Lenkhor Krige, and in this alternate reality, the characters and Hahrzan have never once fought each other.

My players hate Hahrzan, and they loathe the fact that he’s risen to a position of power in this new reality, but their characters have no justifiable reason to attack him. To my players, I describe their characters’ relationship to Hahrzan as “prickly and tense, but not hostile,” and as much as the players want to slay him, there’s really nothing for their characters to act on. Their only recourse is to accept this new reality... at least until their characters become aware that reality has been altered. How’s that for an epic roleplaying challenge?

“Constellation of Madness” is all about my players knowing more than their epic-level characters. As the players figure out why certain things are changing and others are staying the same, no doubt some event will occur that lets their characters realize their world around them has changed... paving the way for the inevitable (and hopefully satisfying) confrontation with Starlord Evendor.



A few words of warning: While epic tier allows you to shift a well-established campaign in unexpected directions, you must be careful not to turn the campaign into something unrecognizable or unfamiliar to your players. They’ve invested too much time in the world to watch it mutate into something bizarre and unrecognizable. Moreover, alternate reality storylines aren’t for everyone. Sure, it’s a great way to bring back dead villains, but not all players are capable of handling the metagame implications of an alternate reality storyline. No matter how hard they roleplay,

their characters always seem to know as much as the players do! Even my Monday night players—expert roleplayers all—can accept only so much metagame torture before their heads leap off their shoulders and fly screaming about the room.

LESSONS LEARNED

The jury’s still out on whether “Constellation of Madness” will go down as a high point of the Iomandra campaign or sink like a stone to the bottom of the Dragon Sea—I’ll keep you posted. In any event, here’s what the experience has taught me about epic-level play:

- ♦ **By the time they reach the epic tier, players think they know where your campaign is heading. Show them how wrong they are.**

Next week’s column discusses the repercussions of last week’s poll results. The votes are in, and things don’t look good for Xanthum the gnome bard! To my credit, I rarely kill characters on a whim, but you’d be surprised how much I enjoy torturing them. As you’ll find out next week, it’s for the greater good.

Until the next encounter!

Post Mortem

5/19/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

This week's session kicks off with a quick recap of the previous week's game: The heroes assaulted the Black Candle, a stronghold of Vecna worshipers hidden in a demiplane that can only be accessed via a secret ritual. Fortunately Xanthum (Curt Gould's gnome bard) had mastered the ritual.

Unfortunately, the Vecnites—themselves masters of secret lore—were more than prepared for the party's arrival. The heroes quickly found themselves surrounded and fighting for their lives against evil wizards, assassins, cultists, shadow demons, and undead creatures that like to feast on healing surges. To make matters worse, the heroes had an unexpected run-in with an exarch of the Maimed Lord, who banished Xanthum the gnome bard to the Nine Hells.

In a recent poll, y'all voted to decide which character in my Wednesday night campaign should die next. The votes were tallied, and Xanthum the gnome bard "won" by a landslide. Perhaps it was fate, but even before we knew the final results of the poll, events of the campaign had already conspired against Xanthum. Curt Gould was forced to wait a whole week to find out whether Xanthum would return from the Nine Hells in one piece. His anxiety only grew once the poll results were tallied.

Fortunately for Curt, I'm not the sort of DM who kills characters solely based on poll results; honestly, my players are quite capable of killing off their

characters, and sometimes each other, without my help. That said, I have been known to torture my players' characters from time to time.

Just ask Rodney Thompson.

Many levels ago, the Wednesday night heroes faced a similar situation where they attacked an elemental weapons foundry and found themselves overwhelmed. The characters were knocked out (except for Andrew Finch's character, who fled), branded as enemies of the Dragovar empire (and by "branded" I mean literally scarred with scorching-hot brands that marked them as criminals), and handed over to a ship full of privateers (and by "privateers" I mean pirates). Prior to the ship's departure, Rodney's character Vargas had one of his eyes gouged out and replaced with a magical one; the bad guys planned to use Vargas as a "mule" to deliver this magic item to a one-eyed pirate warlord locked away in an island prison.

In the course of the journey, with a little help from Andrew's character, the heroes managed to commandeer the ship and avoid incarceration. Yet the pain and mutilation inflicted upon Vargas would be the beginning of a new arc for that character, one that would carry Vargas through many levels and even tiers of play. Rodney seized upon the opportunity, transforming Vargas into an avenger dedicated to wiping out those who maimed him. The eye not only gave Rodney a new magic item to play with, but also a new enemy to look forward to: the aforementioned pirate warlord, who was recently released from prison and—not surprisingly—wanted his magic eye back.

A little pain goes a long way . . .

. . . which brings us back to poor Xanthum. After making Curt wait a whole week to learn the ultimate fate of his character, I took him aside at the start of the session and told him that upon arriving in the Nine Hells, Xanthum was taken prisoner by a covey of night hags, whereupon he became their favorite "plaything." After six years of torture and



abuse (this being a PG-rated blog, I'll spare you the horrific details), Xanthum was returned to his companions at roughly the moment he was spirited away. Curt was stunned, to say the least, but his horror turned to elation—I'd just given him a campaign's worth of roleplaying material to work with. Xanthum, the "cheery sing-along gnome bard," would never be the same!

Alas, Xanthum died later in the session. Fortunately, he was carrying a potion of life, which another character poured down his throat in the nick of time. In what can only be described as a cruel twist of irony, we managed to make good on the poll results while also keeping Xanthum in the game.

It's also worth noting that one of the Vecnite assassins had a quiver stuffed with seven *crossbow bolts of slaying*—one bolt for each character in the party. (The Vecnites had plenty of time to study the heroes' weaknesses and craft these menacing magic items, so this didn't seem beyond the realm of reason.) Here are the stats I created for these busted items, in case you're curious:

Missile of Slaying Level 30 Rare

Inscribed in Supernal script upon the razor-sharp tip of this crimson-fletched arrow or crossbow bolt is the name of the creature it aims to kill.

Wondrous Item 125,000 gp

Property

Inscribed upon this missile is the name of a specific individual. If the missile hits the creature whose name is inscribed upon it, that creature drops to 0 hit points. If the creature doesn't die when reduced to 0 hit points, the creature must make a saving throw; if the save fails, the creature dies. Whether it hits or misses its intended target, the missile's magic is spent once the missile is shot.

Over the course of the evening, the assassin managed to fire off six of the seven bolts before he was slain. Thanks to a couple missed attacks, some successful saving throws, and another potion of life, no one died (at least not for long). Ironically, the only bolt that wasn't shot was the one with Xanthum's name on it.



LESSONS LEARNED

Pain and death are part of the human condition, and until we experience them in some form or another, we cannot truly understand or appreciate what it means to be human. I don't have enough fingers and toes to count the number of books, comics, movies, and television series that use death and near-death experiences as catalysts for character development. In all forms of storytelling, pain and death fuel character development, and D&D is all about character development. Without it, pain and death are largely meaningless. When I hear DMs complain about the pointlessness of death in their D&D campaigns due to the preponderance of Raise Dead rituals and other "cheats," I wonder if maybe they're missing an important opportunity.

On the other hand, I'm also told that 4th Edition characters are hard to kill. I can accept that. It's particularly true if all they face week-in, week-out are encounters comparable to their level. For me, I like to give my player characters the full range, from easy to harrowing. While I don't believe it's the DM's job to kill characters, I do get a morbid kick out of watching my players scour their character sheets in sweaty desperation, looking for that one half-forgotten power or magic item to save their bacon. I often plan sessions in which the characters might (depending on their choices and actions) find themselves fighting more

than one encounter's worth of opponents at once. I run a deadly game of D&D, and yet, more often than not, the heroes prevail. Desperation begets imagination, and when it comes to staying alive, my players can be very imaginative.

To summarize:

- ◆ **Never underestimate the death-defying desperation of player characters.**
- ◆ **Pain and death can trigger great character development.**

Those of you who follow the Penny Arcade podcasts know what I'm saying is true. The death of Aeofel (Wil Wheaton's character) at the end of the third series spawned an entire adventure built around his triumphant return. Ye gods, if you want to see character development at its finest, check out the PAX 2010 Celebrity Game podcast!

When a character dies, it's either a momentous event or a momentary inconvenience depending on the campaign. My goal as DM is to remind players that even in a world with Raise Dead rituals, pain and death can still serve as fodder for good character development. Scars, nightmares, the thirst for vengeance, the undying enmity of the Raven Queen—these are the types of things that can haunt characters for a long time and make them more fun and interesting to play. So, before you puncture the hearts of your player characters with arrows of slaying, try to remember that the goal isn't necessarily to kill them off, but rather to give them more reasons to live.

Until the next encounter!

Special Guest Star

5/26/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

Paragon tier. The search for a lost artifact leads the heroes to a sunken citadel, within which they find an extradimensional vault. The vault holds many treasures and surprises, including its mysterious architect—an astral giant driven mad by the passing centuries. Attending him are two angels: an angel of Erathis named Mercion the Icebreaker, and an angel of Moradin named Kharandar the Firehearted.

Rather than play all three NPCs myself, I invited two special guest stars (former colleagues visiting from out of town) to play the angels, namely Steven “Stan!” Brown and Owen K.C. Stephens.

In keeping with my tradition of treating the campaign as a television series, I’m pleased whenever I can get a “special guest star” to show up for a session or two, even though my gaming group is already quite large. It’s a clever bit of stunt casting that can surprise and delight your players. I think it’s refreshing to bring new faces into the group, and it gives the campaign a different energy as well as someone other than me for the regular players to interact with. It’s also a good way to give friends who can’t commit to joining the “regular cast” an opportunity to contribute to the campaign, if only fleetingly.

I started using “special guest stars” in my long running 3rd Edition campaign when I found myself in the enviable position of having more people interested in my game than seats at the table. I would include special guest stars whenever a player absence meant I had a spare chair, and they appeared often and with great success. (I use them less frequently

now only because I’m so busy that I often don’t remember what an awesome idea it would be to bring in a special guest star until I’m setting up for the game and cursing my shortsightedness . . . but by then, of course, it’s usually too late.)

It does take some DM preparation to make sure everyone enjoys the “special guest star” experience. To prepare for the session with Stan and Owen, I typed up three paragraphs of background information for them to sink their teeth into . . . just enough for them to understand their characters’ goals and motivations. If they weren’t playing angels who’d spent the past several centuries trapped in an extradimensional vault, I might’ve also given them a brief summary of the campaign world, but in this case it actually served the characters of the angels better if their players knew very little about the “outside world.”

Here’s what Stan and Owen were told about Mercion and Kharandar:

Hundreds of years ago, Erathis (the god of civilization and invention) inspired the servants of Moradin (the god of creation and the forge) to build an extradimensional vault, within which was hidden the treasures of bygone empires. The vault’s architect was an astral giant named Runor Everlast. After his work was complete, Runor decided to remain in the vault as its eternal guardian. Moradin and Erathis each appointed an angel to protect Runor and keep him company: Mercion the Icebreaker, and Kharandar the Firehearted. Unfortunately for the angels, the astral giant has since lost his grip on reality.

Many years ago, a small band of githyanki infiltrated the vault by some means Runor could not ascertain. Fearing that the vault had a flaw in its design, Runor set about making “repairs.” Despite his endless toiling, Runor still believes the vault’s security has been compromised. Although the githyanki invaders were dispatched, the astral giant is prone to hallucinations and sees githyanki in his mind from time to time.

Mercion and Kharandar are obliged to protect Runor at all costs, even if the giant puts himself in harm’s way. However, if Runor is slain, the angels are released from service and harbor no ill will toward Runor’s slayers, and might even be persuaded to help them. Both are eager to return to the Astral Sea, but first they must find a way to escape from the vault. Runor occasionally speaks of a secret means of escape but always stops short of revealing the details.

Ultimately, the only things I felt Stan and Owen needed were (1) a reason to oppose the heroes, and (2) a reason to help the heroes. Realistically, they only have three hours to make these characters their own, and more detail wouldn’t have added much to the fun of playing these offbeat roles. I also don’t feel it’s my place to tell them how to play their characters unless they ask for advice; experienced roleplayers will find something to latch onto. In this case, Stan and Owen gravitated toward the elemental nature of each angel: Mercion the Icebreaker sounded cold and calculating, while Kharandar the Firehearted sounded loud and temperamental. I didn’t tell Stan or Owen to play their characters that way; they made the call.

However, Stan and Owen were allowed to ask me questions to fill holes in their player knowledge. For example, at one point the heroes asked the angels for more information about the githyanki raiders; I then stepped into the discussion and revealed some crucial information, but only as much as I felt the angels would be comfortable sharing with the party based on how tight-lipped Stan and Owen were playing them.



In addition to the three paragraphs of background information, I gave Stan and Owen unique stat blocks for each angel, mostly because I enjoy designing 4th Edition monsters so much. I could've easily given them stats for any of the existing varieties of angels, but I wanted the angels to fill different combat roles, and I wanted to make sure they had a decent selection of combat options. Had these angels been designed for less experienced players, I probably would've cut the triggered action powers to make them a bit simpler. Anyway, feel free to plunder these for your home games:

Mercion, Angel of Erathis Level 21 Elite Soldier		
Medium immortal humanoid (angel)		XP 6,400
HP 392; Bloodied 196		Initiative +16
AC 37, Fortitude 33, Reflex 32, Will 34		Perception +19
Speed 6, fly 9		
Immune fear; Resist 15 cold, 15 radiant		
Saving Throws +2; Action Points 1; Healing Surges 3		
TRAITS		
☼ Negation Aura ♦ Aura 1		
Creatures in the aura lose their resistance to cold.		
Angelic Presence		
Attacks against Mercion take a -2 penalty until the angel is bloodied.		
STANDARD ACTIONS		
⬇ Icy Longsword (cold, weapon) ♦ At-Will		
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +26 vs. AC		
Hit: 2d8 + 14 cold damage, and the target is immobilized (save ends).		
⬇ Double Attack ♦ At-Will		
Effect: Mercion uses <i>icy longsword</i> twice.		
MOVE ACTIONS		
❄ Freezing Teleport (cold, teleportation) ♦ Recharge [☄] [⏮]		
Effect: Mercion teleports 5 squares. Any enemy adjacent to Mercion after he teleports takes 15 cold damage and is immobilized (save ends).		
TRIGGERED ACTIONS		
☹ Bitter Rebuke (cold) ♦ At-Will		
Trigger: An enemy damages Mercion.		
Effect (Immediate Reaction): The triggering enemy takes 15 cold damage.		
Skills Diplomacy +22, Insight +10, Intimidate +22, Religion +18		
Str 22 (+16)	Dex 20 (+15)	Wis 18 (+14)
Con 20 (+15)	Int 16 (+13)	Cha 25 (+17)
Alignment unaligned Languages Common, Supernal		
Equipment longsword		

Kharandar, Angel of Moradin Level 21 Elite Brute		
Medium immortal humanoid (angel)		XP 6,400
HP 490; Bloodied 245		Initiative +14
AC 33, Fortitude 33, Reflex 30, Will 32		Perception +19
Speed 6, fly 9		
Immune fear; Resist 15 fire, 15 radiant		
Saving Throws +2; Action Points 1; Healing Surges 3		
TRAITS		
☼ Negation Aura ♦ Aura 1		
Creatures in the aura lose their resistance to fire.		
Angelic Presence		
Attacks against Kharandar take a -2 penalty until the angel is bloodied.		
STANDARD ACTIONS		
⬇ Flaming Longsword (fire, weapon) ♦ At-Will		
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +26 vs. AC		
Hit: 4d8 + 18 fire damage.		
Miss: Half damage.		
⬇ Double Attack ♦ At-Will		
Effect: Mercion uses <i>flaming longsword</i> twice.		
⚡ Vortex of Fire (fire, zone) ♦ Recharge [⚡] [⏮]		
Attack: Close burst 1 (creatures in the burst); +24 vs. Fortitude		
Hit: 4d10 + 17 fire damage.		
Miss: Half damage.		
Effect: This power creates a zone of fire that lasts until the start of Kharandar's next turn. The zone remains centered on Kharandar and moves with him. Any creature that starts its turn in the zone takes 15 fire damage.		
TRIGGERED ACTIONS		
☹ Fiery Rebuke (fire) ♦ At-Will		
Trigger: An enemy damages Kharandar.		
Effect (Immediate Reaction): The triggering enemy takes 15 fire damage.		
Skills Diplomacy +21, Dungeoneering +18, Intimidate +21, Religion +18		
Str 22 (+16)	Dex 19 (+14)	Wis 19 (+14)
Con 25 (+17)	Int 16 (+13)	Cha 23 (+16)
Alignment unaligned Languages Dwarven, Supernal		
Equipment longsword		



LESSONS LEARNED

Although they aren't part of the regular cast, "special guest stars" hold a special place in my heart, and I never use them as frequently as I'd like. Still, whenever they show up, my players take special interest in the session's events, thinking that maybe something big is afoot. Also, the new arrivals usually put my players on their best behavior. To their credit my players always try to make the special guest stars as comfortable as possible, even if they're playing villains.

My players understand the reason behind including special guest stars, and that's to make the campaign experience more surprising and fun for everyone involved. (That reminds me of a related story concerning David Noonan, who joined my 3rd Edition campaign as a "regular player" for a few sessions before his character royally screwed the party. Dave and I were the only ones who knew he wasn't, in fact, making a long-term commitment to the campaign, and his character's sudden betrayal left many lasting scars. You can't really pull that trick more than once before players start to look at each other suspiciously.)

There's no formula for knowing when to include a special guest star. My rule is: whenever conceivable, but not so often that it becomes the norm. Unlike a TV show, it doesn't cost any extra money to bring in extra talent, and it often makes my job easier as a DM because the players aren't just reacting to me all evening. (That said, remember that too much of a good thing can be poisonous.) All you need is someone willing to play for a session or two, and an NPC, party companion or other character for them to take over and make their own.

A couple things to keep in mind about special guest stars in your campaign:

- ♦ A good special guest star is like the tiny umbrella in a piña colada—a fun little element to surprise and delight . . . or to give your campaign a bit of a stir.
- ♦ If you want your special guest stars to have a good time, provide only the essential information they need to play their roles effectively, then give them the same freedom you give your regular cast of players to play their characters as they will.

Until the next encounter!

Popcorn

6/2/11

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

Early in the campaign, on the island of Kheth, the heroes destroyed a cursed cauldron hidden deep inside an underground temple. This act triggered a curse that caused the dead to rise all across the island. The shambling horde chased the heroes back to the fortified village of Tyrak'n, where they made their final stand. I drew a map of the village's palisade wall on a wet-erase battle map, and beyond this wall I arrayed a legion of D&D miniatures—skeletons and other undead critters. There must've been at least fifty of them.

Many levels later, the village of Tyrak'n was again threatened, this time by goblins hiding out in the Feywild. The goblins were using a ritual to create a fey crossing, allowing them to surreptitiously invade the village without having to breach the palisades. When the heroes caught wind of the goblins' scheme, they ventured to the Feywild and assaulted the goblin stockade, which was filled to the brim with nearly one hundred of the villainous little buggers (as well as a few dozen hobgoblins and bugbears).

When it comes to throwing monsters at my players, the more the merrier.

I love minions. To me, they're like popcorn. I can't get enough of them. Every now and then, I dive into my collection of pre-painted plastic minis and sort them into armies that I can, at some future point, throw against my players. Skeletons. Goblins. Gnolls. Orcs. Ogres. Yuan-ti. Githyanki. Giants. Minions come in all shapes and sizes.

The 1 hit point minion is one of 4th Edition's great contributions to the D&D legacy. Minions are fun for the players insofar as they provide instant

gratification; all it takes is one good sword swing or one magic missile to drop a minion, while a good area-of-effect power might annihilate an entire group of them in one fell swoop. They're a godsend to the DM, who doesn't need to waste time tracking hit points.

The *Dungeon Master's Guide* has a simple formula for the power level of a minion compared to a standard monster. I say forget the math! When a battle calls for minions, give the players everything you've got. And I mean everything. What's the worst that could happen? I'll tell you: The heroes might be overwhelmed and defeated. In my campaign, that's never a showstopper. If you're the type of DM who sees this potential outcome as an opportunity and not a campaign-ender, then you'll probably agree with me that you can never have too many minions. Give the players the fight they've been hankering for all week, and let the popcorn fall where it may.

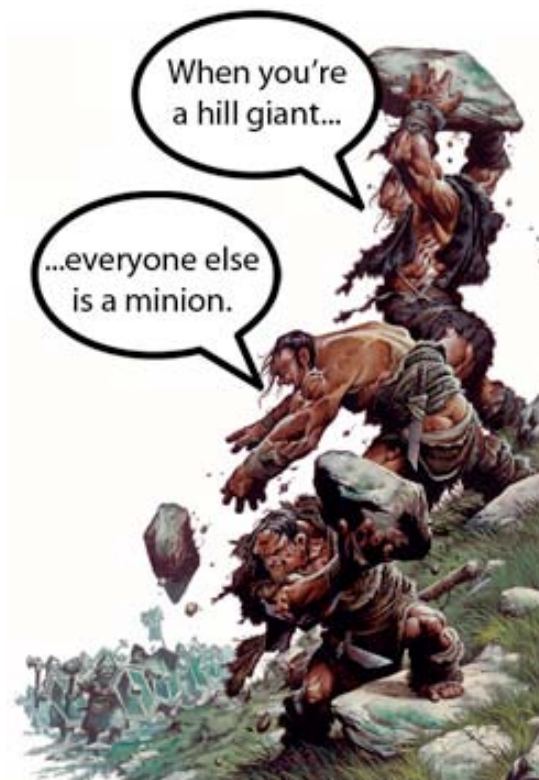
Don't get me wrong: Sometimes it makes sense to include only a handful of minions in an encounter. What I'm referring to are those momentous occasions when you want to impress and terrify your players with what they're up against. When an enemy has the advantage of sheer numbers, players start to think twice about their conventional monster-slaying tactics; true, a wizard's fireball can kill twenty minions as easily as one, but if that still leaves twenty more minions on the table, the heroes could find themselves in serious trouble. They might even be forced to retreat or (gasp!) surrender.

When I build encounters, I balance them without factoring minions into the mix. That's not in keeping with the rules as written, but the DM has license to break the rules (as long as he or she does so fairly, consistently, and openly). Depending on how the minions are arrayed and when they show up has a lot to do with their effectiveness on the battlefield. If they're neatly arrayed in tight clusters for all the heroes to see, the wizard will make sure they're not

around very long. On the other hand, if they're spread out, or if they only appear when certain conditions arise, they can truly change the complexion of the battlefield and force the players to reconsider their tactics. For example, I sometimes keep minions in reserve until the bad guy summons them, and I often keep extras behind my DM screen in case the player characters are having too easy a time.

LESSONS LEARNED

When I think of minions, I think of the big fight scenes in all three films of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. For some reason, the image of Aragorn fighting orcs always springs to mind, and I think to myself, "I will never get tired of watching Aragorn kill orcs." Most



of my players are the same way: They long to play out battles against seemingly overwhelming numbers of foes and watch their heroes carve and blast their way through enemy lines.

- ♦ **Wading through waves of minions makes the heroes feel like heroes.**
- ♦ **Minions in large numbers terrify and excite the players.**

Although minions come with specified XP values, it's ultimately up to the DM to decide how much XP the characters receive for defeating them (and don't let any rulebook tell you otherwise). I tend to "ad hoc" the XP awards for minions. If the minions prove to be instrumental, then I might award full XP for them. On the other hand, if the minions aren't terribly effective, I might award none.

If you follow my advice and start bombarding your players with veritable armies of minions, be advised that the goal should not be to annihilate the party. If that's your objective, it's a lot simpler just to drop an asteroid on them and be done with it. No, your goal as the DM is to entertain the players by creating in-game situations that are perilous and fun, and minions are merely tools toward that end. If the heroes start dropping like flies, consider that the bad guys might stabilize them and take them prisoner. Many great adventures begin with just such a setback or defeat.

Until the next encounter!

The Wyrmworn Experiment

6/9/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

Jeremy Crawford plays a human wizard named Alex, who began the campaign as an orphan shipwrecked on the backwater island of Kheth. There, he studied the magical arts under the tutelage of an eladrin recluse.

In the first episode of the campaign, Alex came face-to-face with Serusa, a dragonborn wizard in the service of the Shan Qabal (an imperial sect of wizards dedicated to magical research). Little did Alex realize that Serusa had come to the island to kill him.

*In due course, Alex learned that he and several other children were part of a magical experiment in which the spirits of mighty dragon-sorcerers were bound within them. In a story inspired by *The Manchurian Candidate*, Alex and the other children—dubbed the Wyrmworn—were to be used as weapons against the enemies of the Dragovar Empire. However, a change in the political landscape resulted in the sudden termination of the project. The Shan Qabal then sought to eliminate all of the Wyrmworn, quietly and without fuss, but opposing forces managed to smuggle several of the children to safety aboard two merchant ships. The ship bearing Alex and several other children was lost in a storm and presumed destroyed. It took the Shan Qabal fifteen years to learn there were survivors.*

By the time he hit paragon tier, Alex was exploring the world with his adventuring companions, and Serusa was nothing more than XP in the bank. As happens with many orphans in fiction, however, Alex discovered he wasn't an



orphan after all. His father, Vincent van Hyden, was discovered to be an influential member of a worldwide trade consortium. From his father, Alex learned that he'd been given over to the Shan Qabal willingly, in exchange for money and the promise of power. Like everyone else, Vincent presumed his son had been lost at sea and spent years wallowing in fatherly guilt. After making amends with his father and tired of the sect's constant attempts to end his life, Alex took it upon himself to confront the leader of the Shan Qabal: Lenkhor Krige.

Lenkhor was an ancient, bedridden dragonborn archmage clinging to life by means of a magical crystal acting as a life support system. To his surprise, Alex learned that Lenkhor was the one who secretly arranged for the Wyrmworn children to be smuggled to safety, for he could not bear to see his handiwork destroyed. Taking fatherly pride in Alex's many accomplishments, Lenkhor also offered to help the young wizard contend with Hahrzan, Lenkhor's apprentice and political rival. Alex comes to learn that Hahrzan not only despises Lenkhor and seeks to wrest control of the Shan Qabal, but also conspires to destroy his master's legacy. Thus Hahrzan, it turns out, is behind the attempts on Alex's life.

Anticipating a confrontation with Hahrzan, Lenkhor tells Alex how to awaken his dragon spirit, believing him powerful enough to control it, but so far Alex hasn't dared do so. Alex has witnessed others like him dominated or destroyed by their awakened dragon spirits, and it remains to be seen whether he has the will and fortitude to do what no other Wyrmworn has been able to. Maybe awakening the dragon is part of his epic destiny. . . .

The Wyrmworn Experiment was something I dreamed up at the start of the campaign. The seed of the idea was a simple character background: one or more characters are survivors of a shipwreck. Of the eight players in my Monday night group, only Jeremy Crawford selected this background. As I began plotting out the first few adventures, I started to contemplate the cause of the shipwreck and eventually settled on a magical storm. I surmised that the storm was a deliberate attack on the ship, but why would someone want the ship destroyed? I made the logical leap that maybe, just maybe, the ship was transporting something dangerous to the Dragovar Empire... something that had to be destroyed at all costs.

For the sake of good drama, this clearly had to be Alex.

When Jeremy chose "shipwrecked orphan" as the hook for his character, he didn't know anything about

the Wyrmworn Experiment. His character didn't even have a last name. These are elements I concocted and doled out over the course of many levels. I'd be lying to you if I said I knew the full extent of Alex's story from the very beginning, or how the various facts would come to light. As happens, a lot of Alex's story was dreamt up along the way. But from the outset, I knew three things were true:

- ◆ **Alex survived a shipwreck as an infant and knew nothing about his parents. (This information I got from Jeremy during character creation.)**
- ◆ **Alex and several other children were turned over to a group of dragonborn wizards, who bound the spirits of ancient dragon sorcerers within them.**
- ◆ **Ironically, the same wizards who bound the dragon spirit in Alex were now trying to kill him.**

The truth about Alex's father and Lenkhor Krige (whose last name I stole from the wonderfully alluring actress Alice Krige) came much later, whenever something would happen in the game that drove home the need to give Alex's story a forward push. The decision to make Lenkhor a sympathetic character was a spontaneous decision that happened in the middle of a session, when it occurred to me how cool it would be to give Alex two father figures, each repentant for different reasons: his conniving biological father who gave him away, and the dragonborn archmage who made him into the man he's become. Also, I was wary of the "evil archmage" cliché and wanted the leader of the Shan Qabal to be something unique and unexpected.

The heroes stormed into Lenkhor's tower expecting a big fight, and what they got was a withered husk of a mighty archwizard lying on his deathbed. The image of a figure who was

simultaneously powerful and weak appealed to me, as did the idea that Lenkhor would do anything—magical and otherwise—to prolong his life, if only to aggravate his apprentice.

For Jeremy, who enjoys a good roleplaying challenge, it was an opportunity for Alex to confront the architect of the Wyrmworn Experiment and realize he's not dealing with a monster but a wizard whose lifelong quest for knowledge and power matched his own. This decision to portray Lenkhor as something other than a threat also opened the door to the possibility of Alex becoming a member of the Shan Qabal, which is basically what happened at the end of the paragon tier.

LESSONS LEARNED

I've been watching *Mad Men* on DVD. It's another one of those ensemble shows I like so much, where every character receives a measure of growth and development. (Sounds like my D&D campaign!) As is typical for me, I'll watch an episode and then immediately watch it again with the commentary track, and what occurs to me over and over is that the show's writers and creators don't map out everything from the beginning. They give the actors just enough understanding of their characters to be effective in their roles, put them in dramatic situations, and then watch and see what happens. As each character's story comes into focus, the writers add new layers of complexity. They pay attention to what the actor does and give the actor new things to play with. Along the way, they look for surprises... and sometimes the things they thought were true in the beginning turn out to be false, or—better yet—lead to deeper truths.

The Wyrmworn Experiment is an example of an evolving character arc. It starts with something simple ("Your character is a shipwrecked orphan") and grows into something epic ("Your character was sold to dragonborn wizards and transformed into a

vessel for a mighty dragon spirit that the Dragovar Empire intended to unleash as a weapon against its enemies"). It's a difficult thing to pull off for every character, and frankly, not all players are hankering for something so intricate. For the invested roleplayers in your group, you can develop similar character arcs by asking two questions at any point in the lifespan of your campaign:

- ◆ **What's true about the character?**
- ◆ **What's really true about the character?**

Alex is an orphan (no, he's not). The Shan Qabal is trying to kill him (yes and no). He has the spirit of a dragon-sorcerer locked inside him (absolutely true, but maybe that's not such a bad thing after all).

Not all characters have or need as much built-in mystery as Alex van Hyden. Consider another character from my Monday night game: Matt Sernett's character, Bartho, began the campaign as a "local yokel," a dull-witted youth who fishes all day and drinks all night. All we knew about Bartho (and all there was to know about Bartho!) was that he wasn't particularly bright, and that he was taught how to fish by his uncle, who also happens to be the village drunk.

When a character is bereft of mystery, it's incumbent upon the DM to get creative and look at all of the elements that make the character what he is, including influential NPCs. Why is Bartho being raised by his uncle? Who is his uncle, really? Maybe the "village drunk" is a role he plays to divert suspicion. Maybe there's more to Bartho's uncle than meets the eye. In fact, what if he's secretly an agent for the Knights of Ardyn, a radical group led by a politically motivated silver dragon who seeks to overthrow the corrupt Dragovar Empire? What if the uncle realizes that Bartho might make a great fighter someday and gives the lad a gift—a silver dagger that the Knights carry around to identify one

another? Maybe one day Bartho will find himself in a Dragovar settlement, innocently skinning an apple with his uncle's knife, when someone familiar with the emblem takes notice. It might lead to Bartho's first brush with the Knights of Ardyn... or the Dragovar secret police. The possibilities alone make me smile and clap my hands like a schoolboy.

Next week we'll check out the winners of the Magnificent Minion contest.

Until the next encounter!



Magnificent Minions

6/16/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

Nacime's regular character is a defective warforged named Fleet. Several sessions ago, a group of Vecna-worshipping wizards abducted Fleet with the intention of dismantling and studying him. Fleet's sudden and somewhat unexpected disappearance afforded Nacime the chance to roll up a new character and try something different for few sessions.

Recently, however, the heroes located and stormed the Vecnites' secret lair and rescued Fleet from his captors. (Now Nacime has two characters, which presents a different sort of challenge.)

To get to the main bad guys, the heroes had to carve through Vecna's disciples, which included plenty of minions. The disciples' main "schtick" was that they uttered a terrible curse when killed. The curse made whoever killed them temporarily vulnerable to necrotic damage, which—as you might imagine—is particularly troublesome when fighting agents of the undead god of secrets.

Here's the stat block I created for the disciples of Vecna, which you're free to plunder for your home campaign:

Masked Disciple of Vecna	Level 23 Minion Brute
Medium natural humanoid, human	XP 1,275
HP 1; a missed attack never damages a minion. Initiative +11	
AC 35, Fortitude 36, Reflex 35, Will 34	
Perception +14	
Speed 6	
STANDARD ACTIONS	
⚔ Staff (necrotic, weapon) ♦ At-Will	
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +28 vs. AC	
Hit: 15 necrotic damage, and the target cannot spend healing surges until the start of the disciple's next turn.	
🔮 Stolen Secrets (psychic) ♦ At-Will	
Attack: Ranged 5 (one creature); +26 vs. Will	
Hit: 15 psychic damage, and the target cannot use encounter or daily powers (save ends).	
TRIGGERED ACTIONS	
⚔ Curse of the Whispered One ♦ At-Will	
Trigger: An enemy's attack drops the disciple to 0 hit points.	
Effect: The triggering enemy gains vulnerable 10 necrotic until the end of the encounter.	
Str 15 (+13)	Dex 11 (+11)
Con 20 (+16)	Int 18 (+15)
Wis 17 (+14)	Cha 15 (+13)
Alignment evil	
Languages Common	
Equipment staff, skull mask	

Because of their *curse of the Whispered One* power, these minion cultists are best combined with undead creatures that deal necrotic damage. Nothing says "bwah-haha" better than a minion who keeps dealin' the damage long after it's dead! Of course, once my players realized that the curse's effects don't stack, they got smart and let one character focus on taking out the minions so that the rest of them wouldn't be cursed.

"MAGNIFICENT MINION" CONTEST

Thanks to everyone who submitted minion ideas and stat blocks for the "[Magnificent Minion!](#)" contest. Not surprisingly, we received a ton of fun and wacky ideas, with brutes and skirmishers by far the most popular monster roles represented. (Not a whole lot of love for artillery and lurkers, however.)

I've picked my three favorites and have a few things to say about each one. A cautionary note: No real effort has been made to develop or edit these monsters. In a couple cases, I made some formatting changes and filled in some accidental omissions, but that's it.

Blood of Torog



By Chris C., U.S.A.F. Academy CO

Torog is the god of imprisonment, torture, and the Underdark. This particular critter likes to crawl inside your body, mingle with your blood, and control

Blood of Torog		Level 10 Minion Skirmisher
Medium immortal animate (ooze)		XP 125
HP 1; a missed attack never damages a minion. Initiative +11		
AC 24, Fortitude 20, Reflex 21, Will 17 Perception +10		
Speed 6, climb 6 Blindsight 10		
TRAITS		
☼ Essence Drain (necrotic) ♦ Aura 1		
An enemy that starts its turn within the aura takes 2 necrotic damage.		
Ooze		
While squeezing, the blood of Torog moves at full speed rather than half speed, it doesn't take a -5 penalty to attack rolls, and it doesn't grant combat advantage for squeezing.		
STANDARD ACTIONS		
⬇ Slam (necrotic) ♦ At-Will		
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +15 vs. AC		
Hit: 6 necrotic damage, and the blood of Torog can shift 1 square and pull the target into the space it just vacated.		
⬇ Invade the Blood (healing, necrotic) ♦ Encounter		
Effect: The blood of Torog shifts a number of squares equal to its speed and must end its move adjacent to a bloodied enemy.		
Attack: Melee 1 (one bloodied creature); +13 vs. Reflex		
Hit: The blood of Torog grabs the target (escape DC 18). Until it escapes the grab, the target takes ongoing necrotic damage equal to its level. If this damage reduces the target to 0 hit points, the target regains hit points equal to its bloodied value and is dominated (no save), and the blood of Torog is removed from play. While dominated, the target acts in accordance with the blood of Torog's wishes. When the dominated target drops to 0 hit points, it is no longer dominated or grabbed, and the blood of Torog appears in a square adjacent to the target.		
MINOR ACTIONS		
Change Shape (polymorph) ♦ At-Will		
Effect: The blood of Torog can assume the form of any creature it kills, though it appears tortured and mutilated. While in this form, it loses the ooze trait.		
Skills Stealth +14		
Str 10 (+5)	Dex 18 (+9)	Wis 10 (+5)
Con 16 (+8)	Int 10 (+5)	Cha 10 (+5)
Alignment chaotic evil Languages —		

you like a meat puppet. *Invade the blood* is a fairly complex power for a minion, but undeniably scary.

I might change the encounter power to a “recharge when the attack misses” power (just to make it even scarier), and while its basic attack damage might seem low at first glance, its aura makes up for it.

The *change shape* power is a particularly nice little bit of flavor that doesn't have much impact in combat but gives the monster a disturbing aspect that mirrors the mutilated form of Torog himself. Sometimes even the most experienced designers forget the impact that these sorts of powers can have at the game table. It also reinforces the idea that monsters can be more than the sum of their statistics.

Clobbermob Nilbog



By Robert P., Toms River NJ

Try saying this monster's name quickly three times! For those who don't know, the nilbog (“goblin” spelled backward) traces its origins back to the earliest days of D&D. Its original shtick was that attacks healed

the nilbog while healing spells wounded it. One of my all-time favorite *Dungeon* adventures (“Pearlman's Curiosity” in issue #32) featured one of these little buggers, and I've been favorably disposed toward them ever since.

Clobbermob nilbogs resemble regular goblins save for their greasy, violet-red skin, black eyes, and backward hands and feet. They speak a hideous mishmash of Elven and Goblin, and are inclined to sing grisly choruses as they swarm victims. Also, check out their equipment—gotta love a minion that carries around three goose eggs and a roasted pixie!

I'm guessing that “AC 1” is not an error but an attempt to reflect the idea that nilbogs are “damage magnets.” I think I'd change its Thievery bonus to +17 to account for training, but its other defenses and its damage are spot on.

Clobbermob Nilbog		Level 14 Minion Brute
Small fey humanoid		XP 250
HP 1; a missed attack never damages a minion. Initiative +14		
AC 1, Fortitude 27, Reflex 26, Will 26 Perception +12		
Speed 6		
Immune attack powers with the weapon keyword		
TRAITS		
Healing Aversion		
The nilbog loses its immunity and all temporary hit points if a creature adjacent to it uses a second wind or heals from a power with the healing keyword.		
Tough Little Bugger		
Whenever the nilbog is hit with an attack power that has the weapon keyword, it gains 5 temporary hit points. These temporary hit points are cumulative.		
STANDARD ACTIONS		
⬇ Knucklebone Cudgel (weapon) ♦ At-Will		
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +19 vs. AC		
Hit: 14 damage.		
Skills Thievery +12		
Str 23 (+13)	Dex 20 (+12)	Wis 20 (+12)
Con 20 (+12)	Int 20 (+12)	Cha 20 (+12)
Alignment evil Languages Elven, Goblin		
Equipment knucklebone cudgel, burlap sack (tunic), wine bladder, three goose eggs, spit-roasted pixie		

Clockwork Wasp Drone



By Beren Ross S., Fort Collins CO

Beren reports that this particular minion was used during a fight where the heroes had to climb a tower with moving floors (shaped like *Tetris* pieces) while being attacked by a hive of clockwork wasps, leading to a boss battle with their queen at the top. That's one battle I would've loved to see!

Being small of brain, I like minions that are simple and straightforward. However, the best minions have a signature power or trait that embodies what the monster is all about. In this case, it's the extra damage that the drone deals when it's adjacent to allies; it makes the DM want to group these minions into tight swarms, and how appropriate is that?

As is true of many minions, the clockwork wasp drone explodes when it drops to 0 hit points. This particular critter unleashes a burst of lightning that targets enemies only, so the poor drone doesn't have to worry about killing all of its buddies like an exploding can of Raid insecticide.

Clockwork Wasp Drone		Level 13 Minion
Small natural animate (construct)		Skirmisher
HP 1; a missed attack never damages a minion. Initiative +12		XP 200
AC 27, Fortitude 25, Reflex 25, Will 21		Perception +6
Speed 6, fly 6		
Immune disease, poison		
STANDARD ACTIONS		
⚔ Stinger (poison) ♦ At-Will		
Effect: The drone can shift 1 square before it attacks.		
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +18 vs. AC		
Hit: 8 poison damage plus 1 extra poison damage for each ally adjacent to the drone.		
TRIGGERED ACTIONS		
⚡ Clockwork Burst (lightning) ♦ Encounter		
Effect: The drone drops to 0 hit points.		
Attack (No Action): Close burst 1 (enemies in the burst); +16 vs. AC		
Hit: 8 lightning damage.		
Str 11 (+6)	Dex 18 (+10)	Wis 11 (+6)
Con 18 (+10)	Int 2 (+2)	Cha 10 (+6)
Alignment unaligned Languages –		

Honorable Mentions

Props also go to Rane S. of Nokesville VA for the “flying eyeball” (each minion comes with a random beholder eye ray) and Kendall B. of Toronto ON for the “troll whelp” (which a troll can spawn when it takes damage and then eat to gain temporary hit points).

Until the next encounter!

Joy and Sorrow

6/23/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

Chris Youngs' tiefling character, Deimos, came close to realizing his dream of becoming a Sea King (a powerful sea merchant) when tragedy struck. He had assembled a fleet of loyal ships, and spent a staggering amount of party gold to “trick out” his flagship, the *Morrow* (named after his surrogate father, Captain Denarion *Morrow*). However, as happens in my campaign, the winds of fate blew ill one game session and the *Morrow* was blown to smithereens. The details aren't relevant; what's important is that I could hear Deimos's dreams of world domination shatter like a dropped mirror, and Chris was not a happy camper.

The explosion that obliterated the *Morrow* also killed Deimos and all but one of the other player characters, but their deaths were but a temporary inconvenience. Once he was raised from the dead, Deimos (a.k.a. Sea King Impstinger) was far more concerned about his precious ship lying in pieces at the bottom of the Dragon Sea than all of the actual party quests combined. What followed was a largely improvised game session during which Deimos, his companions in tow, approached various NPCs in the hopes of finding some way to “undo” the ship's destruction.

Deimos eventually corralled the other heroes into helping him obtain a time-travel talisman, but that endeavor ended badly. The details aren't relevant; suffice to say, the talisman slipped through their proverbial fingers. What's

more important is that Deimos was thwarted, desperate, and broken.

Okay, not quite broken—Chris had one card left in his hand. As one should expect from a wrathful tiefling, Deimos turned to the Nine Hells for aid. Without consulting his adventuring companions, he used a ritual to summon an aspect of Dispat and entered into a binding contract with the archdevil, whereby Dispat would help Deimos raise his ship in exchange for Deimos taking an infernal consort and protecting her with his life. Once the agreement was signed, Dispat released the soul of a long-dead tiefling archwizard of Bael Turath named Samantia Carnago, who used her formidable magic to raise the *Morrow* from the depths.

As the ship broke the water's surface, it became clear that the vessel had been transformed into an infernal aspect of its former self—iron rails lined with everburning torches, sails of black smoke, a flag of burning fire, and the stench of brimstone throughout. It became a constant reminder of the contract that Deimos had brokered. Her work done, Samantia returned to the Nine Hells, leaving the other characters to ponder what Deimos had gotten them into.

In the end, Deimos's ship was returned to him... but not in the way the players imagined. Chris changed the name of the ship from the *Morrow* to the *Sorrow*, and Deimos set about hiring a new crew to replace those he'd lost. Several sessions later, having left his ship briefly to complete an important quest, Deimos returned to find a tiefling woman curled up in his iron-wrought captain's bed. She sat up, smiled, and introduced herself as Tyranny, his infernal consort. As Chris pondered this latest development, the other players squirmed in their chairs.

The DM giveth, and the DM taketh away . . . and vice versa.

Every campaign needs moments when the heroes feel like they're on top of the world—times when things seem to be going their way. These are the moments when their carefully laid plans go

off without a hitch, when the battle is made easier because they have the advantage. As a counterpoint, the campaign also needs those deep, dark nadirs when the players are convinced you hate them for some unspeakable reason. These are the moments when nothing seems to go right, when every step forward pulls them two steps back, and where they feel the loss of something important to them.

I like it when my players feel mighty and powerful, and I like it when they feel helpless and at their wits' end. Without these high points and low points, the campaign would lose its drama. No one wants to see a movie where the good guy always wins or always loses. We want to see our heroes win the race, but only after knocking down some hurdles—or lose the race, but only after saving that cat in the tree.

I know many DMs who are terrified to give their players ships, strongholds, and other "gifts" for fear that the campaign will run off the rails and explode like a train carrying rocket fuel. I know other DMs who give their players a veritable Death Star, only to then stand back and watch helplessly as the heroes blow their campaigns to dust. I don't have any problem giving my players really cool toys to play with, because ultimately I know that everything in my campaign can be used to tell a story, and the social contract I have with my players allows me the flexibility to do nasty things to fuel "good drama." When the *Morrow* explodes, Deimos loses more than his ship; he also loses his moral compass. He eventually wins back the ship, which is the most important thing in the world to him—but ask the other players and they'll tell you: He never found his moral compass. That realization, coupled with the presence of the infernal consort, sets the stage for even more drama in future sessions.

Ultimately, my job as the DM is to propel the story forward and make my players happy. I can be brutal and savage to the characters, as long as my

players know that the winds of fate will eventually blow in their favor. It's part of the social contract that you "sign" with players at the start of your campaign, the same social contract that says everyone at the table will respect one another. If the social contract you have is anything like mine, your players will accept a certain amount of torment and abuse in exchange for the promise of happiness, however fleeting.

There's a certain amount of improvisational skill required to pull off great drama in a game session. Case in point, when the *Morrow* blew up, I had no idea that Chris Youngs would have his character make a deal with the devil. I was just as surprised as everyone else around the table. It took a fair amount of improvisational skill to devise the terms of the





contract on the spot. An expert DM embraces those wonderful moments when the actions of the player characters propel the story forward, and anytime I can introduce a new NPC for the heroes to interact with, I jump on it (even if she's an vile succubus passing herself off as a seductive tiefling).

I won't lie to you: Narrative improvisation comes with experience. However, when I'm stuck and nothing springs to mind, I turn to TV's storytelling masters and ask myself, "What would Joss Whedon do?" "What would Alan Ball do?" or "What would Ronald D. Moore do?" You'd be surprised how well that works.

LESSONS LEARNED

Good storytellers understand what makes good drama: **joy** and **sorrow**. You can't have drama without laughter and tears, just like you can't have a great hotdog without mustard and meat. (Okay, that's a terrible analogy, but all you mustard-haters and tofulovers out there can keep your arguments to yourself!)

Before you blow up the heroes' stronghold and start layering on the drama, stop and consider the social contract of your campaign—the unspoken agreement you have with your players whereby you promise to be entertaining and fair, and they promise to respect your campaign and each other's right to enjoy the experience. Some players have enough drama in their normal lives; all they want is to kill monsters and take their stuff. That's okay if it's part of the agreed-upon social contract. Campaigns without social contracts are doomed, and if your game group feels dysfunctional, chances are your contract is not being respected or acknowledged by everyone around the table.

In the end, a campaign can't rise to its dramatic heights or descend to its dramatic depths without a sturdy social contract between the DM and the players. Some players (particularly those who can't recognize specific dramatic tropes) don't like it when their characters are punished for their decisions and actions. They get upset when their characters are thrown in jail for murdering innocent bystanders, and they start throwing dice around when you take away their magic items. Maybe they don't appreciate the intricately layered drama unfolding before their eyes and aren't patient enough to wait for good stuff to happen. In that case, it never hurts to tell the players that all is not lost, and assure them that their characters' actions are the rudders and sails that determine the course of the campaign. On the other hand, if your social contract permits you to drag your

players through heaven and hell with impunity, go for it! Just don't leave them in either place for too long. Time for a quick gut-check:

- ◆ **Are you happy with the social contract you have with your players?**
- ◆ **When was the last time the players in your campaign felt powerless and defeated? When was the last time they felt like they were in control?**

Until the next encounter!

All Talk

6/30/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

In the previous session, the heroes fought a death knight armed with a soul-draining sword. Two of them fell prey to the weapon.

Once the death knight was destroyed, the surviving heroes sought to free their companion's souls from the hungry blade. They turned to one of their dubious NPC allies—Osterneth, a lich with connections to the god Vecna—and she assured them the souls could be freed by bathing the sword in the blood of a virtuous god. Fortunately for them, she happened to have the blood of a slain lawful good deity in her workshop.

Unfortunately, things did not go as planned: The blood completely destroyed the sword and the souls along with it. The lich apologized profusely and tried to make amends. She offered to instead implant an artificial heart in one of the fallen heroes: Nick DiPetrillo's character, the swordmage Yuriel, but the heart was designed to pump necrotic sludge through the veins of its beneficiary. Implanting it would effectively transform Yuriel into an undead creature.

The heroes considered and rejected Osterneth's offer—but they did bring the lich and their dead friends back to Yuriel's ship, the *Maelstrom*, and consoled Yuriel's distraught widow. They also conferred with a more trustworthy NPC ally, a dragonborn priestess, and asked her to petition Bahamut for advice on how to save the souls of their dead friends. A Commune ritual bore no fruit—the priestess concluded that their souls were well and truly lost.

Meanwhile, left to her own devices, the lich gently persuaded Yuriel's widow that “undead Yuriel” was better than no Yuriel at all; and so, the lich obtained permission to

implant the necrotic heart in Yuriel's corpse. Nick returned the following week with a new version of his character built using the new vampire class from *Player's Option: Heroes of Shadow* as a chassis.

The heroes, not fond of the “new” Yuriel, were troubled by the audacity of the lich, Osterneth. They were also distressed to learn that Yuriel needed the “life's breath” of living creatures to “survive” in his undead state. Yuriel's widow, a genasi named Pearl, diffused a tense confrontation between the lich, Yuriel, and his former companions by offering her own life's breath to sustain her undead husband.

Then, as the *Maelstrom* made port on the island of Severasa, a group of dwarves in league with the Ironstar Cartel approached them for assistance. Frost giants had seized an important mine that the dwarves needed to finish building an iron ship—a prototype vessel that they hoped would earn them a lucrative shipbuilding contract with the Dragovar Empire. To save her own “skin” and redeem herself in the eyes of the heroes, Osterneth used her apparent omniscience to ascertain that a rival consortium, the Winterleaf Coster, was employing the frost giants to delay the completion of the iron ship long enough to swoop in and steal the contract from under the Ironstar Cartel's nose.

Convinced that the lich was speaking the truth, the heroes confronted the Winterleaf Coster and threatened to expose their plot if they didn't withdraw the frost giants from the mine immediately. They were very persuasive.

My Monday night group is a very different animal from my Wednesday night group. If the Wednesday players don't get to kill something every session, they think I'm punishing them. The Monday group, on the other hand, is more willing to entertain the notion of a “diceless” session. They also have more tolerance for entertaining NPCs of conspicuously evil bent.

Osterneth the lich was ripped from the pages of *Open Grave: Secrets of the Undead™*, although I made a few tweaks to her history to accommodate

my campaign. As the thousand-year-old ex-wife of the archwizard-turned-god Vecna, Osterneth is a tremendous source of information—and the Monday night group is naturally hesitant to make an enemy of her. I'd like to say her heart's in the right place, but in truth, she's a lich with bones of bronze, and the desiccated black heart hovering inside her hollow ribcage actually belongs to her ex. Her connection to the God of Secrets gives her access to information the heroes need to complete their quests, and she's courteous enough to conceal her true form behind the illusion of a beautiful and charming Vhaltese noblewoman.

But, to the point: The events described above played out over two game sessions, during which time the players made zero attack rolls. It was a roleplayer's bonanza, and the hardest part for me was keeping all of the player characters involved. Even those who don't typically take center stage during roleplaying encounters were on the hook.

Case in point: Jeff Alvarez's character, the sword-wielding elf ranger Kithvolar, is the “silent killer” of the group. Whenever I noticed that Kithvolar had dropped out of the spotlight for too long, Osterneth would exchange playful banter with him, or a member of the *Maelstrom* crew would try to split a bottle of rum with him and offer an unsolicited opinion about recent events. When the heroes were threatening agents of the Winterleaf Coster, I tried to establish a relationship between Kithvolar and the villainous Talia Winterleaf, the elf daughter of the Coster's founder. It's fun to watch a character known for his brutal savagery confront an enemy he can't kill—at least not without foiling the party's plans and earning the enmity of a politically powerful organization.

Although everyone seemed to be having fun, I always feel like I should apologize to my players when we have a session that's “all talk.” At the end of the session, I told them, “Next week you'll get to



kill something, I promise!” The players gave me dismissive gestures, and Peter Schaefer (who currently plays Metis, Osterneth’s treacherous changeling manservant) exclaimed, “Are you kidding, these are my favorite sessions!”

More than once during these sessions, I was certain a fight would break out, but the players never went there. Things probably would’ve played out differently on Wednesday night. I guess that’s why the players in the Wednesday group often joke that the Monday players “sit around the table drinking tea” while they’re busy cracking skulls and fart jokes.

LESSONS LEARNED

There’s no shortage of D&D players in Renton, WA, so back when I was building my two game groups, I tried to put “birds of a feather” together. The Monday group thinks the Wednesday group is comprised of uncouth savages, while the Wednesday group thinks the Monday players get all their XP from story awards rather than combat challenges. These perceptions are mostly false—the two groups are more alike than not—but running two different groups of players has taught me that despite their subtle differences in play styles, I can get away with combat-free sessions provided all of the players are pulled into the roleplaying fray.

I also believe that the players—not the DM—get to decide when the talking stops and the fighting begins. I’m never disappointed when a player shouts, “Enough talk! Time to die!” because that invariably leads to two of the sweetest words in the D&D lexicon: *Roll initiative*.

Any DM can survive the dreaded “all talk” session, but it’ll be most fun for all concerned if you hold fast to the following suggestions:

- ◆ **Pull all of the players into the roleplaying fray (kicking and screaming if necessary).**
- ◆ **Let the players decide when the talking’s over.**

As a quick footnote, I would like to give props to Calvin K. of Lincoln NE for his “Magnificent Minion!” entry, which came in at the tail end of [the contest](#): the wacky **wall of flesh**. Each wall minion comes with one random graft: an eye that projects a psychic bolt, a mouth that roars, an arm that delivers a real punch, or a tentacle that slides you around. It doesn’t get much weirder than that, folks!

Next week we’ll discuss the cinematic art of bringing back dead heroes and villains and the wonderful havoc that can ensue if you time it just right.

Until the next encounter!

It's About Time

7/7/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

The heroes have traveled to the Feywild in search of a knowledgeable archwizard, only to discover that a lamia has taken over the wizard's tower in his absence. Having seduced the wizard's apprentice, she's convinced him to help her locate a talisman hidden somewhere in the tower.

The heroes defeat the lamia, break her spell on the apprentice, and wait for the archwizard to return,



whereupon he calls forth a Leomund's secret chest and offers them the talisman inside as their reward.

With it, he says, they can travel back in time.

This week, I'd planned to discuss the dramatic impact of bringing back long-lost characters and NPCs. However, a question posed by [Khilkhameth](#) concerning last week's article has prompted me to veer off on a tangent. The question is:

How do you keep players involved in the game once their characters are killed off?

My stock answer is, "Have them play something else—*anything* else." Have them play an NPC companion, hand them a monster stat block, or have them return as ghostly apparitions that haunt the party until Raise Dead rituals can be cast. Anything is better than having the players fall asleep at the game table. In the case of one Monday night player, I decided it was time to bring back an old character that the game group had all but forgotten.

The Monday group recently lost two characters: the genasi swordmage Yuriel (played by Nick DiPetrillo) and the eladrin warlord Andraste (played by Michele Carter). They fell prey to a death knight with a soul-eating sword. Fortunately, Nick had a backup character among the crew on the party's ship, the Maelstrom. Michele's situation was a bit more complicated. She didn't have a ready-to-play back-up character—or so she thought.

Earlier in the campaign, the heroes used the archwizard's *hourglass talisman* (a single-use wondrous item of my own invention) to travel back in time and "meet themselves" in the past. It was a great way to escape their present predicament, and afforded them the rare chance to team up with themselves and effectively play twins for a session or two. The two identical parties joined forces to face a common threat—but Andraste was the only character to survive the adventure with a living twin. Michele didn't want to play two identical characters for the rest of

the campaign, so "Andraste Prime" stayed with her companions while "Andraste Past" conveniently left the group to pursue other quests and interests.

Andraste Past was absent from the campaign for over a year of game time (about ten levels of play), so even Michele was surprised when her character's temporal twin reappeared shortly after Andraste Prime's demise. The trick for me was concocting a situation that would logically reunite Andraste Past with the other heroes. To my credit, I had previously set up a major quest to rescue Andraste's father, an eladrin wizard of some repute who had been arrested for conspiracy. It made perfect sense that Andraste Past would learn of her father's incarceration, particular since the news had been delivered to her temporal twin via *sending stone*. (I decided it was possible for Andraste Past to overhear messages intended for Andraste Prime.)

You've seen this trick used many times in TV shows and movies: Having suffered a great loss or setback, the heroes are drowning their sorrows when a familiar face appears out of the blue. It might be the face of salvation or a harbinger of worse things to come. Either way, it's a tried-and-true cliché that can be surprisingly rousing, particularly if the character is beloved or reviled. (I used a similar trick once with a villain who'd cloned himself. As I recall, his sudden reappearance was greeted with gasps of "Oh, no!" followed by shaking of fists.) Remember the scene in J.J. Abrams' *Star Trek* when Spock Prime first appears in the ice cave? Yeah, you know what I'm talkin' about.

Andraste Past filled the hole left behind by poor Andraste Prime, but not perfectly. In order for Michele to effectively play Andraste Past, she needed a quick download of that character's recent accomplishments—just the highlights. This required some prep work on my part, and the information I provided gave Michele a sense of the experiences that had shaped Andraste Past once she'd left the party. Of course, she was free to swap out her old gear for

new stuff, as appropriate. For Michele, these events afforded her the opportunity to redefine Andraste's relationship with the other heroes and play a version of the character with her own agenda and aspirations.

LESSONS LEARNED

Time travel is a great storytelling tool, but like a chainsaw it comes with a warning label. Used unwisely, it can mutilate your campaign, as it demands a great deal of forethought and caution. I once subjected the Monday night group to the effects of an arcane contraption that teleported them into the future—the specifics of which are discussed in [my blog](#). It was shocking and fun, but it took weeks of preparation since I needed to figure out all the ways in which Future Iomandra was different from Current Iomandra. (In general, the farther into the future you travel, the more gaps need to be filled.) Also, there are many complex factors to consider, such as determining which characters are still alive in the future, and what tragic fates befell the ones that aren't.

My dalliance with time travel in the Iomandra campaign has taught me a few things:

- ◆ **If you use time travel, be ready for the unexpected.**
- ◆ **The past is easier to navigate than the future.**
- ◆ **Keep the “rules” for time travel as simple as possible.**

Don't introduce time travel if you're worried about players altering your campaign's history or acquiring items or information normally beyond their reach. Just as I view time travel as a fun way to mess with my players, they see time travel as a fun way to mess with my campaign. As for the “rules” of time travel, you need to determine how to handle temporal paradoxes and the extent to which the heroes can affect change.

When I decided to give the Monday players the *hourglass talisman*, I did so with the full understanding that the heroes could go back in time, meet themselves, and change the course of history. But imagine if a character travels back in time and kills his parents before he's born. What happens next? Does the character suddenly disappear, having effectively erased himself, or is he a separate entity from his unborn self and therefore unaffected? Probably best not to overthink it, but there needs to be an underlying logic that the players can follow; otherwise, you're playing a game without rules, and that will cause your campaign to crack and fall apart.

My own rules for time travel are simple:

- ◆ **A character traveling through time is removed from play in the present timeline.**
- ◆ **A character traveling to the past or future is not affected by the changing states of creatures around him, including older and younger versions of himself. He can be wounded and killed as normal, but nothing adverse happens to him if his younger or older self is injured or dies.**
- ◆ **Time travel effects have durations. No matter how far into the past or present a character travels, he only gets to stay there for a finite amount of time before the time travel effect ends and he returns to the time and place whence he came. In this way, time travel is like an elastic band; eventually, the time traveler gets pulled back to the exact time and place he left, minus any gear he left behind or resources he expended. This is true even if the character dies in the past or present.**
- ◆ **If a character acquires an item in the past or future, he still has the item when he returns to his normal time. So, if the character travels to the future, kills an evil wizard and takes**

the wizard's staff back to the present, the character now has the staff and the wizard (who is technically still alive) does not.

These rules don't address every corner case that comes up during play, and thoughtful players might discover (and exploit) a few loopholes. If they do, you'll have to improvise. If improvisation isn't one of your strengths, it's probably best to forego time travel for the time being rather than let it disrupt or destroy your otherwise spectacular campaign.

Until the next encounter!

What's in a Name?

7/14/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

The heroes have embarked on a quest to retrieve Fathomreaver, a cutlass with the power to unite the Sea



Kings of Iomandra under one banner. However, time is of the essence, for the cutlass is also hunted by their arch-nemesis—a merciless, one-eyed dragonborn warlord named Vantajar.

This mythic weapon was last seen in the hands of Sea King Draeken Malios, whose ship was lost in the Battle of the Roiling Cauldron nearly a century ago. Somehow the cutlass found its way into the Elemental Chaos. In last week's game, the heroes set sail for the Demonmaw Sargasso and were drawn down into a deadly vortex. They survived the descent, and their ship came to rest on an ocean of jagged ice in the Elemental Chaos near several other vessels trapped in the frigid wasteland, including a ship made of black glass and another made of stone.

Not long after their arrival, the heroes came face-to-face with the captains of these stranded vessels: a fire-haired azer named Captain Zarance; a stormsoul genasi named Captain Ferrik Spark; a stone-skinned half-giant named Shrador; a water archon called Worlus; and a frost-bearded dwarf named Parcilla Shatterbone.

"Oh, frabjous day!" my players cried. "Five new NPCs to add to the ever-growing cast of thousands!"

One of my frequent readers, Matthias Schäfer, sent an email to dndinsider@wizards.com asking why I give my NPCs weird names like "Draeken Malios" and "Vantajar" instead of more pronounceable ones taken from English, such as "Hammersmith" and "Clearwater." He's also curious how I make my players remember such odd names so that they don't end up calling them "the dead Sea King" or "that dragon-born dude."

First, you all need to know that I have a problem: I like concocting weird names. It's a favorite exercise of mine, and one that drives me to create entire lists of names that I keep in binders for handy reference, so that if I ever need a name on the spot, I have scores of them to choose from. (And once I choose a name from the list, I strike it off so that I don't end up reapplying it to another NPC down the road.) It's one of

the best DM tricks in the world, because it gives my players the impression that I've named every NPC in the campaign (which, I suppose, I have).

NO JOHN SMITHS

There's a reason why you'll never encounter an NPC named "John Smith" in my campaign. I find that common English names rip players out of their fantasy world. Even "Jonah Hammersmith" treads a little too close to reality for my tastes. However, I have no problem with "Jaxar Hammersmith" as a dwarf name. In fact, I think I'll add that one to my ever-growing list.

When I set out to build the cultures of my campaign world, I decided to apply certain naming conventions to each race. The tieflings in my campaign are refugees from a fallen empire, so I decided to derive their names from Roman and Greek cultures (e.g., Decimeth, Hacari, Prismeus, Syken). They also have names more akin to those presented in the *Player's Handbook* tiefling race entry (e.g., Suffer, Sunshine, Thorn, Tyranny), although these names are usually self-chosen monikers.

Dragonborn names tend to come from Egyptian and Middle Eastern cultures (e.g., Araj, Fayal, Kaphira, Nazir) or sound like names one might ascribe to dragons (e.g., Drax, Nagarax, Rhesk).

I tend to give elves and eladrin lyrical, multisyllabic names, which is fairly stereotypical (e.g., Ariandar, Lorifir, Talonien).

Dwarves tend to have simple first names with hard or earthy consonants (e.g., Glint, Halzar, Korlag) or names culled from Polish and Hungarian name generators (e.g., Gyuri, Ferko, Szilard), and they usually have compound last names comprised of two common yet emblematic words smashed together (e.g., Ambershard, Ironvein, Stonecainr).

Halfling names are simple and playful (e.g., Corby, Happy, Rabbit, Ziza), and their last names tend to

include some thematic tie to nature or water (e.g., Blackwater, Skiprock, Yellowcrane).

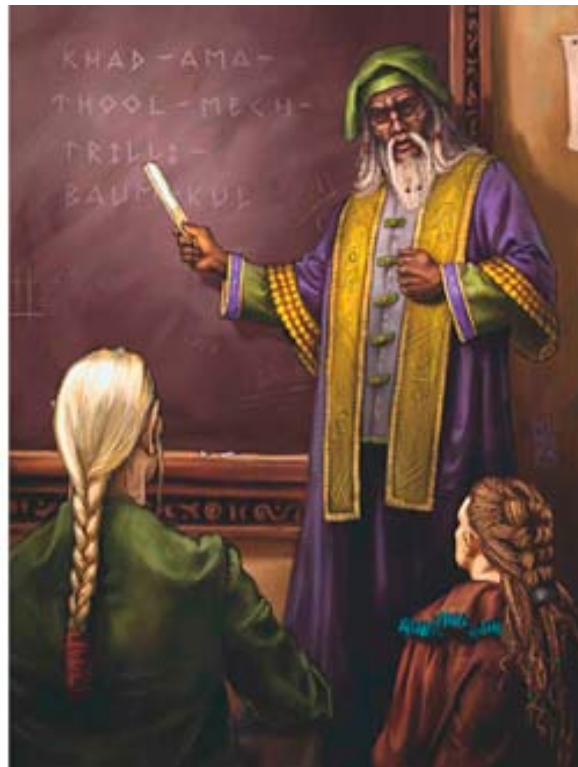
The gnomes in my campaign, though few in number, have cornered the market on silly first names or names tied thematically to magic (e.g., Donkeywheel, Dweomer, Smidgeon, Sparkle).

My human names are all over the map. I tend to go for names that sound like seldom used real-world names (e.g., Arando, Caven, Fenton, Mirabel, Remora) and last names with roots in western European cultures (e.g., Caskajaro, Moonridge, Ratley, Van Hyden), or names built around nautical terms (e.g., Coldshore, Keel, Sandershoal). The trick is coming up with names that sound human but seem grounded in a world of fantasy, not reality.

In my campaign, a name is used to evoke a certain mood or fortify the image I have in mind when I envision the NPC. It's trite, but evil NPCs tend to have evil-sounding names unless I'm deliberately playing against type or trying to mislead the players. "Lhorzo Zalagmar" and "Azrol Tharn" are two dwarf villains in my campaign. The combination of certain letters and sounds (in these specific examples, the letter "z" coupled with the "ar" sound) gives these names an indescribable harshness or sleaziness. "Talia Winterleaf," "Alathar Balefrost," and "Arromar Sunshadow" are elf villains; here I use specific words such as "winter," "balefrost," and "shadow" to help reinforce their sinister role in the campaign. Sometimes it's a combination of words that really sells the name: Case in point, the Wednesday night group recently ran afoul of a warforged villain named "Ironsmile." And on occasion, I'll surprise my players with a lighter name and apply it to a villainous character, as happened with a minor gnome villain and bard named "Clef Wimbly."

REMEMBERING NAMES

I don't go out of my way to burn the names of NPCs into the minds of my players. They will remember the ones that are memorable, and they'll forget the ones that are forgettable. If the NPC appears frequently or has a decidedly memorable quirk or manner of speaking, my players have a much easier time remembering the name. However, I don't sweat it. My campaign includes thousands of NPCs. There's no way my players can remember them all. If "Azrol Tharn" is remembered as "the dwarf vampire who turns into a puddle of oil," I'm cool with that. If all else fails, the players can usually count on Curt Gould



(the group's record-keeper) to surf his campaign notes and remind them if and when it becomes important.

I try not to shove names down my players' throats, because it usually comes across as forced and too often leads to mockery. For example, I would never have my villain announce, "Kneel before me, for I am the pirate warlord Vantajar, scourge of the Dragon Sea!" That's a little too much camp for my tastes. Better to have an NPC's name remain a mystery until the players express an interest in learning it, for they'll be more inclined to remember it afterward. (Would "Voldemort" have been half as memorable, unless it should not be said?)

I must admit, my players have created a private game around trying to guess how I spell the names of my NPCs. The first time a name is mentioned, they take cracks at trying to spell it, anticipating the presence of a silent "h" or the use of "zh" instead of a "j". How many different ways do my players spell and pronounce the names "Zaibon Krinvazh" or "Zaidi Arychosa"? More than one, let me tell you, and that's okay. As far as I'm concerned, such names add realism to the world by virtue of the fact that they are strangely built and difficult to pronounce. I know plenty of real-world people whose names are equally challenging (try pronouncing "Jon Schindehette" or "Bill Slavicsek" correctly, I dare you). Fortunately, my players have the benefit of hearing me say the names, so they're not just reading letters off a page.

LESSONS LEARNED

The first several pages of my campaign binder contain lists of random names, organized by race. Down the right-hand side of the page are blank spaces where I can either add new names or record notes concerning the names I've used. For example:

Human First Names	Human Last Names
Anlow	Arkalis
Arando	Bilger
Azura (f)	Blackstrand
Bram	Carnavon
Cale	Corynnar
etc.	etc.

Arando Corynnar – Knight of Ardyn
Cale Blackstrand – Warden Drax's spy

Where do I get my names, you ask? I've trained my wee brain to devise new names on a whim, but when I'm stuck or looking to flesh out my list, I turn to several readily available sources.

- ♦ **The Internet.** Need some good names to populate the inhabitants of your dwarf stronghold? Try doing a Google search on "Hungarian names." Need names for that rampaging clan of goliaths lairing in the mountains? Try searching for "Hawaiian names" or "Native American names." The Internet is full of baby name lists, pet name lists, and other lists. If you can't find the perfect name on such a list, take two names and smash them together to create something new.
- ♦ **Movies.** Every movie in the past 20 years has a scrolling list of end credits filled with great names. Plop yourself down in front of your laptop or bigscreen TV with a notebook, skip to the credits at the end of your DVD copy of *Hellboy* or *The Return of the King*, and make note of some of the cool fantasy-sounding names that appear. You'll be surprised how many good ones you'll find, particularly if the movie was filmed on different continents.

- ♦ **RPG supplements.** Campaign-focused books such as the *FORGOTTEN REALMS Campaign Guide* and the *EBERRON Campaign Guide* are strewn with names that can be repurposed for home campaigns. I can flip to any page in either of these two books and find an invented word that would make a great NPC name.
- ♦ **Real names.** Take a real name and tweak a few letters to create something new. "Chris Perkins" becomes "Carysto Perek." "John Smith" becomes "Joran Snythe." You get the idea.

Until the next encounter!

Voice Talent

7/21/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

The heroes are sailing aboard their elemental ship, the Maelstrom, when suddenly Captain Yuriel (played by Nick DiPetrillo) receives a sending stone message from his mentor and benefactor, Sea King Valkroi. Word has come down that Sea King Senestrigo, Valkroi's hated rival and sometime campaign villain, has been killed off-camera in a naval battle.

To deliver this great news, I conjure up the very best Jamaican accent I can muster. Suddenly, Nick gives me a quizzical look and says, "Doesn't Valkroi have an Australian accent?"

Crikey!

Nick's right—I've gotten my accents and NPCs mixed up! It doesn't happen often, but when it does, I'm horribly dismayed. I use a Jamaican accent for exactly one character in my campaign—a drow crime lord named Malig du Mavian. You'd think I would remember that! (And for those who read last week's article about names, this one's pronounced "mah-LEEK du mah-vee-AHN.") Truth be told, even good DMs have their bad moments, and when it comes to voice acting, I'm at best an amateur.

Before I dive headlong into this short discussion about using voices to bring NPCs to life, let me tell you about my recent encounter with a god among voice talent artists.



Last month, to cap off a very pleasurable experience at Comicpalooza in Houston, I shared a limo ride to the airport with voice actor and professional announcer [Tom Kane](#). We joked about flying cars and why humans should never be allowed to have them. (I'm sure it sounded grand back in the 1950s when futurists first postulated the notion, but imagine someone's half-eaten Big Mac, leaky antifreeze, or rusted-out muffler dropping on your head from a height of 100 feet. That's not progress, people.)

As we talked and joked, Tom let a bit of Admiral Yularin (from *The Clone Wars* animated series) slip into the discussion. I was also treated to a wee bit of Yoda and a few other characters in Tom's vast repertoire. The voices came out offhandedly and effortlessly, and at that point I realized we had more in common than successful careers in the fringes of entertainment. Tom was doing something I like to do in my D&D sessions and in real life—change voices in conversation, usually for comic effect—only he was doing it really well. He is, after all, the professional, and I'm just an amateur.

I'm not selling myself short here. After all, being an amateur isn't the same thing as being a novice, as evidenced by the fact that I have more than 20 years of experience making up voices in my D&D

campaigns. The fact that I don't get paid for my voice "talent" is why I'm not a professional, and frankly I'm not sure I have the chops for that line of work. Voice acting requires serious training. However, I am Canadian, which means I can do a passable Canadian accent on command. I can also riff on 2d6 + 7 other real world accents because I watch lots of TV and movies. The key word here is "riff," because I'm not sure I can do any accent justice. My German accent makes it seem like I'm mocking Germans—you know what I mean, ya? Ditto with French, Spanish, Cajun, Russian, Scottish, Jamaican, Australian, Bostonian, Minnesotan, Texan, and so on.

Anyone who's seen all four *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies and all eight *Harry Potter* films should be able to conjure up one or more fake British accents (unless of course the person is genuinely British, in which case one would assume it comes naturally). If you can't, it's probably because your lips were sewn on upside-down. However, unless you're a gifted mimic with a trained ear, the voice you hear when you speak is not the same voice everyone else hears around you. I've done a lot of podcasts, and every time I listen to myself, I feel like I'm hearing a stranger talk. My recorded voice does not sound like the voice echoing in my head when I speak aloud.

Consequently, when I do an impression of a famous person like Jack Nicholson, or a famous character like Foghorn Leghorn, the voice that I ultimately create isn't exactly one or the other. It sounds similar but not exactly the same. It is, for all intents and purposes, derivative—and that's perfect. I don't want Jack Nicholson playing a part in my campaign, but I want a character inspired by him. I don't want Foghorn Leghorn, either; I want a ruthless sea captain with a lot of southern bluster or a talking stone face carved into a wall that thinks it knows everything.

LET THE MUTILATION BEGIN!

It's perfectly fine to mutilate real-world accents. So what if your Maine accent doesn't sound like a real Maine accent. It's not like your campaign is set in Maine, after all; the players won't hate you because your rendition failed to conjure memories of summers spent in Bangor. In my campaign, I have no qualms about "looting" regionally distinctive dialects, inflections, and idioms. So what if my tiefling henchman sounds like a caricature of a Boston thug? My players remember him. He's the *hahd-ass* with the big fat mouth (no offense to Bostonians). Rad Longhammer, the new intern of Acquisitions Incorporated, sounds like a Californian surfer dude—or at least my imitation of one—and he earned more than his fair share of laughs at PAX last year.



In my Monday night campaign, I have a recurring NPC named Rhutha. She's a fat dragonborn military general who really knows how to throw her weight around. When I speak in her voice, I automatically stick out my pouty lower lip, talk as deeply as I can, and enunciate every syllable slowly as though she was the long-lost dragonborn sister of Alfred Hitchcock. Then. I. Make. Each. Word. Its. Own. Sentence.

Not surprisingly, General Rhutha is one of the most memorable villains in the Iomandra campaign. It's also easy for me to remember what her voice sounds like because my entire posture changes whenever I get into character. I slouch in my chair and talk down my nose, imbuing her with a certain air of contempt. (Did I mention that DMing is one part acting, one part directing, and two parts improvisation?)

I have another dragonborn NPC who bears the scar of having had his throat cut, and he speaks with a harsh whisper—simple yet effective.

I typically reserve “new voices” (as opposed to higher-pitched, lower-pitched, faster-paced, and slower-paced versions of my natural voice) for important characters. My campaign has thousands of NPCs, and it would be physically exhausting and mentally taxing to give each one a distinctive voice. My players can usually guess the relative importance of an NPC by the extents to which I describe the character and tinker with the voice. If my description of the NPC is threadbare and the character speaks in my own voice (more or less), the players know they're probably dealing with a “one-off” NPC of little consequence. If the NPC instead sounds like Rosa Klebb in *From Russia With Love* or “Buffalo Bill” from *The Silence of the Lambs*, their expectations are immediately inflated.

I rarely forget which voice to use, but it happens—as evidenced by my recent misstep with Sea King Valkroi. To my credit, Sea King Valkroi was envisioned as a particularly important NPC in the Monday night campaign, but because of the direction the campaign went, he's been more of a background

figure who pops up infrequently. I still feel like a balloonhead, however.

LESSONS LEARNED

One of the most effective ways to make an NPC memorable (after giving him or her a distinctive physical trait, quirk, or habit) is to give him or her a voice inspired by a real-world or fictional character. Any person or character with a cool voice or trademark affectation is fair game: Antonio Banderas. Anthony Hopkins. Katherine Hepburn (“*Norrrrrman! The loooooons!*”). Alan Rickman. James Cagney. Anne “*Throw Momma from the Train*” Ramsey. Peter Lorre. Vincent Price. Christopher Walken. Cheech Marin. Zsa Zsa Gabor. Arnold Schwarzenegger. If you're looking for something more exaggerated, try riffing on a character like Zapp Brannigan, Yosemite Sam, Jessica Rabbit, Gaston (from *Beauty and the Beast*), Ren (“*Steeempy, you Eeeediot!*”), or Vezzini and Fezzik (played by Wallace Shawn and André the Giant) from *The Princess Bride*.

I occasionally come up with voices “in the moment” (particularly when I'm forced to breathe life into an NPC on the fly), although I admit those aren't always the most successful. Sometimes the accent is too difficult or too hard to sustain; I once tried to make a villain sound like Dr. Claw from the *Inspector Gadget* cartoons, but my throat simply wasn't up to it. Sometimes the voice just sounds horrid, and so I end up jettisoning it or “wearing down the edges” so that it becomes a bit more palatable.

I like to rehearse voices ahead of time. My three-legged dog, Reggie, tolerates it during long walks through the back woods, where no one else can hear me. A typical rehearsal is basically 5 minutes of me trying to imitate some TV or movie villain, such as Ralph Fiennes' Voldemort or Bill Nighy's Davey Jones, and maybe twisting it in some way (to make it sound female, for example).

Here are some things worth remembering as you fearlessly experiment with voices of your own:

- ♦ **Think of an actor whose voice you like. Try to imitate it, and no matter what the quality, you will end up creating a new character voice that's all your own.**
- ♦ **Often a bad accent is better than no accent at all, and it doesn't need to be “over the top” to be memorable.**
- ♦ **Change the shape of your mouth. Try speaking with your teeth bared, your lips puckered, or your tongue firmly pressed against your lower gums. It sounds stupid, but it works.**

There are scores of other tips and tricks—had my limo ride to the airport been a few minutes longer, I would've pestered Mr. Kane for some voice acting advice to step up my game. If you have some tricks of your own, I'd love to hear about them.

Until the next encounter!

Intervention

7/28/2011

FRIDAY NIGHT.

San Diego Comic Con. I'm standing behind a podium, hosting a seminar panel on "The Art of the Dungeon Master" and sharing nuggets of wisdom with a packed house of 350+ people, most of them dedicated Dungeon Masters actively running campaigns. The presentation concludes with three tips that have served me well in my regular Monday and Wednesday night games: (1) show no fear, (2) don't get bored with your own campaign, and (3) under-prepare, but be ready to improvise.

As my presentation gives way to an open Q&A session, it's hard to miss the enormous white elephant lurking in the back corner. Every DM in the room is aware of it. It's called the difficult player, and it tramples and destroys more D&D campaigns each year than we dare admit.

This is a very real problem and a difficult topic to broach with players. It's also a topic that you and I, as dedicated Dungeon Masters, take very seriously.

During the Q&A part of the panel, one struggling DM bravely stepped forward and announced that his players made a frequent habit of laying waste to his carefully laid plans, transforming what should've been an epic campaign into a mindless slaughterfest. Not all DMs have the luxury of choosing their players. Options are limited, and sometimes jettisoning even one player can cause the entire group to crumble.

That leaves two courses of action: restructure the campaign to give the players more of what they want (and less of what you want), or force them

to adhere to certain codes of conduct on threat of ending the game.

Fact: People play D&D for different reasons, and players come to the game table with different attitudes, expectations, and play styles. As DMs, we need to accept this fact, account for it in our adventures, and move on. However, every successful campaign I've ever run was built on the foundation of a social contract (usually unspoken) that specifies what is acceptable behavior versus unacceptable behavior. Ideally, the DM agrees to adhere to certain rules and to entertain the players while showing favoritism toward none. The players agree to respect each other's play styles, respect the campaign, and refrain from cheating. That's how great campaigns and lifelong friendships come to pass.

Depending on your circle of gaming friends, you might encounter one or more players who refuse to be bound by any form of social contract. They willfully or subconsciously set out to undermine your

authority, the campaign, the other player's enjoyment of the tabletop gaming ritual, or potentially all of the above. Maybe they like to challenge your rulings, maybe they like to murder all of your quest-givers, or maybe they keep hogging the limelight and depriving the other players of opportunities to roleplay.

Here's what I suggest you do when confronted with one or more such players: **ask them to read the following letter, or read it to them.** Before sharing it, decide whether to remove the phrase "because of you" in the first paragraph; reserve it for players who aren't likely to fly off the handle when confronted with the truth. If you think the intervention can do without it, cut it.



DEAR PLAYER(S) . . .

D&D is a game about heroes working as a team to complete quests, defeat villains and monsters, and interact with the campaign that I've created. Right now, **because of you**, our D&D game isn't working, and I need your help to fix it.

It's my job as the Dungeon Master to present a world for your character to explore and fun challenges to overcome. It's also my job to set the rules of the game, be fair to all players, and keep things exciting. I'm hoping the campaign can last a while, and that your characters have a chance to become more powerful and face new threats at higher level. It's a lot of work—and frankly, you're not making it easy on me.

It's your role as a player to have a good time, but not at the expense of me, the campaign, or the other players. When we sit down to play, there's an unspoken agreement that must be respected so that everyone has a good time. You can't have a rock band if one player refuses to take it seriously or doesn't allow everyone else to enjoy the experience. The same holds true for D&D games. That's not to say you can't have fun, but we need to agree on what's fun for everyone.

Here's what I'd like to do: I want to create the best, most fun campaign—not just for me, and not just for you, but for all of us. In return, I want to hear about the things you like and don't like about the campaign, as well as ways I can make it more suitable for your style of play so that you're having fun. I also want you to think about what makes the game fun for me and everyone else. Ultimately, we all want to have a good time, but right now that's not happening.

LESSONS LEARNED

I have a degree in rhetoric, so I know a little something about writing persuasively. Whatever you do, keep things short and honest and private. One caveat: For spouses and siblings, do not hand them a letter! Better to memorize as much of the general content as possible, and then deliver it in a back-and-forth conversation. No point turning a dysfunctional game into a family feud!

Your goals should be to call attention to the problem without dwelling on it, and to focus on more desirable behavior, which is working together to find a solution the serves everyone's best interests. Inviting the player to be part of the solution is key; whether they agree to join your quest to save the campaign depends on how much they really want to be part of the game. Immature or disenfranchised players might refuse your "gracious" invitation; not every intervention works, and sometimes the best (albeit painful) cure for an ailing campaign is to cut loose the disruptive player. It's not ideal but sometimes necessary.

The intervention is best used as a last recourse when more disarming methods fail. In my Monday and Wednesday night games, I allow a certain amount of rowdiness and give the players license to have bad nights and silly moments. When I perceive that things are getting out of hand, I have no qualms about steering the game back on track through sheer force of will and the occasional "Okay guys, let's play this game right" remark. I also let the players police each other; more often than not, they're the ones making sure that their "inner jerks" don't screw things up and reduce the campaign to rubble.

That said, I met at least one DM at San Diego Comic Con whose players are 100% united in their quest to thoroughly trash his campaign. If that were my gaming group, I'd pack up my books and save my campaign for a worthier band of adventurers.

I might also drop by my local gaming store on a Wednesday night, unfold my DM screen, and run a D&D ENCOUNTERS session. Who knows? I might meet some players who actually respect all that the game has to offer.

Until the next encounter!

Maptism

8/4/2011

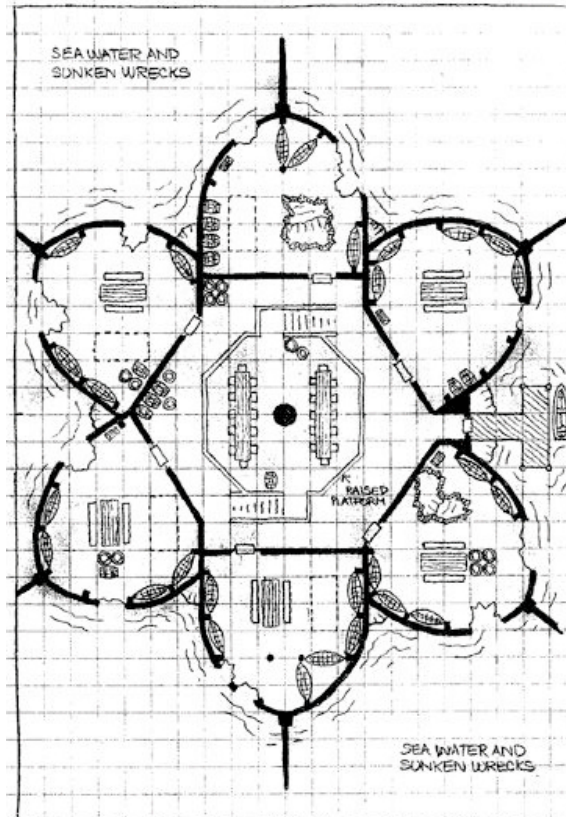
WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

The adventurers are plying the Elemental Chaos when they happen upon a pirate base made from the hulls of six wrecked ships. The map for this location is something I'd created for another purpose—an upcoming Organized Play event called D&D LAIR ASSAULT: Talon of Umberlee—but I loved the way it turned out and decided to plunder it for my home campaign. A DM's gotta do what a DM's gotta do, and there ain't nothin' wrong with that.

If I could get a paying job as a “D&D mapmaker,” I would take that job in a heartbeat—even if the pay sucked. Don't get me wrong—I'm perfectly happy with my current line of work—but creating maps has always been a true passion of mine. Many hours have I spent drawing halls and statues and spiral staircases on graph paper over the years! These days, my schedule rarely permits me to indulge this artistic passion. Often I'm forced out of necessity to repurpose maps created for other uses—either maps I've created myself or maps created by others.

At right is the version of the map I created for *Talon of Umberlee* and plundered for my Wednesday night game, juxtaposed with a more professional rendering of the same map by freelance cartographer Mike Schley.

Damn, that's a cool map, if I do say so myself! Mike's version is lovely, but the location itself has a certain novelty. I spent a long time getting the shape of the hulls just right. It's always risky to go “off the grid,” and I struggle a bit with curved walls. (With this map, I cheated: I drew a ship's bow on a separate piece of graph paper and then traced it over and over



to create the versions that appear in my sketch version of the final map.)

Those of you who choose to participate in the D&D LAIR ASSAULT program (premiering in September and running concurrently with the in-store D&D Encounters program) might actually get to play the encounter for which this map was truly designed. If not, feel free to loot the map for your home campaign. That's what I do—and what every good Dungeon Master does.

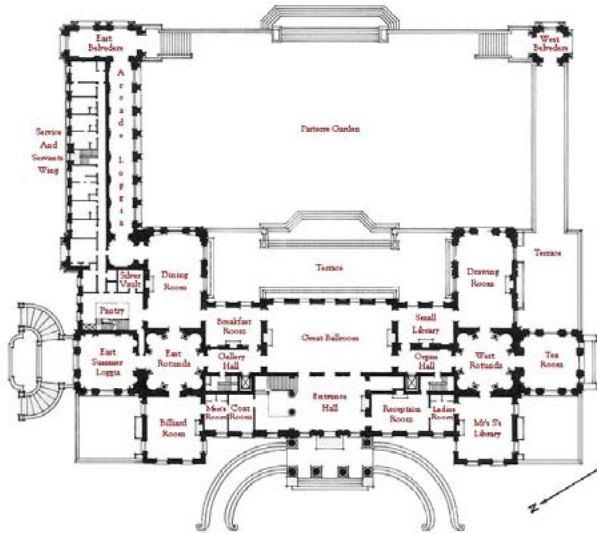
When I was a kid, I spent a large chunk of my allowance on D&D and AD&D adventure modules, knowing full well I'd never find time to run all of



them. The adventure maps were usually printed on the inside covers, and they were so incredibly evocative and immersive that I would often decide whether an adventure was worth running based solely on the maps. Would Count Strahd von Zarovich be half the vampire he is today if not for Castle Ravenloft?

I think it's hard to be a Dungeon Master and not be inspired by good maps. World maps, dungeon maps, castle maps—they define the world as much as any character, NPC, or plot. I don't think a love of maps is required to be a great DM, but it certainly hasn't hurt or hindered me. In fact, whenever I try to conjure up a new adventure, one of the first things I

Whitemarsh Hall
First-Floor Plan



think about is the key adventure location and what the map might look like. In your campaign, it might be a haunted castle, a temple built by a pharaoh's monstrous thralls, or the killer dungeon of a mad archwizard. In my campaign, it might be the winter palace of the Dragovar emperor, a star pact warlock's celestial observatory, or an elemental warship.

Recently I had an opportunity to catch up with Monte Cook, who I don't see often enough these days, much to my chagrin. Monte is a brilliant DM who creates stories of remarkable depth and worlds of such intricacy that they feel absolutely real (although what actually makes him brilliant is his willingness to let the players decide where to take the campaign and roll with it, which, incidentally, is the topic of next week's column—but I digress). Years ago, I was a regular player in Monte's famous Ptolus campaign which, like my current campaign, was run with two different groups on Monday and Wednesday evenings. I was in both groups, which allowed me to observe how Monte

managed to create intersecting stories and opportunities for one group's antics to influence the other.

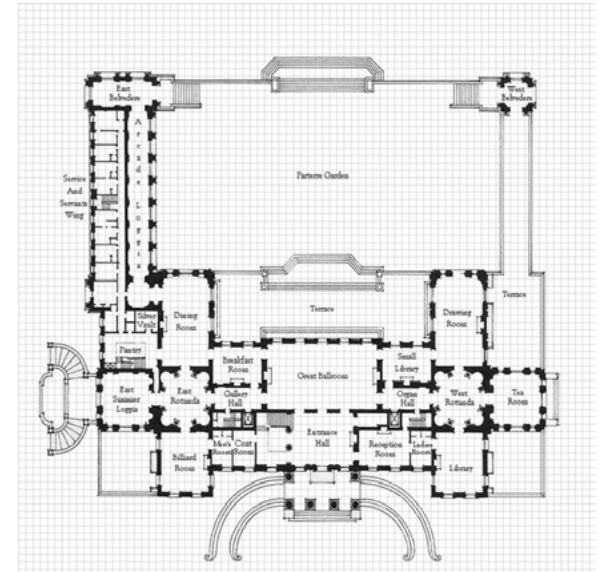
One thing that Monte and I have in common beyond our passion and predilection for DMing is a love of maps. He, like me, is a diehard map aficionado. One need only flip through the 672-page [Ptolus: City by the Spire](#) tome to see his passion for maps brought to vivid life. (The book's cartography won an ENnie Award in 2007.)

When Monte worked at Wizards of the Coast, he used to bring graph paper to meetings and draw gloriously Gygaxian dungeon maps. I wonder how many of those offhand designs ended up in print? I did the same thing in high school English class—my only regret was that I didn't save any of those old maps, crappy as they doubtless were. My early designs were often nonsensical, and over the years I've learned that even dungeons need some internal logic in their design—that even the craziest archwizard or pharaoh builds toward a purpose, and every castle regardless of size needs at least one lavatory or privy.

I don't have as much time to draw maps as I used to, so whenever I attend a gaming convention and have a few hours to kill, I glide through the exhibit hall and peruse RPG books for interesting maps. If I see something I like, I'll buy it in the hopes of plundering it for my home campaign. [Masterwork Maps](#) products are notorious for catching my eye; they produce great stuff, and their castle maps are particularly awesome.

When I'm feeling lazy or pressed for time, I forgo the graph paper and instead turn to the Internet for inspiration. For an upcoming adventure, I needed to create a map of a mansion, so I typed "mansion blueprints" into the Google search engine and discovered among the myriad images the following low-res image of a real-world residence called Whitemarsh Hall:

Realizing that I was missing the upstairs blueprint, I did a Google search on Whitemarsh Hall and discovered [an excellent website chronicling the history](#)



[of the mansion](#), with maps of the upstairs and downstairs levels as well as exterior and interior images that could easily serve as player handouts. Marveling at my good fortune, I copied the mansion blueprints (GIFs) to my desktop.

Since these maps don't have a grid, I decided to add one. (The grid makes it easier for me to replicate sections of the map on a wet-erase battle map during the game.) I downloaded some [free digital graph paper](#), which is a wonderful DM resource, and even specified how big I wanted the grid and the paper size to be. After converting the graph paper PDF into a JPG, I superimposed the maps of the mansion onto the grid. I copy-and-pasted them onto the graph paper as separate layers and resized them using the Edit > Transform function of Adobe Photoshop so that the walls and grid aligned more closely. Here, then, is what the mansion's ground floor looks like on digital graph paper:

In Photoshop, I can erase the tags I don't want and add whatever other embellishments I like. However,

in this case, the maps don't require much manipulation. I'm pretty happy with them as they are.

LESSONS LEARNED

I've often joked that maps are D&D porn for Dungeon Masters. Forgive the weird analogy, but opening up the gatefold covers of old AD&D adventures is like opening a *Playboy* or *Playgirl* centerfold, inviting drooling DMs to take their players into the poisonous dungeon beneath the Hidden Shrine of Tamoachan or the haunted house on the cliff in *The Sinister Secret of Saltmarsh*. Past issues of *Dungeon* are another great source of maps; the magazine has been around in one form or another since 1986, and those of you who have access to back issues are sitting on a veritable goldmine.

We're even learning the lesson here at Wizards and trying our best to get new maps into DM's hands, by every practical means, because we know DMs don't have the time or ability to create their own. Alas, too many modern adventure modules don't pay enough mind to creative map design, and consequently they offer precious little plunder for DMs who need good maps to fuel their campaigns. (There are many notable exceptions.) If you can't steal a map from *Dungeon* magazine or some other source, you can always turn to the Internet and use its power for good.

Do a Google search on "castle maps" and see what you get. Now try "dungeon maps." Next, "wilderness maps." Finally, try searching for "medieval city maps." (editor's note: Don't pass up a chance to visit [the Cartographer's Guild](#).) I think you'll be awakened to new adventure possibilities. Truth be told, you might never need to draw another map again—although I hope that's untrue, since it's incumbent upon all DMs to put pencil to graph paper and create new dungeons that might one day get published for the rest of us to steal at our leisure.

Until the next encounter!

DM's Lib

8/11/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

The heroes are assaulting the Black Candle, a secret stronghold of Vecna-worshipping wizards. Upon reaching the inner sanctum, they discover that their adversaries have summoned an aspect of Vecna mounted on a dracolich. As the aspect turns to destroy them, the beleaguered, resource-drained heroes lower their weapons and beg for a truce, remembering that they and the Maimed Lord share a common foe—a growing threat from the Far Realm.

I ask the players to make group Diplomacy checks as the aspect of Vecna considers their characters' words. The dice results are in the party's favor, and so the undead lord decides to heed the wisdom of their counsel and forge a temporary alliance. The aspect allows the heroes to destroy those they came to destroy and promises to send a more worthy vassal to them at a later time, as part of a pledge to aid them in their efforts to destroy the Far Realm threat.

End of session.

This is not how I expected the game session to end. I expected what most DMs expect: a few minced words followed by a lot of blood and shattered bones. But then, I sometimes forget that a good DM provides the compass but lets the players choose the direction.

I've often said that improvisation is the best tool in any Dungeon Master's toolbox. Actually, it's more of a skill than a tool, and I primarily rely on improvisation to curtail on preparation time and to keep my game from stalling or becoming dull. And like any skill, it develops over time.

If you doubt your improvisational skills, take the following test:

The heroes have a quest to slay Snurre Ironbelly, the fire giant king. After slaughtering their way to his august presence, they decide on a whim not to kill him. Instead, they offer their services as mercenaries-for-hire, citing their success in breaching his hall as proof of their competence. Maybe the offer is genuine, maybe it's a ruse. Regardless, does Snurre attack the heroes?

Some DMs prefer to run published adventures because the story is heavily scripted, and the likelihood that the DM will be called upon to improvise is greatly reduced. But even published adventures cannot account for every action the player characters might take.

In *Hall of the Fire Giant King*, the classic AD&D module, the heroes are expected to kill Snurre. At least, that's what Gary Gygax surely intended when TSR published the original adventure back in 1978. However, no published adventure can account for every possible player choice, and a good DM, like any good storyteller, knows an opportunity when he or she sees it. Snurre's death might be a foregone conclusion, but situations that naturally arise to forestall the inevitable are always worth exploring, as are opportunities that allow characters to break out of the traditional "adventurer" role and spend a few sessions trying on different hats (like the mercenary hat, for example) or exploring their morality.

Were I the DM, I would let the skill check results guide my decision, but I would be strongly disposed toward taking the story in the more unexpected direction. Being a fire giant, Snurre would certainly respect shows of brute force and raw power, so of course he'd want mighty adventurers at his beck and call—who wouldn't? Having the heroes become



Snurre's henchmen, even briefly, is the stuff players will remember long after the campaign has ended.

Now try this one:

The heroes receive a quest to escort the Imperial heir to the capital. The foolish young heir proves to be a royal pain in the ass, and despite the heroes' efforts (or because of them), the heir dies en route. Rather than deliver his dead body, the heroes bury it and decide that one of them will use a hat of disguise to impersonate the heir and perhaps, in time, assume lordship over the kingdom. As the DM, do you allow this?

Yes, of course you do! Maybe you never expected the campaign to bend in that direction, but it's a perfectly logical development to the story, and one that's likely to spur all kinds of wonderful roleplaying opportunities and campaign developments. Suddenly the

heroes have a secret and a chance to really turn the campaign on its head. By allowing for unexpected twists and turns, you've forced yourself to improvise, and every time you do this, your improvisational skill improves and the players' expectations are blown out of the water.

In a seminar at San Diego Comic Con, I urged DMs to "under-prepare, then improvise." My campaign, like many campaigns, has needs that published adventures can't address. (It has lots of roleplaying and politics, and very few sprawling dungeons.) Consequently, I rarely use published adventures, even short ones, preferring to devise my own encounters week after week. Before each game session, I type up a one-page document that goes into my campaign binder ([click here](#) for an example). On this page is a summary of important things that need to be recapped at the start of the session, followed by a list of NPCs who will likely make an appearance, followed by short descriptions of events or encounters I expect to happen. If the adventure includes a location to explore, I include a map accompanied by swatches of descriptive text reminding me of important details. Sometimes I'll require a stat block for a unique NPC or monster, but I try to use existing stat blocks and modify them as needed (as discussed in [Instant Monster](#)).

The one-page session overview illustrates the degree to which I "under-prepare" for a game session. It provides a few guideposts, but most of the session is improvised. I find my players don't suffer for the lack of preparation on my part, as long as I prod them when the action stalls and roll with them once they've committed to a course of action.

LESSONS LEARNED

When the players do something that threatens to take the story in an unexpected direction . . .

- ◆ **Allow it.**
- ◆ **Imagine the next logical outcome or event, and proceed from there.**

If, for some reason, you can't think of the next logical outcome or event, consider ending the session on a cliffhanger and allowing yourself time to mull over the implications. A hero wants to use a hat of disguise to impersonate the royal heir? No problem. But let's see what happens when a perceptive royal sibling succeeds at an Insight check and senses something is amiss. Maybe the threat of discovery leads the characters to kill two birds with one stone by murdering the king and framing the suspicious sibling for his death. Again, no problem! Yeah, the characters have usurped a kingdom, but all the threats to the kingdom are still there—and, ironically enough, the heroes' skills as adventurers might be the kingdom's best hope of survival. The campaign marches on, just not in the way you or your players expected.

So my Monday night group, out of dire necessity, has forged an alliance with the evil god of secrets. The players know it's a marriage of convenience not long for the world, but it raises lots of interesting questions and opens up lots of roleplaying opportunities. Can the heroes learn to work alongside Vecna's evil servants? Will certain characters' personal misgivings threaten to end the alliance? Which side will betray the other first? By their choices and actions, the players have made the campaign more interesting and complicated, and they've put my improvisational skills to the test. I shall not disappoint them!

I've learned that the secret to developing one's improvisational skills as a DM is to listen to what the players want to do, and then steer the adventure

in that direction, even if it runs counter to my own expectations. Only when my expectations are challenged can the campaign go off in surprisingly fun directions. Many campaigns die of boredom (DM boredom, player boredom, or both), but you can mitigate the threat of boredom by keeping yourself open to ideas and demonstrating to your players that you're not locked into telling one story and one story only.

Until the next encounter!



Epic Fail

8/18/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

A legendary cutlass has fallen into the hands of the dragonborn warlord Vantajar, one of the campaign's major villains. He's a level 30 solo brute with an elemental warship, a crew of epic pirates, and a half dozen storm giant mercenaries riding thundercloud chariots.

Seeking the cutlass for themselves, the adventurers board Vantajar's vessel and engage their hated foe head-on, despite the fact that they're only 24th level and are outnumbered 7 to 1. As the storm giants hurl lightning bolts at the party spellcasters, Vantajar brings his cutlass down on Kael, the party cleric, dropping him dangerously close to his negative bloodied value.

With their own ship too far away to render assistance, the heroes are in dire straits. Failure is not an option – it's inevitable.

Never underestimate the resourcefulness of good players. When things look grim, when the cold eyes of death seem fixed on their characters, they somehow find a way to turn certain defeat into victory. One of the players might figure out a way to regain a spent power or healing surge. Another might whip out that half-forgotten magic item or plot detail that can tip the scales in the party's favor. Many times have I stacked the odds against my players and watched them frantically search their character sheets and campaign notes for something—anything—to turn the tide.

And even when nothing presents itself, there's always a chance that their luck could change, that their cold dice might suddenly turn red hot. Hell, I've seen player characters call out to the gods, throwing

themselves at my mercy, and on rare occasion I've allowed the gods to toss them a bone, particularly if they've earned it.

Not this time.

The Wednesday night characters have thrown caution to the wind and acted rashly, and they're doomed to break like waves upon the rocks. At least, that's what I'm expecting will happen. Even as I write this column, the battle is still playing out. However, it's safe to say that I've stacked the deck against them. How could I not? Throughout the entire campaign, Vantajar has been touted as a supreme badass, a legendary renegade who surfaces like a giant shark in the nightmares of child and Sea King alike.

What makes good drama? In a word: failure.

You can't have drama if the heroes never fail. We all know the story of the good guy who faces the bad guy before he's ready and gets his ass kicked. What usually happens next is that the good guy deals with the consequences of his failure, learns a valuable lesson, gathers his wits and self-confidence, and delivers the villain's comeuppance. The story's an oldie but a goodie.

The first article in this series ([Surprise! Epic Gob-lins!](#)) talked about using lower-level challenges to make player characters feel powerful. It should come as no surprise that higher-level challenges have their place in the game as well. I use them all the time, not to be cruel but to reinforce the notion that some challenges aren't balanced for the heroes' level. It forces the players to switch gears, try different tactics, and rely on more than their swords and spells. It also makes the campaign world a scary place, even to epic-level characters.

It's my job as the DM to make sure that the heroes' failure doesn't spell the end of the campaign. If the Wednesday group prevails against all odds, I'll have to work harder the next time they come face-to-face with a major campaign villain. If Vantajar defeats them, the campaign isn't over, for I've concocted a



logical reason why he'd want to keep his enemies alive.

Here's a behind-the-curtain glimpse of what I'm thinking, to give you an idea of the thought process that went into planning the likely outcome of the heroes' failure: Vantajar desires to use the legendary cutlass to unite the Sea Kings—the merchant lords of Iomandra—under his banner. Once the old feuds are cast aside, he will command a navy greater than that of the Dragovar Empire, and he plans to use it to himself become Emperor. However, he needs to present the cutlass before the Eye of the Kraken (an artifact hidden in the island fortress of Krakenholt) and be judged worthy of its power. Only then will the Sea Kings kneel before him. Chris Youngs' tiefling character, Deimos, is better known as Sea King Impstinger, and the supremely arrogant Vantajar wants to see his enemy broken and forced into servitude like all the other Sea Kings. To kill Deimos and his companions now would deny Vantajar an even greater victory, not to mention the ships under Sea King Impstinger's command.

In the event of their defeat, the characters will be knocked unconscious, deprived of their gear, and hauled to Krakenholt. En route, a generous helping of torture will deprive them of their healing surges and any ability to take short or extended rests. Without their precious magic items and their encounter and daily powers, the heroes will be hard-pressed to threaten Vantajar directly, and yet I can imagine all sorts of reversals. They might convince a disloyal crew member to return a useful magic item (such as a sending stone). Maybe they'll ride out the journey and take their revenge as Vantajar presents the cutlass to the Eye of the Kraken. If all else fails, perhaps fate will intervene on their behalf: Maybe Vantajar is attacked en route by a Sea King determined to stop his ascendancy, and the resulting battle affords the heroes a chance to reclaim their gear and win their freedom, or maybe the Eye of the Kraken will judge

the evil warlord to be unworthy of the cutlass, denying him his destiny. Villains become much more interesting when things don't go their way. They are, after all, dark reflections of the heroes.

LESSONS LEARNED

Sometimes a DM has to be cruel to be kind. Sometimes, for the sake of suspense and good drama, you have to drive the heroes into the dirt so that they can pick themselves back up, sharpen their game (and their blades), and stage a storybook comeback, becoming even more powerful than when they faced defeat. Here are some helpful tips to guide you:

- ◆ **Be transparent: Give your players hints that they might be in over their heads.**
- ◆ **It's okay to set the characters up for failure. Just don't be surprised if they succeed.**
- ◆ **If you expect the characters to fail and they fail, know where to take the story from there.**

Many players don't like it when their heroes fail, die, or both—especially when it happens during an “unfair” encounter. My players understand that I'm not on a quest to annihilate their characters or make them feel like useless tools, and so should yours. In classic and modern fiction, heroes rise, fall, and rise again. The unfair encounter is something you can use occasionally (emphasis on occasionally) to rouse your players and propel your campaign in interesting new directions.

If your players are unaccustomed to being trounced and you're worried that they might turn against you, you could do worse than sow the seeds of their eventual comeback. Tell the players how much you're looking forward to seeing how they remedy their characters' latest misfortune, and plant a few hints as to how they might succeed next time. Maybe the villain's subordinates are badly treated and could

be turned against him. Maybe the heroes can discover a weakness to exploit. Maybe the villain lets down his guard or makes a classic blunder of overconfidence. But I'm getting ahead of myself!

Just as the best heroes have faults, so too do the best villains. We'll tackle this subject in next week's column, and I'll pull a few examples not only from the Iomandra campaign but also from the adventure I have in store for Acquisitions Incorporated at this year's [live D&D game at PAX 2011](#)! Stay tuned.

Until the next encounter



The Villain's Fault

8/25/2011

PAX PRIME TIME

If you are planning to attend the [Live D&D Game at PAX 2011](#), be warned! This article contains umpteen SPOILERS. You might want to skip this section.

For those who don't know, this Saturday, in the Paramount Theater in Seattle, I'm running a live game for the gang of Acquisitions Incorporated (Mike "Gabe" Krahulik, Jerry "Tycho" Holkins, Scott "PvP" Kurtz, and Wil "Don't be a dick!" Wheaton) in front of a crowd of 2,500+ PAX attendees. I'm told there will be grand entrances, pyrotechnics, costumes, and live minstrels (as opposed to dead ones, I suppose). For the past couple of weeks, I've been neglecting my home campaign to prepare for this blessed event, but costumes and minstrels aside, the thing that excites me most about the game is the opportunity to take Acquisitions Incorporated somewhere they've never been and pit them against a worthy villain.

If you can't attend the event, be sure to watch [our live streaming coverage](#).

When last we left Jim Darkmagic, Omin Dran, and Binwin Bronzebottom, they had just freed their not-so-dead companion Aoefel from the prison-fortress of Slaughterfast. With the gang reunited, [it was decided](#) to draw them to New Hampshire for the reading of the Last Will and Testament of James Darkmagic I... Jim Darkmagic's grandfather. The main villain of the adventure is Jim's cousin, Percival Darkmagic, who doesn't get the inheritance he's expecting, namely a secret chest of magical lore that the Darkmagics have kept for generations. To make him interesting, however, I needed to give him some faults.

I hit upon the notion that Percy had foolishly promised to deliver this chest of "Darkmagic magic" to the Wortstaff family, a rival clan of archwizards, and woe to him should he fail! I also gave him a more peculiar fault that could have very interesting consequences: Due to a curse placed upon him as a child, Percival is incapable of seeing or hearing creatures of fey origin. I suspect Wil (who plays the eladrin Aoefel) might have some fun with that!

To Percy's credit, he's not a buffoon. He's a very, very bad person, and his plan to seize his "rightful inheritance" is quite clever, if you ask me. (Spoiler: It has something to do with the Darkmagic mansion itself, which has some unusual magical properties.) He also has a "thing" for his sister, which makes him appropriately loathsome.

MONDAY NIGHT.

The heroes break into a safehouse belonging to a guild of tiefling thieves called the Horned Alliance. Their objective? To free a captured member of a rival guild.

The heroes manage to free the prisoner and make their escape, only to find themselves pinned down on a rickety balcony overlooking a city built along the edges of a sunken grotto. An evil silver dragon working with the Horned Alliance lands on the balcony and blocks their escape. As the dragon begins spewing its villainous monologue, the balcony creaks under the dragon's weight, shudders, and breaks away.

Before the dragon can spread its wings and take to the air, it crashes into the city below and disappears in a cloud of dust and debris. Suffice it to say, the players are dumbfounded and seize the chance to make good their escape.

My villains, unlike their mad creator, are imperfect. They're not omniscient. They don't know everything, and like the player characters, they arrive at erroneous conclusions based on faulty assumptions. They miscalculate. They fall down. They suffer setbacks. My villains are deeply, profoundly flawed. And that's why my players like them to a fault.

The best thing about faults is that they can be exploited. Case in point, here are three villains from my Iomandra campaign, each of whom has faults for clever players to exploit:

Prismeus: This tiefling henchman works for Zaibon Krinvazh of the Horned Alliance and has been loyal to the crime lord ever since Zaibon bailed him out of prison. While imprisoned, Prismeus was tortured by his dragonborn captors, his face scarred by acid. His ill treatment and disfigurement has made him resentful of all dragonborn, and his loyalty to Zaibon is beyond reproach. When Zaibon is killed off by the heroes, Prismeus turns the Horned Alliance against Zaibon's killers, putting the entire organization in

jeopardy and leading to a standoff between him, the heroes, and the Dragovar authorities who would like nothing more than to see the Horned Alliance broken once and for all.

Cale Blackstrand: This oily cad works for the Dragovar Empire. When he's not escorting criminals to the island prison of Zardkarath, he's cutting deals and taking bribes to allow criminals to be set free. He also has a weakness for powerful women. When Andraste (Michele Carter's character) needs help freeing her aunt from prison, she reluctantly turns to Cale. Under normal circumstances, Cale would betray her in a heartbeat, taking her money and leaving Andraste's aunt to rot, but he's smitten by Andraste and, like a lovesick fool, blindly agrees to her terms. It never occurs to him that he might be the one betrayed.

Osterneth the Bronze Lich: She's the ex-wife of Vecna (from the days before he became a god) and a powerful lich who hides her true form behind the illusion of a charming noblewoman. When the heroes cut a deal with an aspect of Vecna, Osterneth is sent as the Maimed Lord's trusted representative to assist them in their endeavors. Although she provides the heroes with crucial intelligence, she's also gathering secrets for her dark master. What Osterneth fails to see is that her trusted changeling manservant, Metis, might one day betray her and divulge her secret—that she has her husband's shriveled, still-beating heart lodged inside her ribcage, and that its destruction would spell Vecna's doom.

I've played in games run by experienced DMs who portray villains as unerring, evil-minded extensions of themselves. These villains seem to know everything and always have the advantage because they've

been imbued with an inexplicable omniscience. It threatens my suspension of disbelief as a player when my character confronts a villain only to learn that the DM has gifted his precious bad guy with an unbelievable amount of precognition and insight into my character's plans, intentions, and secrets. Omniscient villains are boring; I'd rather face a villain who gets my character's name wrong or flees upon taking a critical hit. Suddenly, that villain seems infinitely more real to me.

LESSONS LEARNED

The most memorable villains in television, film, and literature have faults as big as the San Andreas. These faults not only make them seem "real" but also lead to their inevitable ruin. In the re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica*, Admiral Cain (played by Michelle Forbes) can't see past her hatred of the Cylons, and that hatred destroys her. In the Bond movie *Casino Royale*, the villain Le Chiffre is undone by one too many bad gambles. Hannibal Lector's fault is his affection for Clarice Starling which, on multiple occasions, nearly costs him his freedom. Annie Wilkes' fault is her sycophantic adoration for Paul Sheldon, which blinds her to his ultimate betrayal at the end of Stephen King's *Misery*. These faults do not make these characters any less fearsome or menacing. If anything, it makes them more likeable.

So here are the key takeaways:

- ♦ **Villains aren't perfect, and like the PCs, they don't know everything and they make mistakes.**
- ♦ **Let the players see your villains' flaws so that they might exploit them.**

If you're unaccustomed to concocting flaws for your villains, consider some of the classics: **love** (the villain is infatuated with one of the characters or another

NPC), **hatred** (the villain is blinded by hate and can't think straight), **ritual** (the villain cleaves to certain predictable habits), **arrogance** (the villain doesn't kill the heroes when presented with the chance), **fear** (the villain is afraid of something), **gluttony** (the villain is never satisfied and always craves more), **deformity** (the villain suffers from a physical impediment), and **curse** (the villain is tormented by an affliction, bedevilment, or unusual malady).

Maybe your villain is blind or haunted by ghosts. Maybe your villain needs a special elixir to stay young, or maybe your villain has the world's stupidest henchmen (like "Mom" in *Futurama*). In branding your villains with flaws, you might inadvertently turn them into clowns, fools, boobs, or imbeciles. Fear not. As long as they do bad things, your players will still love to hate them.

As for Percival Darkmagic (see sidebar), it remains to be seen whether he can hold his own against the heroes of Acquisitions Incorporated. Frankly, I'm more concerned that Aoefel might go wandering around the Darkmagic mansion by himself—and we all know what happens when you split the party! In any event, if you can't attend the live game at PAX, no worries: The game will be filmed and posted so that the rest of the world can see how things went down at the Darkmagic estate.

Until the next encounter!

T'wit

9/1/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

Kael, the party cleric, lies dead—killed by the evil pirate warlord Vantajar moments before the warlord himself meets his end. Before Kael's bodily remains can be salvaged, the enormous water elemental powering Vantajar's warship escapes captivity and sinks the vessel. The surviving heroes flee into an extradimensional space (they are epic level, after all) and so avoid plunging into a sea of acid in the Elemental Chaos.

Chris Champagne (Kael's player) jumps on the chance to play a new character, and I spend the rest of the session trying to facilitate this character's introduction. I'm not a fan of new characters showing up inexplicably to a chorus of voices exclaiming, "You look trustworthy!" No, I much prefer well-staged entrances. Remember Captain Jack Sparrow's entrance in *Pirates of the Caribbean*? Yeah—it doesn't get better than that.

Chris's new character is Kosh, an infernal pact warlock with the Prince of Hell epic destiny. After the surviving characters use the Plane Shift ritual to get back to their own ship, I orchestrate a roleplaying encounter in which Tyranny (the succubus concubine of the ship's captain) concocts a ritual to summon Kosh from the Nine Hells. "Tyra" (as she's known) is convinced that the party could use the extra firepower, but her ritual requires nine drops of blood from nine different mortals, and being an immortal, she has only the crewmembers aboard the heroes' ship to choose from. She must also convince the player characters that this is a good idea, and that having an epic-level Prince of Hell in the party has certain advantages. Suffice to say, it's not an easy sell.

In fact, it proves to be a very hard sell and takes more than an hour of back-and-forth roleplaying and

conniving on my part to make happen. Meanwhile, Chris remains silent for most of the session, jotting down notes about his character's background as I do everything in my power to bring Kosh into play—everything except shout to the other players, "Look, guys, Chris has a new character he wants to play, so stop roleplaying already and let him play!"

I'm sooooo glad I didn't have to say that.

Thanks to a rash of conventions and summer vacations, many of us at Wizards are playing catch-up around the office. The interruptions have also impacted my Monday and Wednesday night campaign and thrown me off my game, to wit: Last week was the first time in a long time that I sat down at the game table and couldn't remember where we'd left off the previous session. I had to check my notes to realize, "Oh yeah, the players are smack-dab in the middle of the biggest battle of the campaign!"

DM "spaz moments" aside, I run a very brisk game—as evidenced by watching the games I run for [Acquisitions Incorporated](#) and the writers of [Robot Chicken](#). When I look back at my notes from the previous Wednesday night session, I see a long list of "stuff that happened" that needs to be organized and recapped for the players' (and my) benefit. It also reminds me that a DM has the power to propel the campaign forward at a staggering pace with a few simple tricks.

This installment of *The Dungeon Master Experience* discusses the ancient art of **contraction** as it pertains to D&D game sessions. My impetus for tackling this subject comes from some recent encounters with DMs at conventions. One question I get asked from time to time is, "How do you pack so much stuff into one session?" I'm guessing that many DMs have experienced occasions when the campaign loses all forward momentum and plods along at an insufferable pace, either because the players lack motivation

or because the players get distracted by too much nonsense.

In English grammar, we use contractions to neatly dispose of unnecessary letters and syllables in conversation and informal writing. “I’m” is shorter and takes microseconds less time to write and say than “I am.” I contract my campaign in much the same way; on a per-example basis, it doesn’t amount to much, but a minute saved here and there really starts to add up in a 4-hour game session.

Here are a few specific tactics that I use:

I cut my campaign the way a film editor cuts a movie. If I find the session is lagging, I jump ahead as far as I reasonably can without causing the narrative to become disjointed. It might be rounds, minutes, hours, days, or months, but I do my best to encapsulate the skipped time period and press on. In my Wednesday night game, the ritual that Tyranny casts to summon Kosh from the Nine Hells happens very quickly in real-time because I wanted to give Chris a chance to play. But at the same time, his entrance needs to be memorable yet appropriate, and so I go the route of a giant flaming pentagram. To take a more common example, if the characters are spending too much time shopping for gear in town, I might say, “After a couple hours spent gearing up in town, you find everything you need and head east, following the edge of a vast, dry canyon. Six hours later, as the sun begins to set, you descend into the canyon and make camp near a fat cactus that provides ample water.” With a couple sentences, I can push the story along and skip over countless wasted minutes.

Using subtlety and guile, I help players get past points of indecision. If the players are mired in indecision, I have an NPC offer them a well-reasoned opinion or bit of sound advice, or I give a player some free bit of information his or her character would logically know. I use this

technique a lot as my way of telling the players, “The DM thinks you ought to do this, as opposed to that.” Sometimes my players will ignore the advice, but that’s more because I have, on occasion, used NPCs to deliberately feed them bad information and advice (a topic which, by the way, really deserves its own article).

I keep my descriptions spare. If the characters are hired to escort a merchant caravan from Town A to Town B and I’ve staged an encounter with bandits at some point in between, I take one sentence to describe the caravan and one sentence to describe the journey from Town A to the bandit encounter. Then, if I feel so inclined, I add a sentence that describes a few pertinent or off-beat “character moments” involving the PCs and/or significant NPCs. For example, “Shortly before nightfall on the first day of travel, one of the merchants uncorks a cask of dwarven whiskey and passes out flagons. Those of you who partake of the whiskey find it difficult to stay awake during your watch.” These sentences might include inconsequential details to give the campaign color, but I don’t dwell on stuff that isn’t important. If the players want more information (such as the brand of dwarven whiskey), they’ll usually ask for it.

I keep my NPC descriptions brief as well. In the Wednesday night game, the adventurers recently faced their arch-nemesis for the first time. My description of Vantajar, the dragonborn pirate warlord, was that he was 9 feet tall—unnaturally large for his species—and had a metal eyepatch bolted to his skull, a la General Chang (Christopher Plummer) in *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*. Everything else was left to the players’ imaginations. I generally like to give an NPC one distinguishing characteristic before moving on.

I don’t frontload information. I let it trickle out in dribs and drabs, and not just because I can always provide more information if the players

ask for it. As the DM, I control the pace of the game, and if it takes me five painfully long minutes to describe the contents of a room, chances are good that the players will fail to pick up or remember important details that will then need to be repeated. My players don’t need to know that a balcony is 20 feet high until that information becomes relevant.

I keep track of initiative on a magnetic white board. That way, the players can see when their turns are coming up and plan accordingly. Giving them visibility into the combat order reduces the number of wasted minutes during a player’s turn.

I exhibit a low tolerance for player indecision in combat. Combat is supposed to be fluid and fast, and nothing causes the game to grind to a halt faster than an indecisive player who can’t decide what actions his character should take on his turn. I will press the player with questions such as, “What does your character do?” If this doesn’t push the player to swift action, I ask, “Would you like to delay?” (which, if answered in the affirmative, lets me skip forward until the player decides he’s ready to jump back in). Other favorite sayings of mine include, “You can always use an at-will power” or “Do whatever feels right for your character.” Another thing I do is have a monster or NPC verbally taunt or insult the character, which often incites the player to take immediate action against the offending enemy (and also breaks the lull with a touch of roleplaying).

I ignore a lot of conditions and ongoing damage effects. Ongoing damage and conditions such as “slowed” and “weakened” are useful in moderation, but they slow down the game. I urge novice DMs to avoid them like the plague. I would rather have a monster deal straight-up damage than apply “rider effects” that need to be tracked (unless they’re part of a monster’s “shtick”). Since most ongoing damage effects end after 1 round

anyway, it's faster and easier to have a monster that deals "ongoing 10 damage" simply deal 10 extra damage on the initial attack, and be done with it.

I dump irrelevant encounters. I imagine every encounter as a scene in a movie script and decide for myself whether it's worth preserving or not. Even a minor encounter should advance the campaign narrative in some way or provide interesting "character moments." At the very least, it should present a challenge unlike anything the players have faced before. If the players are suffering through their sixth "random wilderness encounter" in a row, I've done something horribly wrong. Sometimes it hurts to cut stuff; case in point, I had to cut a bunch of planned moments from this year's live D&D game at PAX purely due to time constraints, including a cool bit where the Dark-magic mansion decides it doesn't like Binwin Bronzebottom and turns against him—a pity, but that's just the way it is.

I sometimes use average damage values. Average damage used consistently and to excess is boring and predictable—two things a DM never wants to be accused of being. Still, it's tech we've applied to minions with great success. In a given session, I roll lots of dice, and adding up numbers takes time. When running complex combat encounters, I alternate between rolling damage for monsters and taking average damage. I have a chart similar to the one below attached to my DM screen, and for the record, I treat monster "recharge" powers as encounter powers when determine average damage for them.

MONSTER LEVEL	NON-BRUTE DAMAGE (AT-WILL)	NON-BRUTE DAMAGE (ENCOUNTER)	BRUTE DAMAGE (AT-WILL)	BRUTE DAMAGE (ENCOUNTER)
1	9	13	11	16
2	10	15	12	18
3	11	16	13	20
4	12	18	15	22
5	13	19	16	24
6	14	21	17	26
7	15	22	18	28
8	16	24	20	30
9	17	25	21	31
10	18	27	22	33
11	19	28	23	35
12	20	30	25	37
13	21	31	26	39
14	22	33	27	41
15	23	34	28	43
16	24	36	30	45
17	25	37	31	46
18	26	39	32	48
19	27	40	33	50
20	28	42	35	52
21	29	43	36	54
22	30	45	37	56
23	31	46	38	58
24	32	48	40	60
25	33	49	41	61
26	34	51	42	63
27	35	52	43	65
28	36	54	45	67
29	37	55	46	69
30	38	57	47	71

LESSONS LEARNED

One analogy I'm fond of using is that a D&D campaign is like a wagon. The players are the horses, and the DM is the driver holding the reins. As the players move forward, they take the campaign and you along with them, and you can guide them to a point, but they can be stubborn, hard to motivate, or just plain out of control. Sometimes you have to snap the reins, but if you "crack the whip" too often and keep the players running at full speed all the time, they'll get worn out, so you need to set a pace that's comfortable for them but also gets the wagon where it needs to go.



When it comes to setting a brisk pace, there are dozens of tactics I use to cram more "gaming time" into my game sessions, some of which are better witnessed than explained, but most of them boil down to being aggressive in my efforts to focus players on the important stuff and get them past distractions that might lead the campaign astray, cause the pace to slow to a crawl, or reduce the players' overall sense of fun. I'm sure you have your own "tried and true" tricks for packing more punch into your game sessions, and I'd love to hear about them.

With regard to my Wednesday night game, it takes a special kind of player to sit still for an hour while his friends decide whether or not to let him play. Had I been "on my game," I would've found a way to contract the back-and-forth debate about the merits of summoning a Prince of Hell so that Chris could put his cool new character in play. Still, I'm glad I didn't go the route of having Kosh magically appear out of nowhere and ask, "Anyone need an infernal warlock?" Talk about dumb.

P.S. Thanks to everyone who voted in last week's poll! The heroes of Acquisitions Incorporated made short work of GygaX the cat—for once it appears the butler didn't do it.

Until the next encounter!

Lies My DM Told Me

9/8/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

Trouble on the high seas! Mind flayers are attacking coastal settlements and ships, and the adventurers are preparing to assault an illithid nautilus—a ship of mind flayers—to rescue the prisoners aboard. Imazhia, an NPC dragonborn priest of Bahamut who receives prophetic dreams, offers to cast a ritual on the characters to grant them resistance to psychic damage. The players readily accept the gift before teleporting aboard the nautilus, knowing they have their work cut out for them.

Aboard the enemy vessel, the heroes find themselves taking a lot more psychic damage from the mind flayers' attacks than expected. Something is clearly amiss, and it doesn't take a wizard to realize Imazhia has lied to them.

Her ritual has actually made them more vulnerable to psychic damage, not more resistant!

I lie to my players all the time. Or rather, my NPCs do.

I never lie to my players “out of game.” In my role as DM, I’m always honest, lest the players walk away from the game table in frustration and never return. But “in game,” I like to feed my players a tasty mix of true and false information. It adds to the campaign’s realistic texture.

Imazhia, the dragonborn priest, is a special kind of villain—the one who pretends to be helpful until the evil Far Realm entities in her head set out to confound and destroy the adventurers. Early in the campaign, Imazhia died aboard an exploding ship and was raised from the dead by her fellow priests. The players saw her as a casualty of a villainous plot, unaware that the villains who sabotaged the ship were actually doing them a favor by taking Imazhia out. After returning from the dead, Imazhia became one of the heroes’ most trusted advisors, using her dreams to guide their actions and steer them away from the monstrous threat posed by the mind flayers. By the time the threat became too great to ignore, the heroes trusted Imazhia more than most other NPCs in the campaign. Surely a psychic priest of Bahamut who’d died and come back from the dead would never deceive them.

In the real world, people speak untruths for many different reasons. Maybe they believe what they’re saying is true. Maybe they are lying because they’re in denial and can’t face the truth. Maybe they’re hiding the truth to protect someone (or something). Maybe they’re lying out of guilt and fear of discovery. Or maybe they’re lying for the cheap thrill, just to screw with you. The less-than-honest NPCs in my campaign deceive for all of these reasons, to the point where my players must constantly judge the words against what they know about the individual speaking them. It makes for some very interesting roleplaying, let me tell you!

In addition to the myriad reasons for not telling the truth, there are good liars and bad liars. My campaign has both. Imazhia is an example of a good liar, and it doesn’t hurt that her words are bolstered by a priestly demeanor and the holy symbol of Bahamut hanging around her neck. I try to limit the number of really good NPC liars in my campaign to a handful, since it takes time for players to hack through the web of lies, and frankly, too much of a good thing can

be a bad thing. On the other hand, my campaign has no shortage of bad liars, and in some respects they’re more fun. The players don’t have to work nearly as hard to cut to the truth, and a bad liar makes for great comedy.

Feeding false information to player characters is something that’s been part of D&D since the early days of the game. Old adventures such as module L1 *The Secret of Bone Hill* had those marvelous “[rumor tables](#)” that encouraged you to roll dice to determine which rumors the characters knew. Some of the rumors were true, some false. I once ran module L1 for some middle school friends who learned, via the rumor table, that the Baron of Restenford was chaotic evil, and so they decided to attack the baron’s castle. Never mind that the baron was actually chaotic good. They stormed the keep, slaughtered the



guards, executed the baron and his family, and made off with some fine suits of armor and tapestries. Pelltar, the baron's wizard, finally set them straight, but the damage had been done. I decided to use the misunderstanding as a springboard for a follow-up adventure in which the heroes tracked down the source of the false rumor and discovered an evil thieves' guild seeking to gain a foothold in Restenford. In hindsight, that was a pretty clever idea for a 15-year-old!

In the intervening 25 years, I've become quite the practiced liar. Whenever the characters arrive in a new village, town, or city, I pepper them with local rumors—some true, some false. As any practiced liar knows, the secret to adding rich layers to any D&D campaign is the aforementioned happy blend of truth and deception. If all of my NPCs lied to my players all of the time, that wouldn't be a fun experience for anyone. Similarly, if the NPCs told the truth constantly, the players would take everything—including my campaign—at face value. In the real world, drama is natural outcome of humans trying to ascertain what's true and what's false, and the emotions and confusion that come when humans are dishonest with one another. Why should the drama of my campaign be any different?

LESSONS LEARNED

I love the roleplaying opportunities that arise when players attempt to deceive monsters and NPCs in my campaign, and as they say, turnabout is fair play. When it comes right down to it, there are basically two kinds of untruths your NPCs can tell the player characters:

- ◆ **Deliberate deceptions**
- ◆ **Unintentional misinformation**

When in doubt, tell the players things that are true. Even the old D&D adventures tended to have more true rumors than false ones. Players don't like to be constantly deceived any more than they enjoy swimming in shark-infested waters. However, when the time comes to deceive them, don't let your evil NPCs have all the fun. Even good and unaligned NPCs have reasons to lie, and your campaign world is full of shamefully misinformed benefactors, inveigling politicians and court jesters, and good people who harbor dark secrets.

Basically, you need to ask yourself, why would the NPC say something untrue? If the NPC has anything to gain from deceiving the heroes, then you have just cause to lie on that NPC's behalf. However, in some respects "unintentional misinformation" is the more interesting way to go, since the characters are dealing with an NPC who is sincere (and therefore harder to threaten with violence). Recently in my Monday night game, two characters were killed by a death knight wielding a soul-draining sword. An evil-aligned NPC named Osterneith said she had the means to free the souls trapped within the blade and, in the process of trying to set them free, accidentally destroyed the sword and souls contained within. Some of the players felt confident enough in their characters' high Insight skill checks to believe Osterneith was being sincere, and she truly was. The lesson: Even the DM's all-knowing, all-powerful NPCs make mistakes sometimes, and it's harder for players to justify killing an NPC who speaks honestly.

Let's take a little test, shall we, using another example from my Monday night campaign: In the world of Iomandra, wood is rare and highly prized for shipbuilding. Talia Winterleaf, whose father owns a wood-trading consortium called the Winterleaf Coster, has bribed a clan of frost giants into attacking an iron mine owned by the Ironstar Cartel, a rival consortium; Talia did so in order to prevent the cartel from finishing a prototype iron ship that it hopes will

impress the Dragovar Empire enough to win a lucrative shipbuilding contract. The heroes learn of the plot, confront Talia, and threaten to take down the Winterleaf Coster unless she pulls the giants out of the mine. Talia does as they wish and promises not to interfere with the Cartel's shipbuilding operation any further. It's also worth noting a minor complication that works in the party's favor: Talia has genuine feelings for Kithvolar, the party's elf ranger (played by Jeff Alvarez). So the question is: Is Talia lying?

The jury's still out, but in this case my instinct is to say no—she's speaking the truth. The players already have sufficient cause to believe she's dishonest, and thus it's more surprising that Talia will be true to her word. Also, her feelings for Kithvolar help to tip the scale in the party's favor, and her fondness for the elf ranger would realistically impact her decision. But don't worry—I haven't gone soft. Talia can't speak for her father or the rest of the Winterleaf Coster, who will no doubt continue to make the players' eyes roll with their sinister business practices.

Next week, we discuss what to do when a character dies suddenly and leaves behind untold stories and unfinished business. The campaign marches on, but will it ever be the same?

Until the next encounter!

C'est La Vie

9/15/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

When last we left the party, Deimos (played by Chris Youngs) had led his stalwart companions into the Elemental Chaos to recover the fabled cutlass Fathomreaver, which he hopes will unite Iomandra's divisive Sea Kings under his banner.

The quest culminates in an epic fight aboard the Maelstrom, an elemental warship commanded by the dragonborn warlord Vantajar. With Fathomreaver in hand, the evil warlord cuts down Kael, the party's deva cleric (played by Chris Champagne), but it's Deimos who deals the final killing blow and slays Vantajar.

As the warlord's blood spills across the deck, the water elemental bound to the vessel is released and wreaks havoc. The elemental unleashes its fury upon the ship itself, breaking it in two. As the Maelstrom goes down in a sea of acid, the surviving heroes escape into an extradimensional space but are forced to leave their dead behind...

This week's installment tackles a question posed by "Arbanax" in response to a previous column. Arbanax's question, which I'm paraphrasing below, had to do with the untimely death of one of the characters in my long-running Wednesday night game:

"I am intrigued as to how you handled the cleric's death, seeing as he'd been part of the campaign for so many levels. I assume he had a backstory and other stuff left unfulfilled. How do you handle this?"

Fantastic question!

The characters in my campaign live and die by their own actions (although the luck of the die also plays its part). When a character is killed off, particularly at higher levels, they can leave behind a lot of unfinished business. I always give the player the interesting choice of continuing to play the character or trying something new. There are plenty of D&D plot devices to revive a dead character, and we've even built races and classes for players who want their characters to come back in a slightly different light (the revenant springs to mind).

In my group, I have players who invest heavily in their characters and are crestfallen or downright pissy when death becomes them. I also have players with very little emotional investment in their characters; they look forward to injecting new characters into the party mix. As a player, I very much fall into the latter camp. As the DM, I have no feelings about it one way or the other. In my opinion, players should be allowed to play what they want to play (within reason). I don't rule their imaginations, and there are very few character concepts my campaign can't accommodate with a little bit of forethought.

Chris Champagne joined the Monday night group in the middle of the campaign's paragon tier, and Kael, his deva cleric, actually died twice. The first time was during a Halloween-themed episode involving a killer plant and several enslaved "pod people." (As a fun aside, the other characters used a special potion to animate Kael until he could be raised from the dead, giving Chris the chance to play a zombified version of Kael for the extent of the adventure.) Kael's second death came at the hands of the dragonborn warlord Vantajar in the Elemental Chaos, and as a further insult, Kael's body was cast overboard and dissolved in a sea of acid.

Deva characters have a built-in [rebirth mechanic](#), but in this instance, Chris decided the time had

come to put Kael aside and try something new—this despite the fact that Kael was close to unlocking the secrets of a past life in which he was the loyal manservant of a young princess who would eventually become the Raven Queen! Now, it's possible that Kael has been "reborn" somewhere (as devas are wont to do), and so there's still a slim chance that he might reappear before the campaign concludes, but Kael's story basically ended when Chris decided to play Kosh, his infernal pact warlock with the Prince of Hell epic destiny. The fact that Kael's story is incomplete doesn't raise my hackles; in a game in which heroes die, it's not always possible to get perfect closure. You end up trading closure for shock as the surviving characters realize, "OMG, he's dead!" A sudden death might cut short that character's story, but hopefully it gives his surviving companions the newfound impetus to press on despite their trepidation.

My campaign occasionally takes a hit whenever a character dies, usually because I have storylines tied to that specific character that have nowhere left to go. *C'est la vie*. In Kael's case, he had found a relic (a bronze raven mask from a bygone age) that triggered flashbacks of his past life as a royal manservant, and we had just begun to explore that past life and Kael's discovery of the Raven Queen's true name. Also, one of the campaign's major villains, a rakshasa named Chan, had strong ties to the Kael character—they were enemies in a past life. Luckily for the campaign (and unfortunately for the players), Chan has made enough enemies in the party that he's still "in play" as far as I'm concerned. Had this not been the case, Chan might have fallen by the wayside.

If my Wednesday night campaign has one structural flaw, it's that many of the big story arcs hinge on certain lynchpin characters. No offense to Mat Smith, but if Garrot the fighter was crushed to death by a falling tarrasque, the villains steering the campaign



wouldn't even slow down to take a picture. Some characters are defined more by their personality or abilities than by their narrative importance. On the other hand, if Deimos died, the entire focus of the campaign would shift, as the party's impetus to unite the Sea Kings is mostly driven by Chris Youngs' character.

(But you know what? As I write this, part of me is so excited by the very idea that I'm half-tempted to drop a tarrasque on Deimos just to watch the campaign cartwheel off a cliff or take one last unexpected turn in the back end of epic tier.

Of course, that would be wrong.)

That said, over the years I've encountered the odd character I've wanted to kill off—usually because the

character was unlikeable, unbalanced, or underwhelming in the personality department (much like those poor red-shirt-wearin' sods in *Star Trek*). I try to resist the urge, since that's the DMing equivalent of "bad form" and is usually counterproductive—the player just rolls up an even more asinine or useless character.

LESSONS LEARNED

Much has been written on the topic of "coping with character death," and at the risk of throwing more wood on that fire, it's only the DM's problem when the player is left feeling unsatisfied. Your campaign will survive and metamorphose regardless, but will the player want to continue partaking of it? If the player wants to continue exploring the facets of the character or feels that there's an untold story left to tell, then the DM's task should be to make the player happy. If the player shrugs his or her shoulders and starts talking about a cool new character idea, then your challenge becomes how to make this new character feel like he or she belongs in your campaign.

- ◆ **The decision to revive a dead character should fall to that character's player. If you can't think of a clever way to bring back the character, there's always the Raise Dead ritual.**
- ◆ **If the player decides to "move on," be kind to the dead character's memory: Let the character's heroism echo through your campaign.**
- ◆ **Your campaign is stronger than any one character. When a character dies and leaves unfinished business behind, declare "C'est la vie" and move on.**

Kael died protecting his friends in the greatest battle of the Wednesday night campaign to date. Chris wisely believed that Kael would achieve no greater

death, and so he let the character go. My responsibility as DM is to keep Kael "alive" by evoking his name from time to time in ways that make his sacrifice meaningful. A saddened NPC might remark on Kael's absence, an emissary from the Shadowfell might reassure Kael's companions that their lost cleric has taken his place by the Raven Queen's side, or a campaign villain might remind the heroes how weak and vulnerable they've become without their deva cleric to back them up. It's also a tasty bit of irony that the party's escape from the sinking ship was facilitated by an exodus knife which Rodney Thompson's character lifted from Kael's corpse, so the party has a useful memento mori to remind them of their bygone friend.

As a final aside, Kael wasn't the only character who perished in the climactic battle with Vantajar.



Many of the characters came close, but a human pirate named Armos (played by Nacime Khemis) also died a player-imposed “permadeath.” Armos had been introduced several sessions earlier after Nacime’s primary character—a warforged warden named Fleet—was abducted by Vecna cultists wishing to study the “living construct.” I’m pretty sure that Nacime knew Fleet would be back eventually and that, at some point, he would be playing two characters. Armos wasn’t around long enough to win the hearts of his companions or carve out a major character arc for himself, so it remains to be seen whether his death has any lasting impression. Years after a campaign concludes, it’s perfectly natural for DMs and players to remember certain characters more readily than others, much as our real-world history judges heroes as popular or unsung.

Until the next encounter!

The Invisible Railroad

9/22/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

As they edge toward the end of the paragon tier, the Monday night group confronts and slays various evil members of the Shan Qabal, a powerful society of wizards, in the sunken city of Io’halador. Deep within the Shan Qabal fortress they encounter a warforged emissary of Vhalt, a secret kingdom protected by the evil god Vecna. The warforged poses no threat and claims to have a message for the leaders of the Dragovar Empire, which has been in disarray since the emperor disappeared along with his flagship—one of the great mysteries of the campaign.

My players immediately get the sense that this warforged is not some throwaway NPC but rather an important figure in the campaign—someone the DM has taken the time to develop. He has quirks and complex emotions, and several Insight checks confirm that he clearly means the party no harm. Perhaps for this reason, the heroes allow the warforged to tag along, but they are suspicious of its motives and eventually decline to escort it to the capital, at which point the warforged bids farewell and tries to leave the party. Out of the blue, Bruce Cordell’s tiefling warlock attacks! The other players are surprised by Melech’s snap decision but join the fray. As the warforged drops to 0 hit points, a magical docent planted in its chest causes the warforged to disintegrate,

leaving nothing behind and no clue about the message it was supposed to deliver.

Players never cease to surprise me.

Although I think it’s possible to run a campaign that is 100 percent driven by the players, I’m not the kind of Dungeon Master who can relinquish narrative control to the point where I’m simply reacting to the players’ desires and “winging it” week after week. I like coming up with adventure ideas and stringing them together to form a cohesive arc that unfolds over multiple levels. When I plan out an adventure, I usually have a good idea where, when, and how it will end—assuming the heroes don’t get sidetracked or TPK’ed en route. I like to call it my invisible railroad.

The worst kind of adventure, in my humble opinion, is one that railroads the player characters—which is to say, one that denies them any opportunity to affect change through their actions or decisions. Players can see a railroad from a mile away, and they are well within their rights to steer clear of it. Even in its simplest form, D&D is all about making choices and dealing with the consequences: Do we go right or left? Climb down the pit or avoid it? Slay the guard or bribe him? Even with my years of experience running D&D games, I’ve designed encounters that unfold exactly as planned by making player choice irrelevant—and shame on me for doing it! Such encounters usually end with disappointment.

That said, a D&D campaign is basically a series of quests that move the heroes from one destination to another, and if you want the player characters at Point A to visit Point B before, say, Point Q, then a track is a handy tool for getting them where they need to go. The trick (and yes, it is a trick) is to make sure that the players never feel as though they’re being carried along by the story.

When DMs ask me how I keep my campaign on track, I tell them that when I plan out the events of a

game session, I'm basically laying down an invisible track that I hope my players never see. This track is what guides my campaign toward its intended destination. If all goes perfectly, my players will make decisions and take actions that push the story farther along this track until, finally, I've gotten them from Point A to Point B. Of course, events rarely unfold as planned—you can't lay down an invisible track and expect your players to follow it. The track is for my benefit, not theirs. Its sole function is to remind me of the intended destination and how far off track the campaign has gotten.

To help steer the campaign back onto the invisible railroad, I use signposts. You might call them nudges, hints, or clues. No matter how far off track the heroes stray, they will at some point see an arrow-shaped signpost that says, in not so many words, "This way." More appropriately the signpost takes the form of a rumor, a helpful or insightful NPC, a corpse that comes with a clue, a sudden and unprovoked attack, or some other plot device that tells the players where they should go next. Eventually it will dawn on the players that Oh, the DM is telling us the adventure is THIS way, or even better, it'll present them with a choice designed to help steer the campaign back on track.

In my Monday night game, for example, I decided to introduce a warforged NPC with tons of important information about the campaign—first and foremost that the kingdom of Vhalt, which was supposedly destroyed by the Dragovar Empire eons ago, has risen from the ashes (with a little help from Vecna). Not only has Vhalt created an army of warforged—living constructs empowered with the souls of the dead—as a prelude to war, Vhaltese agents have kidnapped Emperor Azunkhan IX in an effort to destabilize the Dragovar Empire. The warforged emissary killed by the heroes represented a rogue faction in Vhalt that sought peace, not war. He was under orders to inform the Dragovar leadership of their emperor's

whereabouts—and because he followed orders to the letter, he was reluctant to confide in the heroes. (And, truth be told, they took no strides to gain his trust.) My hope was that the heroes would learn enough of this information, through roleplaying or other means, to track down and rescue the emperor and be lauded as champions of the empire, but alas. . . . I had banked on the Monday group's tendency to roleplay its way around a problem and was quite surprised when battle erupted.

Rather than have the warforged break character and spill the beans just to keep the story on track, I took the "Well, let's see where this takes us" approach. Several game sessions have passed, and the heroes still haven't gotten back on track, but that's because they've stumbled on another invisible railroad tied to a totally different campaign story arc—one involving a threat from the Far Realm. However, every so often I place a signpost that gently nudges them in the direction of Emperor Azunkhan and his Vhaltese captors. These signposts provide subtle reminders of

Vecna's (ahem) hand in the unfolding campaign. My most recent signpost takes the form of another NPC who has ties to Vhalt and some information about the missing emperor. Enough time has passed since the warforged incident that I can introduce this new NPC without my players feeling force-fed, and although the heroes have yet to question her, I feel confident that my patience will be rewarded. And if they kill her, okay—at least they'll have a corpse upon which to cast a Speak with Dead ritual!

Figure 1: The good news is that the players have done exactly what you expected them to do. The bad news is that they probably feel railroaded and have no way to affect the outcome of the campaign.

Figure 2: The good news is that the players are making decisions that affect the campaign. The bad news is that you don't know how to steer them back on track.

Figure 3: The good news is that you're allowing players to chart their own path while cleverly steering them toward your intended destination. The bad news is that you're exhausted from all the fun everyone is having.

Figure 1: The Railroad

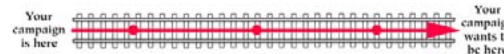


Figure 2: Derailment

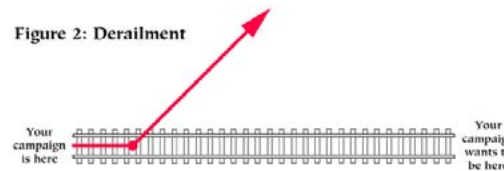
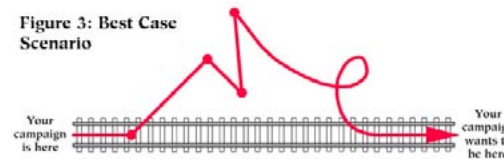


Figure 3: Best Case Scenario



LESSONS LEARNED

Dungeon Masters who take the time to plan adventures in advance share a common nightmare: At some point during the adventure, the players veer off track. Sometimes it happens unintentionally—the players simply do something you hadn't anticipated. Other times they do it maliciously, to test or thwart you. I never lose sleep over this sort of thing; in fact, I think part of the fun of being the DM is watching the players derail my campaign and figuring out ways to steer it back on track.

When your campaign goes off the rails, here's what I recommend you do:

- ♦ Don't worry, be happy! As long as you don't freak out, your players might not even realize that the campaign has gone awry.
- ♦ Be patient. Let the players stray. Let them explore the consequences of their actions.
- ♦ Place subtle signposts that help guide your players back toward the desired destination.

I've found that when players feel as though they can make real choices that affect the outcome of an encounter or an adventure, they are less likely to maliciously ruin my campaign. Patience is the key—if you remain calm and don't show panic or fear, your players will think that you're prepared for any contingency. Also, they'll realize in no time that you're not trying to lead them by the nose. As they fumble about and chase other distractions, you'll see opportunities to steer them back on track, or, conversely, you'll discover that the direction they've decided to go is more interesting than the one you had planned.

Next week, I'll talk about my three-arc approach to campaign building, which is, fundamentally, the idea of building a campaign around three big stories. I mention it here only because it dovetails nicely with the invisible railroad concept insofar as it gives you more tracks for your players to follow. If they fly off the rails, it's often easier to steer them toward another invisible track than to try to lead them back to the one they just left. Consider that food for thought.

Until the next encounter!

The Covenant of the Arcs

9/29/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

The heroes are sailing westward, hoping to rendezvous with the Knights of Ardyn, a group dedicated to wiping out corruption in the Dragovar Empire. It seems the knights have captured a mind flyer ship called a nautilus, and they need the heroes' help to operate it. The knights have decided that the empire needs their help to overcome a threat to the west: a Far Realm incursion brought about by an eladrin warlock named Starlord Evendor, who plans to free evil, godlike entities trapped in the stars, transport them to Iomandra, and provide them with living receptacles as bodies. The mad warlock has help from a powerful starspawn called Allabar and, oh, about fifty thousand mind flyers. To top it all off, the mind flyers have been launching raids on imperial settlements, capturing citizens and transforming them into degenerate foulspawn. Clearly, the heroes and the Knights of Ardyn have their work cut out for them, and their best hope is to find and slay Allabar, which will unleash a psychic shock wave that kills every mind flyer on the planet. The captured nautilus will enable the knights and the heroes to slip behind enemy lines and reach their quarry undetected.

En route to the rendezvous, the heroes' ship is attacked not by mind flyers but by three marauding vessels flying the flag of Sea King Senestrigo. The heroes have been a thorn in Senestrigo's side for many levels, and the Dragovar Empire is too distracted by the mind flyer threat to

deal with the fact that Senestrigo is openly attacking those he perceives as his enemies, including other Sea Kings.

As a further complication, the heroes have aboard their vessel an emissary of Vecna. This helpful lich, who wears the face of a noblewoman and travels with a changeling manservant (played by Peter Schaefer), hails from Vhalt, a secret kingdom that lies beyond a towering wall of deadly fog to the east called the Black Curtain. The heroes are among the few living souls who know of Vhalt's existence, and they suspect that Vhalt might be responsible for the kidnapping of the Dragovar Emperor—an act that has caused great instability within the empire, particularly in light of the mind flyer threat to the west.

I hinted at this week's topic in last week's article, which was about managing a campaign that's "gone off the rails." The smartest thing I ever did as DM was to build my current campaign on a foundation made up of three story arcs that together form an interlocking narrative—a kind of triptych, if you will. I used a similar three-arc structure in my previous 3rd Edition campaign, and it worked out so well that I kept the idea when plotting out the "big stories" in my 4th Edition world of Iomandra.

A campaign arc is a big story. Its impact is measured from the beginning of the campaign to the end, unlike the hundreds of other stories in the campaign that might end after one game session or after a few levels. Case in point: The Monday night group's

enmity with the Horned Alliance thieves' guild was a story that fueled many great moments in the paragon tier, but it wasn't big enough and didn't last long enough to be a campaign arc. However, many smaller stories are actually branches of a campaign arc, and good ones often can link two or more campaign arcs together. The Horned Alliance was made up of tiefling rogues who hated the Dragovar Empire, for it had not only destroyed the tiefling kingdom of Bael Turath but enslaved its people for generations. The thieves' guild offered sanctuary to a group of "kraken cultists" who were staging terrorist attacks against the empire by deploying Far Realm mines to blow up Dragovar ships. Where did they get these mines, you ask? From the mind flayers, of course—which ties directly to one of my three campaign arcs.

The three campaign arcs of the Iomandra campaign are as follows:

- ♦ **War erupts in the west when a star pact warlock triggers a Far Realm incursion that threatens the Dragovar Empire and the entire world.**



- ♦ **A secret kingdom to the east, long thought destroyed, is resurrected by Vecna and kidnaps the Emperor in an attempt to destabilize the Dragovar Empire—for reasons unknown.**
- ♦ **As cracks begin to form in the Dragovar Empire, evil political forces conspire to seize power, and bickering Sea Kings (the merchant lords of Iomandra) become increasingly hostile toward one another.**

Basically, I have a **war story** (the war against the Far Realm threat to the west), an **intrigue story** (the secret kingdom to the east), and a **political story** (boiling feuds and unbridled power-mongering in the wake of the emperor's disappearance).

I chose these three stories because I wanted to center my campaign around an empire in decline (a nod to ancient Rome, I suppose), and how does one go about showing an empire in decline? Well, a war going badly is good for starters. War is dramatic, and this is the second campaign in a row where I've used war as a pervasive theme, but I don't think you need a war to make a campaign interesting. Eberron is set in the aftermath of war, and it's the fear of another war that provides most of the tension. I also love, love, love intrigue—situations when the line between "friend" and "enemy" is indistinct, and players don't always know whom to trust. The "secret kingdom" campaign arc was the last one to fall into place, and honestly I had no clue what the secret kingdom was or what its ultimate goals were. (I trusted that the answers would come to me later.) The Black Curtain began as a source of rumors, a mysterious barrier that seafarers avoided. At the end of the heroic tier, the heroes found a journal containing the first hint of something on the other side of the Black Curtain, and it wasn't until mid-paragon tier when the characters had their first encounter with someone from the "other side." That's a roundabout way of saying that not all three arcs need to be fully fleshed out from the get-go, nor

must they vie for equal attention. It's OK if one arc is "hazier" or less dominant than the others.

It's also OK, by the way, to have adventures and encounters that have nothing to do with your three campaign arcs. Tying every game session to an arc is like fighting troglodytes week after week: The whole campaign starts to reek. It's been my experience that the player characters become more invested (perhaps entwined is a better word) in the campaign arcs as they become more powerful and influential. During the heroic tier, I was running a lot more stand-alone episodes than I am in the epic tier. Were I to compare it to, say, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, it would be the difference between seasons 1-3 and seasons 4-7. The first three seasons of *DS9* were mostly stand-alone stories, with occasional forays into the major series arcs. By the time we got into the later seasons, there were fewer one-off episodes and more attention given to the major arcs—the war against the Dominion, the protection and restoration of Bajor, and the religious awakening of Benjamin Sisko. I think that's natural. Most campaign arcs can only be resolved by high-level characters.

Unless, of course, your campaign is short. It's probably worth noting that if I had I decided to end my campaign at level 10 instead of level 30, I probably wouldn't have needed three campaign arcs. There might be some correlation between the number of tiers in the campaign and the number of campaign arcs it needs. I've never run a campaign that climaxed at the end of the heroic tier, but I think one campaign arc would probably suffice. Having two or three seems unnecessary and would likely leave the campaign and the players unfulfilled.

LESSONS LEARNED

The benefits of having multiple campaign arcs in a long-running or multitier campaign are many. First and foremost, it's like having slightly overlapping safety nets; no matter what the players do, their choices have a pretty good chance of landing them smack-dab in the middle of one of your campaign arcs eventually. The arcs are so encompassing and pervasive as to be nigh unavoidable, and if your players are clearly turned off by one arc, they have two others to choose from. Having multiple arcs gives players opportunities to decide which threat they care about the most, and I promise you, each player will have his or her own opinion on the matter, based on which arc ties in most closely with that player's character. Having three arcs also makes your campaign feel less like a "one-trick pony." Finally, there's the benefit of allowing you, the campaign's primary storyteller, to entangle plot threads and create opportunities or occasions when two or more arcs intersect.

I take immense pleasure in watching my players react as their characters reach those cool points where two or more big stories come together, or those points when they're forced to make a tough choice about which battle to fight. In my campaign, my players are constantly confronted by the reality that they can't always deal with everything. In that respect, having multiple campaign arcs provides verisimilitude, insofar as the players must face the consequences of choosing their battles.

Will the Monday night group resolve all three arcs by the time they reach level 30? I'm not sure. I doubt it. However, as the campaign rockets toward the finish line, I find myself spending a lot of waking hours pondering this very question. In my life, I've only ended a campaign five, maybe six, times. I'm not an expert in campaign resolution. After setting three big arcs in motion and watching them

play out over 25 levels, I'm worried about these last five levels and how each arc will resolve itself. Ultimately, I think, everything ties back to the idea of *players making choices*: If they decide to travel west and overcome the Far Realm threat, they will have accomplished something truly epic and brought peace and stability to the world. That does leave behind some unfinished business, however; but maybe it's OK for some campaign arcs to continue on past the life span of the game. Years from now, while railing against some new campaign threat I've concocted, my players will reflect back on "the Iomandra years" and imagine what what might have happened if their characters had made the other choice, and that by itself is pretty cool.

Still, the perfectionist in me wants to tie off every single plot thread and bring every arc to a fitting end. It still bugs the hell out of me that *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* ended without Bajor joining the Federation. That was the reason why Benjamin Sisko was sent to Deep Space Nine in the first place! Still, that Dominion War arc was pretty amazing.

Until the next encounter!

Setups and Payoffs

10/6/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

Epic tier. The heroes are on a collision course with Starlord Evendor, an eladrin warlock who plans to free a bunch of evil star-gods from their celestial prisons. Unfortunately for the heroes, they possess some information that Evendor needs, and so the villain dispatches one of his apprentices and a strike team of mind flayers to retrieve it one way or another. Despite their clever infiltration of the party's ship, Evendor's evil agents are swiftly dealt with and his apprentice captured.

After interrogating the prisoner, Deimos (played by Chris Youngs) decides it would be prudent to "off" her, or, at the very least, toss her overboard. Ravok (Andrew Finch's new goliath battlemind character) thinks Evendor's apprentice might be more useful as a prisoner than a corpse, and so he urges Deimos not to be hasty. Deimos reluctantly—yet wisely, as it turns out—opts to keep her alive a short while longer.

When Ravok tries to use a Sending ritual to contact some allies of his (a holy order of Pelor worshipers who are working against Starlord Evendor and the mind flayers), he quickly realizes something is amiss. They've been arrested on trumped-up charges of treason by the crew of the Blood-monger, an imperial warship under the command of a dragonborn captain named Artana, whose ship (according

to intelligence reports) was lost during an intelligence-gathering mission in enemy waters. Not only has the warship's crew been partially lobotomized by mind flayers, but the captain and her first mate have been replaced by doppelgangers in league with Starlord Evendor.

Rather than risk losing prisoners in a bloody conflict, the heroes inform "Captain Artana" that they have one of Starlord Evendor's apprentices in their custody. Surely she is worth something to Evendor, and so the heroes begin negotiating a prisoner exchange.

My players learned a valuable lesson this week: sometimes it pays to take prisoners. As for me, I take no prisoners—at least not when it comes to throwing new challenges at my players and fishing for those "Wow!" moments that really pull players into the heart of the campaign. Ask yourself: when was the last time your players found themselves in the middle of a classic prisoner exchange? In the case of my Wednesday night group, it's been a long time, so it took my players a few minutes to get back into the "Oh, hang on, we don't need to kill everything just yet" groove.

As a DM and a storyteller, I live for those moments when something that happened earlier in the campaign helps, hinders, or haunts the PCs later on. It might be something a character did, something an NPC said, or some seemingly random occurrence that suddenly becomes significant. Sometimes it's accidental, sometimes it's planned, but when it happens, you know it instantly. You see it on your players' faces: the dawning horror, amusement, or relief brought on by the moment of revelation.

Novelists and screenwriters can illicit moments of revelation using a foreshadowing technique I like to call **the setup and the payoff**. The idea is that you establish something early in the story and then pay it off later on. In this week's example from my Wednesday night campaign, the surrender of Starlord Evendor's apprentice was the setup, and her value as a tradable commodity is the payoff. The players felt

instant gratification because the story was rewarding them for not only keeping the evil apprentice alive but also for realizing they had the perfect bargaining chip. It's possible that one or more of the players saw it coming, but I don't think that diminished their enjoyment of the moment or made me feel any less brilliant.

It's like that moment in a James Bond movie when Q gives 007 a new gadget. You expect that the gadget will come into play at some point, and so you wait for the payoff. Sometimes in the heat of the narrative you forget that Bond has the gadget, so when it finally comes into play, there's a nice moment of surprise. The Aston Martin's ejection set in *Goldfinger* (1963) is a classic example. The wrist-mounted dart gun in *Moonraker* (1979) is another—and especially surprising because it comes into play not once, but twice. Conversely, if Q gave Bond gadgets that he never used, what would be the point? The writers know they can't set up something like that and not pay it off.

Of course, novelists and screenwriters don't have to worry about RPGers mucking with the story of their novels and screenplays. They have total control when it comes to planting their setups and payoffs. A Dungeon Master, on the other hand, doesn't have complete control of the story and can't always predict what the heroes will do next. Consequently, not every setup has the perfect payoff. If my Wednesday night heroes had thrown Evendor's apprentice overboard or killed her outright, the encounter with "Captain Artana" would have played out very differently.

A setup that hinges on the characters keeping a captured villain alive is risky, but there are other kinds of setups that are subtle and thus more likely to pay off later. For example, at this summer's live Acquisitions Incorporated game, I set up a mystery involving several crates of raw hamburger, which were delivered to the Darkmagic estate with no hint of who ordered or sent them. Later on, the heroes learned of the enmity between the New Hampshire

Darkmagics and the Wisconsin Wortstaffs—and that most of the Wortstaff family were necromancers by trade. The big payoff came in the climactic battle, when the hamburger was transformed into four undead minotaurs by a Wortstaff necromantic ritual.

The time that passes between the setup and the payoff can vary. You don't want the payoff to happen too soon after the setup, but in a long-running campaign you can delay the payoff for months or years. In my Wednesday night game, the heroic-tier heroes were arrested for attacking a military weapons foundry. While in captivity, Rodney Thompson's character was tortured by a dragonborn priest of Tiamat, who replaced one of Vargas's eyes with a unique magic item called an *eye of vengeance*. The magic eye was supposed to be delivered to the island prison of Zardkarath, where it would find its way to an imprisoned, one-eyed dragonborn pirate named Vantajar. On the voyage to Zardkarath, Vargas and his companions escaped . . . and it wasn't until epic tier (nearly two years later) when Vantajar was released from prison and came searching for his missing eye.



LESSONS LEARNED

Not every setup will pay off in a satisfying manner. However, this fact doesn't discourage me from planting seeds that will hopefully bear fruit in the future, because when the payoff happens, it's immensely gratifying and makes me appear so much smarter than I actually am.

Here are three classic D&D setups and payoffs which I use from time to time and which you're free to plunder for your home campaign:

Setup #1: The heroes find a strange word scrawled in blood on the floor, etched into a wall, or written on the inside cover of a spellbook or diary.

Payoff: The word turns out to be a password to bypass a magical trap or unlock a sealed vault, the command word to deactivate a golem, the true name of an evil fiend, or a clever anagram.

Setup #2: The heroes find a locket on the corpse of a slain NPC. It contains a tiny painted portrait of someone familiar or unfamiliar to them.

Payoff: The heroes come face-to-face with the figure portrayed in the locket—a distraught or vengeful lover, one of the heroes' relatives with a secret to share, or an NPC willing to reward the heroes for returning the locket and completing a quest.

Setup #3: The heroes find an intelligent magic item with a secret past.

Payoff: Someone recognizes the item in a future encounter and shares a bit of history that sheds light on the item's previous owner or the secret curse that haunts all who wield it.

Until the next encounter!

Love Letter to Ed Greenwood

10/13/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

A woman walks into a tavern. She's beautiful and voluptuous, wearing the finery of a noble and a devil-may-care smile. She prances around like she owns the place, flirts with the patrons, plays with her shoulder-length auburn curls, and finishes off a free tankard of mead in record time. A bard strums his lute, driving the free-spirited woman to dance, much to the delight of a dozen drooling admirers. When Kithvolar (played by Jeff Alvarez) slyly turns his head to admire her reflection on the night-time glass of a nearby window, gone is the lady's striking beauty. In her place, he sees a twirling, dancing skeleton with bones of polished bronze.

One thing that classic fantasy stories have in common, apart from a preponderance of fantasy tropes, is an exhaustive cast of characters. Scores of characters populate J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Terry Brooks's *Shannara* series, and George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Fire and Ice* series. When one sets out to create a new world, it probably goes without saying that populating the world with fascinating characters is a priority. Few creative forces in the universe are better at this game than Ed Greenwood, whose stories are rich with timeless characters that totally belong in his world and yet never cease to surprise.

I'm in the third year of my Iomandra campaign. While my players joke about the "cast of thousands,"

the actual number of unique NPCs that they've encountered so far is closer to 750—which, I suppose, means that the 1,000 mark isn't beyond the realm of reason. Still, my list pales in comparison to Ed's panoply of FORGOTTEN REALMS characters and NPCs, which he has created over many decades. And yet, every time Ed introduces a new personality to the FORGOTTEN REALMS setting, there's always something about it that's novel (no pun intended).

For example, in an upcoming Eye on the Realms article, Ed introduces us to a beholder named Uldeth, whose physical form was nearly obliterated. All that remains of the creature are ten disembodied



eyestalks that hover in midair. That's something I've never seen done before, and you can bet that I'm going to spirit his creation out of Faerûn and drop Uldeth into my home campaign at the first opportunity.

Many DMs I've talked to have trouble coming up with interesting new NPCs, and even the best of us can't always conjure something out of thin air whenever a player character decides to stop some random schmo in the street and ask for his name and back story. But Ed can. I've witnessed it firsthand. He pulls names and hooks out of the ether. It's the gift of a creative genius and an experienced storyteller to turn a faceless entity who didn't exist two seconds ago into a fleshed-out character with more going on beneath the skin than the rest of us can imagine. Maybe "Joe Schmo" is actually Orvius Turlash, a necromancer in disguise, who's on his way to broker a deal with a corrupt city official to acquire bones and body parts from the local cemetery. Or maybe it's Griggly Muffinstock, a halfling adventurer who was ensorcelled by an archmage to always speak the truth, no matter how embarrassing or inappropriate. He might be looking for a way to rid himself of the "curse," or he might be performing a service to gain the archmage's favor. Granted, these are my ideas, not Ed's, but if you're familiar with Ed's works, you'll probably catch a whiff of Greenwood in these characterizations.

LESSONS LEARNED

I've been following Ed's career (in a not-creepy way) since I was ten years old—long before I got to know the man personally and work with him professionally. Without even trying, Ed taught me two things about NPC creation:

- ◆ **The character's name can tell you a little something about the character and the setting.**

- ◆ **Distinctive physical traits and personality quirks are great, but an NPC needs only one thing to be captivating: a SECRET.**

I've already discussed names in an [earlier article](#), and Ed is a master at conjuring them, but the second point is really the thrust of this week's column. One secret to creating awesome NPCs is to give them secrets. Secrets invest your campaign with intrigue and invite roleplaying. A secret can make the player characters want to get to know your NPC creation better. How did Uldeth end up without a body? Why is Orvius Turlash giving the adventurers nervous looks? Could he be heading for a secret rendezvous? What secrets can we learn from the annoyingly forthright Griggly Muffinstock? What did the halfling do to deserve such a curse? And finally, what's the deal with the dancing vixen whose true form Kithvolar glimpses in a window reflection?

Players who like to roleplay not only like to invest their own characters with secrets but also like to pry into the secrets of others, and I've found that a little mystery surrounding an NPC can fuel hours of tireless, unadulterated fun. At least, that's what Ed taught me (that, and when to use the word "vixen").

Until the next encounter!



3DNPC

10/20/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

I don't like it when NPCs steal the heroes' thunder, but if there's one NPC who could give the party a run for its money, it's Nyrrska. He's a retired dragonborn assassin who used to serve Tiamat, meting out vengeance in the name of his Dark Queen. At some point in his nefarious career, he miraculously survived a life-ending slash to the throat. A servant of Bahamut saved his life, and in the wake of this near-death experience, Nyrrska had an epiphany and repented. He forsook Tiamat and retired to the Temple of Bahamut, becoming a lowly acolyte. When the PCs showed up at the temple seeking refuge from Tiamat's assassins, Nyrrska took it upon himself to help them survive, at the risk of alienating his former associates. When the temple's high priest decided that the heroes were a worthwhile investment, he assigned Nyrrska to accompany them as Bahamut's emissary. His assassin skills were rarely put to use, but when the PCs finally won themselves a ship, Nyrrska's intimidating presence and raspy voice made him a great choice to keep the crew in line.

When the PCs made an enemy of Vantajar, the one-eyed dragonborn pirate warlord, Nyrrska understood why Bahamut had chosen HIM to watch over them. In one of those "too cool for skool" moments of the campaign, it was revealed that Nyrrska had tried to kill Vantajar once. That encounter left Vantajar short one eye and Nyrrska with a slashed throat.

Last week I talked about making nonplayer characters (NPCs) more interesting by giving them secrets, and at the risk of boring the masses, I'd like to continue exploring the topic of NPCs a bit more. It'll give me a chance to do something I haven't done very

often: hearken back to some earlier columns and demonstrate how the pieces fit together.

Not every DM invents his or her own monsters, but all DMs invent their own NPCs. There's no way around it. Generic, nameless NPCs are easy enough to plunder, but they are inherently less compelling than campaign-flavored ones. Specific "named" NPCs have a lot more going for them, but the more hard-coded they are to a particular campaign world, the harder it becomes to transplant them. Yeah, I could file off Drizzt's name and include a scimitar-wielding drow ranger in my home campaign, but my players would think I'd finally run out of ideas. By the same token, the NPCs in my campaign aren't likely to fit well into someone else's campaign. Maybe it's just me, but there's just something awkward and uncomfortable about using someone else's NPCs. It's kind of like using someone else's dice or wearing someone else's socks. As a DM, I'm far more comfortable stealing and modifying a stat block than I am stealing another DM's concept for an NPC.

Fortunately, NPC creation doesn't have to be a chore. When I create an NPC on the fly (and let's be honest, most of mine are created this way), first comes the **name**, then the **secret**, then the **stats**, then the **voice**, and finally the **layers**.

NAME
|
SECRET
|
STATS
|
VOICE
|
LAYERS

Here's where I flash back to earlier articles . . .

Name: The hardest part, IMO. It takes a sharp DM to concoct appropriate and memorable names on the fly, and no, "Wizzy McWizard" and "Thundarr Super-He Man" don't qualify. If you've been reading this column week after week, you already know my [tricks](#) for coming up with names.

Secret: Campaigns are built on secrets. Without them, players have little incentive to explore the world and uncover its mysteries. And as we discussed [last week](#), NPCs need secrets, too.

Stats: I rarely have time to create NPC stat blocks from scratch. Once I know the NPC's level, I can use the D&D Compendium or the "Monsters By Level" appendices in the various *Monster Manuals* to find an appropriate stat block which I can customize using various cheap [tricks](#).

Voice: The NPC's voice is your voice, with or without a twist. You might add an accent or a throaty rasp, change the tempo or pitch, or use any one of a number of other simple tricks, or you might decide it's not worth the effort. Not every NPC needs a unique voice.

And the last piece of the puzzle . . .

Layers: That's layers, not lairs! (Sometimes NPCs need lairs too, but that's a topic for another week.) If all you need is a faceless NPC to remind your players that the world has other people in it, don't worry about adding layers. Layers are what you need to turn a "cardboard cutout" into a fleshed-out NPC as real and three-dimensional as the heroes.

At last, we arrive at the crux of this week's article—what I like to call "the 3D NPC." You've created an NPC and given him or her a name, a stat block, a secret, and a voice. The NPC is all dressed up and

ready to go! As he or she begins interacting with the player characters, you'll see opportunities to start adding layers to the NPC. Layers are great because (1) you don't need to add them right away and (2) you don't need to add them all at once.

Most layers have zero impact on the events of the campaign. They exist simply to add a touch of realism or complexity to an NPC. To be effective, a layer needs to paint the NPC in a different light, revealing a side or aspect of the character that's in some way surprising or unexpected. Here's a random table of layers that you can use for NPCs of any level, alignment, disposition, and importance:

LESSONS LEARNED

I learned the importance of layers by watching serialized television dramas such as *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Lost*, *True Blood*, *Mad Men*, *Leverage*, and *Firefly*. Layers tend to show up in television series more often than in feature films because the writers, producers, and actors have more time to explore the various facets of the characters and revel in the complexity of their relationships.

Let's use *Firefly* for this week's example. In the first episode, we learn that Captain Malcolm Reynolds (Nathan Fillion) is a self-serving bandit with a chip on his shoulder because he fought a war and ended up on the losing side. He bucks authority and doesn't like it when people stick their nose in his business. He shies away from personal attachments, and the harsh frontier of space has turned his heart to ice. And yet, as the series unfolds, we discover his relationships are infinitely more complex and that he's both smarter and dumber than we initially surmised, depending on the situation and the circumstances. We see him at his best and worst. And then there's the character of Jayne (Adam Baldwin), a gun-toting halfwit who takes orders from Reynolds but has zero loyalty. Who could've guessed he'd turn out to be a pompom hat-wearing momma's boy?

In the context of a D&D campaign, a layer is something you add that casts your NPC in a new light. In some cases, the new layer invites players to adjust their opinions of the NPC. An evil brigand surrenders to the party to avoid being killed and turns out to be a friendly and sympathetic joker while in custody. A half-orc innkeeper who's nothing but kind to wealthy adventurers shows little regard for his employees and bilks them out of their earnings. You get the idea.

BACK TO IOMANDRA . . .

You've already met Nyrrska, the dragonborn assassin who lurks in the shadows of the Wednesday night party. Now allow me to introduce you to another NPC from my Wednesday night campaign.

Tyranny (a.k.a. "Tyra") was introduced at the start of epic tier as a foil for Deimos, a tiefling sorcerer and ship captain played by Chris Youngs. After Deimos's ship was sunk, he forged a pact with Dispatier to have the vessel returned to him. As part of the agreement, Deimos was forced to take Tyra, one of Dispatier's consorts, as a concubine and swear to protect her against

D20 THE NPC . . .

- 1 **doesn't like children because they're reminders of an unfortunate childhood.**
- 2 **owns a collection of ukuleles, fiddles, and violins and plays them all beautifully.**
- 3 **used to be a sword swallower in a traveling circus or freak show.**
- 4 **has a "thing" for members of a particular race (such as elves or gnomes).**
- 5 **stutters when he or she lies.**
- 6 **knows everything there is to know about demonology and the Abyss.**
- 7 **is a hopeless romantic and matchmaker.**
- 8 **is obsessed with immortality and wants to be a vampire.**
- 9 **fakes an injury to gain sympathy or advantage.**
- 10 **talks in his or her sleep.**
- 11 **is sickened by the sight of blood.**
- 12 **claims to be of royal descent but hails from a common bloodline.**
- 13 **was raised by orcs, goliaths, or treants and picked up some odd habits.**
- 14 **visits the grave of a deceased loved one regularly.**
- 15 **looks after an ailing parent or elderly mentor.**
- 16 **makes dolls or carves wooden figurines, and gives them away as gifts.**
- 17 **is afraid of cats, heights, water, or the dark.**
- 18 **raises a child but isn't very good at it.**
- 19 **writes poetry.**
- 20 **is a kleptomaniac.**

all harm. Tyra appeared in Deimos's bed one night as a voluptuous tiefling, although her "big secret" is that she's a polymorphed succubus. (For her stat block, I used the level 9 succubus advanced to level 25.)

Tyra's arrival set the other characters (and players) on edge, for Deimos had not consulted with them prior to cutting his deal with Dispat. There were some personality conflicts, but a deal is a deal—the heroes couldn't risk throwing Tyra overboard or killing her. And so, she became a necessary evil.

Tyra's mission is to find some way to resurrect the dead tiefling empire of Bael Turath, but that's a fairly long-term goal. The first layer I added to her was an unflinching lawfulness. She learns the game and always plays by the rules. She needed to prove to her detractors that she was a valuable addition to the crew but couldn't magically charm or dominate them without breaking Dispat's contract. These shackles forced her to rely on her natural charms rather than her fiendish ones. She was blunt when it paid to be honest, quiet when it paid to be demure. Whenever the PCs reached an impasse and weren't certain how to proceed, Tyra would step forward and offer a carefully considered insight that could only come from an NPC gifted with a shred of the DM's prescience. Honesty isn't what the players expected from her at all. That, and the fact that she likes to take her clothes off and walk around in the nude (don't we all).

When it comes to adding new layers, the DM doesn't have to do all the work. Sometimes a player will find a way to add layers to an NPC by way of association. In Tyra's case, another layer was added after two party members died. Chris Champagne decided he wanted his next character to be a Prince of Hell named Kosh, and so he concocted a background that suggested he and Tyranny were old acquaintances. To bring Chris's new character into the fold, I had Tyranny summon him from the Nine Hells. Afraid that the party was no longer strong enough to survive the trials and tribulations ahead,

she convinced Deimos to let her cast the summoning ritual using drops of mortal blood taken from various willing crewmembers. I never expected her to have a history with a character other than Deimos. When your players take to an NPC in this way, you know you're doing something right. It's icing on the cake.

Despite the fact that she's a succubus in disguise, Tyranny has become genuinely fond and protective of the PCs—even the ones who don't trust her. Over the course of the epic tier, she's proven adept at spotting enemy deceptions (she is, after all, a master of deceit). This penchant coupled with her unwillingness to deceive the party elevates her from a mere companion to an equal. Having been stifled by the tyrannical hierarchy of the Nine Hells, she doesn't take her newfound equality lightly, but in her heart, she's still a succubus. She could've summoned any Prince of Hell, but she chose Kosh for a reason. He's her ticket to restoring Bael Turath and fulfilling the terms of her agreement with Dispat. No matter how many layers she has, she must remain true to her essence.

While layers add new depth or dimension to a character, underneath all those layers the character must remain recognizable and true to its core. Malcolm Reynolds would not be Malcolm Reynolds without that chip on his shoulder, and Jayne would not be Jayne if he stopped being a dumbass. Similarly, the ex-assassin Nyrrska would lose his gravity if he burst into tears every time someone hurt his feelings. The next time you want to add a new layer to an NPC, remember: A layer is just icing. You can put tar on the cake instead of icing, but no one's gonna buy it.

Until the next encounter!



Boo Hoo

10/27/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

The heroes find a nautilus (a mind flayer ship) beached on the island of Sha'hadam. The ship's elder brain and crew are dead, killed by a mysterious psychic wave. The DM has just handed the PCs the means to an end—a ship with which they can infiltrate the mind flayer empire and reach their evil nemesis, Starlord Evendor. Peter Schaefer, who plays a changeling named Metis, discovers that he can operate the shipboard systems if he assumes the form of a mind flayer and sticks his tentacles into the pilot's control station, but he still needs the elder brain to provide the vessel's motive force. Imagine my surprise when the players hit upon the idea of asking Imazhia, their NPC companion (and a cleric of Bahamut), to cast an Animate Dead ritual on the elder brain!

The heroes are about to learn a painful lesson: Necromantic rituals and undead elder brains aren't to be trifled with.

Once they realized they needed the elder brain to power the ship, the Monday night players (to their credit) weighed the ramifications of raising it from the dead versus reanimating it. Ultimately they decided that the undead version would be easier to control, and under normal circumstances, they'd be right. But you can't throw "undead elder brain" at the DM (at least, not THIS one) and expect it to end well. Suffice to say, the elder brain was shocked back to "life" by Imazhia's ritual and immediately lashed out at the party. That's more or less how the last game session ended.

Next Monday is Halloween, and the game is off because several of my players have other

commitments. On the one hand it makes me sad, but on the other hand I have another week to think about how I'm going to further torment my players. In the spirit of Samhain, this week I fearlessly don my Scary DM hat, so take the following "advice" with several grains of salt.

Here's my "top 5 list" of ways to torture players, with specific examples from the Monday night campaign:

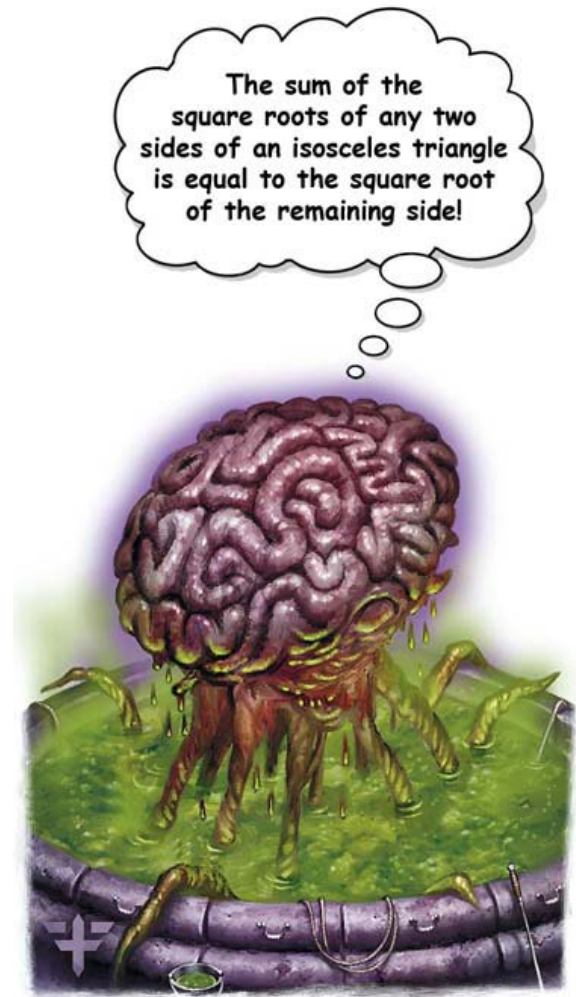
Torture Tip #1: Give the players what they want, then take it away.

It's the oldest, nastiest DM trick in the book, and positively Gygaxian in its fiendish wickedness.

Early on in paragon tier, my players learned of the *Morkoth*, a ship moored at the docks in Io'galaroth that was "up for grabs." Its captain had been killed and its crew disbanded, leaving the ship ripe for the taking. After ridding the city of evil kraken-worshipping cultists, the heroes persuaded the city's magistrate to give them the *Morkoth* for keeps. However, by this time they had made an enemy of an unscrupulous ship captain named Lydia Taralan, who not only commanded a ship of her own but also a 30-foot-long iron shark golem. After Taralan chased them out of Io'galaroth, the heroes decided not to wage a ship-to-ship battle but instead used phantom steeds to bring the fight to Taralan on the deck of her own ship. Meanwhile, Taralan's iron shark golem laid waste to the undefended *Morkoth*, and it sank into the briny depths.

Free ships are great, but players appreciate helpful NPCs even more, particularly likeable ones who push obstacles out of the party's way, give them free stuff, or provide wise counsel. Imazhia, the cleric of Bahamut, is one such NPC. She receives portentous dreams that warn the PCs of impending danger, she

cuts through the bureaucracy of the Dragovar Empire like a knife through a pumpkin, and she provides free healing without complaint. I'm just dying to kill her off, but I'm waiting for the perfect moment . . . the moment when her loss will be shocking and deeply felt. Or maybe I'll just have her arrested by a political



rival on suspicion of treason. Either way, the players won't be able to lean on her anymore.

My players also grew to like Lady Thariel von Zarkyn, a noblewoman who secretly belonged to a cult of Vecna. Thariel had conflicting loyalties and ultimately decided to use the secrets in her possession to help the PCs, so when her superiors told her to dispose of them, she took her own life instead. (Insert creepy DM cackle here.)

Torture Tip #2: Reward the players' accomplishments with logical negative consequences.

For every action, there's an equal and opposite reaction. Okay, so the PCs just slaughtered the dragon and took its stuff. What are the odds that the dragon's mother finds out what happened and puts a contract out on them? Pretty good, I think. And what about that evil merchant they killed? Surely the criminals to whom he owed large sums of money will want their pound of flesh. Learn a lesson from Greek mythology: For every head the heroes cut off, two more grow in its place.

In my campaign, the heroes recently befriended the Knights of Ardyn, a "friendly" terrorist organization committed to stamping out corruption in the Dragovar Empire. In doing so, they've come to the attention of the Vost Miraj, the empire's equivalent of MI:6. The organization, which itself is riddled with corruption, already has an assassin in the party's ranks (played by one of the players, no less), and his buddies are moving in for the kill. This is what happens when you make friends with people who have enemies!

Torture Tip #3: Have that light at the end of the tunnel suddenly go out.

In my mind, that "light at the end of the tunnel" is actually a demented will-o'-wisp, baiting the players as it leads the characters toward their doom. As the DM, you have the power to make them feel like no matter what they do, they're no closer to reaching their ultimate goal or destination. When dismay sets in, but before the players become thoroughly discouraged and despondent, you shine rays of hope straight into their eyes to dazzle them before plunging them back into darkness.

The Monday group desperately wants to end the mind flayer threat and live happily ever after, but every time they achieve a victory, Starlord Evendor, their evil nemesis, uses the reality-altering power of an elder constellation to affect horrendous changes, in one instance depriving the players of their elemental warship and in another resurrecting an old enemy to confound them and slow their progress.

Torture Tip #4: Kill player characters offscreen, and throw their body parts to the other players like scraps of meat to wild dogs.

No, I'm not being metaphorical here. That's what I did to Melech, Bruce Cordell's tiefling warlock, when Bruce missed a session. In my campaign, player-less PCs become glorified NPCs and fuel for storytelling and suspense.

When players are absent in my game, their characters typically "fade into the background" or, if

possible, run errands while the other characters tackle the problem at hand. By DM fiat, a guild of slavers managed to corner Melech while the other PCs were "adventuring," and at the end of the session they delivered his severed head to the party in a bloody bag. True, Melech was raised the very next session, but the shock value was worth it. *Head rolls across the floor AND . . . cut to black. See you next week!*

If you really want to take this idea to the next level, take a dead character and bring him or her back as an undead horror. That's what happened to Nick DiPetrillo's genasi swordmage, Yuriel, who had his soul devoured by a death knight's sword. A helpful lich named Osterneeth offered to put an artificial heart in Yuriel's corpse and pump necrotic sludge through his dead veins, and though the other players objected, Yuriel's wife and first mate (a watersoul genasi NPC named Pearl) was determined to have her darling husband back, and so . . . say hello to Yuriel the vampire! Undead Yuriel didn't "survive" for many sessions. After dying heroically in battle, he had his heart ripped out (more or less) by a blue dragon sea captain, and Jeremy Crawford's character destroyed the heart with a *magic missile* to make sure it couldn't be used again.

Torture Tip #5: Thrust the PCs into situations they aren't equipped to handle.

If I want my players to squirm, I'll put them in a room where their swords and spells avail them not. It might be a room full of politicians discussing the future of the Dragovar Empire, or the hold of a ship containing a sentient Far Realm mine that they must disarm or outsmart before it blows them and their ship to bits.

I'm reminded of a particular "character moment" involving Jeff Alvarez, who plays a highly optimized fighting machine named Kithvolar. The elf ranger

does outrageous amounts of damage in combat and can practically solo your average encounter, but Jeff and Kithvolar are out of their element in noncombat situations. So imagine Jeff's surprise when Kithvolar "awakens" from his nightly reverie with blood on his swords and no memory of how it got there, followed by the discovery that he's murdering people in his "sleep" because the mind flayers put something in his brain. He can't stab the thing in his brain with a sword, at least not without killing himself, so what should he do? That, my friends, is torture.

YOU GOT
10 SECONDS
TO RAISE ME BEFORE
I STICK THIS MAUL
WHERE THE SUN
DON'T SHINE!



LESSONS LEARNED

I'm sure every DM who reads this article can empathize with my primal need to torment my players, and I'm fairly certain I'm not the only DM in the D&D multiverse whose campaign has a sadomasochistic undercurrent. Nothing wrong with giving the campaign an occasional jolt. My players relish the adversity that they and their characters are forced to overcome week after week. The scars they earn along the way will pay off at the end of the campaign, when the surviving PCs gaze at the smoldering ashes of their enemies and realize they've been through hell and withstood the horrors of death, loss, and mutilation. As long as everyone knows it's all in good fun, there's no love lost.

And on that note, here's another parting tip I'd like to share, a surefire way to torment your players: **Think twice before you throw them a bone.** Let the player characters be the instruments of their own demise. My players don't need much help from me to kill off their characters; they're perfectly capable of making ill-informed decisions and rolling a natural 1 on that final death save. When things go from bad to worse, some players expect the DM to jump in and contrive some clever escape for the character(s) in need, or fudge some die rolls in the party's favor. Scary DM says, "Mercy is for the weak!" Stun them by letting that third consecutive critical hit stand. Terrify them by letting the vicious death knight make that coup de grace attack and finish off the party leader lying unconscious at his feet. My players don't remember the time I cut them slack; they remember the horror of that moment when the death knight killed their beloved warlord while her companions wallowed in their own blood and pooped themselves.

Until the next encounter!

Catapult

11/3/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

In a previous session, the heroes captured the apprentice of their nemesis, Starlord Evendor, and agreed to trade her for several prisoners in the clutches of mind flayers. The prisoner exchange was going swimmingly until the illithids' sudden but inevitable betrayal, and although the heroes ultimately kicked ass, there were three "uh-oh" moments when things went from bad to worse.

The first "uh-oh" moment happened when reinforcements arrived in the form of a beholder named King Zorrb. The beholder arrived via Far Realm portal, cried out "Kneel before Zorrb!" and began shooting eye rays at everyone. The second "uh-oh" moment quickly followed when the beholder disintegrated Chris Youngs' character, Deimos. The third and final "uh-oh" moment occurred near the end of the fight, when Mat Smith's character, Garrot, grabbed King Zorrb by the eyestalks and catapulted himself through the Far Realm portal, dragging the beholder with him.

As they say in Hollywood, what an exit!

And that's the story of how Garrot, the dimwitted human fighter, was devoured by the Far Realm.

Most players would think twice about hurling their characters into the Far Realm, even if it meant saving another party member's life. But Mat doesn't play a smart character, and sometimes he has Garrot do things that don't make a lot of sense except, of course, to Garrot. Not surprisingly, Garrot has died and been raised from the dead many times over the course of the campaign, but this time there's nothing to raise. His body's lost.

Over the past four years, Garrot never really evolved much at all. In fact, while I pride myself on creating interesting “growth opportunities” for characters, I was pretty much at a loss when it came to thinking up good Garrot-centric episodes and adventures. Mat played him so dumb that no NPC could communicate intelligently with him, and Garrot had no attachments—even his companions didn’t pay him much attention outside of combat. Garrot didn’t even have a last name (or if he did, it never came up in play). He was like a coat rack with no hooks; there wasn’t much to hang a story on. I also got the impression that after nearly four years of playing the same character, Mat was willing to throw Garrot on a limb just to see if it broke. Put another way, I don’t think Mat would be surprised or horribly depressed if Garrot never returned.

I, on the other hand, am unwilling to let Garrot go.

Maybe it’s because I feel like I’ve failed the character somehow. More likely it’s because Mat’s decision to hurl Garrot into the maddening void should be lauded and rewarded. If Garrot is well and truly dead, then the lesson to be learned from

his actions is “Don’t hurl your character into the Far Realm.” However, I think it’s more fun to tell players, “You never know what’ll happen when you hurl your character into the Far Realm.” Or put another way, “If you’re willing to take a risk with your character, you might be pleasantly surprised by the outcome.”

When it comes to building encounters, I have no qualms about layering on adversity, to the point where the players feel overwhelmed. I love having enemy reinforcements arrive just when things are starting to look up. I’m also happy to give players lengths of rope with which to hang proverbial nooses around their own characters’ necks. However, before you accuse me of being cruel, note that my intentions are good: The goal, as I’ve said before, isn’t to annihilate the party. No, the goal is to reward the players for taking risks.

I tend to think of characters as “chandelier bait,” which is to say that if I hang a chandelier from the ceiling, I expect that at some point during the encounter a character will either (a) swing from it or (b) drop it on someone. The chandelier baits players into taking risks and making decisions they wouldn’t otherwise consider. In Garrot’s case, King Zorrb’s Far Realm portal was the chandelier. It’s also a plot device that can be used to catapult the campaign forward.

Speaking of catapults, there’s something about Garrot that I almost forgot to mention—a seemingly inconsequential bit of character development instigated by Mat many years ago, back when the heroes were looking to buy a magical catapult for their ship. Mat decided that Garrot was fascinated by catapults. He even went so far as to procure a miniature catapult that Garrot would carry around with him and play with while his

companions were doing “boring stuff” like obtaining quests and forging alliances. This utterly marvelous bit of nonsense became a running character gag. At some point, I expected the gag to pay off with Garrot firing himself out of a catapult or something equally ludicrous.

After debating whether or not to bring Garrot back, I finally decided to create a campaign “episode” set in the Far Realm. The adventure begins with Garrot plunging into Tyrak’n Bay and finding himself on the island of Kheth, where the campaign began. The island and its inhabitants are constructs of the Far Realm, familiar to Garrot but distorted by the plane’s malign interpretation of his memories and his rather dimwitted view of the world. More importantly, all of Garrot’s adventuring companions are there, including old characters who’ve been dead for many levels. The other players get to bring back some of their old characters to help Garrot escape from this nightmarish realm using the villain’s giant catapult—because in his childlike mind, that’s how Garrot would escape the Far Realm. Not only that, the players get to fight Starlord Evendor for the first time in the campaign, or rather, an effigy of him created by the Far Realm, and learn some of his dark secrets.



LESSONS LEARNED

As a DM, if I'm going to create moments of seemingly insurmountable adversity, I also need to create moments of opportunity and be prepared for when my players attempt crazy-ass stunts. Although I'm well known for my elaborate schemes and plot twists, some of the most memorable and decisive moments of the campaign happened because of something the players did. I think it behooves every DM to remember that the players have a stake in determining how the campaign unfolds, and the best campaigns are inspired and propelled by the characters' actions and decisions.

So, to summarize:

- ♦ **It's the DM's job to create situations that encourage players to take risks.**
- ♦ **It's the DM's job to let players know that with great risk comes great reward.**

Until the next encounter!

Lloyd the Beholder

11/10/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

The heroes commandeer an illithid nautilus, and Peter Schaefer's changeling character figures out how to steer the ship by assuming the form of a mind flayer and inserting his tentacles into the pilot's control station. He convinces the ship's elder brain to take the vessel deep into enemy waters by first passing through the Far Realm. The DM (that's me!) has Peter's character make a handful of Dungeoneering checks to successfully navigate the Far Realm—and he fails spectacularly. As the ship drifts off course, it picks up three stray beholders who sound an awful lot like Kang and Kodos, the aliens from The Simpsons.

These particular beholders are Far Realm "couch potatoes" who've never visited the natural world and have never seen creatures like the PCs before. They're understandably confused and don't speak a word of Common, but there are enough PCs who know Deep Speech to glean that one of the beholders is named Lloyd. Still, past experience has taught the characters to attack beholders on sight. As battle erupts, out of nowhere the table conversation quickly degenerates into speculation about how beholders go to the bathroom. This, in turn, triggers a seemingly endless series of poop jokes that (excuse the pun) runs throughout the evening, culminating in the final moment when the warlock's eldritch blast kills poor Lloyd and the beholder lets out a resounding "Crap!" before exploding..

This week's column was hell to write because I always have trouble articulating the importance of humor in D&D games. There's a reason we don't tend to write funny D&D products, and that's because we designers and editors know for a fact that players and DMs bring their own humor to the game table, and no one seems to have trouble mining an otherwise straight adventure for comedy gold. In short, D&D players are, by and large, connoisseurs of comedy. Many were raised on Monty Python, for Pete's sake. I've never met a D&D player who was too lofty to appreciate a good fart or poop joke. (That is to say, a good fart joke, as opposed to a good fart.)

I'm the first to admit it: Although my campaign is occasionally lauded for its entwined plots, strange twists, and rocket pace, there are times when it wallows in poop jokes and is more akin to the games I used to run in junior high, which were lewd—and not in a cool Shakespearean way.

This week's session wasn't a very accurate snapshot of the Monday night campaign. It's more like one of those offbeat, funny episodes of *The X-Files* that pop up once or twice per season. Just as humor can insinuate itself into otherwise serious TV shows, comedy is an integral ingredient in my campaign, and I suspect most other campaigns as well, but it's more like a spice or seasoning than a main ingredient. I take my D&D campaign seriously in terms of its entertainment value to my players, which is to say, I put a lot of effort into making sure my players come back week after week by creating an immersive experience with lots of action, roleplaying, and surprises. However, it makes for a refreshing change of pace to inject a bit of silliness now and then.

Jeremy Crawford, who plays the party wizard, said it best in jest: "You've ruined beholders! We'll never look at them the same way again!" I place the blame squarely on Peter Schaefer's shoulders, for reasons I'll explain shortly. But first, a cautionary note . . .



Humor can spoil a campaign. I've seen it happen. It begins when a player decides to name his half-orc paladin "Sir Fartsalot" or when the characters enter a tavern in Waterdeep and see the cast of Cheers sitting at the bar. Sometimes humor takes you OUT of the campaign world, and it's hard to get players back into it. I remember playing in Monte Cook's remarkable Ptolus campaign and witnessing rare moments of frustration and disappointment whenever we, the players, cavalierly assigned silly monikers to villains who failed or declined to announce themselves by name. In my mind's eye, I can still see Monte shaking his head and replying "Yes, fine, whatever" after we decided to "name" one of his carefully crafted NPC villains "Mister Poopiehead." It's been my experience that bad names tend to stick, and once the players take to calling your NPC "Mister Poopiehead," there's very little you can do but flush Mister Poopiehead down the proverbial toilet and never speak of him again or fling him at the characters and hope they learn to take him seriously.

It's been my experience that, outside of the weekly dose of playful banter, humor is best used in small, judicious doses and in situations that work within the context of the encounter or scene. My decision to name one of the beholders Lloyd was spontaneous, as was the decision to model his voice and personality after Kang's. I was running what amounted to a random encounter (in other words, the beholders weren't crucial to the campaign in any way), I was in a weird mood, and these impromptu (and arguably ill-advised) decisions basically gave my players license to assign the other beholders similarly ludicrous names. Consequently, the party's journey through the Far Realm took an offbeat yet appropriately surreal turn. The players were a little taken aback at first, but I can't help but feel that "Lloyd" is a perfectly cromulent beholder name.

My style of DMing changes depending on the group of players I'm with. If you watched me DM a

game for Acquisitions Incorporated and then participated in one of my home game sessions, you'd see subtle and not-so-subtle changes in my DM "performance." I tend to vary my DM style slightly even between my Monday and Wednesday night campaigns, as Peter Schaefer recently experienced when he crossed over from my Monday group to be a special guest star in my Wednesday night game. That's because I'm playing to a different audience, and different groups of players have different expectations. By comparison, when I run games at conventions, I tend to be a bit more "neutral" as a DM and put a lid on the poop jokes . . . at least until I get to know my players better.

My Monday group is, generally speaking, far less likely to wallow in filth than the Wednesday night group. The running gag is that that Monday group playfully disparages the Wednesday group for being a bunch of uncouth, self-destructive barbarians, whereas the Wednesday group accuses the Monday heroes of solving all their campaign woes by sipping tea and chatting with the baddies. This past Monday session was unusual for a number of reasons, first and foremost because the Monday players were less focused than usual and had "devolved" after a back-to-back weeks of not playing. Peter also imported a little of the Wednesday night group's uncouth barbarism to the Monday evening proceedings. He was the one who dropped the first poop joke of the evening, as I recall, and he also instigated the fight by attacking the beholders without provocation. That's not to say I'm blameless. When things started to get really silly, I could've told the players to can it. Instead, I added methane to the fire by referring to the lieutenant of an important NPC as his "number two." The truth is, when I'm feeling jovial, I drop things into the campaign that are deliberately intended to spark a laugh, such as the occasional mock-worthy NPC, laughable accent, and movie quote. But when I tire of the jokes and want to press forward with

the campaign, I suddenly turn very serious and ask pointed questions to deflate the ballooning silliness, such as “What do you do?” and “Is your character taking any actions this round?” That’s the queue to settle down and gets the players back on track in a hurry. Good humor has its place and knows its place.

LESSONS LEARNED

My sense of humor is very much in line with my players’ senses of humor, and therefore I can get away with Lloyd the beholder in my game. Lloyd might not strike you as funny or the type of thing your players will find amusing. A good DM plays to his or her audience and gives players queues to help them grasp the intended mood of the game session. If you’re running an intense session, you don’t want it to become a farce by having the villain or monster break wind. However, I’ll just come out and say it: No campaign is too good or too highbrow for a little potty humor now and then. And by “potty humor,” I mean the general silliness that transpires when a bunch of adults sit around a table and act like 11-year-olds, pretending to be cooler and hipper than they really are (or ever will be). As a DM, I invest a lot of time thinking about my campaign and finding ways to keep the game moving forward. Sometimes I forget that my players don’t need multilayered plots and deep, immersive role-playing opportunities to be entertained. Sometimes they need Lloyd the beholder, and they’ll remember him fondly too!

I’m reminded of the television series *Angel*, starring David Boreanaz as “the vampire with a soul.” The dark and brooding protagonist gave the show a grim intensity, and yet Angel had all sorts of little comic flourishes to remind viewers that they were being entertained, not tortured. I’ve been in campaigns that were pure torture because the DM scowled at every attempt to inject a little humor into the characters and the situations they faced. This week’s encounter with Lloyd and his beholder

buddies was like that final season episode where Angel is transformed into a vampire muppet. I remember thinking “THIS IS THE BEST EPISODE EVER!” while simultaneously acknowledging that it neither defines nor spoils the series as a whole. It works best as a one-off, and it drives home a couple key points:

- ♦ **You can punctuate a fairly serious campaign with humorous moments and interludes without ruining it.**
- ♦ **The DM sets the tone for the game session, and players who are “on their game” will usually follow the DM’s lead.**

Until the next encounter!

Event Horizon

11/17/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

The party’s campaign against Starlord Evendor has reached a threshold. The time has come to forge alliances with powerful forces, from the Knights of Ardyn to the evil god of secrets, to put down the threat of the Far Realm. The players can sense the inevitability of the impending conflict, which will quite literally determine the fate of the world. The gravity is inescapable. Now comes the hard part.!

First off, if you’re a player in my Monday night game, STOP READING NOW! This article contains plot spoilers for an upcoming episode of the Iomandra campaign and is for Dungeon Masters only.

The title of this week’s article is particularly apt because the Monday night group has reached a “point of no return.” We’re halfway through epic tier, the end is nigh, and the heroes know what must be done. There are plenty of big fights headed their way, they basically know what they’re up against, and the biggest mystery outstanding is who will survive to the campaign’s glorious end.

The title is also a play-on-words. I’m not really talking about black holes or the gravitational pull of my campaign’s plot but rather responding to a query by [BalogTheFierce](#), who was curious about how I go about designing encounters. I’ll endeavor to address the topic without regurgitating information you’ve seen in the *Dungeon Master’s Guide* and other sources

that tackle the topic at great length. Instead, I'll shed some light on a Very Important Episode of the campaign that's about to unfold.

First, let me dispel any illusions: I don't write complete, publishable adventures for my home campaign because I haven't the time and I rather like "running with scissors" and the improvisational challenge of working without a script. The adventures I tend to write (and I've written a lot of them over the years) are for the benefit of others and often focus on specific locations, such as a sprawling dungeon complex or an evil lich-king's fortress, and feature room-by-room explorations of these locations. Location-based adventures are great because they're easy for DMs to run (because each room or area contains its own encounter) and difficult to create on the fly (because of the amount of room detail and map work required). A DM can take a large, fully detailed adventure location such as the Temple of Elemental Evil and make that the foundation for an entire campaign, with the added benefit of not needing to spend a lot of time planning game sessions in advance. If the party ended the previous session in area 47, you can probably kick off the next session with the heroes entering area 48. No big deal.

But my campaigns tend to be more EVENT driven than ENCOUNTER driven, so the way I prepare for a game session requires a different approach. It's a bit weird that I think of my own campaign as a series of events and plot them out the way a TV series producer plans a show's seasonal arc, and yet I'm not a big fan of published event-based adventures written by other people. I think it's because an event-based adventure has a certain pace and sequence that doesn't suit every DM's style, whereas a location-based adventure is less about what-happens-when and more about what-happens-where, taking a lot of the DM's pacing and sequential concerns out of the picture.

THE EPISODE SUMMARY

A typical "episode" of my campaign is a series of events arranged in the order I expect them to unfold. It all starts with me remembering the events of previous sessions and fixating on something as the focus of the upcoming session. The focus might be a player character, an important NPC, a location, a big event, or some combination thereof. In next Monday's session, the focus is the secret island fortress of Ardynrise, which has been alluded to since the start of the campaign and which the PCs are finally going to visit for the first time. However, before the PCs reach Ardynrise and learn its secrets, I have some unfinished business from the previous session to tie up.

So, here's how an evening's worth of D&D comes together in Chris Perkins's home campaign:

Step 1: Word!

I open a Word document and type a short summary of important events from previous sessions, which I convert into a "[Previously in Iomandra](#)" paragraph to kick off the session. Doing this exercise puts me in the right frame of mind to look at the unfolding tapestry of my campaign, tie up loose ends, and pick up important threads.

Step 2: Dramatis Personae

Every game session is an opportunity for character development. Underneath the "Previously" section of my Word document I spell out the *dramatis personae*, or cast of characters (a "call sheet," if you will). Typing this list of PCs and NPCs gets me thinking about which heroes to shine the session spotlight on and how many different NPCs will likely come into play over the course of the evening. Sometimes the list of NPCs is quite short, but more often (particularly at higher levels) that's not the case.

Step 3: A Watched Plot

By the time I've finished Steps 1 and 2, I have a pretty good handle on where to take the campaign. In this case, I've decided to play up the [Knights of Ardyn](#), a group of benevolent "terrorists" dedicated to stamping out corruption in the Dragovar Empire. They've been a behind-the-scenes force of good from the outset, and two of the characters have direct ties to them, yet we've never met Ardyn (the silver dragon leader of the group) or visited her secret island. That's about to change.

The characters know that the Myrthon Regency, a vassal state of the Dragovar Empire, has been taken over by mind flayers. They also just learned that the Knights of Ardyn recently helped the daughter of the Myrthon regent escape . . . and that she's been sequestered on Ardyn's island. It's not enough to send the heroes to Ardynrise; I also need something to HAPPEN there. I've decided that the mad Myrthon regent, Tsar Dakor, wants his daughter back and has an ally hidden in the party's midst. I also know that I have some other stuff to resolve en route to Ardynrise.

This step requires me to wrap my brain around the main "plot points" of the episode, which could (depending on what happens) take multiple game sessions to resolve. Basically, it's how I see the story unfolding in my mind barring the unexpected.

Step 4: Event-by-Event Breakdown

Once I've written down my prediction of how the plot will unfold, it occurs to me that there's about a 75% chance that the episode will take an unexpected detour, forcing me to rearrange events or jettison my ideas altogether. Nothing I can do about that; the PCs are epic level, after all, and anything can happen. Still, it helps me get a handle on the "scope" of the adventure by breaking the plot down into a sequence

of events, the order of which is less important than the ideas. After doing the event breakdown for this episode that I've decided to call "Ardynrise," I realize that it might take more than one session to resolve all the business I have planned, and that's okay. Before the heroes get to Ardynrise, they'll have some interesting scenes with Vecna's followers and perhaps another Far Realm mishap.

Not every event is a combat encounter, but it always adds something to the story or gives the story some forward momentum.

Step 5: Other Roleplaying Notes

Event-based adventures make it easy for me to think about the game session in terms of roleplaying opportunities for the players. Every event is a roleplaying opportunity waiting to unfold, even the ones planned as combat encounters. During Step 4, I'll sometimes think of ideas that don't really qualify as "events" but



are likely to come into play. I group these together under the heading "Other Roleplaying Notes" as a reminder to myself. For example, Stan! Brown plays a dragonborn agent of the Vost Miraj, the equivalent of MI6 in my world. The Vost Miraj leadership sees Ardyn as a threat to the Dragovar Empire's stability rather than a potential ally, so I'm expecting some friction between Stan!'s character and the Knights of Ardyn played by Michele and Nick. However, I'm not sure how that potential conflict will be resolved and can't really plan around it.

Here, then, is the complete episode summary, which conveniently fits neatly on one double-sided sheet of paper and easily into my campaign binder:

"ARDYNRISE"

PREVIOUSLY IN IOMANDRA . . .

Osterneth the Bronze Lich (Vecna's ex-wife) forged an alliance with the party against their common enemy: Starlord Evendor and the mind flayers in control of the Myrthion Regency, who are using the Dragon's Eye constellation to affect changes in reality. A flight of dragons bore the heroes safely to the island of Sha'hadam, where a derelict illithid nautilus had washed ashore. Aided by the Knights of Ardyn, the heroes commandeered the vessel, raised the ship's elder brain from the dead, and convinced it to do their bidding. Osterneth's changeling manservant, Metis (played by Peter Schaefer), discovered that he could pilot the nautilus by assuming the form of a mind flayer and sticking his tentacles into the ship's navigation station. The Knights of Ardyn wanted to use the ship to spy on illithid forces in Myrthion waters, and so the heroes persuaded the elder brain to cross a vast distance of ocean by taking the ship through the Far Realm. Metis's inability to navigate the plane led to a random encounter with three beholders. After surviving the encounter and returning to the natural world, the heroes appeared in the middle of a naval battle between Dragovar and Myrthion ships and quickly took the nautilus underwater. Using a sea snake figurine of wondrous power, Andraste (played by Michele Carter) and Kithvolar (played

by Jeff Alvarez) rescued four survivors of a destroyed Dragovar warship and learned that they're deep inside enemy waters but not where they hoped to be.

HEROES (in alphabetical order)

Alex von Hyden (one-eyed male human wizard and Wyrmworn) played by Jeremy Crawford

Andraste (female eladrin warlord and party leader) played by Michele Carter

Baharoosh (male dragonborn rogue and Vost Miraj agent) played by Stan!

Bartho (dull-witted male human fighter) played by Matt Sernett

Kettenbar (male wilden shaman from an alternate reality) played by Shawn Blakeney

Kithvolar (male elf ranger) played by Jeff Alvarez

Metis (male changeling warlock and Osterneth's manservant) played by Peter Schaefer

Melech (male tiefling warlock and vessel of Ulban) played by Bruce R. Cordell

Theralyn (female elf ranger and dragon-riding Knight of Ardyn) played by Nick DiPetrillo
with special guest star

Xanthum Zail (male gnome bard from an alternate reality) played by Curt Gould

NONPLAYER CHARACTERS

Ardyn (female silver dragon and leader of the Knights of Ardyn)

Arando Corynnar (male human Knight of Ardyn captain and Andraste's confidante)

Thorn Rel (male tiefling Knight of Ardyn captain)

Lily von Marek (female human Knight of Ardyn, reporting to Thorn Rel)

Kiril Szarke (male half-elf Knight of Ardyn, reporting to Thorn Rel)

Taras (maimed male dragonborn Knight of Ardyn, reporting to Thorn Rel)

Roksana Kral (female dwarf Knight of Ardyn, reporting to Thorn Rel)

Vastian von Hyden (male human Knight of Ardyn, Arando's friend, and Alex's cousin)

Tsarana Faijhan (female dragonborn noble and daughter of the mad Myrthon regent)

Ramiel (male demon-possessed elf with a dragon orb)

Nyrrska (male dragonborn ex-assassin turned acolyte of Bahamut)

Tauth-Xelramar (elder brain powering the illithid nautilus Soulmonger)

Alathar Balefrost (male half-elf lich working with Osterneth)

Kronze (skeletal red dragon "overlord")
with

Osterneth ("the Bronze Lich," Vecna's ex-wife, and the PCs' temporary ally)

and

Imazhia (female dragonborn priest of Bahamut)

EPISODE SYNOPSIS

Thorn Rel recommends that Andraste assume command of the illithid nautilus Soulmonger, which has been without a captain. The heroes and the Knights of Ardyn conduct a very successful reconnaissance of Myrthon waters before setting sail for Ardynrise. En route, Osterneth instructs Metis to guide the ship to prearranged coordinates where Vecna cultists are waiting to perform a ritual designed to make the heroes aware of past reality changes and protect them against future ones, but she also has ulterior motives. On Ardynrise, the silver dragon Ardyn gives Andraste a new assignment: helping Arando capture Tsar Dakor, the mad regent of the Myrthon Regency, using information

gained from Tsarana Faijhan, who is staying at Ardynrise as the dragon's protected guest. Suddenly, Imazhia reveals that she's a Myrthon agent and opens a portal to the Far Realm, bringing forth an aberrant attack force to destroy Ardyn and recapture the Tsarana.

EVENTS

Event 1: "This Ship Needs a Captain"

Thorn Rel urges Andraste to take command of the illithid nautilus Soulmonger and keep Metis the changeling in line.

Event 2: "What's Wrong With This Picture?"

With Metis at the helm, the nautilus successfully reconnoiters Myrthon waters, gathering intelligence on enemy fleet movements and bases. The ship's elder brain seems very helpful in this endeavor and well disposed toward Imazhia, who raised it from the dead.

Event 3: "We Really Don't Belong Here"

If Metis is dead-set on cutting down travel time by taking the nautilus through the Far Realm, another failed series of Dungeoneering checks might lead the vessel into a part of the mad plane ruled by Mak Thuum Ngatha. Giant tentacles ensnare the ship, and a gibbering orb emissary of Mak Thuum Ngatha boards the vessel to negotiate the crew's surrender or a more suitable offering to the Nine-Tongued Worm.

Event 4: "By Your Command, My Lady"

Back in Iomandra, Osterneth informs Metis that Alathar Balefrost and his operatives have perfected a way to shield the nautilus against changes to reality evoked by the Dragon's Eye constellation and orders him to guide the ship to the tiny island

of Kronze, where Vecnite ritualists are waiting to board the ship and cast the ritual to protect the vessel from the reality-altering constellation.

Event 5: "It's All About Secrets"

The ship arrives at the prearranged coordinates—a craggy island inhabited by Kronze, a skeletal red dragon "overlord" under Alathar Balefrost's control. The Vecnites have an artificially constructed demiplane that overlaps the natural world at this point. While Vecnite ritualists emerge to cast their warding spell on the ship, Alathar Balefrost smuggles special operatives onto the ship for the trip to Ardynrise, but strangely enough, Melech (with his otherworldly connection to the starspawn Ulban and the ship's elder brain) can sense them. En route, the Vecnites try to deprive the heroes and Knights of Ardyn of their memories so that they alone are privy to the intelligence gathered in Myrthon waters (knowledge is power, after all).

Event 6: "Many Dragons Died Here"

Thorn Rel guides the nautilus toward a mist-shrouded, star-shaped island littered with crumbled statues of dragons. Phantom dragons descend from the sky to fetch the heroes and bear them safely to Ardyn's fortress atop the spire that rises from the middle of the island. The story of the island is that a powerful dragonslaying wizard once resided here, and that many dragons united to slay him, only to fall prey to a powerful petrifying ward. They were turned to stone and became testaments to the wizard's power. Eventually, one dragon hit upon the idea of hiring adventurers to eliminate the wizard, and her plan succeeded. Ardyn was that dragon. The heroes are reunited with Arando Corynnar and meet Faijhan, the daughter of the Myrthon regent. She fled her homeland to escape the madness that has

engulfed it. Ardyn asks Andraste to join Arando on a “rescue mission” to capture Faijhan’s family, including the regent, and thus destabilize the Myrthon government.

Event 7: “So Fall the Knights of Ardyn”

Having allowed the heroes to lead her straight into Ardyn’s lair, the priest Imazhia reveals that she’s a Myrthon agent and a “living gate” to the Far Realm. She summons forth a large force of Myrthon soldiers as well as an old “friend” of the heroes—Ramiel, the demon-possessed elf. He uses the *dragon orb* (given to him by the PCs) to subjugate Ardyn and turn her against the knights and the heroes. Alex’s cousin, the “red shirt” Vastian, tries to stop Ramiel and might be killed off. Left to his own devices, Nyrrska assassinates Imazhia to close the living gate. Whoever kills Imazhia becomes deranged (as per permanent *confusion*), and although a Remove Affliction ritual rids the affliction, the individual remains ever haunted by glimpses of the Far Realm.

Event X: “They Call Me Xanthum Zail”

Depending on how events unfold, the starspawn “godling” Allabar might use the Dragon’s Eye constellation to trigger another reality change, inadvertently bringing Xanthum Zail from the Wednesday night campaign into the Monday night game. Xanthum displaces Andraste as party leader, but who knows what’ll happen when he actually shows up and tries to take charge. Wackiness, one assumes. Having been a puppet of Allabar himself, Xanthum senses that there’s a piece of the starspawn godling lodged deep in Kithvolar’s mind—a result of the change in reality.

OTHER ROLEPLAYING NOTES

The Vost Miraj: Will Andraste, Theralyn, and the Knights of Ardyn allow Baharoosh—a known Vost Miraj agent—anywhere near Ardynrise? Stan! will need to be on his game if he wants to keep from being sidelined in Events 6 and 7. If he’s forced to remain aboard the illithid nautilus, the ship’s elder brain can keep him company . . . and turn on him once Imazhia tips her hand.

The Von Hyden Drama: Vastian von Hyden (Alex’s NPC cousin) is introduced here for the first time. Vastian’s a likeable NPC who can provide Alex with news about his beleaguered family and is also someone to throw in harm’s way (a “red shirt”).

If you’ve followed this column from the beginning, you’ve seen this sort of episode summary before. My episode summaries are very modular, and each element is short and surprisingly easy to write. And you know what? They become even easier to produce with practice, and they collectively form the “bible” for my campaign.

PREPARING FOR COMBAT ENCOUNTERS

Once I have an episode summary on paper and in my head, preparing for the actual combat encounters is relatively easy. There are three things I need to think about:

- ◆ Miniatures for key monsters and NPCs
- ◆ Stat blocks for unique monsters and PCs
- ◆ Tactical maps for key encounter locations

I have a large selection of miniatures and, given time, can find something appropriate for any monster or NPC in my campaign. I keep a selection of “stock NPC” minis of different races in containers that I take with me to the gaming table, and I pull monster minis from a giant coffin-sized plastic bin I keep under my desk. (It’s the worst organizational system in the history of miniatures collecting. Sorting my minis is one of those rainy day activities I never get around to doing, which is inexcusable since I live in Seattle, which gets more than its fair share of rainy days.)

I’ve already discussed my secrets for creating instant [stat blocks](#), so I won’t repeat myself here. When it comes to maps, I try to reuse existing materials where practical; for example, I keep an array of “stock” tactical maps for shipboard battles. (It’s no accident that a lot of the action in my campaign takes place on the decks of ships!) Most of my creative efforts go into mapping unique and important set pieces. For Ardyn’s fortress, I have two options: I can design something new or steal a fortress map from some previously published source, in the manner I’ve [previously discussed](#). Fortunately, since Ardyn prefers to assume humanoid form and her home was once the lair of a wizard, I don’t have to create something humungous befitting a dragon of her stature.

Given the choice between reusing an existing map or creating a new one, I prefer the latter endeavor because the act of sitting down to draw the map forces me to imagine what goes on inside the location I’m creating. It gets me in the mood to dream about how Ardyn furnishes her lair and what surprises might be in store for heroes who take time to explore it. It also inspires me to think of interesting encounter set-ups and terrain. Some DMs are content with a roughly drawn map or doodle, but if I can’t spend a generous amount of time creating something new, I’d rather just pillage something. When it comes to maps, I rarely see the event horizon before I’m completely

sucked in. I could spend an entire weekend designing Ardyn's fortress, from the time I settle on the architectural layout to the time I finish putting pen to graph paper. Talk about getting sucked into a black hole.

Next week I'll let some of my esteemed players chime in and mention a few things they've learned about Dungeon Mastering from the weekly abuse inflicted upon them by yours truly.

Until the next encounter!

Behind Every Good DM, Part 1

11/24/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

Mat Smith's character, Garrot, is trapped in the Far Realm. His only means of escape is to fire himself from a giant catapult, which sounds dumb until you realize he's trapped in a part of the Far Realm that has molded itself around his own memories and beliefs—and Garrot's not particularly bright. Unfortunately, the catapult is guarded by a wizard wearing a pointy hat and surrounded by a force field that cannot be breached, only circumvented by digging under it with an apparatus of Kwalish. Fortunately, Garrot is not by himself—the Far Realm has conjured minion versions of all his adventuring companions, past and present. Will they help Garrot escape, or won't they? That's for the other players to decide, once they realize they're playing alternate, glass-jawed versions of their characters. Wackiness ensues, but the adventure has serious undertones, for Garrot's fate (and his future in the campaign) rests squarely in their hands. In the hands of less capable players, I shudder to think what could happen.

Week after week, I try to demonstrate by way of example that the role of the Dungeon Master really isn't that demanding—not if you can think on your feet and have a few good players on your side. A couple weeks ago, I was listening to the commentary tracks for Season 3 of *Leverage* when John Rogers, one of the show's executive producers (and co-author of the 4th Edition *Manual of the Planes*), joked that directing isn't rocket science, and I realized that

DMing isn't either. There's an art to it, however; and like artists, no two DMs are alike. What serves me well as a DM doesn't necessarily serve you well as a DM. We paint our campaign canvases with different colors using different brushes, as it were. Doesn't mean your campaign is inherently better than mine, or vice versa. However, I think it's safe to say that neither of our campaigns would be much fun if our players sucked rocks.

If you ask film and TV show directors what they prize above all else, nine times out of ten they'll say "a great cast." If you have great actors, you can turn humdrum material into something enjoyable and excellent material into something spectacular. Similarly, if a DM has great players, his or her job becomes a LOT easier.

I have two regular groups of players – sixteen players total. Some of them are hardcore roleplayers, a few are hardcore min-maxers, and all of them heed the unspoken social contract that says, in a nutshell, "Thou shalt not be a jerk." Because it's the week of Thanksgiving and I'm heading out on vacation, I decided to ask my players to carry the bulk of this article. Frankly, I think they know more about my strengths and weaknesses as a Dungeon Master than I do, for they've been watching me DM for several years now. Not surprisingly, they have insightful things to say about the art of DMing.

Recently I asked my players to respond via email to the following question:

Based on your experience as a player in my campaign, what's one helpful bit of advice or lesson you'd like to share with the DMs of the world who are reading this article?

Here's what some of the players from my Wednesday night game wrote:

Chris Champagne

Characters: Kael (deva cleric), Kosh (tiefling warlock)

Often, a DM may have an idea of a chain of events they predict a party to go through. Perhaps even in a certain order. However, players get their own ideas. The word I use for what Chris seems to do

is “back threading.” If there is some super crucial resource, some super critical NPC the party needs to interact with, even if the party kills that NPC, Chris will haunt them with the ghost if necessary. The crucial bits come through no matter what, and the campaign evolves and moves forward. And one other tidbit: Chris never forgets that each player (and thus each character) wants to feel like a star at times, the center of the action, the intrigue and attention. He never forgets to shine the spotlight on them (whether the player is ready or not). In a Perkins campaign, everyone gets to be a star.

Andrew Finch

Characters: Abraxas (dragonborn warlord), Alagon (revenant ranger), Ravok (goliath battlemind)

The most important lesson that I learned about being a DM was “don't say No.” I realized after seeing Chris apply this principle that it is similar to the rules of improvisation theater. Roleplaying and improv have a lot in common. As the DM, you should simply accept what your players want to do and then put your own twist on it. Just because you say “Yes” does not mean that you give the players what they want; in fact, it is fact better if you say yes but then give them something they don't expect.

I remember the time when the party had killed a mind flayer. A crystal shard grew out of its head and started to fly away. My character recognized that it was a memory crystal and that it was most likely taking the mind flayer's memories back to the illithid collective mind. He told the party to smash it, and as they did that, I asked if my character could use Read Thoughts to get anything out of the memories as the crystal was shattered. Chris said, “Sure . . . make a saving throw.” It was brilliant. It gave me what I had asked for and at the same time filled me with anticipation of what was

to come next. As my character took in all the memories of the slain mind flayer, he had to spend the rest of the campaign struggling to keep that mind flayer's personality under control. It gave the party a bunch of information about what was going on in the campaign but also gave my character a very interesting subplot.

Rodney Thompson

Characters: Vargas (eladrin avenger), Nevin (half-ling rogue)

Be careful when you blow up the ship. What I mean by that is that the most controversial moment in the campaign, at least from the players' experience so far, was when Xanthum (played by Curt Gould) blew up the party's ship. That was the moment that I think that we felt the most powerless and blindsided and the moment that brought us closest to rebelling as a group. It was very much a rust monster moment—the moment when something we'd invested a bunch of money into was taken away.

Now, in the end things worked out (and for the better, storywise), but that only happened because of a couple factors: first because we've played together a while and trust that the DM's not being arbitrary for no reason, and second because most of us are seasoned players that enjoy exploring our characters' weaknesses as well as strengths. We're players who don't mind losing an eye, getting sucked into the Nine Hells, and so forth, because we know it's a chance to distinguish our characters. Losing the ship was a big blow, but for Chris Youngs it was an open door to becoming evil. For me, seeing the direction that Deimos was headed, it was a chance to explore what happens when Vargas is torn between loyalty to a childhood friend and being a good-aligned character traveling with an increasingly evil party. For Curt, it was



a chance to explore betrayal (even mind-controlled betrayal) and the ramifications of being the guy nobody trusts anymore. Yeah, that may be ascribing a lot of complex motivation to us as players, but I think it's a fair analysis.

Trevor Kidd

Character: Rhasgar (dragonborn paladin)

As a DM, Chris does quite a few noteworthy things, but the one that sticks with me the most is how much character he gives each NPC. Sometimes it seems like they're fleshed out like a main character in a story, but other times, he manages to create a memorable character with just a few words and actions.

An example that sticks with me from shortly after joining the campaign is Captain Prak, a member of the Dragovar empire's martial caste. Apparently he had blackmailed the party before my character, Rhasgar, had joined a few sessions earlier. We ran into him again (the first time for me) after colliding with members of a thieves' guild called the Horned Alliance. The party was later tasked with assaulting the Horned Alliance's stronghold to sweep away the last remnants of the gang. Upon our arrival, we found Captain Prak leading the forces that had "contained" the remaining members of the guild. Prak started insulting and talking down to the party, not believing such a worthless group of casteless non-dragonborn could have been sent by the magistrate to deal with the problem. It was just a few condescending lines of dialog, some sneers, and some sideways insults, and Rhasgar had as much animosity for him as any true villain they had faced already. After successfully completing the mission, we were all satisfied to see Captain Prak's dumbfounded look. When the magistrate asked us what we wanted as a reward, Chris Youngs

and I both said simultaneously, "Fire Prak!" Our request was granted instantly, and our victory was complete.

It doesn't take much to flesh out a supporting character, and not all bad guys are villains. Sometimes they're just jerks, and taking them down a peg can be just as satisfying as saving a town.

Greg Bilsland

Characters: Amnon (tiefling rogue), Brell (genasi ranger), Ashe (deva invoker)

Don't fight purple dragons that can dominate you while on 100-foot cliff ledges? Don't attack young copper dragons at level 1 when you're alone? When you're below 0 hit points and stable, by the gods, stay down and don't get back up! All of these examples point a truth about Chris's game, and perhaps D&D games in general: The most memorable moments are often the deadliest and most harrowing. Don't pull punches just because you think you'll upset players. Sure, characters might die, but deadly and near-death experiences are quintessential parts of the game. Looking back on those experiences as a player, I don't feel the same grumpiness I might have felt at the time. In fact, now they're joked, and that's worth a lot more than if my character had simply beaten those encounters easily, got the XP, and moved on.

LESSONS LEARNED

Want to know if you're doing a good job as a DM? Ask your players what they've learned about DMing by watching you work behind the screen. If they say "Nothing," you know you're in trouble!

Behind every good DM are good players. I've seen good DMs run games for bad players, at least until the paralysis sets in or until they're reduced to shambling wrecks. Bad players are DM kryptonite. That said, I recommend that every DM endure at least one horrendous player experience to remind him or her of the value of great players, of which I probably have more than my fair share.

Next week, in Part 2 of this article, you'll hear from some of the players in my Monday group.

Until the next encounter!

Behind Every Good DM, Part 2

12/1/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

Against the wishes of his adventuring companions, Peter Schaefer's changeling character, Metis (in mind flayer form), took the party's ship—a recently commandeered illithid nautilus—into the Far Realm for the second time. This enabled the ship to skirt vast distances of ocean in the natural world. However, his earlier attempt to navigate the Far Realm nearly ended in disaster, and no one expected this latest foray to go any better.

Knowing how unpredictable Peter can be at times, I had anticipated the possibility that Metis might take the ship back into the Far Realm and even planned an encounter should the ship become stranded there. However, I wasn't prepared for the success with which Metis piloted the ship or his intended destination. Peter had decided, on his own, that the time had come to take the fight to the campaign's main villain, Starlord Evendor, and attack Evendor's observatory deep in the heart of enemy waters.

Navigating the ship through the Far Realm was handled as a skill challenge. However, when I asked Peter where exactly he wanted the ship to appear in the natural world, his intentions became horrifically clear. He aimed to crash the ship into Starlord Evendor's observatory—and on this particular occasion, his aim was dead on. The ship materialized in the air above the observatory and plunged nose-down through the domed rooftop, embedding itself within the tower's metal superstructure. Everyone aboard the ship took massive amounts of damage, some more than others, and several friendly NPCs aboard the vessel

perished instantly. The impact also set off every alarm in the tower.

Welcome to Part 2 of this article! If you haven't read Part 1, start there before pressing on.

Two weeks ago, I shared with you my outline [for this particular "episode" of the campaign](#), which is nothing like what's described above. Suffice to say, Peter pretty much torpedoed my best-laid plans when his character abducted the campaign and took the party to an altogether unexpected place. I suddenly found myself flipping to the end of my campaign binder, where I'd placed my notes on Starlord Evendor's tower observatory and its occupants. I hadn't planned for the heroes to reach this encounter location until they were at least three levels higher, but when things like this happen, you just gotta roll with it.

I don't get scared when players take control of the campaign. There's a little bit of role reversal that happens because now I'm the one who's reacting to events, and I can't simply throw my hands into the air and shouting, "I didn't plan for this!" DMing is all about improvisation, and the show must go on. What do I do in situations like this? I use what I know and what I have, and I make up the rest. Although my plans for the session were jettisoned within the first twenty minutes, I found the experience exhilarating because the players were well and truly freaked out,

and there was some wonderful inter-party conflict as a consequence of Metis's bold actions.

The point of this article, which I mentioned last week as well, is that you can learn a lot about DMing by listening to what your players have observed watching you "do your thing." Recently I sent an email to my players, asking them the following question:

Based on your experience as a player in my campaign, what's one helpful bit of advice or lesson you'd like to share with the DMs of the world who are reading this article?

Here's what some of the players from my Monday night game wrote:

Stan!

Character: Baharoosh (dragonborn rogue)

We always have choices as to where the adventurers will go next, and those are meaningful in that things will continue to develop while we're gone. If we choose to deal with Plot A first, when we come back, Plots B and C will have developed in our absence. It gives the world a feeling of great depth and makes every story arc choice feel more impactful. Sometime we can CREATE a big problem for ourselves just by letting a little one go unattended for a long while.

Bruce R. Cordell

Character: Melech (tiefling warlock)

Chris is a master of creating colorful and easily distinguishable NPCs. His tool for accomplishing this is manner (friendly, suspicious, forgetful, etc.), speed of speaking, and accent. The more you, as a DM, can emulate any of these traits to differentiate your NPCs, the more your players will appreciate

your game, because the creatures they meet while playing will seem to almost have in independent life of their own.

Matt Sernett

Character: Bartho (human fighter)

The plot is everywhere. You can't escape it. But it's not a monolithic freight train bearing you on whether you like it or not; it's a tangled web from which everyone dangles. I never feel railroaded; instead, we're often overwhelmed by options. Every NPC seems to have a story, so much so that I sometimes want to tell another player not to talk to an NPC. It's fantastic, and it's a way of running a game that I took to heart when designing the *Neverwinter Campaign Setting*.

Nick DiPetrillo

Characters: Yuriel (genasi swordmage), Theralyn (elf ranger)

The most important lesson is a simple one: be open. Take a chance on a player from outside your usual circles. If someone wants to launch themselves out of a catapult toward the enemy ship, let him! When the story starts to spin off in a direction you never anticipated, set your notes aside and go along for the ride. If you can't find rules to support what a player wants to do, then you create rules. You should even be open to your own odd-ball ideas. Why not have a session where players take on the role of their characters' henchmen or have a flashback story arc that returns the group to their first-level selves? If you shut yourself off from the possibilities, you can still tell a great story, but legends are born when the whole group collaborates and pushes each other to go a little crazy.

LESSONS LEARNED

In a heroic fantasy movie, the actions, dialogue, and fates of the heroes are scripted. Not so in a D&D campaign. Good D&D players don't pass up opportunities to take ownership of the campaign and make choices that affect its outcome, and I never get annoyed when that happens. Good D&D players also don't cry "Foul!" when things don't go their characters' way. I can deal with a lot of negative player behavior, but I can't stand whiners.

Yeah, okay, I sometimes feel guilty throwing high-level challenges at low-level characters when the players have no say in the matter (and there are valid reasons for doing so). However, when one or more players make a conscious decision to invite disaster, I have no qualms letting them stumble into harm's way and seeing the wreckage pile up. That's where all the best campaign stories come from!

In my campaign, it's absolutely possible for characters to hurl themselves at enemies of much higher level. I try to make levels in my game semi-transparent so that the players have a general sense of which foes are within their abilities to defeat, but I don't sweat when a character picks a fight with an enemy much stronger than him. I won't adjust the encounter difficulty to match the party level, either. Players are allowed to bite off more than their characters can chew. Great risk begets great reward . . . and a higher probability of getting killed. The same thing happens in *World of Warcraft* when you decide to take your level 70 character into a realm populated by level 80 monsters; sure, you might survive, but it's a scary, dangerous place to be.

In the case of the Monday night group, the adventurers (fortunately) have the element of surprise, but (unfortunately) they're facing multiple encounters' worth of enemies at once, all higher level than them. I look forward to seeing how they fare under the



circumstances and where the campaign goes should they prevail or perish.

Until the next encounter!

Riot Acts

12/8/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

Chris Youngs plays a tiefling sorcerer named Deimos, but he is better known in the world of Iomandra as Sea King Impstinger, an up-and-coming merchant lord with a fleet of thirteen ships under his command. His hated rival, Sea King Senestrigo, gets the heroes' attention by placing a catastrophic dragon egg aboard the Prince of Lies, one of Impstinger's ships. Unless the heroes agree to the terms spelled out by Senestrigo's underling, an irksome tiefling captain named Eriesius Devilray, a ritual cast upon the egg will cause it to explode, sinking the Prince of Lies and killing its crew.

The heroes decide to teleport to the Prince of Lies via a network of magic teleportation circles that connect all the ships in the Impstinger fleet. Deimos plans to distract Captain Devilray and his retinue so that Vargas, Rodney Thompson's character, can attempt to dispel the magic cast on the enormous dragon egg. Using an invisibility spell, Vargas sneaks past the egg's guards and begins making Arcana checks. As he sprinkles magic dust on the egg to enhance his Arcana checks, he hears a faint sneeze and realizes there's a tiny, invisible creature perched atop the egg: Devilray's imp familiar! Vargas immediately casts time stop, preventing the imp from sounding the alarm and buying him time to successfully disarm the egg. When the time stop ends, the imp warns Devilray that the egg has been disabled, and all hell breaks loose.

Badly wounded, Devilray is forced to teleport back to his ship and immediately plots his escape. Deimos casts a Phantom Steed ritual, allowing the heroes to gallop across the ocean and board Devilray's ship before it gets too far. However, Devilray's crew is ready for them.

As the heroes subdue Devilray's crew, the ship's elemental rudder is activated, enabling the vessel to cross a vast distance by traveling briefly through the Elemental Chaos. When the ship reappears in the natural world, it's surrounded by six of Sea King Senestrigo's warships waiting at a prearranged rendezvous point! Realizing they've fallen prey to Devilray's back-up trap, the heroes decide to stall for 10 minutes while Deimos creates a teleportation circle. Meanwhile, Vargas discovers that Devilray's ship is riddled with secret passages and finds Devilray himself hidden within them. A close-quarters fight leads to Devilray's capture, and Deimos gives Devilray a dire message to pass along to Sea King Senestrigo before the heroes abandon the ship and make good their escape.

Yeah, I know, this adventure sounds a lot like a Star Trek episode! Given that I run a nautical-themed campaign wherein approximately half of the action takes place on ships and the other half takes place on remote islands, it should come as no surprise that all five Star Trek television series serve as inspiration. But we're not here this week to talk about Trek. This week, I'd like to talk about the structure I use to build combat encounters that feel epic, regardless of whether the player characters are actually epic level.

Before we begin, I think it's safe to say that 4th Edition has been around long enough that more and more DMs are gearing up to run epic-level adventures and campaigns. It's taken years for my weekly campaigns to reach the epic tier, but here we are at last! And so far, it's been a snap. Shocked? Having run tedious epic-level campaigns in the past, I know I am.

The epic tier makes a lot of DMs nervous. I suspect that's because the characters are much more powerful and have access to many more abilities, and consequently it can be hard to challenge them week after week. Nevertheless, in my campaigns there have been more character deaths in the epic tier than the previous two tiers combined, so I don't buy the argument that epic-level characters are indestructible

(and neither do my players). The other challenge DMs face when running epic-level games is the simple fact that there are fewer epic-level monsters to choose from, which means a DM doesn't have as much pre-generated content to work with. I've gotten around this problem by repurposing stat blocks, as I've [discussed previously](#).

When Rich Baker asked me to contribute some advice to his "Rule of Three" column concerning the obvious DMing challenge of "keeping up" with the game's power curve, I sent him an email that included the following advice for epic-tier encounters:

Don't show the players your entire hand at once. Let encounters unfold gradually, with new threats or challenges announcing themselves over a period of several rounds. I think of an encounter as a three-act play (or, if you prefer a different analogy, a three-stage rocket). I introduce a threat in Act 1, add reinforcements in Act 2, and then add a complication or twist in Act 3. Depending on how the heroes are faring, the "twist" might be to their advantage rather than to their detriment. For example, Act 1 might begin with the heroes defending their keep against an ancient red dragon. In Act 2, villainous rogues in league with the dragon announce themselves by attacking the keep from within. In Act 3, a gold dragon allied with the party shows up, chases off the wounded red dragon, and helps the heroes catch the fleeing rogues.

Not every encounter can or should have three acts, but it's a great format to follow for major combat encounters of ANY level because it keeps the players on their toes and varies the tension as the advantage shifts back and forth between the heroes and the villains. If you're familiar with literary three-act structures, you'll know that a lot of playwrights and screenwriters use them when crafting plays and writing scenes for much the same reason.

The events described at the beginning of this article follow this three-act format closely. Here's how the Wednesday night encounter breaks down:

Act 1: The initial threat is introduced. The heroes confront Captain Devilray and take strides to prevent the catastrophic dragon egg from exploding. When the egg is finally disabled, combat erupts.



Act 2: Reinforcements “arrive.” Captain Devilray teleports away when first bloodied, and the heroes chase after his ship. They board his vessel and battle the crew. (In this case, Devilray's subordinates are the “reinforcements,” even though the heroes come to them.)

Act 3: The twist. The heroes find themselves surrounded by a clearly overwhelming force. Now they're the ones who must flee.

As expected, the heroes were too busy negotiating, arguing, looting, and running about to take short rests between the three acts, which added tension and forced the players to be mindful of their resources. That said, the encounter could have “gone south” had circumstances been different. As a thought exercise, let's consider how the encounter might have changed had the following occurred:

ALTERNATE REALITY: VARGAS FAILS TO DISARM THE EGG.

Perhaps Vargas fails his Arcana checks to remove the destructive spell cast on the egg, or maybe the evil imp detects him before he can finish his work. Either way, Captain Devilray and his retinue teleport away moments before the egg explodes and destroys the Prince of Lies. Each character gets to take one action before the explosion engulfs the ship, dealing 500 damage. Had this actually occurred, Acts 2 and 3 might have changed as follows:

Act 2: Reinforcements arrive. Captain Devilray's crew plucks the heroes' corpses out of the floating debris for delivery to Sea King Senestrigo. Heroes who weren't killed in the blast might sneak aboard the ship and try to commandeer it.

Act 3: The twist. Captain Devilray intends to take his ship to the secret rendezvous point. The heroes must either convince him to betray Senestrigo or find some other way to escape their predicament. If they fail, they are rescued and revived by one of Senestrigo's rivals—another Sea King to whom the party is now indebted.

LESSONS LEARNED

The example above illustrates the power of the three-act structure. Even if an encounter doesn't unfold exactly as planned, thinking of each major combat encounter in terms of three acts gives you room to ramp up the danger or diminish it. You no longer need to concern yourself with perfecting encounter balance because the three-act structure lets you make adjustments as the encounter unfolds. Epic level becomes no harder to manage than any other tier.

It's worth noting that not every three-act encounter needs to be structured exactly as I've described above. For example, I can envision a structure wherein Act 1 introduces a threat, Act 2 presents an unexpected twist, and Act 3 is when the reinforcements arrive. Here's an example: In Act 1, the heroes are leaving a tavern in Fallcrest when they are approached and threatened by a gang of rogues who seem intent on robbing them. Battle erupts until the start of Act 2, when a cutthroat suddenly recognizes one of the heroes as an old childhood friend. He instructs his fellow rogues to back off and apologizes profusely. He even offers to buy his PC friend a drink. Before things get too chummy, Act 3 begins when a rival gang of rogues jumps the wounded heroes and their newfound allies.

Once you've experimented with the three-act structure, you'll begin to see all kinds of variations and permutations that also work quite well, which are probably worth discovering on your own.

Until the next encounter!

My Campaign Has Issues

12/15/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

The heroes are citizens of Arkhosia, a collection of more than two thousand islands spread over half the world. Centuries ago, a dragonborn empire sent its fleets across the Dragon Sea to conquer the human nation of Bael Nerath and the dwarven nation of Gar Morra. A bitter war also led to the destruction of the tiefling nation of Bael Turath. After these conquered islands were absorbed into the Dragovar Empire, dragonborn became the dominant race. Humans, dwarves, tieflings, and other “lesser” races became second-class citizens of the mighty empire, though sincere efforts were made to preserve their cultures and religions under Dragovar rule.

Fed up with years of oppression, terrorists from Bael Nerath launch a daring attack on the Dragovar capital. The heroes tried to stop it but failed, and the beleaguered empire was forced to send a fleet to make an example of the humans. General Rhutha, a dragonborn warrior who embodies the best and worst traits of the Dragovar Empire, believes that humans should be grateful for the mercy her people have shown them. She does not bow before terrorists or believe that humans have any rights beyond those given to them by the Emperor. She is ready to make war to ensure that Bael Nerath never gains its independence, for that turn of events would surely weaken the empire and reignite old conflicts. However, some of the heroes are human, and their noble actions of late have proven to General Rhutha that not all humans are fools. She’s willing to hear them out, and they persuade her to meet with

the leaders of Bael Nerath before crushing the rebellion beneath her jackboots. Still, the heroes don’t know whether to trust General Rhutha. Is this warmonger capable of setting aside her deepest prejudices for the good of the empire, and is there any way to end the unrest? And how much do they really care?

The *Star Trek* franchise has more influence on my campaign than any other brand of entertainment. I steal from it shamelessly, right down to its episodic structure and its vast, never-ending mythology. One thing that has kept *Star Trek* relevant for generations, one of the reasons why it resonates with so many different people from so many different cultures, is that it tackles real-life issues. So does my campaign, and that’s the way my players like it.

Not every *Trek* episode deals with important issues, however. Not every episode offers thought-provoking commentary on the horrors of war, race relations, politics and religion, life and death. Some of them are just dumb fun. As it happens, there are moments in our existence when we want to explore “the human condition” and other times when we want to sit back, set our brains on stun, and watch big stuff go boom. Silly, paradoxical creatures that we are, we find both superficiality and depth entertaining. *Star Trek* writers had the smarts to give us both, and I make a conscious effort to do the same as a DM.

A campaign can get by without delving into the sorts of “issues” that magnetize or galvanize our

moral compasses and spark debates and wars on Earth. I’ve seen player characters lose themselves in vast dungeon complexes, killing monsters week after week, never once wrestling with the “why?” question as they plunge endlessly downward into deeper treasure-laden vaults. However, a campaign suddenly comes to life and feels more “real” when the heroes tackle issues from time to time. But there’s a fine line to walk, which perhaps can best be expressed as a question: Is it possible to create an arena in which players can have fun wrestling with serious issues such as political corruption, slavery, noble sacrifice, prejudice, genocide, and ethical misconduct? I believe so.

D&D is first and foremost a game, and a game is supposed to entertain players, not make them feel like they’re in school, in church, or at work.

That doesn’t mean I, as a DM, can’t put my players and their characters in situations where their morals, ethics, and perspectives might be tested or questioned on occasion. For example, how might the characters deal with a friendly dwarf wizard who keeps half-orc slaves? How would they interact with angry farmers hell-bent on burning innocent women at the stake because their crops are dying and they don’t know why?

D&D is more than a game—it’s a roleplaying game. Week in and week out, the players are trying to put themselves in the boots of their characters and make decisions that reflect their characters’ chosen alignments and personality traits. Roleplaying is, by its nature, an outlet for exploring different facets of human and animal behavior. Roleplaying is, for most of us, a safe outlet to explore various issues we humans face in real life, but in a safe environment free of actual consequence. In a D&D game, I can kill and pillage to my heart’s content and still be outraged

by an evil king who burns a church to the ground because its priests worshiped an unpopular god. Issues give players who like to roleplay something to sink their teeth into.

LESSONS LEARNED

I can't assume that every Dungeon Master has a lot of experience running campaigns that tackle serious issues, but I'd be surprised to hear from a DM who ran a D&D game that didn't, at some point, confront players with a moral dilemma, ethical conundrum, or similar happenstance. One classic example: The heroes slaughter a tribe of evil, rampaging goblins and find a cave containing several harmless goblin children. Suddenly the characters are faced with an ethical conundrum: Do they kill the goblin children, or do they let the children survive? Some DMs avoid the issue by removing the children from the equation, if for no other reason that not all players enjoy wrestling with this kind of issue, and that's perfectly cool.

If you think your campaign needs issues, here's some general advice that has served me well over the years.

Try not to beat the players over the head with an issue. A player isn't going to get excited by a "very special adventure" about the evils of racial intolerance, or a world in which his dwarf character is bad-mouthed by every non-dwarf NPC week after week. Better to present an issue in light brush strokes, and leave it to the players to make a big deal out of it (or not). If the players would rather turn a blind eye than confront an issue, let them. Some issues will resonate; others won't.

Let the players make their own judgments. Most players I know don't want to be told how their characters should feel or how they should react to a given situation. They prefer to make those judgments on

their own, based on their understanding of what motivates and provokes their characters. If the characters happen upon a wounded monster, leave it to them to decide whether it's better to slaughter or heal the creature. Imposing your own judgment on the situation doesn't make the decision any more engaging or challenging for the players.

Present issues fairly and responsibly. Ye gods, if you decide to present a controversial issue within the framework of your D&D campaign, be aware that an issue, by definition, can be seen from more than one point of view. If you intend to use religious fanatics as villains, for example, it would behoove you not to use them as tools to reflect your own personal misgivings about organized religion or to cast all religion in a negative light. Better to show more than one side of religious devotion by including a few devotees who aren't villainous and fanatical. Trust me when I say the party cleric will thank you.

Until the next encounter!



Player vs. Player

12/22/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

Several sessions ago, the heroes learned the true name of the Raven Queen, the god of fate. The details of how this occurred aren't important; what IS important is that the heroes have, over the course of the campaign, made enemies of Vecna and his followers. The god of secrets has been searching for clues to the Raven Queen's true name for ages, hoping this knowledge would enable him to usurp her portfolio and become the undisputed Lord of Death. Obviously, the Raven Queen doesn't want her secret to fall into Vecna's hand.

Rodney Thompson plays Vargas, a sworn servant of the Raven Queen. Recently, the Raven Queen contacted Vargas and declared that he was destined to become her eternal champion, but first he must keep her true name hidden from infidels who might use the knowledge against her. She tasked him with slaying everyone in possession of this knowledge, starting with his friends.

Last night, worshipers of the Raven Queen began to flock to Vargas's side, keen to help him complete whatever tasks the Raven Queen sets before him. Meanwhile, Vargas has been searching for a way to protect the Raven Queen's secret without turning on his fellow party members. The Vecnites are known to have rituals that can erase people's memories. Perhaps he can use such a ritual on his companions and erase the Raven Queen's true name from their minds, but that would mean confronting the servants of Vecna directly (a risky proposition, to say the least). So far, he's declined to share the details of his "mission" with

the rest of the party. Will he find an end-around before the Raven Queen grows impatient, and is the party doomed to self-destruct?

What would drive a Dungeon Master, particularly an experienced one, to deliberately turn player characters against one another? Seems like an act of sheer madness. D&D is supposed to encourage player cooperation and teamwork, and frankly, players are quite capable of turning on one another without the DM's assistance. Why provoke inter-party discord and distrust?

Maybe I am chaotic evil. Maybe I'm just plain crazy for putting Rodney's character in the situation of choosing between his deity and his friends, but as a storyteller the predicament fascinates me on many levels. First and foremost, it's a conundrum that isn't solved by the simple casting of a spell, the spending of gold pieces, or the success of a skill check. Rodney isn't going to buy or talk his way out of this one! I also love the notion that the Raven Queen's command not only puts Vargas to the test but also puts Rodney's play skill to the test. How much information should he share with the other players? How ready and willing is he to put his character in jeopardy? Can he figure out some "out of the box" way to protect the Raven Queen's secret and still keep the party from imploding?

As a DM, I'm willing to risk party implosion for good drama. I'm enamored with the notion that good conflict doesn't always come from without; sometimes it comes from within. A lot of television series rely on internal conflict to fuel the drama. I'm thinking now of Lee "Apollo" Adama and Kara "Starbuck" Thrace from the reimagined *Battlestar Galactica* series. Here we have two heroic characters periodically at odds with one another as well as their commanding officers. In some cases, they make choices that fracture their "adventuring party," fueling much of the show's drama. Yet somehow, they

always pull it together. In my campaign, I've adopted the mentality that whether the party survives or not is totally in the players' hands. My job is to keep the campaign alive until such time as the players' choices lead to a natural or sudden conclusion. As far as I can tell, my players enjoy getting together every Wednesday night to play their characters. They're not going to let themselves become the instruments of the campaign's demise, and so they fight me at every turn to keep the party from disintegrating. How far will my players go to keep the game alive? Pretty damn far. They enable me to indulge my inner demon's storytelling shenanigans.

LESSONS LEARNED

The title of this article is a deliberate misnomer. Despite everything I've said up to this point, I'm not really talking about "player vs. player" conflict at all. It's a silly DM who turns players against one another. What I'm really talking about is "character vs. character," and an experienced DM who knows his players well can run a game in which the heroes occasionally find themselves at cross-purposes that could, under certain conditions, escalate into all-out conflict. It's been my experience that you need three things to pull it off:

- ◆ **Players who genuinely like each other and enjoy a roleplaying challenge.**
- ◆ **A little foreshadowing, so the players can steel themselves.**
- ◆ **Wiggle room, so that the players can consider their alternatives.**

My Wednesday night players are fond of inserting little "character vs. character" moments into the campaign that are usually played for laughs, so I felt pretty comfortable inciting a more serious inter-party conflict by testing Vargas's loyalty to the Raven

Queen. I'm lucky because my players all have thick skins and a sense of humor, and they rarely let a good roleplaying opportunity go to waste. There was a nice bit of foreshadowing when the characters discovered the Raven Queen's true name. The players knew that this discovery might come back to haunt them at some point, particularly given Vargas's link to the Raven Queen, and the conflict organically stemmed from this discovery. Finally, I could've had the Raven Queen tell Vargas to turn on his friends immediately, but that paints Rodney into a corner. Allowing Vargas time to wrestle with the decision gives Rodney time to think of ways to satisfy the Raven Queen's desires and save the party.

I have no qualms about creating situations in which characters are incited to turn against each other, but when it's over I still want my players to be friends, not enemies. I might be crazy, but I'm not looking to end my campaign with a fistfight at the game table.

Until the next encounter!

About the Author

Chris Perkins is the D&D Senior Producer at Wizards of the Coast LLC. He's to blame for everything. However, before you start hurling insults, know that he recently had his lower spine reinforced with shark cartilage. If you thought he was bad-ass before, you ain't seen nothin' yet.

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