

# Dungeoncraft

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A 29-part series of articles which appeared in *Dragon Magazine* from 1997 to 1999: a comprehensive look at the process of traditional dungeon-based game-mastering.

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# 1

## Should I DM? et al.

*From Dragon Magazine 255*

The Advanced Dungeons & Dragons (AD&D) game is a game of the imagination. It's this characteristic more than any other that sets AD&D apart from chess, checkers, charades, poker, Monopoly, Chutes and Ladders, Space Invaders, and just about any other game that comes to mind. All of these other games are defined by their rules-pass "Go" to collect \$200, a flush beats a straight, and so forth. The AD&D game, on the other hand, doesn't really have any rules. The Player's Handbook and Dungeon Master Guide aren't full of rules in the conventional sense-they're more like suggestions. AD&D players are expected to take these

suggestions and use them to create their own games ideally suited to their own tastes.

As a result, each AD&D session can be a unique and rewarding experience. It isn't just a game; it's an educational experience, a social event, and an outlet for creative energy. Because there are no absolute rules to fall back on, however, the AD&D game is only as much fun as the players can make it. A game of the imagination isn't very interesting unless the players are inventive. As both referee and guardian of the game world, much of this creative burden rests squarely on the shoulders of the Dungeon Master (DM). Good DMing is the key to a rewarding AD&D campaign. A good DM can make the most mundane adventures come to life, while all the rulebooks and dice in the world can't save the ailing campaign of a poor DM.

A good DM is a writer, actor, game designer, storyteller, and referee all rolled into one. Taking on all these roles is not easy; effective DMing is

more art than science. Beginning with this issue, Dragon Magazine devotes a few pages each month to exploring the art of Dungeoncraft. In the months ahead, you'll have an opportunity to peek behind the scenes as I prepare and run a complete AD&D campaign. Along the way, I'll discuss how I designed and ran various aspects of the campaign. I'll also give you tips for creating or improving your own campaigns and for handling special situations that arise during play. Future installments of this column will cover topics ranging from worldbuilding and character creation to dungeon design and playing effective NPCs.

Although "Dungeoncraft" is an obvious starting point for beginners running their first games, experienced dungeon-crawlers should find plenty of interesting material in these pages as well. Along the way, you're bound to encounter some new rules, techniques, and tricks to help you spice up even a long-running campaign. Between "Dungeoncraft," the monthly "Sage Advice" rules

column, and the occasional "Dungeon Mastery" articles on special topics related to DMing, each issue of Dragon Magazine should provide just about any DM with plenty of food for thought.

"Dungeoncraft" will include advice on how to handle the sticky situations that arise in your own games. Need advice on how to deal with a "difficult" player? Wondering how much treasure to place in your dungeons? Want to know how to run a doppelganger effectively? If so, drop me a line at the address above.

With all that out of the way, we can move on to this month's topic: getting started. A good DM knows that lots of prep time is necessary before building a new campaign. There are maps to draw, stories to write, characters to create, and dungeons to stock. Because the many tasks that must be completed before beginning play are obviously interconnected, it's sometimes difficult to decide where to begin.

Begin by asking yourself a few key questions. Although a couple of these queries might sound a bit trite, having clear answers in mind for each of them up front is bound to save you lots of time and headaches later. In order, the key questions are:

## **1. Should I DM?**

Running your own AD&D campaign can be incredibly rewarding. In essence, you get to create an entire world, write its history, populate it as you see fit, and craft your own legends. What's more, if your campaign is effective, you might experience the unique satisfaction of creating something that eventually attains a depth and a life of its own. Some AD&D campaigns have run for twenty years or more and have generated enough tales to fill several volumes. On the other hand, you should recognize that DMing isn't a responsibility to be assumed lightly. Before



you begin, you should take some time to make sure that you're ready to start a game.

DMs face two real problems. The first is a lack of time. While it's certainly enjoyable work, preparing and running an AD&D campaign is just that-work. In the early going, you should count on spending three to four hours per week (in addition to actual playing time) preparing adventures, drawing maps, and adding little details to your setting. If you don't have the time to spend, don't even try to run the game; you'll only frustrate your players. You can significantly decrease prep time by using published adventures and settings, but as a practical rule, you're likely to get only as much out of these products as you're willing to put into them. Never try to run a published adventure without reading it thoroughly prior to play.

The second problem facing DMs is a lack of restraint. If you think you'd rather be a player, don't DM. Part of the DM's job is to let the

players grab center stage. A good DM always gives the players the last word and lets them decide what happens next. While this advice might sound straightforward, losing sight of it has been the downfall of many a campaign. Once play begins, you're going to have to resist the urge to use favorite NPCs to steal the spotlight from the players. You'll also need to keep an open mind about the outcome of the adventures and storylines you create lest you steer the players toward the endings you favor. Ultimately, the stories arising from your campaign belong to the players. If you have a problem with that, let someone else run the game.

"False starts" can waste a lot of time (yours and the players') and they inevitably make it even harder to set up a viable game later.

## **2. How Many Players Do I Want? Where Will I Find Them?**

Unlike a lot of newer roleplaying games, AD&D works best with a lot of players. Think of the ideal AD&D adventuring party—you need at least a couple of fighters to engage monsters and protect the weaker adventurers in combat, a cleric to cast healing spells, a thief to deal with tricks and traps, and a wizard or two to decipher magical clues and provide an extra punch in important battles. If any of these key roles aren't filled, the players are bound to run into trouble; many AD&D supplements were designed under the assumption that all these skills would be available to the players' party. Similarly, it is nice if one or two of the players choose to play nonhuman races, giving the party even more capabilities and flexibility with regards to language, etc. Because players are free to choose any role they wish, it's wise to plan on four or more players to guarantee a well-balanced party. If your players are willing to give up some of

their options while creating their characters, you might get away with only four or five players (more on this in a later installment devoted to character creation). Playing with fewer than four players is likely to prove difficult in all but the most unusual campaigns.

On the upper end, you'll want to limit yourself to eight or ten players as a general rule. With more than ten players, it's easy to lose control of the game. For similar reasons, less-experienced DMs might want to limit themselves to six or seven players for the time being; you can always add more later. In any case, since you should always have enough room at the game table(s) to comfortably accommodate all players, it's far more likely that the real limit on the number of players proves to be a function of the space available.

If you don't know enough potential players to fill all the slots you have in mind, there are plenty of ways to locate new players. Find out if any local

colleges have a gaming club (most do). Attend a local gaming convention and play in an AD&D tournament. Check with the retailers who sell AD&D products in your area to see if any of them will allow you to post a "players wanted" notice in their shops. You can also post notices in appropriate places on the Internet. The social element is one of the characteristics that makes AD&D such a great game; over the years, thousands of lifelong friendships have formed over the gaming table.

### **3. How Often Should We Play?**

How often you expect to play also affects all sorts of DM decisions. Effective pacing is one of the most important attributes of a successful AD&D campaign, and only by understanding how often you expect to play can you take steps to pace your campaign so that events unfold in an appropriate time frame.

If at all possible, try to play at a regular time, once per week. More often than once per week is going to force you to spend an extraordinary amount of free time preparing adventures and materials. Unless you have this much time to spend, you're likely to burn out before your campaign really gets off the ground. Playing less frequently than once per week, on the other hand, makes it difficult for the players to keep the details of the game fresh in their mind. You'll also find that the less frequently you play, the more likely it is that some of your key players will miss game sessions. The more frequent and regular your game times, the easier it will be for the players to remember them and plan accordingly.

If you can't play once per week, you might get away with any regular interval up to once per month. In this event, it's important to schedule each game session as long in advance as possible and to take careful notes during each session, so you can refresh the players' memories of the game situation at the start of the next session.

Note that for now, you need only estimate how often you expect to play on average. Once things get going, you might play slightly more or less often in certain situations depending on how the game progresses. To finish off a particularly climactic storyline, for instance, you might want to schedule an extra session. Similarly, after a lengthy storyline comes to a close, you might take a week off, giving you extra time to prepare the next set of adventures.

## **4. What Rulebooks and Accessories Will I Need?**

I'm going to assume that you've played the AD&D game before and know that you're interested in continuing. If you haven't played the AD&D game before, your best bet is to pick up the D&D Game Fast-Play Rules or the Introduction to Advanced Dungeons & Dragons boxed set and follow the instructions therein to run a few sample games. This should give you a

nice opportunity to get your feet wet and to decide whether or not you're interested in investing further time and money. Once you're ready to create your own adventures and start a full-blown campaign, you can follow the advice below.

To run your own AD&D campaign, I recommend beginning with just five items: the Player's Handbook, Dungeon Master Guide, Monstrous Manual book, a DM's Screen, and a set of AD&D Character Record Sheets. All together, these items add up to roughly a \$100 investment. Yes, that's a lot of money, but you don't have to spend it all at once. Start by purchasing the Player's Handbook and take time to read and absorb it fully. Then purchase the Dungeon Master Guide and completely peruse it before moving on to the Monstrous Manual book. In this fashion, you can spread the investment over several months, while simultaneously insuring that you're not trying to tackle too much material at a time. If the cost is still a problem, see if your players might be



interested in contributing to the cost of the rulebooks.

*The Player's Handbook* (PH) contains the basic rules for creating characters and handling combats, as well as complete descriptions of all the game's basic magic spells. Although the PH is primarily for players, as DM, you'll find it an essential part of your library as well. You'll use its rules for creating the NPCs who populate your campaign setting, and you'll need its spell descriptions to create tricks and traps and to conduct play.

*The Dungeon Master Guide* (DMG) reiterates the rules for combat, includes lots of indispensable rules for running campaigns and offers complete descriptions of all the game's basic magical items. The DMG will prove extremely useful while you're creating adventures and during play itself.

*The Monstrous Manual* is a complete listing of all the statistics for the monsters inhabiting the

average AD&D game world. While it's possible to begin play without the MM (particularly if you plan to kick off your campaign with published adventures), I recommend buying it for three reasons. First, the Monstrous Manual includes a useful illustration of each of its creatures. These illustrations make it much easier to describe the beasts to your players. Second, the monster entries include lots of information that is omitted from the capsule monster descriptions found in published adventures, and this missing information (ecology, motivation, feeding habits and so forth) is often the key to bringing the creature to life. Lastly, perhaps more than any other AD&D accessory, the Monstrous Manual book is a rich font of ideas. Each of its 350-odd creatures is an adventure waiting to happen; just a quick flip through its pages is bound to plant a few seeds for interesting encounters, obstacles, and storylines. Once play begins, you'll quickly realize that you can use every idea you can get your hands on.

*AD&D Character Record Sheets* are blank forms your players can use to keep track of their character's statistics, hit points, magical items, etc. While the sheets aren't strictly necessary, I recommend that you pick up a set and ask your players to use them. Using well-organized character sheets like these saves lots of time during play. Once they see how useful the sheets are, players might want to buy their own.

*The AD&D DM's Screen* is a cardstock screen you can stand up at your position at the game table and use to conceal your notes and dice rolls from the players. Printed on the inside of the screen, you'll find all the most frequently used game charts and lists, making it unnecessary to waste time flipping through the rulebooks to locate this information during play. While an enterprising craftsman can easily photocopy a few charts from the rulebooks and create his or her own screen out of poster board, the official screen isn't terribly expensive. In later installments, I'll explore some specific techniques

you can use in conjunction with the a screen to add some spice to your games.

## **Other Books and Items**

Beginners are often confused by the staggering variety of available AD&D products. For now, it's best to ignore all those other products. You won't need them to get your campaign up and running. In later installments I'll explore a wide range of available products and discuss ways in which you might gradually introduce new material to add variety to your campaign.

If you're a more experienced DM and plan to use additional material right from the start (perhaps something from the Player's Option or Complete Handbook series), it's a good idea to note exactly which products you'll be using before you go any further. Your choice of products might well influence a few of the basic design decisions ahead.

## **Where Do We Go From Here?**

Now that that's over with, it's time to move on to something a bit trickier. Once you have answers in mind for all four fundamental questions, you're ready to start building your campaign. Meet me here in thirty days for "World Building, Part I."

## 2

# World Building, Part I

*From Dragon Magazine 256*

Last month, we resolved some basic logistical and administrative issues-how many players is best, what rulebooks to use, and so forth. With that out of the way, it's time to start creating the campaign environment.

Before we start play, before we even attempt to design our first adventure, we should flesh out the campaign world. What's our fantasy world like? What sort of adventures await our brave players?

These are a couple of the more basic questions. Before we go too far, though, it's time to introduce you to the...

## **First Rule of Dungeoncraft:**

Never force yourself to create more than you must.

Write this rule on the inside cover of your Dungeon Master Guide. Failure to obey the First Rule has been the downfall of too many campaigns. You shouldn't feel compelled to create more information or detail than you'll need to conduct the next couple of game sessions. When some DMs sit down to create a new campaign, they are strongly tempted to draw dozens of maps, create hundreds of NPCs, and write histories of the campaign world stretching back thousands of years. While having this sort of information at your disposal can't hurt, it probably won't help—not for a long time yet. Spending lots of time on extraneous details now only slows you down, perhaps to the point where you lose interest in the game before it starts. For now, the goal is to figure out exactly what information you'll need to conduct your first few game sessions. You can fill in the holes later, as it

becomes necessary. This approach not only gets you up and playing as quickly as possible but also keeps your options open and allows you to tailor the campaign around the input of the players and the outcome of their adventures. In this spirit, you should aim to start your campaign as soon as you can, while doing as little preliminary design as possible.

With that in mind, you face an important decision at the start. You must choose whether you want to use a published AD&D setting or create one of your own. As usual, there are both advantages and disadvantages associated with either path.

TSR's settings were all created by expert game designers, so they're full of great ideas. They also come packaged with professionally crafted maps and play aids, and there are dozens of published adventures available for most of them, which might help you get through the occasional dry spell during which you don't feel like creating your own adventures. Surprisingly, however,



none of the settings is terribly appropriate for inexperienced Dungeon Masters. Most of them concentrate on presenting the sort of information that's unlikely to directly influence an actual game session for quite some time (detailed histories, cultural backgrounds, etc).

Creating your own setting, on the other hand, requires you to begin from scratch. Ultimately, you must generate your own maps and supply your own ideas. While this can be challenge, successfully tackling it is one of the most rewarding experiences you can have with the AD&D game.

For the purposes of future columns, I'm going to assume that you'll be creating your own campaign world. If you'd rather use one of the TSR settings, the advice in "Dungeoncraft" will still be useful. You'll be surprised how much of the work that goes into starting a new campaign remains the same under both options. If you decide to use a published setting, you might be able to skip a few

of the steps that follow, but we'll probably catch up to you within the next column or two. Note that those of you who create your own settings should still take the time to browse through the various AD&D supplements and adventure modules down at your local hobby shop, even those specifically tailored to one of TSR's published settings. Most of TSR's AD&D material is easily adapted to just about any campaign setting with relatively little effort. Later, you can look to the occasional module for a welcome and temporary relief from your design duties.

## **Starting the World**

How does one go about creating an entire fantasy world from scratch? After all, it sounds like a lot of work. The secret is to remember the First Rule and to keep in mind that "creating the world" is what you and your players are going to do together over the next several weeks, months, or

years of play. For now, your job is to create only those details necessary to get the ball rolling.

Your starting point is the world's basic concept or "hook." Most successful AD&D settings have a single, easily digested characteristic that makes them unique and interesting. Ultimately, it's this concept that captures your players' imaginations and draws them into the game. Making an imaginary world come to life is one of the most difficult tasks you face as the Dungeon Master. The more unique and interesting your world, the easier it will be for your players to accept its reality. A good "hook" goes a long way toward immediately signaling the world's unique characteristics to the players. Think about your favorite fantasy worlds from books, movies and games and try to identify what it is about each of these settings that makes it different from all the rest. Try to express these differences in no more than a paragraph or a few sentences. This is exactly the sort of distinguishing characteristic or hook you need for your own world.

Most hooks can be broken down into five categories: culture, environment, class/race, opposition, and situations.

## **Culture**

Perhaps your game world is set against a cultural backdrop not encountered in the typical AD&D game. For instance, you could run a game based on the cultures of ancient Egypt, ancient Greece, or the ancestors of the American Indians. You can then set about adapting the AD&D game's magic systems, character classes, and monsters to this new environment. Depending upon the culture you choose, TSR has published some excellent sourcebooks and settings that might inspire you. Some of these titles are out-of-print, but you might be able to find them at local stores, game conventions, or Internet auction sites.

While settings based on cultural hooks can be interesting and rewarding, they're often difficult to create. To do a good job of adapting the AD&D

rules to your chosen backdrop, you'll probably have to do some serious research and maybe a little game design to patch the few holes that pop up. For a detailed example of the sort of work involved, pick up any of the TSR products mentioned in the sidebars. One obvious benefit of a cultural hook is that it has the potential to tell you and your players an awful lot about the game world. If you base your game around an ancient Egyptian culture, for instance, you know something about the setting (largely desert), some of the adventures the players can expect (exploring hidden tombs), some of the monsters the players are likely to encounter (sphinxes, the phoenix, various desert serpents) and something about the world's mythology and theology (both based on ancient Egyptian beliefs).

## **Environment**

Another option is to use a particular environment as your hook. Imagine a continent that consists

almost exclusively of forests, mountains, swamps, jungles, deserts, or islands. Note that your choice of environment can also tell you a few things about your game world. The idea of a forest world, for instance, suggests that elves are more prevalent than they are in other AD&D settings. A desert world suggests that its cultures are largely nomadic and that finding drinkable water might be an important part of many adventures. A world that consists of an enormous archipelago suggests that seafaring will play an important role in the campaign.

## **Class/Race**

You might also think about basing a hook around one or more of the AD&D game's character classes or races. Imagine a world in which all the player characters are members of an ancient order of wizards, or another in which all the adventurers are members of rival orc tribes (in which case you might want *The Complete*

Humanoids Handbook). Most of TSR's Class Handbooks give you some advice on how you might run an entire campaign built around a single character class.

While campaigns built around such a hook can be lots of fun, they're often difficult to pull off. First of all, the various character classes and races work together to balance the AD&D rules. By tampering with the available choices, you can upset that balance. As an example, think about how much more difficult the average adventure becomes if none of the player characters are Clerics and the party has no access to healing spells. Similarly, lots of players prefer or dislike various roles. By limiting the available options up front, you're making it harder for some players to create characters they like.

## **Opposition**

The most commonly encountered opposition is another possibility for an effective hook. In this

instance, your campaign is dominated by a single monster or a closely related group of monsters. The exact monster you choose should suggest to yourself and your players something about the world. For instance, a world dominated by dinosaurs probably has a primitive "land that time forgot" appeal. Likewise, a world dominated by undead suggests that the campaign environment has been subjected to some sort of evil curse and that the ultimate aim of the player characters is to lift that curse. In fact, if you're interested in running this type of game, it's important that you select an adversary that suggests similar possibilities. Deciding that your campaign is set in a world dominated by stirges or umber hulks is bound to confuse your players and isn't likely to help you create the campaign environment.

## **Situation**

Sometimes, a simple situation can serve as an effective campaign hook. Imagine, for instance, a



world on the brink of apocalypse. Age-old prophecies predict that a great cataclysm will befall the world just a few short years after you begin play. It sounds like the players' job to uncover the true nature of this cataclysm so they can try to prevent it. Similarly, think about a campaign dominated by a conspiracy comprised of evil doppelgangers who have replaced many of the world's most important nobles at the behest of a tanar'ri prince (sort of a medieval version of The X-Files). Games based upon a situational hook allow you plenty of room for creativity and give you an opportunity to create a memorable campaign. The possibilities for intriguing situations are endless. If you're finding it hard to invent your own, you can always borrow a concept from a favorite book or movie and adapt it to an AD&D setting.

To get your creative juices flowing, here are a few more ideas:

- A world in which all humans, elves, dwarves, and orcs are psionic.
- A world which hasn't seen a sunrise in more than five hundred years. This world is plagued by famines and suffering. Ultimately, you might allow the players to solve the mystery of the eternal night and restore the light.
- A world in which humans are incredibly long-lived or even immune to death from natural causes.

If you're having a hard time choosing between several appealing possibilities, don't fret. Pick the possibilities that are easiest to develop and move on. You can always supplement your world with a new location built on an entirely different hook at a later date. For instance, if you're having a hard time choosing between a world dominated by dragons (opposition hook) and a world dominated by Wizards (class/race hook), go with the

dragons. Later, you can introduce a separate continent ruled by Wizards. In fact, every time you introduce such an area you have an opportunity to devise a rationale that connects its hook to your other hook(s) and adds depth to your game world.

Returning to our example, let's suppose that, across much of the world, all the most important rulers are dragons and that most wars and international affairs stem from conflicts or alliances between these dragons. While humans can rise to the rank of duke or baron, they are ultimately little more than slaves or vassals of the dragons. Eventually though, the players discover a large hidden island in the middle of a vast sea. This island is ruled by Wizards, the ancestors of whom successfully rebelled against the dragons and established their own secret kingdom more than a thousand years ago. The Wizards' ancestors defeated their reptilian masters by stealing the secret of magic from them. It turns out that every human Wizard in the world ultimately owes his

ancestry or tutelage to an inhabitant or former inhabitant of the island. Working together, these two hooks have just provided us with some rich backstory and fodder for future adventures. We now know how mankind learned the art of sorcery, and we can suppose that at least some of the dragons are interested in finding the island and recovering magical treasures stolen long ago.

For the campaign I'll write about in future installments of "Dungeoncraft," I'm going to select an environmental hook-a world covered almost entirely by various forests. Although the First Rule precludes me from taking the hook too far at this point, before I go further it's worth quickly examining some of the hook's implications to see what they might tell me about the game world.

To me, a forest world suggests an uncivilized planet dominated by Mother Nature. It's not hard to take this a step further and envision a "living" world that is essentially one colossal organism.

Perhaps the planet itself is the major deity in the campaign and a vast network of dungeon passageways beneath its surface form the living deity's veins and organs.

Next, I'll think about basic locations and geography. For variety's sake, I plan to eventually incorporate all sorts of forests into this world- tropical jungles near the equator, conifer forests near the icy polar regions, and thick marshes on a few of the coasts. I like the idea of outpost "cities" consisting of a series of interlocking platforms and treehouses spread across various levels of large deciduous forests. The geography of a forest world also suggests a geopolitical situation that revolves around the domination of strategically placed trails through the thick woods. It's worth noting that farmland is going to be relatively rare on such a world, so those few patches of land not blanketed in trees are going to be very valuable.

Finally, it's worth thinking about how the hook might tie into the various monsters, character classes, and character races that make up the AD&D game. Obviously, I have an opportunity to do something special with any or all of the plant-related monsters. Perhaps treants (from the *Monstrous Manual* book) are heralds or avatars formed when the planet god instills some of its consciousness into a tree. The planet god uses the treants to protect its interests and to impose its will upon its inhabitants. Clearly, there is a special role for Druids and Rangers to play on a forest world. Druids are probably the special servants of the planet god. Rangers might be the planet god's chosen warriors; perhaps their class abilities stem from a special bond with the essence of the planet god.

While I can explore any or all of these ideas in much greater detail, I have more than enough material to get started. As the campaign progresses, I'm sure I'll develop the religious customs of the Druids, the nature of the bond

between the planet god and the treants, and the implications of the mystical bond between the Rangers and the forests. For now, I'm concentrating on assembling only enough information to get the first few game sessions off the ground.

Now that we've actually fleshed out some details of the campaign world, it's time to introduce you to the...

### **Second Rule of Dungeoncraft:**

Whenever you design a major piece of the campaign world, always devise at least one secret related to that piece.

AD&D is all about the players' attempts to explore your imaginary world, and nothing captures the thrill of exploration quite so effectively as discovering a secret. As you build your world, you should devise plenty of secrets

for the players to unravel. Try to create a new secret every time you flesh out a major part of the campaign or create an important NPC. That should guarantee that your players always have new mysteries to uncover. Later, we're going to strew hints and clues all over the campaign world that foreshadow the events to come and help the players unravel some of these secrets. We might even design an adventure or two that revolves entirely around a secret. By introducing such hints weeks (and sometimes months or even years) before the players get to the bottom of a secret, you make your campaign world seem more carefully constructed and "alive." For now, don't worry about exactly how the players are going to unravel each secret or how long it will take them to solve each mystery. There's plenty of time to decide on those details as play progresses.

So, I need at least one secret that stems from my chosen hook and the few details I've sketched out. Two possibilities spring to mind, and I think they're both worth keeping. First, the "living



planet" god suggests to me that somewhere in the campaign world, probably located atop the tallest mountain, there is a single enormous tree that is synonymous with the god's life essence. Felling this tree is the equivalent of dealing the god a serious if not mortal wound. Should this ever happen, the seasons of spring and summer will not come again for many years, many of the planet's forests will begin to wither and die, and the planet's Druids will lose their magical powers. Of course, the god and its followers are keenly aware of this weakness. All Druids of 9th level and above know the secret of the tree and its location. With the help of a handful of trusted Rangers and hordes of treants, they secretly conspire to defend it. Much later in the campaign, I'll probably design a series of adventures in which the tree is threatened, allowing the players to uncover its secret and safeguard the world by defending it. For the time being, I'll simply place a few key hints as to the tree's existence.

Second, I've decided that shambling mounds (from the Monstrous Manual book) are actually former treant heralds of the planet god who became corrupted by the influence of an evil artifact and rebelled. When play begins, only the treants and the shambling mounds themselves are aware of the beasts' true nature. Later in the campaign, I might introduce the artifact that caused the mounds' downfall and lead the players to believe that it boasts a potent, benevolent enchantment. Only by unraveling the secret of the shambling mounds can they discover the true nature of the artifact and avoid its evil influence. Early in the campaign, I'll drop a few hints as to the origin of the mounds.

Join me in thirty days for "Worldbuilding, Part II" in which we'll take a look at establishing government and religion in an AD&D campaign.

# 3

## World Building, Part II

*From Dragon Magazine 257*

Last month, we began fleshing out our AD&D world by beginning with the "hook" or single characteristic that distinguishes our campaign world from most others. We also explored the first two Rules of Dungeoncraft:

1. Never force yourself to create more than you must; and
2. Whenever you fill in a major piece of the campaign world, always devise at least one secret related to that piece.

This month, we'll continue sketching out the basic overview of the campaign world by looking at home bases, politics, and government.

## **The Government You Deserve**

Obviously, the sort of government in the campaign locale is likely to have a profound impact upon the PCs and their adventures. Many of the published AD&D game settings devote a lot of pages to this topic, detailing noble hierarchies, laws, and taxation systems. While such information will eventually prove useful, for now you should follow the First Rule and create only the information you need to get started. Just to recap, this approach gives you two important advantages: it gets you up and playing as fast as possible, and it keeps your options open so you can add more later.

What sort of information do you need to know about local politics to begin the campaign? The quick answer is, "just enough to give the players

some idea of the world in which they live." For now, you want to provide a rough sketch that will help the players' imaginations fill in their surroundings. You won't need NPC write-ups for important government officials, specific crime and punishment systems, or detailed military chains-of-command.

Two different levels of politics are of interest, and you should consider them separately. You must know something about politics on the broad "national" level and something about politics on the focused "local" level. Although none of this information will have a direct impact upon a play session for quite some time, it's likely to help you create other details that are more directly relevant. Deciding a few things about political matters also provides a few more "secrets" (from the Second Rule of Dungeoncraft) that you can use to shape your world.

## Home Base

Since it has the greatest potential impact upon your first several game sessions, start by considering local politics. Think, at first, in terms of geography. Your goal here is to decide upon a "home base" for the PCs, somewhere relatively safe and secure where they can rest and count their treasure between adventures. This base might serve as the locale in which all the player characters came of age. It should almost certainly serve as the site of their first meeting. You shouldn't agonize over this decision for too long—your PCs aren't going to stay in this location forever. (By the time they reach 4th or 5th level, you'll probably move them along to bigger and better things.) Once you've decided upon a suitable base, you should think about who rules this base (if anyone), where the nearest uncivilized or wilderness areas are located, how the home base interacts with those areas, and whether there are any local rules of interest.

There are a number of basic home-base templates:

## **City**

You might choose to base your campaign in a large fantasy city with thousands of inhabitants. Such a locale has several advantages—a wide variety of shops and services at the players' disposal, constant traffic flowing through the city, and a huge number of interesting NPCs with whom the PCs might interact. On the other hand, using a city as your base of operations probably has even more disadvantages. Cities are large and time consuming to create and map. Also, large cities are so rare and important to most fantasy worlds that they are bound to have lots of contact with the outside world. In the early going, this might be a problem, since you don't know all that much about your world yet. Basing your campaign in a city will almost certainly keep you scrambling to create new details about the game world. While some DMs prefer such a challenge,

most are best served by trying to find a nice, semi-isolated locale to use as the setting for the early adventures.

Cities are generally overseen by an important political official who sits atop a large bureaucracy, usually an appropriately high-ranking noble (a duke) or a civil servant (a Lord Mayor). (Of course, nothing says you must use the standard medieval European titles; feel free to use or invent any titles you wish.) Since cities normally serve as centers of trade and knowledge, some of the bureaucrats who govern the city are inevitably dedicated to these functions—perhaps a Master of the Docks who authorizes all cargo that comes in and out of the city (and makes sure the appropriate tax is collected) or a Dean of Colleges who grants visiting scholars permission to use the city's archives. Because a city is bound to be of strategic importance to the kingdom or empire that controls it, it's likely to be heavily defended and thus home to one or more large military formations (and more bureaucrats, who



oversee these formations). Cities are also likely to have their own highly organized constabulary serving as a sort of medieval police force (with still more bureaucrats to head them).

## **Stronghold**

A stronghold is a keep or fortress built on the fringe of an important border. Because the stronghold usually sits at an important crossroads or waypoint, it often becomes a stopover on various trading routes and a gathering point for local loners (hunters, trappers, prospectors, and adventurers). Strongholds have an important characteristic that makes them ideal home bases—the fact that they are defensive constructs suggests a close proximity to some sort of perilous region (perhaps an enemy nation, a dangerous wilderness, or the territory of a threatening humanoid tribe). Such a conveniently located "area of mystery and danger" is an obvious and accessible setting for adventures (exploring ruins out in the perilous wilderness,

protecting the inhabitants of the stronghold from the marauding humanoid tribe, unmasking enemy spies, etc.). Most strongholds are also appropriately isolated from the rest of civilization, cutting down on the amount of game world detail you'll need to create before beginning play.

Because strongholds are usually the only outposts of civilization in their vicinity, small towns or villages often spring up around them, offering various services to the stronghold's steady stream of visitors. Sometimes these towns are encompassed by the walls of the hold, sometimes they spring up immediately outside the hold, and sometimes they are founded a short distance away from the hold next to another convenient geographical feature (such as a pond or river). Since the towns that grow up around strongholds are usually small and in a constant state of flux, with new businesses frequently opening and closing, they're easily manageable for a DM. When gaming in such a town, you can start with

just a few shops and key inhabitants and expand as you're ready.

Typically, strongholds are under the command of an important military official, such as a marshal or warden, though they are sometimes overseen by a minor noble (such as a baron). Most often, the stronghold commander ultimately answers to a powerful noble or prince who is responsible for the defense of the entire region. Because strongholds are usually located far away from more civilized areas, their commanders are usually given wide latitude when it comes to enforcing justice. When combined with the considerable military forces at their disposal, this power can make a despotic commander particularly fearsome.

## **Feudal Towns**

Feudal towns are mid-sized settlements constructed in the shadow of an important noble's castle or fortress. Generally, such towns are

founded upon a pact between the noble and the townspeople. In return for overseeing his lands, the noble offers the townspeople protection from perils ranging from rampaging monsters to famines and other calamities. (In these cases, the noble is expected to dip into his personal stores to provide for his people.) Although the pact between the noble and the townspeople is rarely spelled out, it's usually well understood by both parties. A noble who fails to live up to his end of the bargain may expect little sympathy from neighboring nobles should the townspeople decide to revolt against him. For their part, the townspeople are typically obligated to hunt, farm, or mine the land, while ceding the lion's share of the spoils to the landowner. Usually, no one questions the noble's right to discipline any townsman who abuses this trust.

The exact stature of the noble responsible for a feudal town generally varies with the size of the kingdom in question. In some small kingdoms, a full prince might be responsible for his own

feudal town, though the post is customarily held by a duke or baron. While the noble who oversees a feudal town (or his appointed underlings) has the last word in justice, taxation, and privileges for the town's residents, the typical proximity to other, larger feudal towns generally prevents him from exercising the sort of total control commonly displayed in strongholds. Typically, the noble is a vassal of a nearby, more powerful noble who'd like to avoid a peasant revolt that can easily spread to other nearby towns. All but the most evil or corrupt feudal masters are usually willing to intercede and gently correct the behavior of a vassal who violates the understood trust of the townspeople.

## **Farming Village**

While both the stronghold and feudal village are largely defensive constructs, some small villages are more valuable economically. Typically, these villages lie deep within the borders of a kingdom, where defense is not as great a concern. Most

"farming villages" are actually devoted to one of four commercial ventures: farming, mining, hunting, or fishing. The village exists solely to allow its inhabitants to practice their craft efficiently. Because of the steady stream of commodities they produce, most of these villages are important stops on various trade routes.

When viewed as a prospective base of operations, a farming village has both advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side, they are usually rustic and idyllic, providing the PCs with a nice safe base of operations where they can relax between adventures. Usually, even long-term activities (such as spell research or convalescence) can be carried out in a farming village without fear of calamity or interruption. On the other hand, the fact that such villages are so neatly tucked out of the way suggests that the PCs might be forced to travel long distances to reach adventure sites, which are typically situated in "dangerous" or "mysterious" areas. It's likely that basing the PCs in a farming village will have

the added effect of forcing you to create a largish section of your campaign world rather quickly. Sometimes, you can offset this drawback by employing a bit of geography. Suppose, for instance, that your mining village lies along a stream and a trail, high in the mountains and isolated from the rest of the campaign world. The trail is a major route for trading caravans and leads to the larger kingdom. The stream winds through 15 or 20 miles of some extremely inhospitable terrain and down into a perilous valley. Although the village is located far from the valley and has nothing to fear from its inhabitants, the PCs can quickly and easily travel down into the valley by boat. More importantly, since the intervening rocky terrain is so inhospitable, there's no reason for you to make up any details about it, so you can skip directly to detailing the smallish valley.

Normally, farming villages are governed by a civil servant (perhaps a mayor or burgermeister) who is appointed by a distant noble. Nobles rarely

reside in or around such villages and as a consequence, their residents tend to greet the occasional visiting knight or minor peer with a combination of awe and fear. Farming villages rarely boast any sort of organized constabulary, instead relying upon volunteers from among the townsfolk to protect the village from interlopers.

## **Wandering Tribal Camp**

No one says your base of operations must be confined to a single geographic location. Another perfectly acceptable option is to base your campaign around a roving locale, like a nomadic tribal camp or a large merchant caravan. In fact, this approach has several advantages. The base's mobility gives you an excellent opportunity to move the PCs to new parts of the campaign world at your own pace; whenever you have a new area ready to go, it's time for the camp to pull up stakes and move along. Since most roving camps aren't too big, it shouldn't be too difficult to detail the camp and its major NPCs. Also, the basic



premise of the wandering base might lead to some pretty entertaining adventures. Once it's ready to move, perhaps the camp encounters an unusual obstacle en route to its next destination. Or perhaps the PCs are dispatched to scout ahead to find a suitable location for the camp to establish itself.

If you select this option, you should spend some time figuring out exactly why the camp moves. Real-world nomads tend to migrate in order to follow game, resources, clement weather or some combination of the three. For instance, the camp might migrate down into a lush valley every spring to plant crops. Just after harvest, the tribe wanders back up into the mountains to winter among amid a collection of natural hotspots. Of course, you needn't confine yourself to such a mundane explanation. Perhaps instead the camp is really a train of pilgrims that aims to visit every sacred site on the planet in the course of their lifetimes to atone for some egregious sin. Or perhaps the wandering camp is actually a circus,

and the PC characters begin the campaign as performers or part of its crew!

Befitting their migratory nature, wandering camps usually have loose laws and social structures. Sovereignty over the camp is usually decided according to the doctrine of "ascension of the fittest." In other words, anyone who can outfight or outsmart the current leader has the opportunity to become the new leader. Although such groups must generally rely upon volunteer mobs to keep the peace, they usually deal with criminals and sociopaths swiftly and severely. Since resources are often scarce in such camps and survival a challenge, anything that threatens that survival is ruthlessly dispatched.

## **It's the Economy**

After you've decided upon an appropriate base, there are two important steps you should take to breathe a bit of life into your selection.

## Means

First, you should think about the local economy. Basically, this translates into "how do the inhabitants of this area manage to get food and other necessities?" Common models include the following situations:

The residents hunt or grow their own food and trade for other necessities.

The residents produce some important commodity (such as mined ores) or offer some important service (such as expert blacksmithing) and trade for food.

The base is actually "funded" by a wealthy noble responsible for providing all food and necessities. (Strongholds often fall into this category.)

The residents earn their keep through some unusual or "fantastic" means. For example, the base might stretch across a strategic mountain pass, and its residents might impose a large "toll"

that travelers pay to traverse the pass. Or, the local gods may have placed the base under their aegis and required their followers to make a pilgrimage to the base to provide its inhabitants with food and necessities.

Some might be tempted to start working up detailed economic models and complex trade schemes. For now, you should remember the First Rule and resist this urge. There will be plenty of time to add such details later; for now, you have more important things to worry about.

## **Ways**

The second step to breathing life into your base is to invent at least one interesting custom or cultural characteristic that sets it apart from anywhere else on the campaign world. Some examples from history and legend include the following situations:

The inhabitants of ancient Sparta were highly-trained warriors who would rather die than surrender.

Ancient Alexandria housed a library that contained a good portion of all the world's knowledge.

King Arthur's legendary court of Camelot was home to the Knights of the Round Table, an order of noble warriors sworn to protect the land and its people.

These are all good examples of the sort of thing you're looking for. Just one simple unique fact goes a long way toward making the area seem alive in the minds of the PCs. Other possibilities include: a region internationally known for the games it throws annually, a town that houses a holy oracle, or a city in which any violent act is punishable by death.

At this time, it's also a good idea to choose an alignment for the society that dominates your base of operations (see the Dungeon Master Guide). Since this area is supposed to serve as a place of relative peace and comfort for the PCs, it's recommended that you select one of the "good" alignments, though a base of operations corrupted by "evil" might make an interesting change of pace and challenge.

## **The Body Politic**

Once you've fleshed out your base of operations and local structure, it's time to think about politics and government on the "national level." Since this information isn't likely to directly affect an adventure for some time, you needn't spend much time thinking about this decision, and your choices are quite simple. Your real goal here is to provide the PCs with a single paragraph or so that paints the "big picture" of the world in which they live. Don't worry about the details-you'll fill those

in later. For now, you just want to give the PCs the rough idea that they're inhabiting a "big world" comprised of mighty nations. The simplest way to do this is to decide something about the form of government employed by the nation the PCs inhabit and to roughly sketch out a sentence or two describing any of that government's major enemies or allies.

Basically, there are four forms of government likely to dominate most AD&D game worlds.

## **Despotism**

A single "dictator" (perhaps benevolent) makes all decisions for the nation. Because so much of the society is invested in the dictator, the national character is inclined to change suddenly between regimes, and the nation tends to plunge into temporary chaos. Most humanoid tribes are essentially despotic nations.

# Monarchy

Like despotism, a single leader makes all decisions for the society. In this case, however, leadership is determined on a hereditary basis, providing continuity and stability to the society between regimes. Typically, monarchies are based upon complex social hierarchies (such as the feudal system of medieval Europe) that help determine the order of succession to the throne. The citizens of some monarchies believe that their royal families are descended from the gods themselves (and since this is a fantasy world, they might just be right).

One noteworthy variation on the monarchy is the city-state. City-states are essentially a collection of tiny independent monarchies (usually based in individual cities) that band together to stand united against larger, foreign nations. Typically, the united entity is governed by some sort of ruling council agreed upon by all the kings.



## **Republic**

Republics invest their power in a large ruling body that theoretically represents the people, such as a senate or a parliament. Usually, the members of this ruling body are elected by a noble class and serve for a set term of office. The ruling body selects a group of executives from among its own ranks to preside over meetings and oversee special governmental functions.

## **Anarchy**

No national government at all is an interesting option. Such an area is usually a collection of tiny, squabbling local powers and warlords.

Anarchies don't often last long since they're ripe picking for any larger, more organized nation that is looking to expand.

## **Finishing Touches**

Once you've chosen an appropriate government type for the PCs' home nation, round things out

by inventing one interesting fact about that nation. Possibilities include: something unusual about the nation's ruler, something unusual about the nation's history, a unique custom, or an unusual commodity that can be found in the nation. Then, invent a few other nations (each with its own form of government and interesting fact) to serve as enemies and allies.

## **Example**

Because they are easy to master and develop, I'll choose a stronghold as my base of operations. I imagine that this stronghold sits on the border between a mighty nation and a dark cluster of woods dominated by three rival orc tribes that might threaten that nation if they were ever united. This gives me a good area in which to set my first several adventures.

Befitting the hook I selected for the campaign world last month, the stronghold is actually a collection of fortified towers and platforms built

high into the treetops. The only major pathway that leads out of the dark woods and into the great nation actually passes directly beneath the stronghold, giving archers and engineers an excellent field of fire upon an enemy army attempting to overrun the structure. Commanding the garrison of troops that defends the stronghold is an ex-adventurer who now holds the title of Warden of the Black Wood. The Warden was appointed by the nearest noble, a Duke who runs the equivalent of a feudal town about 45 miles away from the stronghold. Though Neutral Good, the Warden is a grim, determined man who is tough on his troops and the residents of the small settlement that shares the treetops. He is worried about the threat posed by the orcs and feels that only by enforcing the strictest discipline can he prepare the area for their inevitable assault.

Economically, the stronghold is divided into two classes that each receive their food and necessities from a different source. The soldiers who make up the garrison receive their food and

wages via supply caravans dispatched weekly by the nearby Duke. The townsfolk, on the other hand, survive mainly by offering goods and services to the many drifters who stop at the stronghold on their way out to the black woods and beyond. Most of these drifters are adventurers or trappers who collect pelts from the exotic wildlife that lives in the murky woods.

As for a unique characteristic that distinguishes the stronghold, I've decided that it's known for the eerie wailing noise that can be heard echoing through its surrounding forests at night. The noise is a complete mystery (even to myself, at present); no one knows what produces it or where it comes from.

Now that I've created some important details about the campaign world, the Second Rule compels me to invent an appropriate secret based on these details. Looking back over last month's column gives me an interesting idea. Suppose that a fairly sizable cluster of the woods surrounding

the stronghold is actually comprised of an army of elderly treants whom the plant goddess has ordered to take root and guard a sacred spot located near the hold. From time to time, some of these treants wander a bit, shifting the course of several of the minor paths that crisscross the area. Of course, only the most skilled foresters understand that the paths actually move; most people who try to negotiate the area simply believe the paths are unbelievably confusing. Let's further suppose that according to local legends, several decades ago, a great general was somehow able to bypass the stronghold (which was once originally held by one of the orc tribes) to launch a surprise attack into the black woods. No one knows how he could have accomplished this feat, so most people don't believe in the legend. But the legend is true. The general skirted the stronghold by discovering the secret of the treants and convincing enough of them to move aside to form a second path through the forest large enough to accommodate an army. This secret has several interesting opportunities for

future adventures: the PCs can discover the secret of the treants, they can discover exactly what the goddess has deployed the treants to protect, and-if the stronghold is ever temporarily captured by the orcs-they might duplicate the general's legendary feat to reclaim it.

Finally, turning my attention to politics on the national level, I've decided the nation that maintains the stronghold is a feudal monarchy. Its interesting fact is that its kings, on their fortieth birthday, have always been known to bid their friends and family farewell and venture into the black woods alone, never to return. No one knows why they observe this ritual. Obviously, a future adventure might give the PCs an opportunity to get to the bottom of this mystery. In accordance with the Second Rule, I've decided that the ritual has something to do with a price the royal family agreed to pay to forestall some terrible calamity, though I'm not going to develop it any further at this point.

In addition to the large, uncivilized black wood, I've decided that three nations border my feudal kingdom. One is an enemy under the despotic rule of an evil Wizard. Its interesting fact is that the Wizard's palace is set amid a clump of woods that continuously rages with fire. The second is a republic of elves that sometimes serves as an uneasy ally to the feudal king. These elves are believed to be the first inhabitants of the planet and know a great many secrets. The third nation is second feudal monarchy dominated by isolationists. Its rulers have gained an impressive knowledge of genetics which they use to selectively breed the members of the nation's noble houses. As a result, most of the nation's nobles are almost superhumanly strong and intelligent.

Join me in thirty days for "World Building, Part III," where we'll tackle religion and finish everything we need to do before drawing our first maps.

# 4

## World Building, Part III

*From Dragon Magazine 258*

Last month, we thought about the basic geography of the campaign and put simple political and economic systems into place. This month, we'll flesh out a few details about the gods and religions of the campaign world, giving us everything we need to begin mapping out a starting point for play.

### Gods, Myth, and Faith

Gods and faith are important components of the average AD&D game world for a couple of reasons. Fleshing out the divine forces that shape your fantasy universe gives you an opportunity to tackle some of the "cosmic" questions likely to be



on the minds of your world's inhabitants. Where do we come from? How was the world created? What is magic? Your answers to these questions give your world flavor and help your players relate to the cultures you create. Also, don't forget that three of the game's basic character classes revolve around faith (Priest, Druid, and Paladin). It's quite likely that one or more of the players will select one of these classes, so you'll need some details to share with them before play begins.

If you have a copy available, take some time to flip through the pages of *Legends & Lore*, the AD&D game hardback that details a number of real world mythologies in game terms. You won't need nearly as much detail about your own gods as *Legends & Lore* provides, but a good perusal should get your creative juices flowing and get you into the right mood for the work ahead. While scanning *Legends & Lore*, be on the lookout for particularly interesting concepts or myths you can appropriate for your own world.

You might even discover an entire pantheon that you can borrow for your game, particularly if you selected a "cultural" hook for your game world (see Chapter 1). If you choose this path, you might want to change all the names of the gods, as well as a few important details to "file off the serial numbers" and prevent the players from recognizing them. This lets you keep some of the gods' secrets to yourself, at least until revealing them makes the game more fun.

The rest of this column presumes that you are creating your own mythology from scratch. Any information you borrow from Legends & Lore lets you skip one or more of the steps that follow.

In general, creating your own AD&D mythology is a five-step process. Before you begin, it's important to remind yourself of the First Rule of Dungeoncraft: "Never force yourself to create more than you must." At this point, all you need are a few simple details about the gods, their associated legends, and their followers. Although

you might be tempted to start writing scores of elaborate legends and crafting dozens of highly detailed religious rituals, try to rechannel that enthusiasm for now. It will soon be needed elsewhere. You can always flesh out your mythology later, after you see how your players react to the bare bones you establish at the beginning. Once you decide to add more detail to your mythology, you might want to consult *The Complete Priest's Handbook*, which includes lots of useful tips and guidance.

## **1. Choose Polytheism or Monotheism**

Your first step is to decide whether your faith is polytheistic or monotheistic. Polytheistic cultures believe in a collection of gods (collectively known as a pantheon). Typically, each of these gods has his or her own sphere of influence (such as air, water, wisdom, fire, magic, and so on), and the pantheon is organized according to some sort

of hierarchy, with one or more gods ruling over the others. Polytheism is far and away the model most commonly employed in AD&D game worlds—all of TSR's published settings and all of the cultures detailed in Legends & Lore (except the Arthurian heroes) are polytheistic.

Monotheistic cultures, on the other hand, believe in a single supreme deity. Although all divine power resides in this single being, even monotheistic cultures typically recognize a host of lesser divine beings such as saints, angels, avatars, or divine servants.

If you decide upon a polytheistic faith, your next step is to think about the various gods' spheres of influence and sketch out the hierarchy that defines the relationships between the gods.

Typical spheres of influence include sunlight, earth, air, fire, water, weather, love, war, death, agriculture, wisdom, art, evil, and magic. Select any of these spheres that you feel are appropriate, or invent your own. You'll find plenty of ideas for other spheres in the pages of Legends & Lore or

any decent book on world mythology. Try not to select spheres at random. Instead, come up with a reason why these particular spheres have their own dedicated gods. For instance, in a world on which it is believed that all things are composed of the four alchemical elements-air, earth, fire, and water-it makes sense that the four most important gods would command these spheres. If you cannot imagine this sort of direct relationship between spheres, stick to spheres that would have an obvious cultural interest to the inhabitants of your world. A warrior culture has an obvious need for a war god, for example, while a more civilized people might worship gods of wisdom or agriculture.

Typical hierarchies of polytheistic religions have a single god or a mated pair of gods that rules supreme over the others. Sometimes the lesser gods accept the dominion of the chief god, and in other cases they scheme to capture his or her throne. Often, the lesser gods are the offspring of the greater god, though sometimes they are

siblings or even totally unrelated by blood. Some hierarchies are quite complex, featuring more than two levels or comprised of several separate and smaller hierarchies. Imagine, for instance, a world shaped by three great gods, none of whom is superior to the others. One god watches over nature, one watches over humans, and one watches over magic. The nature god has three lesser offspring: a sea god, a god of the heavens, and an earth god (who, in turn, has her own offspring, a goddess of agriculture). The god of humans also has three offspring, each representing humankind's most powerful passions: a god of love, a god of art, and a god of war. The god of magic has two offspring: a god of prophecy and a god of death.

Note that such complex hierarchies give you an interesting opportunity to say something about the nature of your world. The previous example, for instance, suggests something about how the inhabitants of the world might behave. Perhaps at any given time, each of the world's residents is

under the influence of one of the lesser gods of humanity—love, war, or art. Similarly, the example also defines death (more broadly interpreted as decay or destruction) as a magical effect, perhaps influencing the magic spells you make available in the campaign and prompting you to redefine some of their effects. (If death is a magical effect, characters dying from disease, poison, or injury on such a world might be revealed by a detect magic spell.)

While it's okay to invent many gods at this stage, don't force yourself to do so. Whether you envision many gods or just a few, you'll detail only a few major powers before play begins (in accordance with the First Rule of Dungeoncraft). Since you want to share only as much information with the players as necessary to begin play, the big picture should be sketchy enough to allow you to detail other gods later.

If you'd rather employ a monotheistic approach, your only task at this point is to think about any

lesser divine entities that serve or oppose your supreme being. Does your god employ servants, saints, or spirits? Were these beings created specifically to serve the supreme being, or were they "promoted" from among the ranks of the faithful who have passed on?

## **2. Determine the Nature of the Major Gods**

Your second step is to consider the nature of your major deities (or the single supreme being, if you opted for a monotheistic faith). One of your first decisions is whether your god(s) are "personifications"-that is, whether or not they resemble human beings. The deities that typically crop up in AD&D games (and those appearing in TSR's published settings) are almost all personifications, though some cultures envision their deities as animals, spirits, or even nebulous and mysterious "forces." Opting for personified deities lets you set up more interesting



relationships between the gods and makes it easier to generate myths and legends that might be used to propel adventures. On the other hand, non-personified deities are unusual enough to go a long way toward giving your game world a unique feel.

If you decide that your deities are personifications, you should then consider their basic personalities and demeanors. Some pantheons are composed of emotionless, otherworldly beings largely beyond human understanding. Others exhibit all the emotions and imperfections of humanity and are sometimes capable of being duped or tricked by mere mortals. In this latter case, the individual personalities of the various gods often stem from their spheres of influence. Sea and fire gods, for instance, are usually short-tempered and overbearing, love gods are carefree, and wisdom gods are thoughtful and taciturn. Try to come up with two or three adjectives that describe the personality of each deity. At this point, you

should probably start confining your thinking to the three or four most important members of your pantheon, in accordance with the First Rule. Your goal is to develop only enough information to paint a rough picture and suggest a few options for any players who choose to create Priest, Druid, or Paladin characters.

If you've opted for more humanistic deities, you should now think about the relationships that exist between the various gods. Are any of your gods particularly good friends or particularly bitter rivals? Why? Sometimes the spheres of influence you have chosen suggest some obvious answers. For example, it's easy to imagine a fire god and a water god who are sworn enemies.

### **3. Describe the Faith and Worshippers**

The next step is to think about how your major gods are worshipped (only your major gods; don't

forget the First Rule). There are several important questions you should strive to answer. Think first about whether Priests and other worshippers are devoted to a single god or serve the entire pantheon. The former option gives you an opportunity to create interesting variations on the Priest character class, each with its own selection of weapons and special powers (see the Priest section of Chapter 3 in the Player's Handbook). A Priest devoted to a fire god, for instance, might have special access to the fireball or wall of fire spells, while the Priest of a war god might have a broader selection of weapons than the standard Priest class. The downside to this approach is that it forces you to work harder before beginning play; you'll need to create details about how each of your major gods is worshipped. Note that assigning special powers to your own Priest subclasses can be tricky and might easily upset play balance. Unless you have some experience with the AD&D game and a good "feel" for whether a given power is appropriate, try to use the following rules of thumb. Assign each Priest

class three special abilities, one gained at 1st level, one gained at 7th level, and one gained at 12th level. The first is no more powerful than a 1st-level spell (of any class), the second is no more powerful than a 3rd-level spell, and the third is no more powerful than a 4th-level spell. Each ability is usable once per day, and any ability that is the equivalent of a Wizard spell is treated as though it was cast by a Wizard of one level lower than the Priest's own level. The Priests of a fire god, for instance, might have the following special abilities: affect normal fires at 1st level, fireball at 7th level, and fire shield at 12th level; a 7th-level Priest of the fire god casts his fireball as though he were a 6th-level Wizard. Alternatively, you can assign special powers by finding a similar god in the pages of Legends & Lore and borrowing that god's assigned powers, or make use of the more advanced suggestions found in The Complete Priest's Handbook. If there is an appropriate nature or forest god in your pantheon, you might simply rule that the

Priests of this god are members of the standard Druid class described in the Player's Handbook.

In addition to assigning special powers to your Priest classes, you must also decide which spheres of Priest spells are available to them. (See Chapter 3 of the Player's Handbook for a complete description of all sixteen spell spheres.) Although balancing the number of available spheres against the special powers bestowed upon a new Priest class is more an art than a science, again there's a simple rule of thumb you can use. If you followed the guidelines above for assigning special powers, give each of your Priest classes major access to three spheres and minor access to three spheres. The responsibilities and nature of the deity in question should go a long way toward helping select the appropriate spheres from those listed in the PH. Priests of our archetypal fire god, for instance, might have major access to the Elemental, Combat, and Sun spheres; and minor access to the Healing, Divination, and Protection spheres. Since a

Priest's ability to cast the various healing spells is important to AD&D game balance, you should assign each of your Priest classes at least minor access to the Healing sphere unless there is a good reason not to.

If you decide that the Priests of your world serve an entire pantheon or you've opted for a monotheistic faith, it's likely that your Priest player characters will all use the Cleric class. In this case, it's probably a good idea to re-read Chapter 3 of the Player's Handbook to refresh your memory on the special benefits and restrictions that apply to Clerics. Of course, nothing says that you can't create your own custom Priest classes to handle these characters, as well. You might even present the players with several different Priest classes that all worship the same pantheon or supreme being, but represent different factions or sects within the faith. Perhaps the fundamentalist followers of the pantheon have different abilities than the more mainstream priests, or maybe a special order of

Priests within the faith have devoted their lives to a specific task or function. Likewise, there's nothing to stop you from making the Cleric class available to players (representing perhaps a special order of holy warriors or guardians) even if you've decided that most of the clergymen on your world are devoted to a specific deity and are members of the Priest class.

Now that you have some of the mechanics surrounding player character Priests and Clerics in place, think about whether the alignments of the Priest and Cleric classes should be restricted in any way based upon the nature of your gods. Depending on the god's personality and attitude, it might not make sense to allow Evil-aligned Priests to worship a god of healing. It's almost certainly inappropriate to allow Good-aligned Priests to worship gods of trickery or deceit. Try to make sure that you're presenting enough Priest and Cleric options to accommodate as many alignments as possible, but don't feel compelled to cover every single alignment. There's nothing

wrong with deciding that there's simply no such thing as a Chaotic Evil Priest or Cleric in your world.

At this stage, you should also think briefly about what sort of religious services your Priest or Cleric factions hold, whether non-clergy attend these services, and where the services are held. Are services held once per week? Once per month? Are the services held in elaborate temples, sacred groves, or somewhere else? Does the service consist of a reading or lecture? Is there some sort of sacrifice? Don't get too carried away. For now, you need only a few sketchy details to help flesh out the faith. Later, as play progresses, you can elaborate.

Finally, take a few moments to set down two or three tenets for each of your Priest and Cleric class options. At least one tenet should describe a special belief of that class, and at least one other should consist of a special restriction. Your goal here is to give players a few details they can use



to help flesh out their characters. Priests of a storm god might believe that all storms are an expression of their god's anger. Priests of a fire god might believe that fire is a holy, purifying force. Sample restrictions include: tithing (the Priest must give 10% of any wealth he receives to the church), chastity (the Priest is not allowed to marry or have romantic relations), enforced prayer (the Priest is required to spend several hours per week in prayer), and honesty (the Priest is not permitted to tell anything but the complete truth under any circumstance). When assigning restrictions, don't get too carried away. Your objective is to provide flavor, not to cripple members of the character class.

## **4. Create Two Myths**

To seem lifelike to your players, your imaginary faith must consist of more than a few dry descriptions and restrictions. A great tactic you can use to add flavor to your religion is to think

about its myths or its "explanations of cosmic mysteries." How was the world created? Where did humankind come from? What's the relationship between humans and the various demihuman races? What happens in the afterlife? How did humans discover the secret of fire? How did humans discover the secret of magic? These are all great examples of the sort of questions that interesting myths might tackle.

Before play begins, try to create two myths exploring any topics you choose. You should share these myths with the players just before the campaign begins to give them some idea of what faith and religion on your world are all about. Don't worry about providing anything too elaborate; a paragraph or two will do nicely. This is your opportunity to be creative. For inspiration, consult *Legends & Lore*, or head to the local library and spend a couple of hours with a book on world mythology. If you absolutely can't invent any myths of your own, don't be afraid to "borrow" a couple from these sources. Later, as

play progresses, you'll create additional myths to flesh out your faith.

## **5. Imagine Other Faiths**

Few fantasy worlds are dominated by a single religion. Take a few moments to think about whether there are any other faiths existing on your world that the players are likely to run across in their first few adventures and describe each with a single sentence. You needn't fully detail these alternate faiths using the procedure described in the first four steps unless you are going to allow the players the option of serving as their Priests or Clerics, a step you should take only if it's really necessary. Under most circumstances, you're better off requiring player clergy to stick to your primary faith at the beginning of the campaign.

Nonhuman faiths are a special exception. On most AD&D worlds, the various demihuman races worship their own sets of gods. If you want

to follow a similar scheme on your own world, you must be ready to deal with any player who wants to create a nonhuman Priest or Cleric. The easiest solution to this problem is to adopt the official AD&D nonhuman deities into your own world. These entities described in *Monster Mythology*, *Demihuman Deities*, or *The Complete Books of Elves* (or *Dwarves*, etc.). If you'd rather create your own non-human deities, just follow steps one through four above. In this case, you can probably get away with inventing fewer details about the nonhuman deities than you invented for their human counterparts; create perhaps a single god in each appropriate nonhuman pantheon and a single myth.

If at all possible, try to determine the relationship between your primary faith and any alternates you create. Maybe the patriarchs of each pantheon are somehow related, or perhaps the various pantheons signed a sacred pact long ago to divide the world among themselves.

## Example: Ray's World

With all the previous points in mind, it's time to return to my own campaign. Looking back at the information I've created in earlier installments, I think a monotheistic approach works best for my world. The "living planet" nature deity functions as a non-personified supreme being.

Moving on to Step Two, I think it's clear that the nature deity is not a personification. She (I've decided that the inhabitants of my world use the feminine pronoun when referring to the supreme being) shares all the attributes of nature-she can be bountiful and serene, or cold and destructive. In previous installments, I've already detailed some of her servants: treants she can imbue with a part of her consciousness and animate when necessary to protect her interests.

As for the faith and worshippers, the nature deity is honored, for the most part, by an extensive order of Clerics who maintain temples in sacred

groves all over the campaign area. This order worships the deity's bountiful side and its members cannot be Evil in alignment. To make things more interesting, I envision two additional orders dedicated to the nature deity. The first is an Evil group that worships the nature goddess in her destructive capacity. Its leader was a high-ranking member of the main order who became seduced by the goddess' capacity for destruction. In civilized (i.e., Good-aligned) areas, this order operates entirely in secret and none of its members ever reveal their true nature to the outside world. The second lesser order consists of clergymen who devote their time and energies to protecting and exploring the world's extensive forests. Made up entirely of Druids, the leaders of this sect are ultimately responsible for protecting the secret tree mentioned in Chapter 3. Note that all the clergymen in my campaign (so far) are Clerics or Druids; there are no Specialty Priests.

## **Services & Tenets of the Main Order**

The main order holds special religious services in honor of the nature goddess during each change of seasons; the Clerics of the order spend the rest of their time studying, adventuring, trying to aid members of the flock, and spreading the reverence of the goddess. The services consist of lengthy festivals and banquets attended by most residents of the campaign area and designed to celebrate the goddess and her bounty.

The Clerics of the main order believe that the goddess' bounty is a manifestation of the good and evil of the world's inhabitants. So long as the flock continues to do good deeds, the goddess will deliver a bountiful harvest, the weather will be mild, and her people will enjoy long, peaceful lives. They also believe that owls are sacred; the owls are the "eyes" the goddess uses to monitor her flock. Clerics of the main order are required

to spend one week of each season alone in the wilderness.

## **Services and Tenets of the Evil Order**

The evil order also holds services during the change of seasons; its Clerics spend the rest of their time trying to attract and corrupt new followers. The evil order's services consist of human sacrifices, ceremonial bonfires, and acts of destruction.

The Clerics of the evil order believe that the main order has blinded itself to the goddess' true nature. Power and understanding, they believe, always stems from suffering and an acceptance of nature's destructive capacity. Clerics of the evil order are required to kill one innocent each season to reaffirm their faith.



## **Services & Tenets of the Druidic Order**

The druidic order holds a service on the night of every full moon, consisting of chanting and a reading of litanies. The Druids believe that the goddess' only daughter (the planet's single moon) will one day take her place in the cosmos; life will eventually die out on the main planet and spring up on the moon. The Druids are required to abide by all the restrictions of the Druid class listed in the PH.

### **Two Myths**

One myth commonly repeated across the campaign area is that all the living creatures on the planet are actually a part of the goddess herself. As they move across the planet, they are like blood flowing through her veins. The main order views evil as a sort of cancer infecting the goddess.

A second oft-repeated myth explains the origin of the planet's single moon. Most inhabitants of the campaign world believe that the moon is the daughter of the goddess; it, too, is a sentient, living being. According to legend, the moon was once a continent on the main planet. It was thrown into the sky by a cataclysmic volcanic eruption that took place more than ten thousand years before the campaign begins, a process the clergy equates with childbirth.

## **Other Religions**

I've decided that most of the demihumans across the campaign world don't worship the goddess directly, instead honoring her treant servants. The demihumans view themselves as the treants' heralds and protectors. Humanoids are believed to be demihumans (and their descendants) who were long ago corrupted by evil: orcs were once elves, goblins were once dwarves, etc. Beyond that, I don't envision any other sects that might be significant at this time.

## **The Second Rule of Dungeoncraft**

Of course, now that I've created some new information, the Second Rule of Dungeoncraft (see Chapter 2) compels me to invent a secret that is somehow related to that information. I've decided that the Druids are more correct about the moon than they realize; the nature goddess did originally intend for her daughter, the moon, to replace her in the natural cycle. Unknown to the Druids, however, the moon has already birthed the new life form that is destined to replace humankind: mind flayers! (See page 251 of the *Monstrous Manual* book for more details.) These creatures are so malevolent that the nature goddess has disowned the moon and is striving to create an entirely new moon to replace her. The mind flayers and their moon goddess, of course, hope to foil this scheme and claim their birthright. While these events won't impact the campaign for some time, they're bound to lead to all sorts of interesting adventures down the road.

# 5

## Character Names

*From Dragon Magazine 259*

Whew! If you're still with me after those last three installments, give yourself a little pat on the back. You're halfway to holding your first game session, and a nice big chunk of the hard work is behind you. You should now have a good idea of where your campaign is heading. This month's task, although it requires imagination, isn't as labor intensive as the earlier steps.

Believe it or not, one of the most difficult tasks you face as Dungeon Master is dreaming up cool names for all those places, gods, monsters, and NPCs you create. As superficial as this chore might seem, nothing kills interest in an AD&D game faster than goofy names. The minute your

players are attacked by Gargathrank the Unclean, a great deal of the credibility you've carefully fostered flies straight out the window. Don't forget that the players' first impressions of your game world are based, in part, on the names you choose.

Here are a few simple techniques to help you choose the right names easily.

## **1. Never append adjectives to your character names.**

I've listed this suggestion first for a reason. Garrok the Bold, Dobbin the Swift, and Peebold the Wise all sound silly and immediately call to mind "Knights of the Dinner Table" strips. Maybe, somewhere, someone once invented an adjective name that sounded as cool as it was supposed to sound, but-in twenty years of gaming-I've never heard it. The easiest way to

avoid cluttering your game with silly adjective names is to rule out the adjectives altogether.

If a player chooses an otherwise okay name with an appended adjective, most of the people he meets in your game world should simply refuse to address him by his self-proclaimed title until the player finally takes the hint and drops the silly thing. It's likely that many NPCs will form a bad impression of such a character. After all, there's something presumptuous and downright arrogant about a young whippersnapper of an adventurer wandering around calling himself "the Strong," "the Brave," or (especially) the "All-Powerful." If the player persists, a little bit of mockery from NPCs or increasingly difficult challenges to prove his right to bear the title should put him in his place. ("So you're Gabel the Tough, eh? Well why don't you show me how tough you are!").

One workable alternative to appending an adjective to your names is appending a noun instead as a sort of surname. Thorvin Backbiter is

not a bad name for a Thief, so long as Thorvin is one of those guys who doesn't mind walking around with a name that immediately says, "Hey! I'm a Thief!" If you go this route, aim for an interesting, non-standard noun-"backbiter" instead of "backstabber," "spellshaper" instead of "magic-user," etc.

## **2. Borrow an existing language.**

Remember this number: 400. That's the Dewey Decimal classification number for language. If you go to your local public library and browse around the 430s through about the 490s, you'll find plenty of foreign-language dictionaries, each of which can be strip-mined for good names. Flipping open just about any foreign language dictionary to a random page should either provide you with a number of usable names or at least a nice collection of syllables that you can rearrange to form usable names. The advantage of

this approach is that the names it generates don't sound like a clunky collection of sounds, since words in most languages naturally evolve to please the ear. In fact, it's not a bad idea to fix on one particular language and use it to generate the names of all the places and NPCs in one particular region of your game world. That way, you'll establish a continuity and make your names sound like they were derived from a single, common tongue (because, in fact, they were). Later, you can select other real-world languages to use as the naming blueprints for other regions in your campaign, giving each locale its own individual "feel."

Note that this approach is particularly recommended if you selected a cultural hook for your game world (as described in Chapter 2). If you're building a Viking world, find a Norwegian dictionary. If your world is based on ancient Roman culture, find a Latin dictionary.



### **3. Don't be afraid to use English names.**

For some reason, many people presume that AD&D character and place names should consist of random, nonsensical syllables. What's wrong with good, old-fashioned English names? What sounds better to you-The Knights of Gligathrax, or the Knights of the Blood Throne? Similarly, Jason, Elaine, and Thomas are all perfectly good character names.

You can also form interesting names by combining a couple of descriptive English words. Tanglewood is not a bad name for a dense, scary forest. A town that lies along a river and was once the site of an important battle might be known as Bloodwater. The local pixie king might be named Skitterfeet. The idea here is to select interesting words and avoid cliches. Orcsmasher, Bigtown, and Meatrender are not good names.

Remember that the names you choose tell your players a lot about your game world. Sticking to English names tends to reinforce a medieval (almost Arthurian) atmosphere. If that's what you're aiming for, then this is probably the naming strategy for you.

## **4. Mercilessly rip off good names.**

This is the age of the super-sized bookstore. Just about every community in America boasts at least one Barnes and Noble, Borders, SuperCrown, or other mammoth bookseller. Typically, these bookstores feature two or three enormous shelves stuffed with science fiction and fantasy paperbacks. Every book on those shelves is likely to contain at least a handful of usable names. A bit of idle flipping through these books is bound to turn up some workable concepts. Similarly, a quick glance through a detailed world atlas or two is likely to conjure a few usable place names. Get

in the habit of bringing a notebook along when you go shopping and jot down anything that strikes your fancy. When swiping names, though, never use the names of well-known characters no matter how cool they sound. Naming shopkeepers and town guardsmen Conan or Gandalf not only confuses your players, it usually sounds just as silly as a "random syllable" or "appended adjective" name.

One of the very best secret resources for Dungeon Masters is your local bookseller's children's section. Not only are the children's books stuffed full of great names, they often contain useful, imaginative ideas for entire adventures. In the past, children's books have inspired me to design adventures that take place in giant trees, in the belly of enormous sea creatures, and other unusual and imaginative locales.

One last point to make about swiping names from other sources: If you need a great name for an elf, dwarf, halfling, or other demihuman, consider

going directly to J.R.R. Tolkien, unless you have a compelling reason not to do so. Not only did the good Professor derive his names for these creatures from complex invented languages he derived from real ones (thus lending the names that same sense of continuity mentioned in rule number two), just about every Dungeon Master who has preceded you ripped off his elf and dwarf names from Tolkien. Thus, Tolkienesque elf and dwarf names sound "correct" to many AD&D players.

This isn't to say that you should take your names directly from Tolkien's works-often, your best bet is to pull a few syllables from a collection of three or four names and rearrange them to form a new name.

## **5. When all else fails, turn to the local phone book.**

If you don't have immediate access to a foreign language dictionary or a Barnes and Noble, you can often glean useful names from your local phone book. Open to a random page and take a look at the surnames. To illustrate, I've just opened the Seattle Metro White Pages to page 401. Glancing through the columns, I can see a couple of usable character names (Finzer, Fiori, Fiscus) and a couple of decent place names (Firnburg and Firth). Obviously, those in large cities can employ this tactic to greater effect than rural-dwellers.

## **6. Work with the players to name their characters.**

All the hard work that you put into keeping silly names out of your game world can be destroyed by a couple of unimaginative players. It seems that every group has at least one or two jokers

who want to name their characters Soupy, or Bullwinkle, or even ... (shudder) ... Kramer. Usually, these folks are just trying to be funny, but sometimes they're just terribly unimaginative. In any case, you should be aware that as minor as this issue sounds, such names can wreak havoc on your campaign. The first time a particularly fun and dramatic moment arises and you must address one of your players as Bullwinkle, you'll see what I mean. Don't be afraid to rule out any names that have the potential to trample the tone of your campaign. If your players are having difficulty inventing usable names, try suggesting some of the techniques outlined in this column. You might even suggest some names yourself. In any case, you don't want to go overboard. In the end, the players should have the right to select their own names, just so long as they don't select something unworkable.

With these strategies in mind, I've attached a few names to some of the places and concepts in my own campaign. Since I want to reinforce a sort of "Robin Hood" atmosphere (to go along with the general concept of a "forest world"), I'm going to try to stick to English names as much as possible.

## **From Chapter 2:**

Stronghold, base of operations: Ironoak.

Woods surrounding the stronghold, secretly dominated by treants: Tanglewood.

Woods dominated by orc tribes that lie beyond the border protected by Ironoak: The Black Wood. (This is where the warden's title comes from.)

Warden of the Black Wood: Richard (For characters, I'd like to go with a combination of appropriate real world names and more traditional fantasy names-the same approach George Lucas chose in Star Wars.)

Feudal monarchy that maintains the stronghold:

Umbria (The name of an actual geographical location in Great Britain.)

### **From Chapter 3:**

Nature goddess, also doubles as the name of the planet: Aris. (A homonym of Eris, the ancient Greek goddess of discord; I merely liked the way the name sounded and reworked it for my own purposes.) The moon: Selene. (The name of the ancient Greek goddess of the moon; I'm hoping this name will resonate with the players and remind them of the moon every time they hear it.) The evil religious order: simply, the Legion. The good order: the Children of Aris, or simply "the Children." Priests of the order often place the title "Childe" before their names. The druidic order: Why not call them "Druids"?

Now that you've attached names to some of the most important people, places, and concepts in your campaign world, it's time to perform an important task that will prepare you for some of



the work ahead. If you've been following the Second Rule of Dungeoncraft, each time you invented a significant detail about your world, you created a secret related to that detail. It's now time to write each of those secrets on a three-by-five index card for future reference. Later we will use this "deck of secrets" to help us flesh out the campaign area and design adventures. That should do it for now. Join me next month, when I'll look at designing the campaign's base of operations

# 6

## Home Base

*From Dragon Magazine 260*

Five installments so far, and we've yet to draw a single map. If you've followed this column, you know that we've already created lots of background details about our campaign world. In this installment and the next, we finally begin taking some of these concepts and turning them into a playable setting. Our first mission is to map the players' base of operations. (See Chapter 3 for details on selecting an appropriate base of operations.) Although many DMs begin mapping their gameworlds on a larger scale and slowly work their way down to more detailed local maps, it's much easier and more efficient to go in the opposite direction. Remember that the First Rule of Dungeoncraft: Create only those details that

are immediately useful. It's unlikely that you'll need large-scale maps of your campaign environment for quite some time. The players' local base of operations, on the other hand, is likely to serve as the setting for the bulk of play throughout your first several game sessions. Although the players are unlikely to embark upon adventures within their home base, the details you lavish upon the area establish the tone of the campaign and prepare the players for the challenges they'll face later.

Before we get started, let's briefly recap the role the players' home base will play in the campaign. Once play begins, we're going to subject the heroes to all sorts of trials and tribulations, pushing them to their limits whenever we can since a fast, perilous pace makes for fun gameplay. Occasionally, though, the players need to escape to some safe haven to divvy up treasure and plot strategy. From time to time, they'll need to purchase new equipment, heal their wounds, experiment with new magical items, and perform

all sorts of other mundane but useful tasks. Over time, these tasks provide a welcome change of pace from the rigors of the wild and woolly campaign. That's where the home base comes into play. An effective base serves as a safe, civilized haven for the players and houses the infrastructure they need to carry out their various administrative errands.

Effective bases tend to have the following features:

## **A Local Authority**

Remember that the base is supposed to give the players a sense of security. Usually, this means that the base is home to some sort of constabulary or military formation, and this in turn implies that the base is under the command of a local authority. The presence of these forces assures the PCs that their enemies can't easily pursue them and kill them as they sleep. Note that the forces present need not be formidable—a simple

detachment of thirty to forty soldiers (0 level) is sufficient. The authority who oversees these forces is typically a minor noble or civil servant. For the purpose of drawing maps, the authority and his troops call for the presence of the appropriate quarters and barracks, which should be on high ground or otherwise defensively placed.

Don't forget that societies have alignments, just like individual characters. (See the Dungeon Master Guide.) To foster the players' sense of security, it's probably best if the society inhabiting the base of operations is Lawfully aligned. One of the key functions of the local authority is to enforce and maintain this order. As you create the local authority, think about whether the local code of conduct includes any unusual laws or provisions. You should also plan on incorporating some sort of stockade or jail into your base map. After all, it's difficult to enforce laws if there is nowhere to house lawbreakers.

In the campaign developing in these pages, the players' base of operations is a forest stronghold known as Ironoak. The local authority is a minor noble named Richard who holds the title Warden of the Black Wood. Ironoak was built along the edge of a vast forest wilderness (the Black Wood) to protect the civilized kingdom of Umbria against incursion. Because this mission is so critical, Richard has complete and unquestioned authority within Ironoak and its environs; his role is essentially that of an old west sheriff in a frontier town. Fortunately, Richard and the society he represents are both Lawful Good. Richard has thirty-five men-at-arms and sixteen archers at his disposal. Because Ironoak is a forest stronghold, I've decided upon an interesting provision in the code of conduct that he upholds. Fearful of devastating forest fires, during the summer dry season Richard has ruled that leaving an open flame unattended in or around Ironoak is a serious offense that deserves brief imprisonment in the stronghold's stockade. This also gives me the idea to plan on incorporating

some sort of central fire alarm (such as a bell or gong) into the Ironoak map.

## **Townsfolk**

In addition to the soldiers, it's a good idea to have a handful of common townsfolk around. Don't worry about giving them all names and statistics; that won't be necessary. In this case, inventing too many details can actually prove harmful. The main reason to establish the players' base of operations in a populated area is to provide a handy mechanism you can later use to insert useful NPCs into the game. When you get around to creating adventures and dealing with the whims of your players, you'll find it's often necessary to introduce new nonplayer characters into the campaign. Suppose, for instance, that you come up with a concept for an adventure that revolves around an aging ex-soldier who hires the players to accompany him on a mysterious mission to meet an old battlefield enemy. Now

you need a nearby aging soldier. Similarly, what if the players decide to seek out an expert on ancient lore to help them translate some elder runes? Now you need a nearby sage. A vaguely defined population in the vicinity of your base of operations allows you to introduce new nonplayer characters as they are needed; they've always lived "on the other side of town" and just haven't yet encountered the players.

When it comes to drawing maps, all these townspeople require houses and hovels in which to live. One important note to keep in mind is that the residents of genuine medieval villages tended to crowd many more people into a single dwelling than we do today, with ten or twelve largish buildings usually providing more than enough shelter for anywhere from fifty to one hundred residents. Of course, nothing requires you to design your fantasy villages according to this principle, though it's certainly something to consider. As you're preparing your base map, also think about what the townsfolk do for a living;



perhaps this industry requires other structures and dwellings. A town full of shopkeepers, for instance, means that there are plenty of shops around, as well as the infrastructure necessary to allow for the easy importation of goods (i.e., facilities to quarter merchant caravans, warehouses, etc).

I envision Ironoak housing between seventy-five and one hundred townfolk. Most of these people live in multiple-family treehouses, so I'm assuming that there are between twenty and thirty total dwellings. Most of Ironoak's residents earn their keep in the surrounding forest as trappers and hunters, though several operate market stalls catering to the steady stream of merchants and adventurers who pass through the frontier stronghold. All of this suggests to me that the Ironoak map should feature an unusual number of inns (say, three) for an outpost of its size to cater to the adventurers and merchants.

# Shops

Because the PCs will eventually need to upgrade their equipment and purchase various supplies, your base of operations should feature all the shops and merchants necessary to meet their needs. This does not mean that you should offer all of the items listed in the Player's Handbook for sale in the immediate area. You want to leave some items, particularly some of the more expensive pieces, unavailable for the time being. Later, when the players can afford these items, the fact that they must seek them elsewhere can serve as a useful springboard for an adventure or two. Suppose, for example, that horses are unavailable in the base of operations. When the players are ready to purchase mounts, they must travel to the nearest larger town or city, giving you a great opportunity to make their voyage a bit dangerous and exciting. For now, simply make a list of those items that are definitely not available in or around the base. You should also think about how many total shops are present and which

shops sell which goods. Since it's generally easier to deal with a fewer number of buildings, try thinking in terms of larger general shops that sell many different categories of goods rather than smaller specialty shops that sell only one or two items. Alternatively, you can go with one or two large marketplaces that house many small, specialized vendors.

The following items are normally not available in Ironoak: any sort of expensive clothing, any kind of animals (including horses), any sort of transport, spyglasses, water clocks, arquebuses, composite bows, hand crossbows, lances, khopeshes, scimitars, and any armor better than chainmail. I'm going to presume that most of the other items listed in the Player's Handbook are available somewhere in the stronghold, though I won't rule out the possibility of excluding other items on a case-by-case basis later. Although a small smithy is the only real shop in Ironoak, the stronghold is home to a large market that features several dozen specialized stalls and tables. The

regular vendors who operate in this market are sometimes temporarily joined by merchants passing through the stronghold, some of whom occasionally offer the items not normally available for sale.

## **Temple**

You should definitely think about incorporating a temple or two into your base of operations. Not only does it give Clerics and Specialty Priests a place to pray, it also gives your adventurers somewhere they can turn to receive the higher order healing spells and cures early in the campaign, before the PC Priests are capable of casting such spells themselves. Of course, the NPC Clerics who run the temple will expect a donation in exchange for their services. (See Chapter 12 of the *Dungeon Master Guide*.) A good rule of thumb is to place the temple in your base of operations under the aegis of a 7th-level NPC Priest. This gives the players indirect access

to all Priest spells up to the 4th level, including: cure light wounds, detect poison, cure blindness, cure disease, remove curse, cure serious wounds, and neutralize poison. Making these services available to the players will give you much greater freedom when it comes time to select monsters and adversaries to place in your adventures.

If you read the column on AD&D game world religions (see Chapter 4), you should already know something about the nature of religion and temples in your fantasy world. You may want to review those notes now to give you a better idea of how one of your temples might appear on a map. Are all your temples located in forested groves? If so, such a grove must exist in or around your base of operations. Are your temples surrounded by large colonnades? If so, you should plan on allocating more map space.

Ironoak boasts a small temple dedicated to the sect known as the "Children of Aris." The temple

occupies yet another treehouse, and it boasts, among other things, a large library of ancient writings and scrolls. This library will make an excellent source of arcane information for the player adventurers, and the master of the temple also acts as a sage with fields of study in history, folklore, and religion. (See Chapter 12 of the *Dungeon Master Guide*; I'll consider his temple library "Partial" for the purposes of Table 62.) Of course, the temple master expects compensation for his services, just like any other sage.

## **Fantasy Element**

This is no more than a matter of personal taste, but I like to place something "fantastic" in all the towns and villages I create for my AD&D games. This element immediately signals to the players that they are not in the real world and gives them an idea of what they can expect. Flip through the *Monstrous Manual* book. Perhaps one or more of its denizens are active in your base or village-

maybe the local innkeeper keeps a mischievous leprechaun trapped in a cage behind the bar, or perhaps a centaur serves as a special scout and advisor to the local authority. Similarly, you might think about whether any demi-humans are active in the base and what sort of role they play in the local society. Other good sources of ideas for workable fantastic elements include the various spell and magical item descriptions, children's books, and even modern buildings and cities. As an example of the latter, since Ironoak is suspended in the treetops, I think a large, ornately carved wooden elevator that moves people and items from the ground up to the trees sounds like a lot of fun. The elevator operates via a complex series of winches and pulleys; it's cranked between treetop and ground level by a contingent of Richard's troops who act as watchmen.

That should be enough to get you started. Next month, we'll take a look at a couple of additional

characteristics of effective home bases and  
explore strategies for actually drawing the map!



# 7

## The Rumor Mill and Maps

*From Dragon Magazine 261*

Last month we started work on a map of the PCs' base of operations for the early phases of the campaign. This month, we continue to look at the essential features of such a base and provide some tips on drawing the map itself.

### The Rumor Mill

Adventures are the cornerstone of any AD&D game campaign, and it's difficult for the PCs to undertake adventures if they can't locate them. This might seem like a trivial problem, but inventing fresh and interesting ways to involve the players in your adventures is one of the most challenging tasks you'll face as Dungeon Master.

To aid yourself in this endeavor, plan to include a fairly obvious "rumor mill" in your base of operations, a place where adventurers gather to swap boasts, rumors, and legends. Once the campaign begins, you can take steps to inform the players that a few hours spent in the rumor mill are likely to turn up an interesting story, patron, or legend capable of steering them toward a fresh adventure. This isn't the only means you should use to guide your players into new adventures (at least, it shouldn't be), but it doesn't hurt to have a safe backup for those times when you just can't think of anything better. Also, a solid rumor mill prevents the players from getting the uncomfortable idea that there's just nothing left to do.

Typically, the local rumor mill is an inn or tavern with one of those quaint names like "The Laughing Unicorn" or "The Wistful Wyvern," though there are plenty of other opportunities. The mill could just as easily be a marketplace, an "adventurers' guild," or even a library. Any place

where adventurers, veterans, "mysterious strangers," or storytellers gather will do.

Whatever locale you select to serve as your rumor mill should be a location that obviously draws a lot of travelers and out-of-towners. The more people who pass through the mill, the greater the ease with which you can introduce new information, rumors, and legends.

Of course, nothing says that you must confine your rumor mill to a single location. If you can come up with multiple sources for gossip and legends that seem to fit into your plan, so much the better. In our developing campaign world of Aris, for instance, the forest stronghold features two separate rumor mills. Somewhere inside the marketplace introduced last issue is a storyteller's square that has acquired a degree of notoriety throughout the lands under the aegis of Richard. Bards, adventurers, and others with a tale to tell come to this square to speak their piece to the public, hoping for a few silvers in return.

A youngster, for instance, might come to the square to relate the story of how he and his father were recently waylaid by a huge furry beast (actually an owlbear) on one of the trails outside Ironoak. Fortunately, the youngster managed to escape the beast's clutches, though his father wasn't so lucky. Hearing this tale, an outraged local merchant offers five hundred gold pieces for the beast's hide. This should be all that any adventurer worth his salt needs to hear before setting off to hunt the beast, and another adventure is underway.

In addition to the storyteller's square, one of Ironoak's inns, The Queen of Cups, is a notorious hangout for out-of-towners and adventurers passing through to the Black Wood. Ernst, the owner of the Queen of Cups, is a retired adventurer himself. Part of what attracts newcomers to The Queen is Ernst's huge collection of curiosities. He's known to pay top dollar for any souvenir of a daring exploit. He then exhibits these items to attract new patrons to

the inn. For the price of a few drinks, he'll happily relate the story behind any piece in his collection. At present, the collection includes a black dragon's tooth, an inert ioun stone, the pickled eyes of a medusa, and several lesser items, though Ernst is constantly acquiring new objects. This collection should be doubly effective in setting the players off on new adventures. Not only can they overhear gossip and rumors from Ernst's patrons but also Ernst himself and his items might easily serve to interest the players in a potential feat of derring-do.

## **Interesting NPCs**

Part of what makes the AD&D game fun for your players is the opportunity to interact with the interesting nonplayer characters you create. It's hard to imagine your base of operations taking root in the players' imaginations unless it's populated with interesting NPCs. At this stage, you should try to create at least two such

personalities. If you can easily come up with more than two good ideas, so much the better, but don't feel obligated to stretch yourself. It's much better to develop two really good ideas than four or five mediocre ideas. You'll also have plenty of opportunities to introduce new NPCs into the base later.

There are a number of characteristics that might make a nonplayer character particularly interesting. NPCs with obvious secrets, for instance, are always interesting; they encourage the players to get to the bottom of those secrets, possibly touching off an adventure or two. NPCs who can teach something of value to one or more of the players (like a master wizard, a high-ranking cleric, or a retired master strategist) tend to be interesting, as do NPCs the characters can obviously help or assist in some fashion (an orphaned boy, perhaps, or a kindly merchant deep in debt to an evil moneylender). Other viable strategies include NPCs who are not what they appear to be (a vaunted warrior who is secretly a

coward), NPCs with distinctive physical features, NPCs who make mysterious prophecies ("One day, you will earn the right to command this stronghold."), and NPCs who are particularly good at involving the PCs in new adventures (perhaps an absent-minded wizard who continuously makes serious mistakes in his magical research, unleashing catastrophes the PCs must struggle to clean up). Note that at this stage you need only a couple of simple ideas for key characters so you can account for their needs when you draw your map. For now, don't worry about developing game statistics, personalities, or backgrounds for the NPCs. We'll address those chores in a future installment.

Let's consider a couple of the most interesting local NPCs in Ironoak. The captain of Richard's guard, Tarrin, is both "not what he seems" and a "man with an interesting physical characteristic." Tarrin has no left hand. He has told everyone that he lost the hand many years ago while fighting in a war, but the real story is much more interesting.

About twelve years ago, Tarrin led a special detachment of the king's troops to destroy a stronghold built deep in the forest by an evil cult. In retaliation, the cult leader cast a horrible curse on Tarrin that gave his left hand a mind of its own. Soon, Tarrin was waking up to discover bloody weapons in his hand; the next day he'd learn that one of his neighbors was killed in the night. Eventually, the situation became so unbearable that Tarrin went deep into the woods and cut off the hand himself to escape the curse. He doesn't know that the hand "survived" and is slowly crawling its way across the continent, wreaking subtle havoc and trying to find its erstwhile owner. Naturally, the hand is eventually going to show up in the campaign to provide a strange adversary (and surprise) for the PCs. As captain of the guard, Tarrin needs a special office or barracks somewhere on the Ironoak map.

Another local NPC is an old, retired wizard named Jarrak who lives somewhere in the woods outside of Ironoak, though he frequently visits the



stronghold to replenish his supplies. Jarrak has the uncanny ability to come and go unseen. You might suddenly hear his voice from the corner of the inn and turn to find him comfortably seated and sipping his broth, even though no one saw him enter. A few moments later, you might turn to speak with him, only to find that he is gone, though no one saw him leave. Jarrak is famous for having discovered a potent, unique spell that he used to save Ironoak from a band of marauders almost thirty years ago. It's said that Jarrak is the only wizard on all Aris who knows this spell; he's never found an apprentice worthy enough to learn it. Naturally, this is meant to serve as a challenge to any PC wizards. I'm hoping (and assuming) that they'll eventually attempt to convince Jarrak that they are worthy recipients of his secret knowledge. Since he's an out-of-towner, Jarrak won't need any special accommodations on the Ironoak map.

## Something Related to a Secret

If you've been following this column and obeying the Second Rule of Dungeoncraft, you've already created a number of interesting secrets pertaining to your campaign world. Two installments ago (Chapter 5), you might have written each of these secrets on a separate index card. It's now time to pull out your "deck of secrets" for the first time.

The idea behind these secrets, of course, is that the players will eventually uncover them and come to realize the depth and richness of the campaign world you've created. But the players can't possibly uncover any of the secrets without the appropriate clues and hints. Carefully shuffle the index cards you have prepared and draw one at random. Your task is to think up a clue related to that secret so you can place it somewhere within your base of operations.

I've drawn a secret I created in Chapter 4. If you recall, the campaign planet itself is a living entity

known as Aris and worshiped as a goddess by its inhabitants. Most inhabitants believe that the planet's single moon, Selene, is also a living entity and the daughter of Aris. Legend has it that Aris gave birth to Selene so that her daughter could one day take her place in the cosmos. Eventually, Aris (and all life upon her) will die out, opening the way for Selene and new life the moon goddess will create. Unknown to almost everyone on the campaign world, however, Selene turned evil, prompting Aris to revoke her birthright. Selene has already given birth to the race that she hoped would replace the races birthed by Aris: hideous mind flayers! At present, there are probably some ten thousand mind flayers and other assorted beasts living on Selene. They and their goddess plan to destroy Aris and claim their birthright by force.

Now it's time to invent a clue to this secret that I can place inside Ironoak. Before I proceed, I note that I've drawn a particularly big secret: It affects the entirety of the campaign world and has the

potential to pit the players against some pretty tough monsters. Ideally, the players won't get to the bottom of this particular secret until far in the future, when they have gained enough experience levels to deal with the mind flayers. As a consequence, I'm not looking for a hint that gives away the farm; I need only raise the players' interest and allow them to uncover something suggesting the mere existence of the secret. As a general rule, the more time that elapses between the point at which the possible existence of a secret is first suggested and the moment the players finally uncover that secret, the more satisfying their experience. Since I hope to give the players a whiff of this secret long before they finally get to its bottom, the saga of the mind flayers and the evil moon goddess has the potential to form one of the most satisfying episodes of the entire campaign.

So what's the clue? Ernst provides an obvious opportunity. Somewhere among the items in his collection is a mysterious stone idol in the shape

of a mind flayer perched atop an orb. The orb is inscribed with a strange rune. Ernst acquired the idol from a passing adventurer but has no idea where the adventurer found it. In fact, the seller was too afraid to talk about how he came to possess the idol and was obviously happy to get rid of it. (He sold the piece for a mere five gold pieces.) This gives me all sorts of possibilities for the future.

We might introduce a strange cult of moon worshipers (the mind flayers' agents on Aris) who track their idol back to Ernst and attempt to reclaim it, possibly dragging the players into an adventure. Eventually, we could also allow the players to discover that the strange rune on the orb was a symbol for Selene in one of the planet's ancient tongues, providing them with a clue to the mind flayers' origin. In any case, the fact that the appearance of the flayers will be foreshadowed many months before they actually show up in the campaign should make their eventual arrival exceptionally dramatic. Since this hint is

delivered in the form of Ernst, it won't require adding additional buildings or locations on the Ironoak map.

## **Drawing the Map**

Now that we have surveyed all of its most important features, you can draw the map for your base of operations. Before you get started, you should review the five quick tips below. To recap, the following features must figure into the design of Ironoak:

- Barracks for Richard's troops
- A centrally located "fire alarm" gong
- Between twenty and thirty dwellings for townsfolk
- Three inns, one of which is The Queen of Cups

- A smithy
- A large, open marketplace that features a storyteller's square
- A temple of the Children
- An elevator that allows visitors and their goods to be hauled up to the treetops
- Tarrin's guardhouse

## **Tip 1: Use Graph Paper**

A sense of scale and all that it implies are very important to the AD&D game. Although you won't need to keep track of such things during the bulk of the time the players spend in town, someday you'll need to know how many buildings are affected by a fireball dropped in the middle of your village, or exactly how many rounds it takes a wizard to run from the town gate to the local inn. If you get in the habit of drawing

all your maps to scale on graph paper, you'll find it much easier to calculate the appropriate distances during play. Graph paper also helps you track the characters' movements in those instances when it is important.

As a general rule, you should draw all your town and dungeon maps on regular square graph paper and all your wilderness maps on hex paper. (Regular graph paper is widely available at office supply stores; you can usually purchase hex paper at your local hobby shop.) In general, hex paper makes it easier to quickly assess the distance between any two points on your map, but it's not well suited for towns and dungeons since the right angles so common in dungeon corridors and city streets don't match the hexgrain well. I prefer graph paper with five squares to the inch, but you should feel free to use the size that works best for you. If you can't find graph paper, you can draw your maps on blank paper and use the cellophane overlays from the Forgotten Realms Campaign Set to quickly drop a grid over the map when



necessary. In any case, you should carefully craft your map to exact scale.

A scale of approximately 25 feet to the square works best for maps of small towns and villages. This means that the long side of a sheet of standard paper covers approximately one quarter mile (if you're using paper with five squares to the inch), giving you an opportunity to comfortably fit all the town's buildings and a bit of the surrounding terrain on a single sheet. If, for some reason, your base of operations spans a larger area, increase the scale as necessary.

## **Tip 2: Get as Fancy as You Can**

Unlike some of the dungeon and adventure maps you'll draw later, you're going to allow the players to look at this particular map during play. The more fancy and interesting you can make it, the more likely it is to spur on the players' imaginations and improve your game. At a minimum, you should draw the map carefully and

neatly. You should also consider adding color (colored pencils work best) and any other artistic flair you're capable of providing. If you have the means, there is a wide variety of computer software available that can help you spice up your maps, most notably the Campaign Cartographer product from Pro-Fantasy software or the AD&D Core Rules v. 2.0.

### **Tip 3: Make the Map Useful**

When drawing maps for your campaign, you should always try to anticipate exactly how you'll use the map in play and tailor it to suit those needs. Anything that you can add to the map that might ultimately save you or your players some time is probably a good idea. On the map of your base of operations, for instance, you might include a legend indicating how far the average character can move in both one turn and one round. You might also place symbols on the map indicating where key characters are often found, diagrams showing the routes patrolled by guards,

borders indicating areas frequented by local thieves, and other legends explaining the purposes of your buildings and areas. In this particular instance, though, don't place anything on your map that wouldn't be known to the average resident of the base. Remember, you're ultimately going to show this map to the players.

#### **Tip 4: Don't Be So Predictable**

Try to include at least one or two distinctive features on every map you draw. If every one of your towns uses the same basic layout, your players are likely to grow bored and confused. If there's something distinctive in each town, the players are more likely to remember each town individually and to bring each location alive in their imaginations. Sometimes, basic geography is enough to make each location distinctive. Try experimenting with angled streets, hills and other geographical features in the midst of town, and unusual building layouts. If you're struggling with basic layouts, look to maps of real world cities

and towns for inspiration. You can also give each village map its own unique identity by resorting to fantastic elements (see last issue), special monuments, or unusual features (maybe a circus, a library, a mint, or an arena).

## **Tip 5: Be Logical**

Finally, when drawing a village or town map, try to put yourself in the shoes of one of the town's fictional residents. Is water readily available to each of the residences? Are the town's inns easily noticed and accessible to out-of-towners? Are there places for merchants and visitors to stable their mounts? This sort of consistency will help lend your campaign an air of plausibility that will pay big dividends down the road.

Next month, we'll look at more of your questions before moving on to our first area map.

# 8

## Four Things You Can (and Should!) Do With NPCs

*From Dragon Magazine 262*

You can't run a memorable AD&D campaign without creating some memorable nonplayer characters. Think about it. The only tools you can use to bring your campaign setting alive in your players' imaginations are your descriptions, storylines, and NPCs. Of these, only the NPCs give you an opportunity to step into your own world and flesh it out from the inside. Your NPCs allow you to ham it up and bring the game world to life. They give you a chance to step out from behind your DM's screen and get in on the action. Your characterization of NPCs is especially critical because your players look to you for guidance in developing their own characters. If

your NPCs are lively, your players are likely to follow your lead with more memorable creations of their own.

Last month, we identified the first nonplayer inhabitants of our campaign world. In this month's installment and the next, we'll explore strategies for making those NPCs an effective part of the campaign. But before you can create great NPCs, you must first understand the various roles they are likely to play in your adventures, so let's begin with a discussion of...

Four Things You Can (and Should!) Do With NPCs

## **1. Provide the Players with Exposition**

NPCs are a great tool you can use to introduce the players to information about your setting. There is probably some resident somewhere on your

campaign world who can answer just about any question the players might want to pose. The wizened sage who lives in the big city can probably identify the runes on that ancient book the adventurers pulled out of the last dungeon they visited. The local king can probably give the party a clue as to why his daughter recently disappeared. The goblin lord probably knows when the five tribes are planning to assault the local stronghold and how they might approach it. Of course, some or all of these folks are probably not inclined to share their secrets, leaving it up to the players to figure out how to loosen their tongues!

When creating an NPC, it's important to think about what he or she knows. What important questions might the NPC answer? How can this information help the players? What secrets might the NPC potentially reveal? You should also think about how the players might gain this information. Is the NPC someone the PCs might befriend or someone they must outwit? And then

there are some NPCs who are designed to reveal their information without any sort of coaxing from the players. Imagine an old beggar who aimlessly wanders around the city mumbling about some terrible creature he encountered in the forest long ago, or a traveling minstrel who moves from inn to inn singing ballads of great heroes and their adventures. When NPCs are free with helpful information, make sure they keep their revelations as subtle as possible. Make it at least a little challenging for the players to puzzle out the significance of any information they glean. The wandering beggar shouldn't come right out and tell the players that the creature he met was a wyvern. Instead, he should describe "a terrible hiss," "wings that blotted out the sun," or a "razor-sharp tail." Clever players will get the hint, deduce the creature's identity, and take the appropriate precautions before venturing into the forest themselves.



## 2. Offer the PCs Services and Tactical Options

Typical adventurers are able folks, but even the most experienced and well-equipped group can't do everything for itself. Sooner or later, the PCs will need the services of a blacksmith, a sage, or a moneylender. This means that whenever you create an NPC, you should also consider what that character can do for the PCs-and what it might take for the PCs to procure these services.

A good AD&D campaign presents the players with a web of possible solutions to any problem they encounter, and NPCs are likely to occupy key positions within this web. Suppose, for example, that the PCs retrieve a magical sword from a dungeon but are unsure of the weapon's true nature and capabilities. In a well-developed campaign, they'd have several clear options, allowing them the freedom to choose and reinforcing the idea that their destinies lie in their own hands. They might simply use the sword and

try to deduce its capabilities from its performance. They might mount an expedition to recover a lost spellbook of which they've heard, hoping it contains an identify spell or other lore concerning the weapon. They might visit a nearby sage in hopes that he'll recognize the blade, or they might travel all the way to the big city, where they can hire a friendly wizard to cast an identify spell for them. Of course, for these latter options to work, the PCs must have already met these two NPCs and familiarized themselves with their capabilities. To build these sorts of options into your own game, you should anticipate the services the players might need in the months ahead, then liberally sprinkle appropriate NPCs all over your setting. Likely services usually include help with: spellcasting, identifying magical items, buying and selling equipment, raising money, acquiring information, and ensuring adequate security.

Keep in mind that the services your NPCs can supply aren't very helpful if the players are

unaware that they are available. The local captain of the guard might be an expert jeweler, but this ability won't provide the players with any problem-solving options until the players discover the guard's expertise. This doesn't mean that you should immediately reveal the capabilities of your NPCs to the players, but think about how and when you might go about making those disclosures. If the capabilities of the NPCs aren't obvious, try to reveal them in as subtle a fashion as possible.

A couple of months after the campaign begins, for instance, the PCs might stumble across a fracas in the local marketplace. An old man and a merchant are loudly arguing over the value of a small ruby, each threatening to pummel the other. Apparently, the son of the old man bought the ruby from the merchant earlier in the day. When the son returned home, his father discovered that the gem was flawed and that his son had been fleeced. For his part, the seller insists that the ruby is exceptional and that the boy's father is near-

sighted and senile. Eventually, a patrol led by the captain of the guard comes on the scene. When he learns the nature of the dispute, the captain snatches the ruby, holds it up to the light and announces that the old man is correct. He then threatens to imprison the merchant unless he returns the boy's money, quickly ending the incident. When his fellow soldiers look to him with surprise, the captain explains that his own father is a jeweler and that he mastered some of the basic skills early in his youth. Once the PCs have witnessed this scene, they realize that they could potentially turn to the captain should they need a gem appraised in the future.

For maximum effect, this revelation should come long before the PCs might actually need the guard's services. Otherwise, it will seem like you're conveniently suggesting a course of action and doing their job for them. The trick is to make the players feel like they're clever for remembering that guard they encountered all those adventures ago.

### **3. Propel the PCs into Adventures**

As you create each of your NPCs, think about how each of them might direct, drag, or otherwise coax the players into undertaking an adventure. NPCs might possess information that is just begging to be investigated, or they might keep secrets that reveal danger or opportunity when uncovered.

There are many strategies to use NPCs as adventure springboards. One tried and true method is to give the players some reason to care about the NPC-which shouldn't be too hard with good-aligned adventurers-then place the NPC in danger. For example, any AD&D adventurers worth their salt should rush off to save a friend's recently kidnapped son, giving you a great opportunity to throw some interesting and entertaining obstacles in the way. Similarly, what if an adventurer's sister is accused of witchcraft and threatened with execution? This should

prompt the PCs to investigate, inevitably leading to a confrontation with the entity who is really responsible for the unexplained events that have panicked the townspeople.

Another classic method of using NPCs to trigger adventures is to create characters who are interested in hiring the PCs to undertake some dangerous assignment. Maybe a local merchant needs an armed escort to accompany a caravan he plans to send across the Murky Swamp, or a powerful wizard is looking for a party capable of procuring those wyvern's teeth she needs to cast an important spell. While it's easy to use this method to launch new adventures, try to employ it sparingly. Using NPCs in this fashion often feels like you are telling the players what you want them to do. This is OK every once in a while, but in general you should allow the players to feel like they've undertaken an adventure on their own initiative. That way, you'll give the players a sense of empowerment and reinforce the

idea that they are making as many contributions to the storyline as you are.

A third method that bears a mention is simply to create an NPC who is bound to become an adversary to the adventurers. If one of the PCs is a priest, introducing an important NPC priest from a rival sect is sure to result in the two characters' crossing ... er, maces. One great way to make this tactic more effective is to introduce a foe whom the players don't immediately recognize as an adversary. Generally, the more time that elapses between the introduction of the NPC and the revelation of his or her true nature, the more dramatic the end result. Imagine the shock when the players discover that the kindly innkeeper they met fifteen or twenty adventures ago is actually the vampire responsible for the strange killings that plagued the campaign world over the last two years.

## 4. Create Atmosphere

Finally, NPCs are a great way to lend the game a touch of sorely needed atmosphere when necessary. You might think about creating an appropriately goofy NPCs who can visit and liven things up when necessary or an appropriately somber NPC who can bring the players back down to earth when they are getting too silly. While these sorts of NPCs can be quite useful, it's important that you don't overuse them. Try to confine their appearances to no more than once per adventure to guarantee that they don't hog too much of the floor and draw attention away from the players' characters.

On a related note, it's not a bad idea to create an important "stereotypical" representative of each of the most important social and political factions in your campaign world. Making sure that the players frequently cross paths with these characters is a great way to help the players learn to understand these various groups and the roles



they play in the setting. In other words, if the elves of your world are generally proud and arrogant, you might introduce a particularly arrogant elf whom the adventurers often encounter. This will give them a better idea of what to expect from other elves and help them recognize and appreciate the unusual elves who run counter to the stereotype.

## **Tarrin and Jarrak**

To illustrate some of these principles in action, let's return to the two sample NPCs from last month's installment: Tarrin the guard captain and Jarrak the wizard. Tarrin is Richard's second-in-command of the Ironoak stronghold and the captain of all the guards stationed there. Years ago, he lost his left hand to the curse of an evil cult leader. Jarrak is a powerful and mysterious wizard who once devised a potent spell that saved the stronghold from devastation. Jarrak has never shared the secret of this spell.

Tarrin is probably best used to 2) Provide the Players with Tactical Options, and 3) Propel the PCs into Adventure. Since the military might of Ironoak is essentially under his control, the PCs can earn the option of seeking assistance from his troops whenever a crisis arises. Of course, you can't allow Tarrin to fight the PCs' battles for them; his assistance should definitely come at an appropriate price and on Tarrin's own terms. If the PCs have nowhere else to turn, however, he can be a very powerful ally. As for propelling the PCs into adventures, you can make special plans for Tarrin's missing hand, as hinted in the last installment. Eventually, the cult that left its curse on Tarrin (and the hand itself) will reappear and threaten Ironoak, dragging the PCs into the conflict.

For his part, Jarrak is best used to 1) Provide the Players with Exposition and 3) Propel the PCs into Adventure. That Jarrak is a wise and formidable wizard with his own mysterious agenda is already established. He certainly has

access to important myths, legends, and other facts that could benefit the PCs on their journeys, and the fact that he occasionally emerges to share this knowledge with the PCs won't seem unusual. They're likely to presume that he is assisting them for his own mysterious purposes. Eventually, Jarrak might propel the player characters into adventure by asking them to duplicate his feat of saving Ironoak from the same marauders who attacked it decades ago, as he is now too old to combat the fiends on his own. In fact, at the climax of this adventure, one or more of the PCs might even earn the opportunity to convince Jarrak to share the secret of his powerful spell.

Next month, we'll look at the details you should create to flesh out an NPC, and we'll concoct some examples from the world of Aris.

# 9

## The Anatomy of an NPC

*From Dragon Magazine 263*

Last month, we looked at several interesting and effective roles that NPCs are likely to play in your campaign. Here are the remaining steps to preparing an NPC for play.

A fully developed NPC consists of four things: game information, a description, one or two memorable character traits , and (possibly) a secret. Before you determine any of these things, think about the specific role or roles the NPC is likely to play in the campaign. As noted last month, your choice of roles is bound to influence all the other facets of the character.

# 1. Game Information

Game information consists of statistics, equipment lists, spell assortments, and other information you need to handle the character in play. It is not necessary to fill out a full-blown character sheet for each of your NPCs. Don't forget the First Rule of Dungeoncraft! Concentrate your efforts on creating only the information that's likely to become relevant during play.

In general, this means that there's no reason to figure out the king's Dexterity score. The PCs are unlikely to fight the king himself, and it's therefore unlikely that his Dexterity score will ever become an issue. In fact, on the subject of NPC ability scores, it's probably a good time to introduce you to the Third Rule of Dungeoncraft.

## **The Third Rule of Dungeoncraft:**

Whenever you have no idea what the

probability of success should be for a particular situation, consider it 50%.

In other words, suppose a metal portcullis is slowly descending in a dungeon. One of the PCs unexpectedly slides a wooden chair beneath the portcullis, hoping to delay the falling gate long enough so the entire party can crawl beneath it. What's the chance the chair can hold the portcullis long enough for the party to pass? Well gee, I don't really know much about the structural integrity of wood vs. heavy metals so it's, um ... 50%. This is certainly inexact, but it's simple, it keeps the game moving, and it's usually plausible enough to pass muster.

How is this rule relevant to NPC attributes? Some quick math produces a nice corollary to the Third Rule. Ability scores are often used to conduct ability checks, and a character with a score of 10 has a 50% chance to pass such a check. This means that if you need an ability score for an NPC and haven't already determined it, the Third

Rule of Dungeoncraft suggests that you use a score of 10.

This rule jibes nicely with what the Player's Handbook has to say about ability scores ("Ability Scores and What They Mean" in Chapter One)--a score of 10 is an average value for the typical inhabitant of an AD&D campaign world. This means that when you assign ability scores to your NPCs, you should only bother thinking about and listing his or her exceptional scores--those substantially less than or greater than ten (say, those scores less than 8 or greater than 12).

During play, if a score you haven't created becomes relevant, simply presume it's 10, and move on. If you take this advice, you suddenly have far fewer numbers to create and record. This may not save a lot of effort right now, but after your campaign grows and you have several dozen NPCs in play, you'll recognize the benefit. You'll also notice that you can dispense with

determining ability scores altogether for a wide range of characters who are unlikely to have any extraordinary abilities.

Thus, the first step in creating ability scores for any NPC is to decide which of the six abilities is likely to be extraordinarily high or low. You can then go through these abilities one by one and assign the appropriate value. Note that it's usually not a good idea to generate NPC ability scores randomly. You should decide the NPC's role in the campaign first, then assign the values you think are appropriate. This approach makes it easier to create NPCs who feel like true characters rather than random piles of numbers.

Once you've created the NPC's relevant ability scores, you can quickly decide on a character class, level, alignment, and hit point total. Remember that the inhabitants of your campaign who are not extraordinary adventurers or their equal should probably be 0-level, with few hit points. At this point, it's a good idea to make sure



that your choices of class and hit points make sense with the character's various ability scores and level.

For equipment and spell lists, again focus your attention on the extraordinary. List only those special or magical items the character carries and those few spells he or she uses most often. During play, you can improvise additional items and spells as necessary.

The idea of improvising spells makes some DMs nervous. Since the players must select their spells before play begins, they feel it's unfair to allow NPCs to cast spells at will. While you should definitely make sure that none of your NPCs is casting more spells than his or her level permits, don't worry about figuring out which spells each NPC has memorized; it's just too much work.

One of your responsibilities as DM is to make sure that you don't take advantage of the fact that you are making up the NPC spell lists as you go

along. Your NPCs should definitely not have access to the perfect spell under all circumstances. If you ever come across a situation in which you can't decide whether or not the NPC would have thought to memorize a specific spell, you can always roll for it. The chance the NPC has access to the spell is, um ... 50%.

Note: The Third Rule of Dungeoncraft is a useful tool for keeping the game moving, not a replacement for your own good judgment and knowledge of the rules. Use it wisely!

## **2. Description**

This entry is pretty self-explanatory. You should invent an appropriate physical description for each NPC. Don't strive for anything too elaborate; just a few sentences will do. Again, try to concentrate on the unusual. Create just one or two interesting physical features for each of your NPCs, and stress them. One NPC might be

unusually tall, another might have an unbelievably long beard, and a third might have an elaborate facial tattoo. Of course, nothing says that these distinguishing characteristics must stem from the character's anatomy. An unusual wardrobe, particularly interesting equipment, or an unusual demeanor all do nicely as well.

The real purpose of your NPC descriptions is twofold: to provide the players with details that spark their imaginations, and to serve as simple reminders that help the players distinguish the NPCs from each other.

At the start of a new campaign, you can expect your players to confuse Ragnar with Hroth and Skjold. The moment they're reminded that Hroth is the old guy with the long white beard and Skjold is the fair-haired man with the lute, though, they'll get back on the proper page. Therefore, to get the most mileage from your descriptions, remind the players of NPC descriptions the first several times they are

encountered. Try to keep these reminders as subtle as possible. "You see Ragnar, the extremely tall warrior, enter the inn" is more cumbersome than "You see Ragnar enter, ducking low to clear the threshold." If you have access to a large library of AD&D game products or Dragon Magazine back issues, try to find an appropriate illustration to represent each of your major NPCs. (The "PC Portraits" column in Dragon Magazine is perfect for this task.) Not only does this let you dispense with most descriptions altogether, but pictures tend to work even better than the most effective text. Each time the players meet the NPC in question, just flash the picture. If you go this route, try to photocopy the illustrations and cut away any text and graphics that surround them so the players aren't distracted.

### 3. Memorable Personality Traits

To create an effective NPC, you must also know something about his or her personality and general demeanor. Many beginning roleplayers mistakenly believe they should strive to create deep, complex characters and prepare for each game session with all the gusto of Robert DeNiro readying a new role. You're much better off setting more modest goals for yourself and allowing your NPCs to develop slowly over time. As with the descriptions, your best bet is to concentrate on creating one or two unusual behaviors, tendencies, or idiosyncrasies for each NPC. By focusing on just these few things, you'll give yourself time to get a handle on the character and you'll also create another way for the players to distinguish between NPCs and remember which is which.

When creating these personality traits, confine yourself to simple behaviors that are clearly

demonstrable during play. "Hrothgar has a deep-seated hatred of his mother" is not a useful trait, because there is no way to demonstrate it to the players short of pausing every so often for Hrothgar to say, "You know, I really have a deep-seated hatred of my mother." "Hrothgar is hard of hearing and asks everyone to repeat everything they say," "Hrothgar is clumsy and bumbles every task he is given," or "Hrothgar is a silent loner who almost never says a word" are all much more appropriate. Each of these characteristics can be easily roleplayed in a wide variety of situations. Note that a valid and useful personality trait needn't necessarily say anything obvious about a character's personality at all. A catch phrase (Homer Simpson's trademark "D'Oh!"), a gesture, or a funny voice are all workable. Once you start to use this method, you'll learn that the traits lead to the character's personality almost by magic.

## 4. Secret

The Second Rule of Dungeoncraft tells us that each time we invent a significant detail about the campaign, we should also invent at least one secret pertaining to that detail. Many NPCs are important enough to qualify for this treatment themselves. As a general rule, any NPCs the players are likely to encounter consistently for a few months of game time or more deserve their own secrets. Valid exceptions might be NPCs who tend to remain completely in the background, such as innkeepers, merchants, and other service people.

Yes, this means that your campaign is bound to resemble a soap opera, with never-ending twists, turns, and unexpected revelations. This is a good thing. Many people become addicted to soap operas for a reason--the desire to uncover the next secret or unravel the next plot twist is a powerful urge. By giving your players plenty of mysteries,

you'll keep them interested in the campaign and coming back for more.

We've already discussed strategies for creating secrets elsewhere (Chapter 2), but there are a few approaches that work particularly well when it comes to NPCs. Unexpected relationships ("Luke, I am your father!"), shady pasts, and hidden motivations all work well. If you're having a hard time creating a specific secret for a particular NPC, you can look back to the various roles I outlined last issue for a clue. An NPC designed to provide the players with exposition probably knows a secret about the campaign world, while an NPC designed to provide the players with a service might have access to some secret item or power that the players will eventually earn an opportunity to win for themselves.

Once you create the various secrets related to your NPCs, don't forget to write them on index cards and add them to your "deck of secrets" (see



Dragon Magazine #246). Later, as you flesh out the campaign world, these cards will become a useful resource.

## **Tarrin and Jarrak**

To refresh your memory, Tarrin is the second-in-command of the Ironoak stronghold and the captain of the guards stationed there. Years ago, he lost his left hand to the curse of an evil cult leader. Jarrak is a powerful and mysterious wizard who once devised a potent spell that saved the stronghold from devastation. So far, Jarrak has never shared the secret of this spell.

Tarrin is obviously a skilled warrior, so he probably has a high Strength and Constitution. Since I picture him as a charismatic leader and a trusted advisor of Richard, I'll give him abnormally high scores in Wisdom and Charisma as well. A 6th-level fighter with 40 hit points seems just about right. Tarrin carries a broadsword and wears studded leather armor.

Tarrin's missing left hand already provides a big chunk of his description. I've further decided that he's an older man with a pencil-thin mustache who always wears a perfectly immaculate uniform.

For his first memorable trait, I've decided that Tarrin inevitably lapses into war stories culled from the many campaigns in which he served. For a second, it might be fun if he interrupts all of his long speeches to bark orders to his men.

Tarrin's secret pertains to his severed hand and was discussed last issue.

- Tarrin: AC 6 (Studded leather); F6; hp 40; NG; Str 15, Con 14, Wis 14, Cha 14.
- Description: Missing left hand; older man with a pencil-thin mustache.
- Memorable Personality Traits: Tells war stories, constantly barks orders to his men.

- Secret: Missing hand is "alive" and seeking him out.

Jarrak, on the other hand, is a powerful wizard. Obviously he has a high Intelligence, and I think it's appropriate to give him high scores in Wisdom and Charisma as well. Jarrak is a 14th-level wizard. He wears bracers of defense AC 2 and carries a staff of the magi. He is particularly fond of the teleport spell and various illusions.

As for a description, Jarrak is a thin, bony man who wears a flowing black robe and a skullcap crafted from raven feathers. His eyes are completely black, with no irises. Jarrak speaks only when spoken to, and only when he can answer a direct question with a question of his own. This should give him a spooky, otherworldly feel. For a second trait, he tends to come and go at unexpected times without warning.

Jarrak's secret is the mysterious spell he crafted several years ago to save Ironoak.

- Jarrak: CG; AC 2 (bracers); W 14; hp 38; Int 18, Wis 18, Cha 15.
- Description: Extremely thin, ageless man in black robe and skullcap; black eyes.
- Memorable Personality Trait: Speaks only when spoken to and only in questions; comes and goes unexpectedly in a mysterious fashion.
- Secret: Powerful spell known only to him.

As you finish each of your NPCs, summarize all of the relevant information on an index card.

Later, this will provide you with easy means for filing away and keeping track of the dozens of characters you'll create as your campaign grows.

Next month we'll start to map the wilderness the players are likely to explore throughout the first few months of the campaign.

# 10

## Mapping the Wilderness

*From Dragon Magazine 264*

For you latecomers, "Dungeoncraft" is a column devoted to exploring the fine art of Dungeon Mastering. Over the past nine installments, we've examined the process of developing an AD&D campaign from scratch. So far, we've constructed the basic framework of a fantasy world, mapped a home base, and built some interesting NPCs. Along the way, we've gathered a series of special guidelines that form the cornerstones of good dungeoncraft.

This month, let's begin mapping the outdoor environment for the PCs to explore over the first three or four months of play. Our goal is to create an interesting, expansive space that gives the PCs

plenty to do without straying too far from the base of operations (from Chapters 6-7).

Before putting pen to paper, we have some thinking to do. First on our agenda is some careful consideration of the important issue of scale. How much area should this map cover? Ten miles? Fifty miles? Five hundred? Before answering that question, consider these goals:

## **1. Start With the Familiar**

This first outdoor map should detail the chunk of the gameworld that is intimately familiar to the player characters when the campaign begins. In other words, most buildings, locales, or towns known to the player characters or visited by the PCs prior to the beginning of play should be depicted on this map. Such a map should go a long way toward helping you answer questions about these locales during play. Achieving this goal probably seems like a tall order. After all, if any of you were to make a map depicting all the

places you've visited, it might span several hundred (or even several thousand) miles. In the Middle Ages, though, it was common for the average citizen to spend the whole of his or her life within 20 miles of home. The only forms of relatively fast transportation that existed at the time (horses and sailing ships) were well beyond the means of most citizens.

## **2. Include the Unknown**

The AD&D game is about exploration. As a consequence, this first map should cover plenty of unfamiliar territory for the PCs to explore. As a general rule, the familiar territory should occupy no more than 25% of this first map. The PCs should have only a vague idea as to what lies in the remaining 75%.



### **3. Plan Ahead for Adventures**

Your first outdoor map should house enough interesting details to keep the players occupied for several months of play. You'll soon learn that drawing one of these maps is a lot of work, and since you'll have plenty of other tasks to occupy your time as your campaign gets off the ground, you'll want to make sure that you won't have to draw another one for some time. In practice, this means that you should sprinkle your map with interesting locations and possible adventure sites. These sites should be placed far enough apart that it takes the PCs some time to find and explore them all.

### **Combining the Three Goals**

Together, these three guidelines suggest that the first map should cover a radius of approximately 60 miles. This means that it takes the adventurers about three days to cross your entire map location on horseback and approximately a week to cross

it on foot. Most of your locations lie two or three full days of travel apart, which should work out just about right. At this distance, you can focus on the journeys that take place between the various adventures as much or as little as you like, allowing you to control the pace of the campaign. Across two days of travel, it's equally plausible that the players experience several encounters en route or none at all.

If we presume that our map fills a half sheet of paper and covers a roughly circular area with a radius of 60 miles, its scale works out to about 15 miles per inch. This scale offers plenty of space to depict towns, roads, and other relevant features on the map.

Now that we've decided upon a scale, let's look at the individual characteristics of a good small-area map.

## Boundaries

One of our goals, remember, is to keep the adventurers more or less confined to this first map for several months. As a consequence, we should think about how to surround the fringes of the map with natural barriers or other obstacles that make it a challenge to leave the area. We must be careful here; we don't want the players to feel like they're imprisoned. Our boundaries should be as subtle and formidable as possible.

Some of our options are obvious: impassable mountains, deep seas, and thick forests; but there are plenty of other, more creative possibilities. Fear can serve as an excellent boundary. Suppose that the only trail leading off the map to the east is known to cross a long-abandoned cemetery that is home to hordes of undead. Or what if the lands that lie just beyond one edge of the map are controlled by an enemy state known to imprison trespassers?

Lack of amenities and motivation are other strong possibilities. Suppose there are no obvious sources of fresh water for several days' travel in one direction. To cross this barrier, the players must either locate hidden water sources or acquire the resources necessary to outfit an expedition large enough to carry several weeks' worth of water. Many game months are likely to pass before the players are in a position to explore either possibility. Similarly, you can often prevent the players from traveling in a given direction simply by giving them a strong reason to believe that nothing of interest lies in that direction. Why, for instance, would the PCs venture out into the middle of a vast desert said to be devoid of life? Of course, you can always change their beliefs later, when you're ready for them to move on. Perhaps they learn there is a hidden city in the middle of the desert that appears only at sunrise and sunset each day.

In the AD&D game, you can even call upon supernatural or otherworldly means of keeping

your players in check. Perhaps a strange caustic mist permeates one border of your map and wreaks havoc upon anyone who ventures inside. No one knows the origin of the mysterious mist or what lies beyond it. (Sounds like a great opportunity for a future adventure.)

Alternatively, in a more whimsical fantasy world, perhaps your starting map consists of a small valley that rests beneath a ring of tall, sheer cliffs. The only way out of the valley is to pay an enormous giant 1,000 gold pieces to lift you up and over the rim. It should take some time before the PCs accumulate enough wealth to get the whole party out.

Of course, the best strategy is to erect a series of boundaries that employ a combination of all these methods. In the world of Aris, high, forested mountains, nearly impassable without the aid of a skilled guide, close off a couple of flanks. Sparsely populated forests seal off another border. Until they can obtain the appropriate magic

(create food and water spells, for instance) or secure the financing necessary to mount a large expedition, PCs won't be able to carry enough supplies to go too far in this direction. Yet another approach is sealed off by a series of formidable humanoid strongholds. It will be quite some time before the PCs are mighty enough to fight their way past these encampments. The final approach is bordered by the "wandering forest" first described in Chapter 2. This forest is secretly populated by a large tribe of treants who continuously move from place to place, shifting the location of the trails that cut through their domain. Most travelers who enter these woods become hopelessly lost.

## **Wilderness and Non-Wilderness Areas**

In most AD&D campaigns, the players spend the bulk of their time on just two activities: adventuring and planning. You should

accommodate them by making sure there is terrain appropriate to both activities on your area map. In essence, this means that you should make sure that your area map contains both tame, civilized areas and wild, unsettled areas. The former territory makes an ideal retreat during the planning phases of the campaign. By adding it to your map, you guarantee that the players have a haven where they can feel safe. The wilderness areas, on the other hand, give the players something to explore and provide a nice venue for their daring exploits.

Perhaps the most important reason to include both types of terrain on your area map, however, is to facilitate adventuring. Later, when you begin to devise adventures, you'll find that some of your adventure concepts require a wild setting, while others require a civilized setting. Exploring an undiscovered ancient ruin and seeking the lair of a fearsome monster are both good examples of the former. Helping a merchant outwit his crooked rival and hunting down a vampire

terrorizing local barmaids are good illustrations of the latter. Giving yourself the flexibility necessary to run a wide variety of adventures in the area covered by this first map makes it a lot easier to keep the players comfortably confined to this area for as long as possible.

Note that these civilized and wilderness areas don't necessarily equate to the known and unknown areas mentioned earlier. You can certainly include civilized areas that are unfamiliar to the PCs on your initial map, just as you can include wilderness areas they know well.

The civilized areas on the Aris campaign map consist of the Ironoak stronghold, its immediate surroundings, and the area surrounding a small town located about two days' travel from Ironoak. Although much of the intervening land is wilderness, at least a couple of the PCs have grown up in the area and are familiar with this terrain.



## Variety

Adventuring over the same ground can grow stale fast. Try to depict a wide variety of terrain types on your initial area map. This gives you a lot of options when deciding upon where to set your adventures, as well as the opportunity to throw a variety of challenges at the players as the campaign progresses. Maybe a mountain climbing adventure would be fun, or an adventure in which the players must cross a great sea or a burning desert. Most importantly, a wide variety of terrain types in your initial starting area allows you to make use of a wide variety of monsters. The PCs aren't likely to encounter a hill giant when there aren't any hills within a hundred miles.

Of course, this doesn't mean your terrain placement doesn't have to make sense. A tropical jungle just a few miles away from a desert isn't plausible. Try to observe the basic rules of geography. For example, mountains are usually

surrounded by foothills, and dense forests are usually found along the coast or near a major river.

Since the Aris campaign is set on a forest world, variety is a bit of a challenge. We can solve this problem by varying the terrain that lies beneath the forests (forested hills, forested mountains, arctic forests, and so on), the types of trees that comprise the forests and the density of the forest clusters. We'll also invent some exotic tree types to provide the players with new and unexpected terrain to explore: trees that secrete poison from their leaves, trees covered with dangerous thorns, and forests that grow a canopy so thick it blocks all sunlight from overhead.

Next month, we'll continue to review the key features of a good local map and address strategies for drawing the map itself.

# 11

## Wilderness Features

*From Dragon Magazine 265*

In this month's installment, we continue the discussion of wilderness maps begun last issue. Then we'll sketch out a wilderness map, depicting the areas the players will explore over the first few months of the campaign.

Last month, we left off by identifying the characteristics of a good, useful local wilderness map. This time, we'll look at four more important elements to consider when constructing a good local area map. Before continuing, however, remember the first three steps described last issue:

- Start With the Familiar

- Include the Unknown
- Plan Ahead for Adventures

## **4. Integration of the Local Economy**

Presumably, the citizens of your make-believe cities and villages must somehow find food, clothing, and shelter. This means they must have direct access to these necessities or access to skills or resources they can trade for the necessities. Obviously, the manner in which you solve this problem can and should have a tremendous impact on your area map.

Because food transportation and preservation technology is relatively unsophisticated in the typical AD&D world, most populations should have direct access to a food source capable of supplying at least half the food needed to sustain the population-and usually quite a bit more than

that. Food might be secured by hunting, herding, foraging (harvesting wild nuts, berries and fruit), or agriculture. Hunting obviously implies that plenty of wild game lives in the area. Herding implies that there are ample and convenient grazing lands somewhere on the map. Agriculture implies the presence of farmlands and water sources. Once you've figured out where the food comes from, don't forget to give some thought to how it is distributed. Do the villagers feed upon grain grown by farmers who live in the fertile valley on the village's outskirts? If so, there is probably a trail leading from the village into the valley and one or two checkpoints along that trail to provide protection.

Anything the population needs and can't supply for itself (additional food, building materials, goods) must be secured through trade. Think about what it is that your local population typically offers in exchange for these necessities. Do your villagers work a mine in the area and trade ores for the other goods they need to

survive? Do the villagers produce excess food they can trade? Are the villagers skilled craftsmen who can trade their services? If your society relies upon trade for a number of the necessities, the placement of trade routes on your area map is obviously very important.

While answering these questions can give you important insights into how to construct your area map, at this stage you don't want to spend a lot of time devising a complex treatise on the local economy. Don't forget the First Rule of Dungeoncraft! Your goal is to generate some ideas for your local area map and a few scant details you can use to help explain the area to the players. You can work out all the specific whys and wherefores of the economy later, if and when they become relevant.

The Ironoak area map depicts only two civilized populated areas: the Ironoak stronghold itself and a small town located a couple days' travel from the stronghold. The stronghold's economy is

somewhat unusual in that the fort and many of its inhabitants (the various soldiers and such) are entirely funded and supported by the nearby kingdom of Umbria. Ironoak plays an important role in Umbria's defense and the kingdom dispatches regular caravans to the stronghold to guarantee that the soldiers have everything they need. Basically, the soldiers are trading a service (their skill at arms) for all their necessities.

Ironoak is also home to a number of small shops and businesses that cater to the many merchants and travelers who stop at the stronghold on their way to the frontier. Most of the food consumed in Ironoak consists of imported grain and salted meats, though the local innkeepers supplement their menus with live game from the surrounding forests. All of these things suggest that important, well-defended trade routes lead in and out of the stronghold.

As for the nearby town, the bulk of its inhabitants trade a combination of resources and services. The town, called "Redheath," is known

throughout all of Umbria as home to the finest armorers, weaponsmiths and blacksmiths in the kingdom. It's built upon a series of flat, stony plateaus in the midst of the great forest. At the base of these plateaus lies the entrance to a rich iron mine. Hundreds of travelers, adventurers and merchants from all over Umbria visit Redheath each year with new challenges for its highly skilled laborers. Those inhabitants of the town who are not involved in the smithing or mining operate businesses that cater to these visitors.

One peculiar feature of the Ironoak map is the complete absence of farmland. Those of you who have followed this column over the past year might remember that the Aris campaign is set on a dense forest world. Lands well suited to cultivation are scarce, forcing most of the inhabitants of the world to rely upon imported foodstuffs. This makes the supply lines between settlements particularly important. Wars on Aris are usually won by blocking the enemy's supply routes and cutting off their access to food.



## 5. Monster Lairs

It's difficult to imagine an AD&D game world that isn't populated by a wide variety of monsters. Obviously, all of those monsters have to live somewhere. The first thing to understand about placing monster lairs on your area map is that it isn't necessary to determine every single monster that lives on the map before beginning play; in fact, it's a bad idea. Later, as the campaign progresses, you'll have all sorts of ideas for adventures, some of which may depend upon the presence of specific monsters. Unless you leave your map somewhat vague, giving yourself the ability to introduce new monsters in previously unexplored areas when necessary, you'll find it difficult to run these adventures. For now, you should concentrate on placing just a few, major monster lairs in the area. The general presence of most of these monsters is probably known to many of the region's inhabitants, though the specific locations of the lairs and the exact nature of the creatures in question may well be a

mystery. In other words, if an owlbear lives in the vicinity, the locals might be aware of a terrible beast that lives in the woods and a rash of disappearances attributed to the beast, but they probably don't know exactly where the beast lives or what sort of beast they're dealing with.

For a map the size we've been discussing, try to identify three to five major monster lairs. Since this area is intended to serve as the starting point for your campaign, most of the monsters you select should have seven or fewer Hit Dice, although it's okay to toss in one or two more powerful monsters, as long as they're fairly isolated from most of the area's inhabitants. You should definitely select these monsters before you start drawing the map. That way, you can make sure that each creature's special terrain needs are reflected in your drawing.

As you select the monsters, take a few moments to think about the role each might play in the campaign and what the local inhabitants know

about the creature. Is the monster a predator who sometimes preys upon the local population? A highly intelligent creature that is carrying out some sort of fiendish plot? An ally to a local noble or government? Also, don't forget that not all monsters are evil. You might want to place at least one good monster in your campaign area to assist the players in their adventures. Once you come up with a few details about each of your major monsters, if one or more of them appear to be particularly important to your campaign environment, don't forget the Second Rule of Dungeoncraft. Each particularly important creature deserves its own secret.

When it comes time to place the lairs on your map, take advantage of the opportunity to plot as much useful information about the creature as possible. If the creature is a predator, for instance, you might draw a dotted circle around its lair indicating the rough boundaries of its hunting ground. If the creature regularly travels or migrates, indicate its route(s) on the map. The

real purpose of placing these lairs on the map in the first place is to provide you with inspiration for creating events and situations the players might encounter on their travels. Adding secondary details like these helps to accomplish that mission.

Suppose, for instance, that the adventurers are camped out at night, and that you've just rolled a random encounter. If you glance at your map and notice that the party has crossed into the hunting grounds of the owlbear you placed earlier. You now have all sorts of opportunities to spice up this encounter. Perhaps the players encounter the owlbear itself and realize after hearing its distinctive growl that they must be facing the terrible beast rumored to be hunting unlucky travelers from the nearby forest. Alternately, the players might encounter a merchant who was just chased off the trail by the owlbear, or a young man who managed to escape from the owlbear's lair and begs the players to return with him to

save his sister, who is still in the beast's ghastly clutches.

Before deciding where to place your monster lairs, choose the monsters by browsing the Monstrous Manual tome. Depending on the nature of your campaign world, you might find different monsters more appropriate. For the Aris campaign, several choices appear in the "Monster Lairs of Ironoak" sidebar. Taking a look at the list, it looks like the kenku and the dryads are each worthy of a secret as per the Second Rule of Dungeoncraft. Let's say that the kenku who live near Ironoak are the only such creatures on Aris. They were hatched from jeweled eggs that a high-level thief once stole from the nest of a powerful owl spirit that lived on the Astral Plane. The priest who hatched the original kenku noticed that the "gems" stolen by the thief were actually eggs. Due to his respect for the sanctity of life in all its forms, he bought the eggs and hatched them. To make matters more interesting, the owl spirit originally laid the eggs to repay a debt to a

powerful extradimensional entity. She meant to hatch the eggs, birthing the kenku as a race of servitors who could serve as the entity's heralds. Since the eggs were stolen before they hatched, though, she was forced to default on her debt. Now, almost two hundred years later, she still languishes in a gilded cage in the entity's palace. The kenku would give a great deal to learn the story of their birth, and once they learn, they will almost certainly mount an expedition to rescue their creator.

As for the dryads, an incredibly valuable diamond necklace was stolen from a noblewoman passing through Ironoak roughly two months before the campaign begins. When the noblewoman finally departed, she left the captain of her personal bodyguard at the stronghold to continue the effort to locate the thief and return her property. Unknown to everyone, the necklace was stolen by one of Ironoak's officers, a personal assistant to Tarrin (see Chapter 7). While out wandering the woods around the stronghold, the officer

encountered one of the dryads and succumbed to her charm spell. He later stole the necklace and returned to present it to the dryad as a love offering. Now, months later, he continues to visit the dryad and uses whatever influence he has to stall the bodyguard's investigation. Ultimately, the players should stumble across this little mystery and investigate.

## **6. Hard-to-Reach Areas**

A good map should tease the players and present them with hints of obvious challenges. You should strive to place two or three locations on your area map that are particularly hard to reach, preferably beyond the capabilities of the player characters as the campaign begins. Later, you can drop interesting hints about what the players might find in these areas, increasing the temptation to explore them. Over time, reaching the areas is likely to become a miniature puzzle that the players devote a lot of effort to solving,

making sure they remain within the confines of this first map for as long as possible. The key is to make sure the players are not disappointed once they manage to get past the obstacles you put in their path. Fortunately, you'll have a long time to think about what might await them.

There's no reason to figure out exactly what lies in your hard-to-reach areas just yet. Wait until the players are getting close to finally penetrating them.

There are many strategies you can employ to make an area hard to reach. An obvious possibility is to surround the locale with dangers that are beyond the adventurers' means to overcome. For instance, you might place a sacred canyon said to house the entrance to an ancient ruined city on your area map. The entrance to the canyon is guarded by two iron golems left by the former inhabitants of the ruined city to protect their secrets. Obviously, there's no way a party of 1st-level characters can deal with the golems, so it will take the players several months to



penetrate the mystery. During this time, they'll have fun looking for alternate means of entering the canyon, exploring various magical means of sneaking past the golems and so forth, all while tackling other adventures they've stumbled across. Other means you can use to create hard to reach areas include: formidable terrain (unclimbable mountains), mazelike trails and even more "fantastic" barriers (such as mountain passes that open only when the correct password is spoken), or cities that magically appear only once every decade.

A couple of possibilities for hard to reach areas around Ironoak naturally suggest themselves. In an earlier installment, we considered a series of "wandering paths" that surround Ironoak (see Chapter 10). Many of the trees surrounding the paths are actually treants. As outsiders enter their wood, the treants move, subtly shifting the paths and leaving the outsiders hopelessly lost. Somewhere, in the middle of this wood, lies something incredible. To reach it, the players

must learn that the treants exist and figure out how to deal with them. A second hard-to-reach area is suggested by the spider lair mentioned earlier in this column. Imagine a huge grove blanketed in thick, giant spider webs coated with sticky tree resin. Together these webs form a vast maze that's home to hundreds of giant spiders and other insects. Over time, we can spread some rumors about a fantastic treasure said to be lost somewhere in the webs. Although tackling so many giant spiders is well beyond the players means when the campaign begins, eventually they'll become powerful enough to make their way through the webs to uncover their secrets.

## **7. Clue Pointing to a Secret**

Thanks to the Second Rule of Dungeoncraft you should already know lots of secrets about your game world. Secrets are useless, though, without the clues the players need to uncover them.

Before you finish thinking about your area map,

pull out the "deck of secrets" you should be keeping (see Chapter 5) and draw a card. Try to create a clue pointing to this secret and place it somewhere on your area map. If you're feeling particularly confident or have a particularly large deck, go ahead and pull two cards and try to cover them both.

The secret I've drawn is Tarrin's Wandering Hand (see Chapter 7). As you might recall, Tarrin, the captain of Ironoak's guard, cut off his own hand years ago to escape the effects of a hideous curse. Unknown to Tarrin, though, the hand is now a living being and has been slowly "crawling" its way across the countryside for several years, looking for him. An obvious clue I can plant on the map pointing toward this secret is the location where the amputation took place. Somewhere out in the woods, in a relatively civilized area, lies the bloodied rock upon which Tarrin did the deed.

With all this planning out of the way, we're finally ready to draw the map itself. Before you proceed

you might want to re-read the general tips for drawing maps presented in Chapter 8.

# 12

## Challenging the Players

*From Dragon Magazine 266*

In our first year together, we've devised campaign hooks, governments, and religions. We've drawn stronghold maps and wilderness maps. We've created NPCs and sprinkled a few secrets across our fledgling game worlds. With this behind us, we're finally ready to turn our attention to the meat that lies at the heart of any compelling AD&D campaign-adventures!

In this installment and the next, we'll examine some general guidelines that should help you create the sort of fun, engrossing adventures that your players will recount to bemused Gen Con Game Fair acquaintances for many years to come. In the installments that follow, we'll put these

guidelines to work and create an actual adventure, paying particular attention to how the most important decisions are made.

Good, compelling adventures are so important to the AD&D game that they demand a...

### **Fourth Rule of Dungeoncraft:**

Always challenge both the players and their characters.

This rule means that a good adventure works on two levels. On the first, it poses a challenge to the players-it makes them think carefully and causes them to wonder for just a brief moment whether they are truly up to the task of overcoming its many obstacles. Once complete, great adventures provide the players with the same satisfaction they might receive upon finally completing a challenging level of a video game. This sense of satisfaction arises from the players' perception that it was their own skillful maneuvering and decision-making that led to success, not mere

random luck or charity on your part. Balancing adventures so they challenge the players without overcomplicating the situation or causing confusion is one of the trickiest parts of adventure design.

On the second level, good adventures always provide a challenge for the players' characters. In general, this means that you give the heroes opportunities to use their powers, proficiencies, and abilities. After all, it's no fun owning a vorpal blade if you never get to use it. For many players, part of the attraction of the AD&D game is that it allows them to play the roles of brave adventurers who can accomplish almost superhuman feats. To satisfy these players, you must give them a chance to flex their characters' muscles. In much the same way that you strive to balance the adventures to the players' capabilities, you must also balance the adventures to the capabilities of their characters. If the feats of derring-do you ask them to attempt are too easy-say, a high-level party pitted against an inconsequential goblin

tribe-they'll soon become bored. On the other hand, if the obstacles you place in their path are obviously well beyond the PCs' capabilities, the players will soon become frustrated. Fortunately, this part isn't as hard as it might sound. While balancing an adventure to challenge the characters isn't as simple as falling off a log, it's usually much easier to accomplish than properly testing the players.

Since it's the more difficult task, let's first consider some specific tactics to challenge the players.

## **Make the Players Make Decisions**

The best way to make sure the players remain involved in your adventure is to offer them the opportunity to make plenty of decisions.

Decision-making gives the players a sense of empowerment and reinforces the idea that their



destinies lie in their own hands. In a typical AD&D adventure, decisions can take on many forms. Is it best to enter the dungeon via the cave mouth or through the large oaken door? Should we accept the elves' offer of assistance? Is it wise to venture down to the next level of the dungeon? Or should we return to town and heal our wounds? In many ways, the heart of every good adventure is a series of options. As you create your dungeon maps and individual encounters, you should definitely keep this in mind. Strive to offer the players a number of approaches to all the most important situations likely to arise during the adventure.

## **Examples**

Suppose a band of evil cultists has captured the elven queen and taken her back to their mountain stronghold, where they hope to offer her as a sacrifice to their dark god. (And yes, I know this is an appalling cliché. Remember, this is just a simple example!) This situation leads to several

ways you can cause the players to make important decisions.

**The Road Less Traveled:** It's probably a good idea to present the players with two possible routes to reach the stronghold. The first is short but very dangerous; the second is much longer but relatively safe. During play, these two alternatives force the players to make an interesting choice. The queen might be sacrificed at any moment, so time is of the essence. But the dangers of the shorter route threaten to damage the party before they reach the stronghold, possibly ruining their chances of defeating the cultists once the PCs arrive. This conundrum is likely to provoke an interesting and lively debate among the players.

**Strength or Stealth:** Once the PCs arrive at the stronghold, you might confront them with several possible entrances. The first is a well-guarded main gate, where small mobs of hooded cultists regularly arrive and depart. The second is a

doorway located just off a parapet that lies at the top of a steep cliff. Although the main gate is quite secure, the constant traffic might give the player heroes an opportunity to waylay some passing cultists, disguise themselves in the cultists' robes, and attempt to enter the stronghold using trickery. The parapet entrance is probably the easier to negotiate. To reach it, however, the thief must pass a series of Climb Walls rolls to scale the cliff and drop a rope down to her comrades.

**The Enemy of My Enemy:** Finally, once inside the stronghold, the party might discover an imprisoned evil sorcerer who is also being held captive by the cultists. If the party frees him, the sorcerer promises to help them rescue the queen and defeat the cultists once and for all. Whether the sorcerer can be trusted is hard to determine. While he might prove quite an asset, it's also possible that he'll betray the party to pursue his own agenda. Freeing him might even endanger the party's mission.

One important point that these examples illustrate is that whenever you build a decision point into your adventure, it's important to give the players some idea of the consequences that they can expect to accompany the choices they make. In other words, asking the players to enter a dungeon through one of two seemingly identical doors isn't really offering them a choice at all. Unless they have some information upon which to base their decision, you're asking them to perform the mental equivalent of flipping a coin. When setting up your decision points, try to associate some obvious possible advantages and drawbacks with each option. As they approach those two identical doors, for instance, suppose the players hear muffled screams beyond the first door and nothing beyond the second. Now their choice suddenly becomes quite interesting. If they choose the first door, they're bound to encounter some immediate danger, but they might have an opportunity to come to the immediate aid of the screamer. If they choose the second door, they might have an opportunity to enter the dungeon

unnoticed, but they might reach the screamer too late to be of assistance.

## **Have Players Solve Puzzles**

Another way to engage the players is to confront them with puzzles or riddles. While magical tricks and traps are obvious methods for injecting such obstacles into your adventures, there are much subtler ways to accomplish the same goal. It's possible to disguise puzzles so they're not so obvious as such.

Suppose that the PCs come to the end of a dungeon corridor to find an obvious door 20 feet up the wall, but no way to reach that door. The rope ladder that normally hangs down is missing, the wall is too smooth for climbing, and there is nothing up the wall that a grappling hook might catch. Although it might not seem like it, this is actually a puzzle. The solution is to realize that the lumber and tools the players found a few rooms earlier can be used to hammer together a

makeshift ladder that allows them to reach the door. In fact, asking the players to figure out how to use the items they find in one part of the dungeon to overcome obstacles they find in another part of the same dungeon is a time-honored tactic.

Sometimes, this same technique is taken one step further, and the players are asked to take two items they found in disparate parts of the dungeon and combine them to make a third item they need to circumvent an obstacle. You could employ this variation on an earlier example by placing the lumber in one room and the tools in a second room. It's then up to the players to realize that these two items can be combined to build the ladder that will allow them to reach the elevated door.

In general, as you design an adventure, be on the lookout for opportunities to make the players draw logical conclusions or remember things they saw earlier to accomplish important goals. The

entrance to the mad cultists' sacrifice chamber might be a secret door activated by touching a specific portion of a mural painted on the wall. If the players pay attention, they should notice that this mural is identical to several they saw earlier in the stronghold in every respect save one, and it is this single incongruous detail that marks the activation point. Similarly, to navigate the stronghold's dungeons to find the queen quickly (before she is sacrificed), the players might be required to deduce that she is being held prisoner on one of the dungeon's uppermost levels. They might do so by noticing that the stairway leading down to the lower levels is covered with a thick dust and obviously hasn't been used in several weeks.

In accordance with the first guideline, you might design your puzzles so they can be solved in several different ways. This is actually easier than it sounds, since the average party of adventurers has access to an impressive collection of skills, items, and abilities. The elevated doorway, for

example, can be solved with a jump spell, a fly spell, or boots of striding and springing. If the players miss the lumber (depending upon the circumstances), they might opt to leave the dungeon to memorize the appropriate spell or hire someone capable of casting it for them.

In fact, many AD&D players are so resourceful that it is sometimes okay to build minor puzzles into your adventures that have no intended solution. Suppose, for instance, that somewhere within the first couple levels of your dungeon is a deep pool of clear water with a glowing magical sword at its bottom. The pool is too deep for any adventurer to hold his or her breath and reach the bottom. At the time you create this adventure, you don't have to have any idea how the players might retrieve the sword-maybe they'll think of something, and maybe they won't. Even if they fail, you'll at least give them something interesting to think about.



## **Give the Players Interesting Opportunities for Interaction**

One of the biggest attractions of the AD&D game is the opportunity to roleplay a heroic, well-rounded character. Many players take pride in inventing interesting personalities and enjoy the opportunity to interact with colorful NPCs. Thus, another way to keep the players engaged is to provide them with particularly interesting opportunities for roleplaying. You might, for example, call upon a PC to console the young princess in the wake of her mother's death, or you might ask another to compose a ballad capable of settling down an inn full of rowdy patrons. Generally, those scenes that are the most melodramatic or the liveliest have the best roleplaying potential.

This third tactic is all too frequently overlooked when constructing dungeon adventures. Don't forget that your monsters should have personalities. You should strive to provide the

players with opportunities to interact with your monsters, even within dungeon settings. Instead of the four fire giants pounding the heroes until they are dead, what if the giants merely subdue the heroes and then play a game of cards among themselves to decide which giant earns the right to kill the captives? Such a situation allows clever players an opportunity to talk themselves into the game somehow or convince three of the giants that the fourth is somehow cheating, possibly precipitating a timely escape. At the very least, you should give the players an opportunity to exchange words with the monsters while they are fighting. The mixture of threats and clever quips that tends to accompany most battles can be quite satisfying itself.

Join me here in 30 days, when we'll consider some specific tactics for engaging the player's characters, plus a brief list of dos and don'ts for adventure designers.

# 13

## Challenging the Characters

*From Dragon Magazine 267*

Last month, we started to explore the fine art of creating AD&D adventures and examined the Fourth Rule of Dungeoncraft: Challenge both the characters and the players.

This rule means that good adventures give the players plenty of opportunities to think and plenty of opportunities to show off their characters' abilities, spells, and magical items. Last month, we looked at some specific tactics for challenging the players. This month, let's explore similar tactics for challenging their characters.

# Challenging the Characters

The biggest attraction of the AD&D game is that it allows the players to assume the roles of bold heroes capable of performing incredible feats. One of the hooks that keeps players returning to the game table is the lure of gaining new levels and acquiring formidable spells, magical items, and capabilities. Obviously, this attraction loses its luster if the players have few opportunities to use those fantastic abilities.

In part, your job as Dungeon Master is to make sure that your adventures are full of situations that test the characters' mettle. Unlike obstacles that force the players themselves to think and make decisions, your goal this time is to design challenges that push the characters' game statistics, spells, and other capabilities to their limits. Generally, such challenges fit into one of three categories, each tailored to the specific class of abilities it tests.

# 1. Balanced Combats

The most obvious method of challenging the player characters' abilities is to test their skill in battle. Combat is a big part of the AD&D game, and properly balancing the combat is one of the DM's most important responsibilities.

Unfortunately, the only way to design a completely balanced encounter is to apply hard-won experience. Until you have this experience, try to err on the side of making the foes too easy for the characters to vanquish. It's easier to add more enemies (or beef up existing enemies) during play than it is to mysteriously remove enemies from the battlefield.

Typical adventures make use of three different types of combat encounters: romps, battles of attrition, and drag-out fights. Romps are combats in which the player characters aren't in any danger; they're designed to allow the characters to kick some butt and show off. A good example might be a small party of goblin raiders trying to

waylay a party of 6th-level adventurers. Although your ultimate intention is to push their characters' abilities to the limit, allowing them to run amok tends to increase the players' sense of satisfaction and create some good opportunities for roleplaying. Although this formula isn't completely reliable, most encounters in which the total Hit Dice of the opposition is equal to or less than one-fourth the total experience levels of all the adventurers are bound to be romps. In other words, eight orcs (1 Hit Die each, total of 8 Hit Dice) versus four 8th-level characters (total of 32 levels) is a romp.

Battles of attrition are engagements that pit the characters against slightly tougher foes. Although the characters should win these fights, the opposition might be stern enough to inflict a little damage. The idea here is to test the party's stamina. Alone, none of the battles presents a significant challenge to the heroes' abilities, but a series of these combats should start to inflict a real toll. Do the PCs have enough hit points to

withstand the onslaught? Enough healing spells? Encounters in which the total Hit Dice of the opposition is roughly half the total experience levels of the adventurers often fit best into this category.

Drag-out fights are big, climactic battles in which the players face strong opposition. Normally, a drag-out fight is a prelude to the players' receiving some great reward-obtaining valuable treasure, uncovering an important secret, or successfully completing the adventure. Drag-out fights are the hardest combats to balance. The ultimate objective is to make the opposition weak enough that the players will almost certainly win the fight, but strong enough to make the players doubt their chances. As a rule of thumb, when designing your drag-out fights, begin by selecting a group of monsters with total Hit Dice that equal approximately 75% of the total experience levels of all adventurers. Since you're facing a much thinner margin of error when designing these encounters, though, you should be especially

careful. Although the "75% Rule" might provide you with a decent starting point when setting up your drag-out fights, in the end you're going to have to trust your judgment. For now, just choose opponents that make the battle seem balanced in your eyes, and then take away one or two enemies or capabilities for good measure.

One of the keys to designing an entertaining adventure is to combine romps, battles of attrition, and drag-out fights in just the right proportion. The best adventurers establish a sort of combat "rhythm." For example, one or two romps can whet the players' appetites. These are followed by a few battles of attrition that lead to the first drag-out fight, which is then followed by a few more romps and then another drag-out fight. From here, the adventurers might face a series of battles of attrition that culminate in the big drag-out fight that serves as the adventure's climax. In effect, you're pacing your adventure in much the same way a good director paces a movie. Place romps in the areas where the



surroundings are less interesting and you'd like to speed up the action. Battles of attrition are a good way to provide the players with the feeling that they are slowly but steadily advancing toward some goal. Drag-out fights pick up the tension and get the players' hearts beating a bit faster. Although it's dangerous to make firm assumptions about the order in which the players will tackle the encounters you sprinkle in their path, you should give some thought to how you'd like your adventure to progress when you are designing the players' opposition.

## **2. Heroic Feats and Tests**

The AD&D game provides several different systems that allow the players to use their characters' unique abilities to perform heroic stunts and feats: ability checks, saving throws, and proficiency checks. These systems can be used to force the players to overcome a wide

variety of obstacles that aren't directly connected to combat.

For example, you might require the adventurers to leap across a narrow chasm (requiring a Dexterity check). Similarly, you might place an extremely valuable jewel in a room full of worthless trinkets; only a successful Appraising proficiency check allows the adventurers to make off with the real prize. For more inspiration, you should re-read the sections on ability checks, proficiency checks, and saving throws in both the Player's Handbook and the Dungeon Master Guide.

One important distinction to keep in mind as you sprinkle opportunities to perform heroic feats and tests throughout your adventure is the difference between ability checks and saving throws. Saving throws improve dramatically with experience level, while ability checks do not. Since a character's experience level is the most important indicator of that character's significance and

general aptitude, try to arrange things so that the adventure's most critical heroic feats are resolved by saving throws. As an example, suppose you've decided that, to reach the leader of the evil cult and rescue the princess, the heroes must first make their way through the Caverns of Despair—a magical labyrinth that saps their will to fight. Only heroes with the strongest willpower can hope to negotiate the caverns successfully and reach their quarry. Since Wisdom is a measure of personal willpower, it might seem like a good idea to require each adventurer to make a successful Wisdom check to make his or her way through the caverns. However, this situation is probably best handled with a saving throw vs. paralyzation, since it should always be easier for higher level characters to perform a feat that is so important to the adventure. There's certainly something wrong if a legendary hero has no better chance to complete an important test than a 1st-level character. In this particular case, you can account for characters with high Wisdom scores

by allowing them to add their Magical Defense Adjustment to their saving throws.

For similar reasons, an ability check or proficiency check should never be used to resolve a life-and-death situation; always use saving throws to handle these cases. Let's return to the example of the narrow chasm the adventurers must leap to reach a remote portion of the dungeon. While it's reasonable to require a Dexterity check to perform the leap, any characters who fail the check should not fall to their deaths. Instead, give these unfortunates a saving throw vs. breath weapon to catch themselves on a ledge before plummeting. Again, the higher the hero's level, the greater the chance he or she will find a way to survive against all odds. Using saving throws in this fashion also ties nicely to some of the game's other systems and assumptions. After all, shouldn't a ring of protection +2 help prevent an adventurer from stumbling down a chasm to his or her death? It will if you resolve the situation with a saving

throw, but it won't if you rely solely upon an ability check.

Of course, one of the problems with using saving throws in this fashion is that it's sometimes difficult to determine which category to use in any particular situation. To help, here is a recap of some important and often overlooked guidelines from Chapter 9 of the Player's Handbook.

Paralyzation, poison, death magic: Situations that call for exceptional force of will or physical fortitude. Petrification, polymorph: Situations in which a character must withstand massive physical alteration to his or her entire body. Breath weapon: Situations in which a combination of physical stamina and Dexterity are critical factors in survival. Spell: Situations that don't fit into any of the other three classifications.

### 3. Feats of Sorcery

The coolest thing about playing an AD&D wizard or priest is the ability to toss around magical spells. You should strive to keep your spellcasters happy by giving them all sorts of opportunities to exercise their magical abilities and show off for the other players. Generally, this gives you two things to consider when designing your adventures.

First, try to make sure that you eventually give each of the spellcasters in the party an opportunity to cast all of the spells in their various arsenals. If one of your wizards finds a scroll containing the plant growth spell and adds it to his or her spellbook, the player will become frustrated if your adventures never provide an opportunity to use the spell. Of course, this doesn't mean that you must include an opportunity for all your spellcasters to use all their spells in every adventure. As you sit down to create each adventure, however, take note of any

of the adventurers' magical capabilities you might have been neglecting in recent weeks and try your best to incorporate them.

Second, think about using special riddles, puzzles, and obstacles that can be solved only by the correct application of magic. Suppose, for example, the PCs are pursuing a band of orcs who have captured one of their comrades. Eventually, the characters find the orcs slaughtered in a clearing, but there is no sign of their friend. What should they do? Well, if she's using her head, the party's priest might realize that she can spend a few hours praying and then cast a speak with dead spell. It's likely that the dead orcs can provide the PCs with the clue needed to continue the quest.

When you incorporate these sorts of challenges into your adventures, you accomplish two aims. You make sure that the spellcasters have the opportunity to make an important contribution, and you confront the players with an interesting

enigma. You can also use this tactic to prevent the PCs from reaching certain parts of the adventure until they're ready. Placing a wizard lock on a key door in your dungeon, for example, prevents the party from entering that area until one of their spellcasters obtains a knock or dispel magic spell.

Join us again in thirty days when we'll begin to lay the groundwork for an actual adventure.



# 14

## **Creating an Adventure Concept**

*From Dragon Magazine 268*

Over the past two months, we've discussed some general tips for effective adventure building. Now let's put those tips to work and generate a complete concept for a first adventure.

### **Creating the Concept**

Every great adventure begins with a great concept. Before you pull out the graph paper or start thumbing through the *Monstrous Manual* book, take some time to stop and think about the adventure you're creating. Although other approaches can be equally effective, many of the

most memorable AD&D scenarios are location based.

This means that the heart of the adventure consists of a series of maps and a key that describes the important locations on them; the heroes' mission is to explore the maps and overcome the challenges they meet along the way. As a consequence, you should begin planning your adventures by thinking about exotic, interesting locales. Ideally, you're looking for an environment that is relatively self-contained and can accommodate plenty of rooms, chambers, and nooks capable of housing monsters, tricks, and traps. To keep things fresh, you should expend some effort trying to dream up a location that is as different as possible from the dungeons your players have tackled in the past. An important part of devising a suitable adventure location is considering how and why that location was built, and how it came into its present state. Failing to answer these important questions is a mistake that derails an awful lot of

first-timers. A random nondescript hole in the ground isn't nearly as interesting as the "long abandoned stronghold of Zelligar and Rogan that is said to have been deserted ever since a strange curse claimed the lives of all its inhabitants more than a hundred years ago."

Always keep in mind that the potential to uncover the secrets created by the DM is one of the major attractions of the AD&D game. Without a coherent rationale underpinning your dungeon, it's going to be awfully tough to create meaningful secrets. And while you're giving some thought to the history of the adventure locale, be sure that you don't make a related mistake that befuddles an equal number of beginners-make sure the players have an adequate opportunity to uncover and understand the background you create. Although the players needn't necessarily know that they are exploring the lost stronghold of Zelligar and Rogan when they first set foot in the dungeon, you should try to make sure that they'll uncover this secret by the time they leave.

All too many novice DMs spend a lot of time creating elaborate backgrounds for their creations without giving the players a good chance to understand what is happening.

Of course, whenever the subject of background arises, you should be thinking about the First Rule: to create only those details that are absolutely necessary for play.

After you've thought up a couple of possible locations, but before you go any further, consider your goals for this first adventure. An adventure that is perfectly suited to begin a new campaign has four special requirements. Although it's not really necessary to build all four of these characteristics into your scenario, each of them you manage to include will make it easier for the players to become interested in your game.

## **It Explains How the PCs Meet**

The AD&D game gives players a tremendous amount of flexibility when creating their characters. Chances are good that your players will create characters drawn from a wide variety of races, classes, and alignments. An ideal first adventure provides your players with a ready rationale that explains how their characters meet and decide to adventure together.

Imagine, for instance, an adventure that opens with each of the player characters receiving a summons to visit a remote temple. Once they arrive, they all recognize the temple's high priest—over the years, in a variety of different guises, the priest provided some favor or service to each and every one of them in exchange for a promise one day to return his generosity. In fact, across the span of his career, the priest aided thousands of individuals under similar circumstances. The priest then reminds the adventurers of their promises to repay his kindness and explains that

he needs them to join forces and track down an important relic that was recently stolen from his church by a gang of bandits.

Similarly, you might plan an adventure that begins when the PCs each show up at the local temple seeking the cure for a strange fever that has recently gripped a friend or loved one. The priest of the temple explains that the only cure is a draught sipped from a magic chalice stolen from the temple by goblin raiders a few years ago. This news should provoke the player characters to join forces in search of the goblins and the stolen chalice.

Of course, elaborate rationales such as these aren't strictly necessary. If you can't think of anything else, you can always begin your adventure with the old classic, "One evening, you're all sitting around the inn enjoying yourselves, when you overhear an old man telling a fantastic tale...." But the more you can do to make the player heroes' first meeting a more

organic piece of your adventure, the easier it is to get the adventure off the ground and get the players interested.

## **It Provides a Portal for New PCs**

Beginning AD&D characters are fragile. Just one or two mistakes is often all it takes to send a 1st-level character to the afterlife. As a consequence, it's entirely possible that one or two of the PCs will not survive your first few adventures. Over time, as the adventurers become more durable, character deaths should become increasingly less frequent as the party gains more power and more flexibility. To account for this phenomenon, you should try to design your first few adventures in a way that allows newly generated replacement PCs to be introduced into play as smoothly as possible. If you've selected an evil temple in the swamp as your locale, for instance, you might want to place a prison dungeon somewhere on the temple map. If one of the PCs dies, then it's not too hard to explain how the remaining

adventurers suddenly stumble across his replacement in one of the temple's halls-the new character just escaped from the dungeon prison and is hoping to avenge himself on his captors!

## **The Location is Reusable**

Most of the earliest and most notable AD&D adventures were vast complexes that called upon the players to make many return visits to penetrate all their secrets. If you can get away with it, it's not a bad idea to mimic this approach when creating the adventure you'll use to kick off your campaign. The advantages are obvious-not only do you present your players with a wide variety of possibilities for exploration, you also save yourself a lot of effort. A well-designed environment of this type might fill several weeks of play (or more!), giving you plenty of time you can use to begin crafting your next challenge. Note that an adventuring environment doesn't have to be huge to be reusable. You might set your adventure in a relatively small iron mine



overrun by orcs, for instance. After a few evenings' worth of adventure, the heroes finally manage to rout the orcs from the mine, earning the eternal gratitude of a band of dwarves who are the rightful owners of the mine. A couple weeks later, though, the orcs return to the mine in greater numbers and reclaim their prize, prompting the player heroes to clear out the complex once again and overcome an entirely new set of challenges the orcs have placed in their path. Later still, the players might uncover a secret explaining why the orcs were so intent on capturing the mine in the first place, encouraging them to return to the mine for a third time in search of a hidden chamber or two they overlooked during their first two visits.

This last example illustrates an important point. Always save the maps and notes that make up your adventures. You never know when you'll find an opportunity to pull out an old location and use it as the setting for an entirely new adventure.

## **It Foreshadows Bigger Events**

Finally, an ideal first adventure should give the players a taste of bigger things to come. One of your most important responsibilities as Dungeon Master is to keep the players interested in the campaign. As noted in earlier columns, one of the easiest methods of maintaining interest is to construct interlocking "onion layers" of secrets that the players can peel back one by one. Ideally, your first adventure should introduce the players to these onion layers and hook them from the very beginning. If your campaign world partially revolves around an age-old conflict between a tribe of fire giants and a secret society of wizards, for example, you might try to foreshadow this conflict in your first adventure. Perhaps the adventure consists of exploring an abandoned wizard's tower. As they explore the tower, the player heroes discover that a powerful band of creatures obviously attacked and ransacked the tower, killing all the inhabitants and somehow smashing through formidable defensive barriers.

Particularly observant players might realize that the marauders made a systematic effort to destroy every book in the tower and that the marauders were obviously looking for something. Even after the adventure is complete, this set up gives the players a lot to think about. Who killed the tower's inhabitants? Why? What were they looking for? Why did they destroy the books? The fact that you incorporated these mysteries into the adventure suggests to the players that you'll eventually provide them with answers, probably piquing their interest.

If you're having a hard time deciding what to foreshadow in your adventure or how to go about it, don't sweat it for now-just carry on with the design. Later, after you've fleshed out the adventure's basic parameters, randomly pull a card or two from your "deck of secrets" (you have been maintaining your deck, haven't you?) and take a crack at figuring out how you might link the secret you've drawn to your basic scenario. Don't be afraid to invent new details to make the

secret fit; this is exactly how your campaign world will grow to take on a life of its own.

## **Creating the Situation**

After selecting a suitable locale for your adventure and contemplating your goals, turn your attention to devising the basic situation. What sort of creatures live in the adventure area? What are they doing there? How did they get there? Do they hope to accomplish anything? How might the adventurers discover the adventure locale? What might the adventurers hope to accomplish? The key word here is "situation." Many beginners (and even a few professionals) mistakenly devise a "plot" at this point instead of a situation. Plot implies that you know exactly what is going to happen once play begins. Situation, on the other hand, implies that you know enough of the details to figure out what will happen during play, after you see what the players decide to do. It's important to realize that

creating an AD&D adventure is not the same thing as writing or planning a story. Instead, it's more akin to filling up a toy box with a collection of puzzle pieces you'll use to assemble stories later. In general, if you can't look back on what you're developing and imagine four or five different ways in which the adventure might unfold, you're probably concentrating too much on plot and not enough on situation. If you fail to achieve the proper balance, you'll find yourself pulling the players through the adventure rather than letting them tackle the scenario their own way.

Suppose that your adventure calls upon the PCs to recover a stolen magical potion from the stronghold of a local wizard. In this case, you shouldn't worry about how you expect the players to obtain the potion. Instead, concentrate on figuring out where the potion is kept within the stronghold and how it is guarded, why the wizard stole the potion, and what he plans to do with it. Armed with this information, you'll be prepared

to deal with any approach the players might attempt. If they decide to sneak into the stronghold and pilfer the potion, you know what obstacles stand in their way. If they make an attempt to bargain with the wizard, you know exactly how important he considers the potion and can therefore decide what he might be willing to accept in trade. If the PCs take too long to fulfill their quest, you know exactly what the wizard plans to do with the potion and can easily decide what happens next. Perhaps after a week, the powerful noble who hired the wizard to steal the potion arrives to claim it, giving the players one last chance to obtain the draught before it is gone forever.

## **Putting the Pieces Together**

The easiest way to illustrate good adventure-building technique is by example. These concepts should become a great deal clearer as we walk

through the process of devising a specific adventure.

First, I thought about location and decided upon a ruined, underground temple. While a temple isn't terribly interesting, I was looking for something with a classic D&D "dungeon" flavor. To spruce up the locale, I've decided that this particular temple sits at the bottom of a deep, barren ravine located in the Black Wood, a few days' travel southwest of Ironoak. This ravine, known to locals as "The Scar," is one of the few patches of land on the entire continent that is not blanketed beneath Aris's lush forests. No one knows exactly why the Scar is so desolate. All available evidence seems to indicate that the surrounding lands were once fertile, but they were somehow devastated by a mysterious natural catastrophe.

At this point, I turned my attention to crafting a situation that might fit the four criteria outlined above. Eventually, I hit upon an interesting idea: The temple is functioning as a makeshift prison

camp under the control of an orc tribe that lives in the Black Wood. The orcs have overrun the temple ruins and are using their prisoners to dig through the rubble so they can retrieve some sort of item lost in the temple several hundred years ago. I've decided that the PCs begin the campaign as unarmed prisoners. Their obvious goal is to escape.

I like this concept for several reasons:

1. It explains how the player heroes met and decided to adventure together. With the adventurers all imprisoned together, they are well-motivated to get to know each other and cooperate.

2. It should be easy to introduce new PCs into play. Presumably, the PCs aren't the orcs' only prisoners. If one or more of the PCs dies, it should be relatively easy to introduce a new prisoner who can take his or her place.



3. Designed properly, the temple should be a highly reusable environment. I imagine a vast underground complex, many areas of which have been sealed off by fallen rubble and debris. As the campaign progresses, I can gradually give the adventurers access to the capabilities needed to clear out more rubble, periodically opening up new areas of the complex and allowing the players to discover new secrets.

Furthermore, once the heroes manage to escape, there are many means that I can use to motivate them to return. While they are still imprisoned, for instance, the heroes might discover what the orcs are looking for. If the consequences of the orcs achieving this objective are sufficiently unpleasant, the heroes might be strongly tempted to return to the temple to foil the orcs, or to capture the prize for themselves. I might also introduce an NPC with a daughter imprisoned inside the temple. After the NPC discovers the players' escape, he might hire them to return to the temple to rescue his girl. Yet another

possibility is to introduce various legends detailing items, spells, or knowledge said to be lost inside the temple, tempting the players to make even more return visits.

4. The "prison break" situation gives me a good opportunity to design an adventure that will adequately challenge both the players and their characters (the Fourth Rule of Dungeoncraft). Since the player heroes begin play unarmed and relatively defenseless, they'll have to use their wits as well as their character capabilities to succeed. I envision a Great Escape scenario, in which the players must make the most of the few items they manage to sneak out from under the noses of their orcish overseers. I might also ask the players to intelligently select their allies from among the other prisoners and overcome interesting physical obstacles. They might decide to dig secret tunnels, lead all the other prisoners in an uprising against the orcs, uncover some of the temple's secrets and use them to their

advantage, or pursue any one of a number of other courses.

5. This setup lends itself to some interesting roleplaying possibilities. Not only can the PCs interact with their fellow prisoners and the orcs but each also will have an opportunity to figure out how he or she was captured before play began. This should encourage each player to invent a handful of interesting details about his or her character.

With all that out of the way, the only base I've yet to cover is to guarantee that this first adventure serves as an adequate introduction to my campaign and starts the players down the road to uncovering some of the interesting secrets I've prepared for them. To give me some ideas, I drew a card from my "Deck of Secrets" and came up with "Selene's Treachery." (See the sidebar if you need to refresh your memory about this secret.)

After some careful consideration, I created a backstory linking the ruined temple with the secret of Selene. (See the above sidebar.) First of all, I've decided that the Scar is actually the site where Selene was "born" several thousand years ago. Her separation from Aris is the terrible cataclysm that dug the ravine, shattered the temple, and killed the local vegetation. In fact, the temple itself served as a sort of "womb" in which the baby goddess was nurtured by Aris's high priests before she was born. I've decided that Aris originally planned to give birth to twin moons. For several generations, the priests of the temple watched over two large "eggs" (resembling enormous gems) and cared for them according to Aris's instructions. Just before the eggs "hatched," though, they were temporarily stolen by cultists from the Legion, the rival sect that worships Aris's dark and destructive side. The Legionnaires hoped to curse the eggs so the goddesses within them would be born as cruel and merciless beings who might help the Legion seize control of Aris herself. Eventually, one of the temple's most

noble paladins rescued the eggs, but not before the Legionnaires successfully cursed one of them. Since Aris and her priests had no desire to birth a malevolent goddess, only the pure egg was returned to the womb; its corrupted sister was locked in a deep dungeon to languish.

Curiously, just after the eggs were returned, the paladin awoke one night in the throes of a mysterious evil madness. Shortly thereafter, he secretly switched the positions of the two eggs, tricking the priests into birthing the cursed twin. This tale explains Selene's treachery.

I've decided that the orcs who are excavating the ruins of the temple at the base of the Scar are working under the direction of a mysterious stranger who is none other than the undead incarnation of the paladin who betrayed the temple priests several thousand years ago. Ever since his transgression, the paladin has been a dark servant of Selene and the Legion. To this day, he still doesn't understand what compelled

him to forsake his duties. The paladin has returned to the temple ruins after all these years in search of the second egg. The mind flayers have recently discovered a spell that would allow Selene to absorb the essence of her unborn sister, greatly augmenting the moon goddess' power.

Of course, I don't intend to allow the players to uncover much of this story for many weeks to come. In this first adventure, they'll briefly encounter the mysterious paladin and uncover just enough of the story to whet their appetites. For now, I'll emphasize the orcs, their mysterious quest, and the idea of escape.

That wraps up another installment. Tune in again in thirty days, when we'll begin to design the temple and its inhabitants.

# 15

## Starting Adventure Maps

*From Dragon Magazine 269*

Last time, I decided upon an old ruined temple as the setting for the adventure that will inaugurate my new campaign. This month (and the next), let's walk through the steps I took to design that adventure from the ground up. Along the way, you're bound to pick up lots of helpful tips and inspiration that should come in handy when you sit down to design your own adventures.

Remember that my opening adventure, "The Scar," will be presented in its entirety in our sister publication, *Dungeon® Adventures* (issue #80). This column and the next might prove more useful if you pick up a copy of *Dungeon Adventures*, read the adventure, and follow along.

## First Things First

Last issue, I fleshed out the basic concept of the temple adventure and spent some time devising a backstory. With these two preliminaries out of the way, the next step is to start thinking about the map. Since the essence of the AD&D® game is exploration, a particularly strong map (and all it implies) usually translates into a strong adventure. For this reason, it's generally a good idea to design the map first and let the rest of the adventure flow from there.

Start your adventure maps by making a list of locations you know you'll need somewhere on the map. For now, concentrate solely on the locations that are absolutely essential to the adventure. For instance, if the adventure is centered around a quest for a magical item, you'll need the location in which the item is finally found. Similarly, if your adventure calls upon the player heroes to investigate an underground war between goblins



and kobolds, you'll probably need several areas housing the two combatant tribes.

The best way to guarantee that you've correctly identified all your requirements is to mentally strip your adventure down to its barest elements so you can make sure to account for all these elements when you draw your map. For instance, "Party enters ruined stronghold looking for fabled magic sword; party discovers that a tribe of hill giants has established a lair in the stronghold; leader of the giants uses the magic sword as a table knife, unaware of its value." Or, "Party enters dungeon to rescue a princess kidnapped by an evil cult; princess faked the kidnapping and is actually the cult's leader; she and her followers hoped the ruse would lead her father's champions (the party) into a trap." In the former case, your map would need quarters for the hill giants, especially the king's kitchen (where the sword is found). In the latter case, you'd need one or more areas that make up the cultists' trap.

My own adventure reduces down to "Party begins as prison laborers for a band of orcs; orcs are forcing the prisoners to dig through the remains of a ruined temple to find some mysterious object; the party is trying to escape." For my adventure, I need:

- A semi-hidden vault (the orcs believe their quarry is located in one of the temple vaults).
- Some rubble-strewn work areas the orcs' prisoners must dig through to reach the vault and the orcs' prize.
- Prisoner confinement areas and barracks for the orcs (both improvised atop the temple's original facilities).

Since escaping from the orcs and the temple is the main objective of my adventure, I'll also need to include a number of possible escape routes on the map. In an earlier installment, I noted that it's a

good idea to include alternative approaches to overcoming an adventure's obstacles whenever possible. Since the escape is such an important goal in this adventure, I'm especially determined to provide the players with a good set of multiple choices. Therefore, in addition to the obvious main entrance, I've decided that there are a few hearths in the temple featuring chimneys that stretch up and out of the complex. Later on, to make the players' choice of routes more interesting, I'll try to position the chimneys such that each offers its own unique challenge.

## **Scouting the Locations**

Once you've identified all your needs, the next step is to expand the list to include locations you'll want to place on the map. For me, this is usually a two-step process. First, I try to look at the setting from a logical perspective and ask myself what sort of locations should be present. The notion of a ruined temple, for instance,

implies that some of the rooms in the complex once served as shrines, meditation chambers, and quarters for the priests and their servants. Similarly, logic dictates that if the temple once served as a living area, its inhabitants needed access to food, water, and other basic necessities, leading me to place ruined kitchens, pantries, and water storage areas on my list. Because my backstory states that the temple was originally constructed as a sort of citadel to house an important artifact, it also seems logical that warriors or guardians (paladins, in this case) were quartered in the temple alongside the priests.

After I finish examining the setting from a logical perspective, I round out my list of "wants" by looking at the map from a playability standpoint. Here, my goal is to come up with a few locations that will be fun for the players to explore—something different and unique. As I finally draw my map, I'll attempt to scatter rooms like these among the more mundane locales I've already identified. When designing this first adventure, I

drew my inspiration for these locations from a number of sources: a book on ancient Mayan temples, a couple of classic "prison break" movies, fairy tales, and-of course-my own imagination.

At this stage, I also flip through the Monstrous Compendium® books and their various supplements to start thinking about the sort of creatures I'll call upon to populate the map.

Although it's unnecessary to draw up an exhaustive list of occupants at this point, some monsters have special requirements for their lairs that I'll need to take into account when drawing the map. In this case, I decided that large spiders, stirges, and wild dogs are ideally suited to inhabit the temple ruins alongside the orcs.

## **Drawing the Map**

Once the list of locations is complete, it's time to start drawing the actual map. Begin by deciding upon a couple of basic parameters. How large do

you expect the map to be? How many "dungeon levels" will it cover? And, what (if anything) serves as a main entrance?

In my case, I decided that my map would consist of a single level that should cover roughly one sheet of graph paper with fairly small squares. As a general rule of thumb, you can assume that each full page of dungeon maps that are part of your adventure translates into approximately two game sessions of playing time. Two evenings sounded just about right for what I was trying to accomplish. My main entrance, I decided, would consist of a long staircase descending down into the very center of the complex.

When drawing dungeon maps, I always start by lightly sketching a very general outline on the graph paper. In this case, I noticed that most of the locations I identified fit into four general categories: priest quarters, temple rooms, special areas (the key room, paladin quarters, and wizard labs), and the monster maze. I drew a rough box

the approximate size of the complex centered around my main entrance, divided the box into four quadrants and lightly labeled each to correspond to one of the location categories. I decided the monster maze would occupy the northwest quadrant of the complex, the temple areas would occupy the northeast, the special rooms the southwest, and the priest quarters the southeast. I then lightly penciled in the names of all the locations I identified in the exact areas in which I wanted to place them on the map.

With this guide in place, it was then a simple matter to sketch out the temple's various rooms and corridors. I placed all the locations I'd already identified in the rooms that ended up closest to the locations I'd already sketched out for them. By the time I was finished, of course, the map contained more rooms than I could match to my list of locations. To decide what to do with these "extra" rooms, I was forced to double and triple up a few general locations like the priest quarters and meditation chambers. I also thought up a few

more locations to occupy some of the gaps, a process that was a lot easier now that there was an actual plan for the complex in front of me. You can see the final results of my mapmaking in [Dungeon Adventures](#).

That wraps up another installment. Join me here in thirty days for our third descent into the dungeon and more notes on the construction of the adventure.



# 16

## Identifying the Sub-Goals

This is a good point for relatively new readers of "Dungeoncraft" to check out the earlier installments available on the Internet. This month's column is the final installment of a series examining the anatomy and construction of an AD&D adventure. The adventure it describes, "The Scar," will appear in *Dungeon Adventures* (issue #80), letting you trace the whole project from concept to finished form.

In the past two installments, we examined strategies for evolving adventure concepts and building maps. This time, let's explore the process of turning a simple map into a full-fledged adventure.

## Identifying the Sub-Goals

Once the map is drawn, mentally recap the ultimate objective of the adventure and try to imagine how play might progress. What routes might the players take? What might they see or encounter along the way? Often, the easiest way to accomplish this is to break the objective down into a series of "sub-objectives" the players are likely to see as prerequisites to the main objective.

In my own adventure, for example, the players' primary objective is to escape from their orc captors. They face an obvious obstacle in the orcs themselves -- it will certainly prove difficult for the unarmed and weakened PCs to fight their way out of the complex. Before they attempt escape, therefore, it's likely that the players will try to tackle one or more lesser objectives. They might try to find makeshift weapons or equipment to improve their odds in combat, for instance. Or they might search for spellbooks and material

components necessary to restore their magic-users' spellcasting capability.

A careful look at the maps for "The Scar" and trying to "think like a player" inspired this list of sub-goals:

## **1. To gain weapons.**

Since the unarmed PCs stand almost no chance against the numerically superior orcs, this is a necessary first step toward any plan that involves the PCs' fighting their way out of the complex and a prudent precautionary step toward executing just about any other plan. There are three obvious ways to achieve this goal. The PCs can capture weapons from the orcs, they can find their own weapons stored somewhere within the complex, or they construct makeshift weapons from the stones, planks, and other items they find in the temple ruins.

## **2. To restore spellcasting ability.**

As the adventure opens, the spellcasters in the party obviously lack the material components, spellbooks, and other items necessary for making magic. Finding a method of restoring this ability would obviously increase their chances of escaping -- a single sleep spell might be all the PCs need to elude their captors.

## **3. Identify less obvious exits.**

The temple map depicts only one obvious exit to the outside, and it is certainly well guarded at all times. To increase their chances of escape, the PCs might search for a less obvious exit that isn't so well guarded.

## **4. Identify a "sneaky" method of taking out the orcs.**

It's clear that the odds favor the orcs in a straight-up fight, but clever players might look for a more devious method of removing a large number of

orcs from the picture. Perhaps there's some way to trap the bulk of the orc tribe within a conveniently collapsed cavern or behind a locked door.

## **5. Identify a potential distraction.**

If the PCs decide to leave via the main exit, they might improve their odds with a distraction aimed at occupying their captors. Perhaps they'll free and arm the remaining prisoners, or devise a method to provoke a fight between two rival factions within the orc tribe.

## **Enabling the Sub-Goals**

With such a list in place, you can make sure that you address each of these possible approaches as you design the adventure. Of course, nothing says that you must design the adventure so that every single one of the potential approaches works -- maybe there aren't any less obvious exits -- but it's a good idea to enable as many as you can.

That way, you give the players plenty of options. For "The Scar," let's allow every approach we can devise, making some a bit more difficult to accomplish than others. Since this is the first adventure in a whole new campaign, there's no way to anticipate how the players will respond to the obstacles we place before them. Consequently, let's give them as many options as possible to decrease the chance that they'll become frustrated while the DM is learning to understand their playing styles.

Looking back at the past couple of installments, you can see that we've already accounted for most of the subgoals:

## **1. To gain weapons**

It won't be difficult to sprinkle weapons and potential weapons liberally throughout the complex. As a rule of thumb, it should be relatively trivial for the players to locate a weapon that inflicts less damage than the orcs'

weapons (grabbing a rock from a rubble pile down in the work area should be easy enough), and a bit harder to find weapons that equal those of the orcs. To find a weapon that is superior to those carried by the orcs, the PCs should need to do something daring or clever.

## **2. To restore spellcasting ability.**

Before play begins, the DM should ask each player to invent a brief story explaining how he or she came to be held captive. Depending upon the nature of their individual stories, the DM can then place the spellcasters' spellbooks and materials somewhere within the complex with the rest of the PCs' equipment. Furthermore, since there might be an old wizard's lab located somewhere within the temple, it might house the items necessary to allow wizards to cast a few carefully chosen spells.

### **3. Identify less obvious exits.**

While building the map last month, we included a few chimneys that lead directly to the surface. Of course, one or more obstacles will undoubtedly stand in the way of using these back-up exits, but the variety should provide the players with a nice set of options.

### **4. Identify a "sneaky" method of taking out the orcs.**

Last month, we included a wine cellar within the temple complex. Poisoning the large kegs stored in the cellar might take out each of the many orcs who sample the wine supply every night. A suitable poison might be located in the fungus garden that we also described last month. Similarly, let's plan to make it possible for the PCs to call upon the temple's ancient magic to scare or neutralize the orcs.



## **5. Identify a potential distraction.**

We've already recognized the possibility that the PCs might arm and free the remaining prisoners. As discussed last month, the PCs might also discover a way to unleash a powerful monster into the complex to cause general mayhem.

## **Think Like a Player**

Once you've identified a list of potential subgoals, it's worth thinking about whether the players are likely to pursue any even lesser objectives before tackling the subgoals, particularly if your list features more than a couple of entries. Once again, try to think like a player, anticipate, and address any new objectives you identify.

The list of possible sub-goals suggests that, to pursue any of these goals, the PCs must first resolve to explore the temple itself. Because it's impossible for them to form an interesting escape plan without gathering plenty of information

about their surroundings -- and because their opportunities to gather such information are limited -- we should probably provide them with some assistance. One good solution would be to include a series of elaborate friezes depicting the construction of the complex, running along the temple walls. By learning to interpret the friezes, perhaps the PCs can glean useful information about various areas in the complex without actually visiting those areas. These clues can vastly augment their "intelligence gathering" capabilities.

Of course, it's extremely unlikely that a list of potential objectives covers every possible approach the players might pursue. In your games, you'll quickly find that your players are great at tossing you unexpected curveballs. By identifying and enabling a number of possible sub-goals, though, you'll help guarantee that there is enough meat beneath the surface of your adventure to help you deal with the unexpected.

When I ran an early version of this adventure, for example, one of the PCs tried to take the orc leader hostage and bargain for the party's freedom. Although I didn't anticipate the tactic while I was designing the scenario, I fleshed out enough details about the temple complex while preparing for the possibilities I did foresee to easily improvise and adapt.

In fact, the capacity to adapt is so important that you should make sure you're not falling into the trap of over-anticipating the PCs' actions while identifying your objectives. Beginning DMs often make the mistake of designing their adventures around a single, expected plan of action. Should the players start to deviate from this expected plan, these DMs tend to react by subtly (or not-so-subtly) "steering" the party back on course. Of course, this sort of steering inevitably frustrates your players and takes control of the game out of their hands. In general, if you can't look at your adventure and easily identify either several different ways the players might pursue your

main objective or several different objectives to choose from, it's probably time to go back to the drawing board.

## **Fleshing Out the Challenges**

Remember that the Fourth Rule of Dungeoncraft states that "Good adventures always challenge the players and their characters." After you've identified and addressed the various objectives the players are likely to pursue, it's usually a good idea to take a fresh look at your creation and make sure you are adequately accomplishing these aims. At this point, you might look for ways to incorporate some of the tactics discussed back in Chapters 12 and 13 to help bring your challenges up to snuff.

"The Scar" looks like it has the potential to sufficiently challenge the players in a number of ways. First, the sheer number of potential approaches to escaping the temple promises to force the players to make a series of interesting

decisions. Furthermore, several of the various objectives give the DM the opportunity to ask the players to solve puzzles. Using the mushrooms found in the fungus garden to poison the orcs' wine, for example, is a classic "item puzzle." We can also embed some interesting puzzles into the friezes that blanket the walls and into the various relics of the temple-builders that remain in the complex. Because the PCs aren't the only prisoners in the temple, we can also give the players plenty of opportunities for interesting interaction with the NPCs.

As far as challenging the players' characters is concerned, the fact that the PCs begin play without any weapons or armor should lead to some challenging combats. "The Scar" will certainly include some kind of mechanic that forces the PCs to make various saving throws or ability checks to avoid succumbing to weakness as their imprisonment drags on. Sneaking around the complex after hours and employing a few of the alternative escape routes should test the

abilities of PC thieves. Making the most of the rudimentary spellcasting abilities at their disposal should adequately test the PC clerics and wizards.

## **Doling Out the Rewards**

After you've completed everything else, take another look at your adventure and think about how you plan to reward the players for overcoming the various obstacles you'll place in their path. Obviously, treasure and magical items are the easiest rewards to dish out. Although the *Monstrous Manual* book gives you a good starting point for assigning treasure to the various creatures inhabiting your adventures, you should always modify these amounts based upon the circumstances at hand. If a monster is likely to be encountered when the PCs are in a weakened state (because there are other nearby monsters they might encounter first, for instance), you should increase the treasure guideline listed in the *Monstrous Manual* book by as much as 50 or

even 100 percent. If, on the other hand, the PCs are likely to encounter the monster when the creature is at a disadvantage, you should lower the listed treasure by as much as 50 percent. Because the PCs are generally disadvantaged throughout the course of "The Scar," we'll need to be somewhat generous in allotting treasure to the orcs and the other denizens of the temple complex -- maybe the equivalent of 5-10 gp per orc. The fact that the orcs are in the process of looting the ancient temple neatly explains why they are so wealthy.

As far as magical items are concerned, my own rule of thumb is to include two or three "important items" per adventure, but to make all of these items particularly difficult to find or recover. Exactly what constitutes an "important item" depends upon the average experience level of the PCs who will tackle the adventure. For this first effort, I might include a single sword +1, a shield +1, and a little dust of disappearance. I chose this last item because it might play a

particularly interesting role in the PCs' escape. To keep things interesting, we can supplement the important items with twice as many lesser items -- healing potions, minor scrolls, a dagger +1, or some arrows +1, and the like.

It's important to note that money and magical items are not the only rewards at your disposal. You can also reward the players with simple information. If you've been dutifully following the Rules of Dungeoncraft, you should know a number of interesting secrets about your campaign world by this point. If you've done your job well, simple clues pointing to these secrets and the occasional major revelation make for rewards that are just as satisfying as money and magic. In "The Scar," for example, we can begin peeling back the curtain on the "mind flayer conspiracy" described way back in Chapter 4.

Don't forget to pick up a copy of *Dungeon Adventures #80* to see how "The Scar" came out. And come back here in thirty days to explore



some methods for helping your players create interesting adventurers.

# 17

## Preparing for the First Session

Last month, "Dungeons & Dragons" passed an important milestone. After sixteen installments, we've finally created everything needed to begin a new campaign. These last few months have been pretty grueling -- we've drawn maps, devised governments and religions, created some NPCs, and designed an entire adventure. Now it's finally time to get those dice rolling!

The first step, of course, is to locate a group of players. As mentioned way back in Chapter 1, I feel that the AD&D game works best when you can round up a whole lot of players -- say, somewhere between five and eight. Finding the perfect player is an art form unto itself and

probably worthy of an entire column some day. For now though, I'll just assume that you have easy access to five or six friends who enjoy each other's company, won't whine when they don't get their way, and won't insist that you allow undead tyrannosaurs as player characters. Once you have them, it's time to begin the process of rolling up characters and preparing for play.

## **DM Preparation**

As DM, you have just a few more decisions to make before you're ready to invite your players to create their characters. Begin by re-reading the character creation chapter in the Player's Handbook, paying close attention to the various options it presents. Your first order of business is to decide which class and race options you'll open up to your players. Just because a particular combination is covered in the Handbook doesn't mean you have to allow it in your own game. Maybe there's no such thing as a half-orc on your

world, or perhaps there aren't any druids. Of course, you don't want to narrow the options too much -- players appreciate a variety of choices.

As far as character classes are concerned, unless you're quite experienced, you should allow all of the basic classes: fighter, thief, wizard, and cleric. By excluding one or more of these classes, it's pretty easy to throw the AD&D rules out-of-balance -- imagine a world without clerics, for instance (and thus, no healing spells). Instead, pay particular attention to the specialized subclasses, looking for options that might not fit into the world you've built. If your campaign world is dominated by savage barbarians, for example, a paladin player character might not make a lot of sense. Similarly, depending upon how you see magic working in your campaign, you might want to exclude illusionists and other specialist wizards.

Another good reason to exclude a character class is concern about potential abuse. If you've ever

had bad experiences with a particular character class or you think you might have trouble handling any of a class's special abilities, feel free to rule that class out of bounds. An excellent example of a potential concern might be the paladin's ability to detect evil. Some DMs find this ability extremely confining and believe that it almost completely takes away their ability to plan encounters that surprise the players. Other DMs find it relatively easy to adjust and handle detect evil without a problem. If you fit into the former camp, you should simply prohibit your players from choosing paladins.

These same guidelines apply when it comes to PC races. Exclude any that make you uncomfortable or don't fit your campaign conception. I also tend to weed out a race when I can't think of anything interesting I can do with its culture. For some reason, I often drop gnomes from my games. I guess there's just something about the little beggars that throws off my imagination. Plus, I've always had a difficult time differentiating them

from halflings. Of course, your own experiences will vary.

## **The Cheat Sheet**

Once you have a pretty good idea of what you will and won't allow, you should start to create a quick "cheat sheet" for the players. Ultimately, this sheet will contain everything the players need to know about your campaign. The sheet should begin with a brief description of your campaign concept (see Chapter 2) and then a list of all the available character options, including a sentence or two describing how the more outré options might fit into the campaign. Rangers and paladins, for instance, are usually members of some sort of organized society or order. Are there any details about this order that a paladin or ranger player might need to know as play begins? Similarly, thieves are often organized into guilds. Is there a thieves' guild operating in your campaign area? If so, are PC thieves

automatically members? When creating this information, don't forget the First Rule of Dungeonscraft. You don't need to generate reams of data about any of these organizations or societies. For now, just a sentence or two will do; you'll fill in the details later, as they become important. The idea is to give the players everything they'll need to choose a character type before play begins. With this in mind, it's certainly a good idea to use this section of the cheat sheet to briefly summarize the options for priest and cleric characters we discussed way back in Chapter 4.

You can take this opportunity to tinker a bit with the restrictions and abilities of the various classes to help them fit into your own campaign. Perhaps in your campaign, all magic-users must be of evil alignment, or all paladins receive occasional prophetic dreams from their patron deities. Although this is a great way to "personalize" your campaign, it isn't something you should do lightly. Again, the AD&D rules are carefully

balanced, and it's surprisingly easy to upset the apple cart. It's generally a good idea to keep all alterations as minor as possible and proceed only if you are quite comfortable with the results.

After you've listed and discussed all the character and race options, you should round the cheat sheet off with a brief description of the geography in your campaign area (discussed back in Chapter 7). Here, your goal is to give the players just enough "lay of the land" to understand any references that pop up during play, allowing them to make some educated decisions about where to go and what to do. A single paragraph summary of the local government/economy and a brief list of the major geographic features in the region (each described by no more than a single sentence) should do nicely. You should already have all this information at your disposal. Lastly, if possible, adding a small version of your area map to the cheat sheet is a nice touch. This is particularly easy to do if you created your map on a computer, but even if you resorted to old



fashion paper and pencil, you might be able to photocopy your own map and add it to the cheat sheet. In any case, you should make sure that the map you'll give to the players does not include any secrets or other pieces of sensitive information.

Once the cheat sheet is complete, you should make copies for each of your players. While you're at it, make a nice pile of extras -- as soon as word gets out about your incredibly well conceived campaign, lots of latecomers will want to join in. You'll find a copy of my own cheat sheet on the following pages.

## **The Character Creation Session**

Once your cheat sheet is finished, it's finally time to assemble all your players and ask them to create their characters. If at all possible, you should always ask the players to create all their

characters together as a group -- unless you are particularly pressed for time, frown on the idea of the players arriving at the session with their characters already created. In this way, you can guarantee that the players have an opportunity to review your cheat sheet before they get started. This method also allows the players to consult with each other, allowing them to assemble a better balance of character classes and races.

If at all possible, try to conduct the character creation activities immediately prior to an actual game session. Some DMs like to hold a special session solely devoted to character creation, but I like to make sure the game gets started immediately. I think it's important to give the players a taste of the adventure as soon as possible in order to keep their interest high. I've seen far too many DMs go the other route and never get the actual game off the ground due to boredom and logistics. Over the years, I've learned that the sooner you begin playing, the more likely you are to keep playing.

Once your players have cranked through all the various dice rolls and decisions discussed in the Player's Handbook, your final step before beginning play is to give each character a careful once over. Here you want to make sure that you're completely comfortable with every aspect of the character. Pay particular attention to the class and race chosen, as well as the character's spells and equipment. Did the player purchase an item that isn't really appropriate to your campaign? Does the character have spells you're not comfortable with? If so, here's your chance to demand a change with a minimum of fuss. Also, you should use this opportunity to make sure that the players have selected a healthy mix of character classes. If there isn't at least one cleric, one wizard, and a couple of fighters present, you might suggest the players shuffle things around a bit. Such a mix will definitely improve the players' chances and make a "false start," in which the entire party is quickly wiped out, far less likely.

## **Aris Player's Guide (the "Cheat Sheet")**

Although the world of Aris is covered with trees, it's simpler to indicate only those forests that are pertinent to the campaign. The DM should always keep a simple terrain map handy. This map was created in only two hours using Photoshop 4.0.

Aris is a lush world that is almost entirely blanketed in trees of almost all descriptions: tall redwoods, majestic conifers, dense oaks, and lush palms. Because there is so little arable farmland, food can get quite scarce; a number of political factions square off to gain control of the all-important trails that cut through the planet's thick forests.

Another characteristic that makes Aris unique is the fact that most of its inhabitants are certain that the planet itself is alive. Legends speak of living forests capable of forming and obliterating new pathways at will, and strange sentinel spirits that

occasionally rise up to defend the forests against incursion. Aris herself is the only major goddess worshiped across the planet.

## Character Choices

Most of the options presented in the Player's Handbook are open to PCs:

- **Fighter**

Fighters come from all walks of life on Aris: ex-soldiers, jungle barbarians, adventurers and just about anything else you can imagine.

- **Ranger**

Rangers on Aris are fighters who feel a strange sort of mystical bond with the planet-goddess; in many ways, the rangers are special defenders chosen by the planet itself. Although they aren't really organized in any fashion, rangers always seem to recognize each other by sight

(even if they've never met before) and don't often refuse a request for assistance that comes from another ranger.

- **Mage**

Magic users of all types (including illusionists and other specialists) can be found scattered across all of Aris, though in most areas they are either so rare or so low profile that some of the planet's residents occasionally doubt whether wizards exist. Sorcery is an ancient and elusive art on Aris, and no worldly creature has ever penetrated enough of its secrets to understand its real origins.

- **Cleric**

For now, all player character clerics on Aris belong to one of two societies: the Children or the Legion. Both societies worship the planet as their only goddess. The Children are made up of good- and neutral-aligned clerics who operate most

of the temples in most civilized regions of the world and worship the planet's bounty. The Legion is composed of evil clerics who worship the destructive aspect of the planet's nature. Because it operates like a secret society, relatively few of Aris's inhabitants are aware that the Legion exists.

Services and Tenets of the Children: The Children hold special religious services in honor of the nature goddess during each change of seasons; the clerics of the order spend the rest of their time studying, adventuring, trying to aid members of the flock, and spreading the reverence of the goddess. The services consist of lengthy festivals and banquets attended by most residents of the campaign area and are designed to celebrate the goddess and her bounty.

The members of the Children believe that

the goddess's bounty is a manifestation of the good or evil of the world's inhabitants. So long as the flock continues to do good deeds, the goddess will deliver a bountiful harvest, the weather will be mild, and her people will enjoy long, peaceful lives. They also believe that owls are sacred; the owls are the "eyes" the goddess uses to monitor her flock. Clerics of the Children are required to spend one week of each season alone in the wilderness.

Services and Tenets of the Evil Order: The Legion also holds services during the change of seasons; its clerics spend the rest of their time trying to attract and corrupt new followers. The Legion's services consist of human sacrifices, fires, and other acts of destruction.

The clerics of the Legion believe that the Children have blinded themselves to the goddess's true nature. Power and



understanding, they believe, always stem from suffering and an acceptance of nature's destructive capacity. Clerics of the Legion are required to kill one innocent per quarter (every three months) to reaffirm their faith.

- **Druid**

Druids on Aris are special priests who devote most of their time and energies to exploring and protecting the planet's forests. Like rangers, they have some sort of strange mystical bond with the world itself. Unlike rangers, they have organized themselves into a strict hierarchy as described in the Player's Handbook.

Services and Tenets of the Druidic Order:  
The druidic order holds a service on the night of every full moon, consisting of chanting and a reading of litanies. The druids believe that the goddess's only daughter (the planet's single moon) will

one day take her mother's place in the cosmos; life will eventually die out on the main planet and spring up on the moon. The druids are required to abide by all the restrictions of the druid class listed in the Player's Handbook.

- **Thief, Bard**

Like fighters, thieves and bards on Aris come from all walks of life: cutpurses, rogue adventurers, wily traders, and troubadours.

## **Local Geography**

The campaign is set in Ironoak, a stronghold that lies on the fringes of the kingdom of Umbria. Umbria is a noble monarchy surrounded by an uncivilized wilderness that is inhabited by several malevolent tribes of humanoids. One of the kingdom's many claims to fame is the fact that its rulers always abdicate on their 40th birthday and venture alone into the forest, never to be seen

again. No one knows why they do this or where they go.

Built within and atop a cluster of tall trees, Ironoak is ruled by man named Richard, the rightful Warden appointed by the king of Umbria. His main responsibility is to protect the kingdom against humanoid incursions that might arise in the adjoining cluster of wilderness known as The Black Wood.

A few points of interest are noted below.

- **The Wandering Wood**

A small subforest located just outside of Ironoak, the paths through the Wandering Wood seem to mysteriously shift and flow. Unskilled travelers often find it impossible to navigate the area effectively.

- **The Webbed Wood**

This small cluster of tall oaks is honeycombed by thick spider webs,

causing all but the most intrepid travelers to avoid it.

- **The High Mountains**

This rocky, tree-covered mountain range forms Umbria's western border in this region.

- **Redheath**

Redheath is the town that stands closest to the Ironoak stronghold. It currently boasts approximately 1,100 residents and stands as a major waypoint along all the merchant trails leading through south Umbria.

- **Rotwood**

The Rotwood is a cluster of dead and fallen trees inhabited by all manner of strange creatures.

- **Poisonwood**

The trees in this sector of the forest

occasionally drip a deadly poison from their leaves down onto the heads of interlopers. Although most of the poison trees in the region seem clustered in this area, there are a few scattered at random throughout several of the neighboring forests, making it dangerous to travel through certain areas without an experienced guide.

- **The Scar**

The Scar is a rocky, desolate rift that lies just inside of the Black Wood. It's one of the few areas on Aris that is not blanketed by trees. Local legend has it that some sort of cataclysm formed the scar and killed all the trees in the area several centuries ago.

# 18

## Tools

Those of you who have followed this column over the past year and a half are now ready to roll the dice. All preparations are complete, and it's time to start playing. Before you can expect your diplomas, though, there's the small matter of the final exam. You won't know for certain whether you have what it takes to DM unless and until you make your way through the first game session. I'm saving the pointers on how to run a session for next month. Before we consider them, it's worth taking some time to survey the various tools that are necessary to play the AD&D game. Having an ideal collection of books, dice and supplies on hand is one of the most effective steps you can take to ensure a smooth game session.

The notes that follow are my personal opinions. Of course, everything that appears in "Dungeoncraft" is my opinion, but in this case it's worth noting. The true masters of Dungeoncraft are more likely to disagree on this subject than any other. Every DM plays differently, and what is an absolutely essential tool to some is an unseemly distraction to others. So as usual, treat my ramblings as food for thought; use the advice you like and ignore the advice you don't like. If you've never DMed before and don't have an opinion of your own, try it my way, discover what works and doesn't work for you, and then write me a letter later to tell me why I was wrong.

There's one other point worth mentioning before I get started. If you plan to do some serious Dungeon Mastering, a trip to your local office superstore is in order. These outlets (such as Office Max, Office Depot, or Staples) carry an indescribable array of papers, organizers, and gadgets that you're likely to find useful. My own tactic is to browse my local superstore from end

to end and allow inspiration to strike. Over the years, I've unearthed an incredible collection of special graph papers, whiteboards, cork boards, and drawing templates that I've found invaluable.

With that out of the way, here are my thoughts on the specific tools you might have on hand before sitting down to a game of AD&D.

## **1. DM's Screen**

A DM's screen of some sort is an absolute necessity. Although I recommend the official "store bought" screen, it's easy enough to improvise your own if you'd rather spend your gaming dollars elsewhere. The main purpose of the DM's Screen, of course, is to give you some place to set your various notes and maps without exposing them to the players. Trying to run a session without a DM's Screen is likely to force you into some uncomfortable contortions and slow play -- you won't be able to keep your materials spread out for easy access, and you'll



find yourself constantly shuffling through papers. In fact, if you have the space on your gaming table, I recommend setting up two adjoining screens for even more secret space. This configuration lets you simultaneously lay out all your materials and keep a rulebook open to an important page, while still leaving plenty of dice-rolling space.

As you get more and more sessions under your belt, you should strive to evolve your DM's Screen to make it as useful as possible. Do you have a consistent problem recalling a certain rule? Scribble a note to yourself and paperclip it to the inside of your screen. Is your next adventure likely to place the players in situations requiring special rules or charts (such as underwater combat or extraplanar spell casting)? Photocopy the appropriate materials and clip them to the inside of your screen. Similarly, when I'm running a store-bought or prepared adventure, I almost always photocopy short sections of the text and clip them to my screen for reference. If I

were running "The Scar" (my adventure from *Dungeon Adventures #80*), for example, I'd copy the random encounter charts and the sections about sneaking around the complex.

Somewhat related to the DM's Screen is the notion of a Player's Screen. Some players like to set up their own secret areas, and TSR even produced an official line of Player's Screens a few years ago. Under all but the most extraordinary circumstances, I ban these distractions from the table. Not only do they take up too much space, but I find that most groups find one or more players maintaining obvious piles of secret notes distracting. Most players with such an interest are really just frustrated DMs anyway and would be much better off running their own campaigns.

## **2. Adventure Notes**

Some set of papers describing the adventure you are running is another obvious necessity. Unless you are one of the best eight or ten DMs ever to

grace the gaming tables, don't even think about running a game without a prepared description of the adventure you are undertaking. A lack of preparation vastly increases the odds that the whole session will collapse into boredom. Sure, you can't possibly cover every contingency in your notes, but a good starting point and a foundation are necessities.

Adventure notes break down into two obvious categories: those you purchase and those you create yourself. The former category is pretty straightforward--you're planning to use whatever the designers give you. (Most store-bought adventures are quite well organized.) When using a store-bought adventure, I always take the time to photocopy any important charts or maps that appear in the text. That way, I can refer to these important materials while keeping the main booklet open to the section describing the players' current activities.

Notes you prepare yourself are another matter altogether. Everyone has his own favorite format, but I prefer to scrawl my notes on carefully numbered loose-leaf paper and keep them in three ring binders. This method allows me to separate the pages so I can refer to several of them simultaneously when necessary. In fact, I've grown so fond of this system that I'll sometimes photocopy smaller store-bought adventures onto individual sheets so I can use them in the same way.

### **3. Rulebooks**

You can't really play the AD&D game without a copy of the rulebooks on hand for reference. One of your goals as DM is to minimize the rules look-ups during play, but a certain amount of page turning is just unavoidable. Always make sure you have your own copies of the Player's Handbook and Dungeon Master Guide on hand, as well as the complete descriptions for any

monsters that might turn up during the evening's adventuring -- not to mention any subsidiary rulebooks you're using (such as the various Complete Handbooks). If one or more monsters are likely to turn up in the current adventure, try copying their vital stats onto 3-by-5 index cards before play begins. That way, you can quickly pull out the cards during play and won't need to flip through various rulebooks and magazines.

I use a couple of other special regulations regarding rulebooks. First, I don't allow the players to refer to anything but the Player's Handbook (and the appropriate Complete Handbook) during play. This prevents the players from consulting monster statistics during a battle or referring to the lists of standard magical items when trying to make guesses about newly acquired items. In fact, I strongly discourage the players from bringing copies of the Dungeon Master Guide or other banned books to the session to save space at the gaming table.

Further, I require players with spellcaster characters to keep the appropriate spell descriptions handy during play. If I have a question about a particular spell cast by a player, I expect that player to have the answer on hand. (What's the range on that sleep spell? What's the duration of invisibility 10' radius?) This prevents me from spending a lot of time flipping through the rules myself, and it usually gives me an opportunity to keep play moving by conducting some other action while the player seeks the answer.

## **4. Character Sheets**

While a blank piece of paper can certainly serve as an effective character sheet, I prefer to provide more formal sheets and mandate their use. I go so far as to require the players to fill out the entire sheet before play. That way, I can guarantee that the players are fully prepared and have pre-calculated their THAC0s, saving throws, and

various other details. Stopping for a player to look up these numbers during the game is only going to consume valuable time and cut into everybody's fun.

Of course, it's possible to take this philosophy too far. Some of the character sheets I've seen (like those for the 1st edition produced about fifteen years ago) practically require the players to write entire books about their characters. The key is to find a sheet that requires a minimum of fuss but still includes all the important details. The official sheets now sold by Wizards of the Coast are quite good. You can also find some decent character sheets floating around various Internet sites, or you can sit down and draw up your own. I recommend this last course only if you expect your campaign to have some unusual needs. As DM, you already have plenty of work to do -- if you can't find anything else, investing a few bucks in the official sheets is almost always worth it.

## 5. Dice

Dice are an obvious requirement for playing the AD&D game, though there are a couple of points that are worth mentioning. Don't buy cheap dice made of soft plastic -- the high impact polyhedrons aren't much more expensive and one decent set will last you forever. The softies tend to wear out after a few months. Also, make sure you and your players have enough dice for everybody. Generally, at a minimum this means a full set for the DM, a full set for the players as a whole, and a separate d20 for each individual player. Sharing a single d20 among all the players tends to waste a lot of time and slow down combat. It's also a good idea to ask the players to keep the dice they are using close to themselves and away from the center of the game table. Allowing the dice to clutter up the middle of the table not only makes it easy for players to lose dice they personally own, but it can make specific dice difficult to find when needed.



While it's important to make sure you have enough dice on hand, it's also important not to clutter up the playing area with unneeded dice. For some reason, there are some DMs who like to travel around with huge bags full of the things. I've never understood this impulse. As DM, you already have enough things to carry, and a huge mess of dice is just going to get in your way.

## **6. Miniatures**

Miniatures constitute one of the great controversies among DMs. Some wouldn't think of playing without them; others find them distracting and limiting. Personally, I think they add a great deal to play, and I encourage you to use them every chance you get. That said, there are some obvious drawbacks that prevent many DMs from adopting them.

If you've ever been in a game store, I don't need to tell you that miniatures are expensive. A good starting set can easily run a couple hundred

dollars or more. Even after you shell out the cash, you have to find the time to paint the things. The last seventeen columns have probably already clued you into the fact that, as DM, you already have an awful lot of work to do.

Of course, buying and painting miniatures is an enjoyable end unto itself. There's a real satisfaction in capturing just the right expression on that goblin's face or correctly painting chain mail for the first time. Plus, a good collection of painted miniatures is a nice trophy you can use to decorate your game room.

If you're thinking about using miniatures in your games but have yet to make up your mind, here's a recommendation. Never buy more than one or two figures at a time, and buy new figures only when you've finished painting the last ones. That way, if you discover that you don't really have the time or the patience to invest in a collection, you'll minimize your investment and won't end up with an enormous pile of unpainted lead.

## 7. Battle Maps

Some DMs like to run their combats entirely in the imaginations of the players, taking time each round to describe the relative positions of the various combatants and the surrounding scenery. I prefer to use tokens, markers, or miniatures as a visual aid to depict the action. I find that such a scheme not only saves me time but also encourages the players to be a bit more creative when describing their actions. Showing a player a battle map roughly depicting the scenery inside the dungeon is a great way to encourage him to try an interesting maneuver like yanking a tapestry off a wall down onto the head of his opponent. Another benefit of using a battle map is that you'll find it much easier to adjudicate the range and effect areas of spells, breath weapons, and so forth.

If you're on a tight budget, a pad of paper and a pencil can serve as an effective map. Whenever you start a combat, sketch out a little map of the

battleground and place each character's initials on the map to indicate his or her position. As the combatants move, just erase and redraw the initials.

If you've got a little money to spend, an even better method is to purchase a small whiteboard (say 2 feet by 3 feet) and a set of dry erase markers from your neighborhood office supply store. Place the whiteboard in the middle of the gaming table and quickly sketch out the surroundings whenever a combat begins. You can use improvised tokens or miniature figures directly on the board to represent the various combatants or draw in initials as I recommended above.

## **8. Notepads**

I always make sure to have two small notepads on hand when running a session. I keep one and place the other outside of my DM screen in front of the players. The purpose of the notepads is to

allow specific players and myself to exchange secret communications.

Suppose, for instance, that the players are exploring a forest, they've sent their thief up ahead as a scout, and he's just stumbled across something interesting. For now, I might simply pass that player a note describing what he sees instead of blurting out the description to the whole party. After all, if the thief just discovered something dangerous, the rest of the party shouldn't know anything about it unless the thief is close enough to shout a warning.

Similarly, if the thief just discovered some treasure, he might want to help himself to some of the choice pieces before he reveals the rest of the treasure to his friends.

## **9. Props**

I'm a big fan of using relevant props during play, particularly little handouts approximating scrolls,

notes and other important clues uncovered by the players. I think that props give the DM an excellent method of subtly communicating important information to the players and therefore lead to much more interesting puzzles (for a more complete discussion of puzzles, see issue #271). Suppose, for instance, that the players are searching a duke's private papers and they find a note the duke received from his lord ordering him to launch a treacherous attack on a nearby town. The fact that a couple of specific words in the letter are misspelled might be a clue meant to convince the players that the note was a forgery. Perhaps the players have already seen another note undeniably written by the king's mischievous brother in which those same two words were misspelled. How can you pass the players these clues without providing them with facsimiles of the notes in question? After all, simply announcing that "You find a note in which two words are misspelled" immediately calls attention to the ruse and spoils the whole thing. This is a great example of the sort of puzzle you should

strive to create, and you should try to use such props and facsimiles whenever you can.

On the other hand, I'm not a big fan of using props that don't really advance the adventure or provide the players with important information. I've known DMs and players who like to bring toy daggers, cheap jewelry, or even entire costumes to game sessions to help them "get into character." Personally, I find those sorts of things a little spooky, but if you find that they add to your fun, more power to you.

That wraps up another installment. Next month, as promised, I'll provide some tips for running your first session.

# 19

## Action and Reaction

Traditionally, the best way to learn how to DM is to play in a few games run by a veteran Dungeon Master. In many ways, the fine art of Dungeoncraft is a grand oral tradition passed from DM to DM that stretches all the way back to Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson. If it works, the following advice will help you get up and running even if you don't have access to a veteran.

## Action and Reaction

The AD&D® game is one of action and reaction. As the DM, you begin the session by describing a scene or situation. The players react by describing the actions they wish to take. You react to their descriptions by deciding and announcing the



outcomes of those actions. The players then react to the outcomes with new actions, and you react with still more outcomes. This process continues through the session and the entire campaign. The best way to illustrate is through the simple example in the box below:

Even this simple example reveals that the lion's share of DMing boils down to a trio of basic skills:

- Providing effective descriptions.
- Determining how to resolve the outcomes of the characters' actions.
- Deciding when you should automatically reveal information and when you should force the players to specifically ask for information.

# Providing Effective Descriptions

The first skill, providing effective descriptions, is by far the easiest to master. You've probably practiced it all your life. Giving accurate and interesting descriptions is an important part of the DM's job for a number of reasons, most of them obvious. If you can't effectively describe the rooms the heroes explore or the characters they meet, you'll only confuse the players and make it difficult for them to formulate actions in response to your situations. Neglecting to mention that open window on the north wall when the players are trapped in a burning inn, for example, might ruin your entire game. Similarly, droning on and on with boring descriptions of scenery is likely to put your players to sleep before the action even starts.

Although advice on improving your ability to provide descriptions is really the province of an English class, here are a few quick tips before

moving on. First, if you're not completely comfortable inventing your own descriptions, stick with published adventures like those found in DUNGEON® Adventures. These offerings almost always include notes that help you describe the action and sometimes go so far as to provide complete, "ready to read" descriptions (usually boxed and shaded text). Although you'll still bear the brunt of the work, you're sure to find a good starting point incredibly helpful. After you get a couple of sessions under your belt, you'll almost certainly find yourself growing more and more comfortable with the notion of improvising your own descriptions. A simple tactic you can glean from the best published adventures is the idea of incorporating all of the heroes' senses into the descriptions that you create. Don't just tell the players what they see in the dungeon; tell them what they hear and even what they smell when appropriate. Done effectively, this will take some of the pressure off your shoulders by making your environment seem more real, allowing the

players' own imaginations to fill any gaps or accidental omissions.

Also, never allow yourself to feel rushed while conducting a game session. If you're not sure what should happen next or how best to describe it, don't be afraid to pause for a few moments to think before you start talking. Your players certainly won't hold it against you, and, under most circumstances, the brief pause only adds another layer of suspense to the proceedings. Some beginning DMs tend to get nervous or "freeze up." Just remember, this is only a game. Nobody's grading you, and the very worst thing that can happen is that you and your friends will decide to let someone else DM for a while.

## **Resolving Actions**

The second skill, resolving the players' actions, is a little more difficult to master, but it's still pretty straightforward. What makes this skill relatively easy to develop is a pair of powerful weapons that

are at your disposal: the AD&D game rules and simple common sense.

Instructions for resolving many of the most common actions the players are bound to throw your way appear in the Player's Handbook and the DUNGEON MASTER Guide. The rules tell you how to resolve armed attacks and attempts to cast spells, to turn undead, to find secret doors, and so on. The rules also tell you how to resolve many of the consequences that might arise from a character's actions. A thief who fails to climb a wall falls. The rules tell you just how much the fall hurts the thief.

It is precisely because the rules are so helpful in resolving actions that a good working knowledge of the rules is a minimum requirement for any DM. Generally, each of the game rules exists because the specific situation it handles is particularly hard to resolve credibly without assistance. Take the earlier example of the thief falling off the wall. Does she die from the fall?

Break a leg? Survive completely unscathed? Any ruling you might make based solely upon your own whim is bound to seem totally arbitrary to the players, risking your credibility. An arbitrary decision here or there is relatively easy to accept, but long strings of arbitrary decisions tend to make the players start to doubt the impact of their own actions. After a while, they'll find it hard to make intelligent decisions because they have no idea how you'll rule.

Using the rules whenever possible makes it easy to make some tough calls because the rules leave little for you to decide. The rules also provide a reliable mechanism by which the players can predict the outcome of some simple actions while still leaving a great deal to chance. It's this fact that allows the players to make informed, intelligent decisions. A party of 3rd-level adventurers usually knows that they shouldn't mess with an ancient red dragon because even a cursory knowledge of the game rules reveals that the dragon will soon be picking bits of adventurer

out of its teeth. Without consistent rules, there would be no way for the players to decide when a monster is worth fighting.

For all of these reasons, to be a good DM you must know as much about the game rules as possible. If you're not aware of some rules (and there are an awful lot to digest), you might find yourself making arbitrary decisions when it isn't really necessary. Making matters a bit more complicated is the fact that simply knowing the rules is sometimes not enough. Under some circumstances, you have to understand the intent of the rules to wield them capably. A perfect example might be the rules for saving throws; their true potential is often overlooked. The DUNGEON MASTER Guide tells us that a saving throw vs. paralyzation, poison, or death magic might be used to represent an extreme test of a character's physical fortitude or willpower. Suppose the prototypical damsel in distress is trapped in a burning tower and one of the PCs decides to run in after her. Does the attempt

succeed? If you hadn't carefully read the DUNGEON MASTER Guide you might be forced to make an arbitrary decision even though this is an ideal opportunity to simply call for a saving throw vs. paralyzation or death magic. If the saving throw is successful, the character rescues the damsel. If the saving throw is unsuccessful, the character is forced out of the building before he can rescue her. Of course, the fact that the rules are useful doesn't mean that you should become a slave to them. It's often more important to keep the game moving than to make sure you're following each rule strictly. This advice probably makes it sound like it's going to be difficult to determine when you should carefully follow the rules and when you should just "wing it," but you're likely to find that such decisions are surprisingly intuitive during play. You'll quickly develop a feel for which rules seem too complex for your group and which seem relatively digestible.



When it comes to resolving those actions that are not covered by the rules, common sense is your most useful ally. Once play begins, your players are going to throw all sorts of unexpected actions at you, and many won't be explicitly covered by the rules. It's at this point that you're forced to become both judge and jury. Do the actions seem plausible? What is their likely outcome? Suppose, for example, that the adventurers are trapped high up in a wizard's tower. To escape, they've decided to rip some bed sheets into strips so they can tie the strips together and fashion a crude rope. How long do you think it might take to fashion the rope and scale down? Unfortunately, the rules are of little use here.

The best way to beef up your ability to make this type of decision is to watch a lot of adventure movies and read a lot of fantasy novels. The last example illustrates an important point. You should never lose sight of the fact that the events that take place in your AD&D games are not supposed to reflect our own reality, but a world of

grand adventure. In the real world it might be difficult and time consuming to shred bed linen into a useful rope. In movies and fantasy stories, though, the heroes do this sort of thing all the time. As a consequence, the tactic should work perfectly well in your games. The more stories you read and absorb, the better the feel you'll develop for handling these situations. Fortunately, few DMs have to be specially motivated to read fantasy stories and watch adventure films. If you're interested in the AD&D game, the odds are good that you're also interested in the stories that inspired it.

## **Revealing Information**

The third and most difficult skill to develop is a good feel for when and how you should reveal information. Suppose that the adventurers hear a cry of distress coming from around the corner, deep in a dungeon. When you describe the cry, should you reveal that the voice sounds like that

of the damsel the adventurers rescued from the burning tower a couple of sessions ago, or should you reveal that information only if one of the players specifically asks if the voice sounds familiar? Unfortunately, there's no easy answer to this dilemma.

These situations generally reduce down to a trade-off between revealing lots of information to keep the game moving and revealing only a little information to force the players to make more decisions and ask for more clarifications. Expert DMs tend to use the amount of information they reveal at any given time to pace their adventures in the same way that great movie directors control the pacing of their films. Consider a simple example: The adventurers have just entered an unpopulated dungeon chamber filled with various bits of broken furniture. Beneath an old shattered bed is a small sack containing 10 gold pieces. There are several ways you might describe this scene, each revealing various bits of information.

- **Method One**

You enter a small chamber filled with broken bits of old furniture. From the doorway you can see what appears to be a small sack resting beneath an old shattered bed.

In this case, you're revealing everything. To get the gold, the players simply announce their intention to grab the sack.

- **Method Two**

You enter a small chamber filled with broken bits of old furniture.

Here, the gold is now one step removed. To find it, the players must announce a specific intent to search the broken furniture.

- **Method Three**

You enter a small chamber. Inside is an old smashed chair, two badly broken

tables, and the remains of shattered bed.

This method makes the gold even harder to find. Simply searching the furniture isn't really possible. To find the gold, the players must announce a specific intent to search beneath the shattered bed.

Which approach is best depends upon the situation. If this isn't an important encounter, and you want the game to move quickly past it, you might select the first or second approach. If this is a crucial encounter, though, you might opt for the third approach to slow things down a bit and emphasize the action. Notice how the amount of information you supply in your descriptions dictates the amount of detail the players are forced to supply in return. Unfortunately, the only reliable method of gaining a feel for which approach is appropriate at what times is to earn it through hard experience.

In addition to slowing down play, another reason why you might sometimes opt to reveal less information is to challenge the players to make decisions, take actions, or draw conclusions. Suppose a dusty room in your dungeon houses a giant spider living in a camouflaged web that stretches across the ceiling. Instead of immediately describing the web, you might describe a set of dusty footprints that lead into the middle of the room and suddenly stop. It's now up to the players to recognize that something must have dropped down to kill the owner of those footprints in the room's midst, prompting them to specifically examine the ceiling and find the hidden web. If the players don't grasp the significance of the disappearing footprints and simply blunder into the room, you might rule that the spider takes them by surprise, putting them in a bit of a pickle. This is a great example of the sort of "puzzle" you should try to incorporate into your games. (See Chapter 12.) Deliberately withholding some information is often a

necessary component of making such puzzles work.

# 20

## Your Game's Voice

Last month, we started to examine what it takes to run a D&D game session and got as far as the three basic skills that cover the lion's share of the DM's responsibilities-providing effective descriptions, resolving actions, and deciding how and when to reveal information. This month, let's conclude the examination with looks at two new and equally important topics-characterization and time keeping.

### Your Game's Voice

The DM spends the bulk of any session describing the action. As DM, you must describe locations, events, actions, and characters. Properly describing this last category is



particularly challenging. Before you even begin, you face an important decision that's likely to set the tenor of your entire campaign. To describe a character completely, you must describe not only that character's physical appearance but also what the character says and does. Sometimes, you must even describe how the character feels. Most DMs convey this information in one of two ways, which are best illustrated by example.

## **Method One**

DM: You see a town guardsman on the road up ahead. He's asking you to come over, and he seems friendly.

PC: All right. I approach the guardsman. What does he want?

DM: He asks if you've seen any suspicious individuals out on the road this evening.

Apparently, a merchant caravan was waylaid a couple of hours ago, and he's looking for the

perpetrator. Something about the way he's asking, though, suggests that he's not telling you everything he knows about the incident.

## **Method Two**

DM: "You see a town guardsman on the road up ahead." (in a booming voice, as the guard) "Hello, my good fellow! Might I have a word with you?"

PC: (hesitant) "Hello, my friend. Is something wrong?"

DM: (as guardsman)"Oh, no! No, sir. I was just hoping to ask you and your friends here if you might have seen anyone...well, suspicious out on the road this afternoon."

PC: "Suspicious? In what way."

DM: "Hmm...I suppose you might say, well...let's just say suspicious."

These two opposing play styles neatly define and divide Dungeon Masters in the same way that "right handed" and "left handed" define and divide major league pitchers. When all else is equal, neither style is "correct" or superior to the other, but most players respond better to one style or the other. Similarly, it's usually difficult for a DM inclined toward the first style to run a game using the second, or vice versa. Since the style you choose-or, perhaps, the style that chooses you-has a profound impact upon the sort of games you'll run, it's important to understand all of the advantages and drawbacks of each method.

## **Third-Person Play**

The first method is usually known as third person, a term you might remember from English class. In this case, the DM and players narrate the action in a neutral voice and refer to the various characters they play in the third person-just like Bob Dole used to refer to himself in his campaign

speeches. In other words, if you're temporarily taking on the role of an orc and you want to insult one of the player heroes and threaten him with death, you might say, "The lead orc walks up to you and threatens you with death." Games run in a third-person style tend to place more focus on plot and less on characterization. In other words, after you've played in such a game for a while, you're more likely to remember the epic sagas that unfolded rather than the colorful characters that have emerged.

One of the real advantages of a third-person game is that such a style makes it considerably easier for shy players to participate fully in the action. Some players find it difficult to get a little silly, and the third person allows them to maintain a certain comfortable distance. Third-person games also tend to move faster than their counterparts because lengthy, intricate conversations are often summarized into a series of quick conversations. This is one of the characteristics of a third-person game that tends to result in an emphasis on plot,

since a faster pace tends to mean that more things can happen during each session.

One of the myths about third-person gaming is that such a style makes it impossible for the players to create interesting characters. In fact, the third person sometimes allows you to easily convey certain subtleties that are difficult to get across in any other way. For instance, you might accept an invitation to lead a war party into enemy territory by saying, "I'll accept the king's offer. As I leave his chamber, though, the look in my eye clearly indicates that I do not relish the prospect of more bloodshed." Getting this point across using another technique might be much harder. In fact, this example nicely illustrates that the most interesting sort of characterization that emerges from third-person games tends to illustrate the deeper psychology of the characters involved in place of their simple mannerisms. It's often a bit harder to firmly create a character in the imagination of the players using such a method, but it's certainly possible.

# First-Person Play

The second method illustrated in the earlier examples is usually known as first person. In a first-person game, the DM and the players temporarily become the characters they are playing. At a minimum, this means that the players speak their dialogue exactly as their characters would say the lines. In other words, instead of "I walk up to the guard and ask him what's causing that commotion on the other side of town," you might say, "Friend guard! What exactly is causing all the unrest on the far side of the bridge?" In most first-person games, though, the players go one step further and speak in funny voices or use other mannerisms to better convey their characters. A fighter might speak in bold, confident tones, while a wise old wizard might scratch his chin a lot and quietly reflect before speaking. In other words, the players almost go so far as to act out their roles as though the game is a very special sort of stage play.

The chief advantage of the first person style is that it allows the players to easily convey their characters' basic mannerisms and attitudes. Players who are skilled in this style can very quickly create an impression of their characters in the imagination of the remaining participants, making it very easy for everyone to distinguish one character from another. Since the players who like this sort of thing tend to ham it up a bit, though, first-person games almost always progress more slowly than their third-person counterparts. In fact, it's quite easy for an accomplished group of first-person gamers to spend an entire session re-enacting a suitably social encounter, like a grand banquet or a ball. Of course, such delays aren't necessarily a bad thing at all. Even though it's entirely possible that no dice will ever hit the table and little "plot" will be resolved, these experiences can be a lot of fun, and they tend to help the players add depth and interest to their characters. The fact that such sessions don't require a lot of preparation on the

part of the already beleaguered DM doesn't hurt either!

One of the big drawbacks to the first-person approach is the amount of stress it places upon the DM. After all, it's fairly easy for each player to invent a character voice or an interesting mannerism for his or her character, but the Dungeon Master often takes on the roles of several different characters each session! To keep things running properly, the DM must be a wellspring of funny voices and unique characterizations. Some DMs relish this challenge and enjoy the opportunity to grab the spotlight. Others quickly fall into a rut and use the same voices over and over again. Fortunately, most DMs who are drawn to the first person style are natural hams and it tends to take a while before repetition starts to become a real problem.

Again, the most important thing to understand at this point is that neither style is superior to the other. Don't try to force yourself to adopt a style



that seems uncomfortable. Employ whatever style comes most naturally and try to take maximum advantage of its strengths while playing down its weaknesses. If you are inclined toward third person, this means preparing more plot for each session (due to the faster pace) and giving some thought to the deeper psychology of your NPCs. If you are inclined toward first person, it means designing encounters with plenty of opportunities for conversation and working out fresh voices and mannerisms for your NPCs.

## **Timing**

One of your most important duties as Dungeon Master is keeping an accurate account of time as it elapses in the fictional game world. In other words, you should always know how long it takes the characters in the game world to resolve the actions they are currently undertaking. Sometimes the game rules will help you calculate these durations. The rules tell you, for instance,

how long it takes a given character to walk from one end of the dungeon to another, or how long it takes a wizard to prepare her spells. Often, though, you must judge the timing of an action with only your common sense and real-world references to guide you. Suppose, for example, that the players decide to hire some laborers to dig a gold mine. How long will it take to sink the mine and start extracting ore? A month? A year? How long should it take to hunt for game or assemble a makeshift shelter out of tree branches?

## **Tracking Time**

Keeping an accurate account of the passage of time is important for a number of reasons.

Inaccurate timing makes it difficult to gauge your responses to the players' actions and unfold whatever plots you have devised. Suppose you've decided that the players' stronghold has attracted the attention of a local burglar who plans to sneak in on the night of the next new moon. On the

evening in question, the players happen to be returning from a dungeon when they decide to stop on their way home to ask a local sage to identify some treasure. Does the thief arrive at the stronghold before or after the players return? Obviously, the answer to this question will have an enormous impact upon how you decide to deal with the situation. This example is rather simplistic to help illustrate the point, but during the typical game session you're bound to encounter this dilemma in numerous and subtler guises.

Accurate timing is also crucial to resolving many situations arising directly from the rules. Suppose a wizard casts a sleep spell on an ogre. How much farther into the dungeon can the party go before the ogre wakes up and comes looking for them? Similarly, imagine an army of enemy soldiers advancing on the adventurers' stronghold. How many spells can the players' wizards manage to prepare before the army arrives and

the battle begins? These are crucial questions, and you'll need to arrive at clear, consistent answers.

The good news is that keeping track of time is one of the DM's easier responsibilities. Try to get in the habit of maintaining a special scratch pad used just for time keeping, and make sure this pad is always handy. I like to mark a "D" on the pad for each day that elapses, an "H" for each hour, a "T" for each ten minutes, an "M" for each minute, and a check mark for each melee round (10 rounds make 1 minute). In other words, if the adventurers make a two-day trek to the nearest town for supplies, I mark "DD" on my timing sheet. If they pause for a meal as soon as they enter the town, I might decide that the meal takes about an hour and a half and I'll mark H T T T (1 hour and 30 minutes) on the sheet. Once I've marked down enough 10 minutes to equal an hour or enough hours to equal a day, I'll cross out those markings and replace them as appropriate. In other words, when I reach six Ts (for 60 minutes), I cross them out and replace them with an H (for

a single hour). This system allows me to quickly compute the current day and time in the game world, which in turn allows me to time my plots and events accurately.

## **Pacing**

Closely related to the importance of accurate timekeeping is the concept of pacing. Another of the DM's many important responsibilities is keeping the events of the game moving at a brisk pace in order to keep the players interested. Getting bogged down in details or describing each individual tree the players pass during a long cross-country journey is a quick route to boredom. We touched upon the DM's ability to arbitrarily speed up play in last month's discussion of effective descriptions. It's important to recognize, though, that there are also situations in which it makes sense to slow down the passage of time to emphasize important actions. Fortunately, this concept is built directly into the

D&D game rules. Under normal circumstances, game play proceeds in a free-form fashion, with the players announcing their actions somewhat haphazardly and the DM resolving those actions and passing whatever time he feels appropriate. Once combat starts, though, the game becomes more formalized, the players begin announcing their intentions in strict turn order, and all actions are restricted to durations of 6-second rounds to make sure that nobody accomplishes too much before others have an opportunity to react. In essence, combats take a disproportionately greater amount of real time to resolve than most other game situations, drawing additional attention to them and heightening the suspense that arises from them.

Although the D&D game calls for the use of formalized melee rounds and initiative scores only to resolve combat, you should feel free to employ these rules whenever you'd like to slow down play for effect, whether or not the players are embroiled in a fight. It might make sense to

use combat rounds while the players cross a rickety bridge suspended high over a valley. Asking each player to take formal turns describing his actions as he crosses the bridge not only increases the drama of the encounter but also helps you decide who has an opportunity to react should someone stumble.

That wraps up another installment. Next month, try the "Dungeoncraft" Pop Quiz to see what you've learned so far. Time to pull out your back issues and start brushing up!

# 21

## I've Got a Secret, Part I

### **The Second Rule of Dungeoncraft:**

Whenever you fill in a major piece of the campaign world, always devise at least one secret related to that piece.

Ever since I introduced the Second Rule of Dungeoncraft way back in Chapter 2, I've tried to stress the importance of keeping good secrets. It's difficult to imagine a successful D&D campaign without a whole web of interesting secrets at its heart. In most cases, a good campaign is like a good soap opera -- it's the twists, turns, and unexpected revelations that keep the audience interested. Giving your players the opportunity to



unravel big mysteries can give them a real sense of accomplishment, while simultaneously adding a lot of personality and depth to your campaign world.

Sadly, creating really interesting secrets can be tricky. I receive a lot of requests for tips on creating and using secrets in the fan mail I read each month. Unfortunately, creating appropriate secrets is a lot like swimming or riding a bike -- written instructions aren't very useful; you have to learn by watching and doing.

After giving this topic some thought, I decided that the best way I can help is to present a bunch of sample secrets. Although it should be easy to fit the rough templates I'll provide directly into most campaigns, my real hope is that exposure to enough of these ideas will get your own creative juices flowing. Along the way, I'll briefly discuss the ideas I present and include a few notes on how such a secret might affect the campaign.

One general piece of advice to consider when creating secrets is to strive for the truly outrageous. In most cases, the more shocking the secret, the more effective it will prove in play. A tactic I sometimes employ is to introduce a fact or situation that seems impossible, then allow the players to uncover the information necessary to explain it. After the second or third time the players get to the bottom of such a mystery, you'll usually find that you've nicely peaked their sense of anticipation, insuring their interest in the game. (What's going to happen next, and how is he going to explain it this time?)

I've divided my examples into five simple categories: historical secrets, character secrets, divine secrets, geographical secrets, and just plain weird secrets. The first two kinds are covered this month.

# Historical Secrets

Shocking revelations about the hidden past of your campaign world can provide plenty of entertaining opportunities. Generally, this sort of secret not only gives your players something interesting to explore, it also conveniently fleshes out the history of your game world and provides springboards for several interesting adventures to come. The very best historical secrets give your players an opportunity to directly interact with the most important events that shaped the history of the game world, allowing them to feel like an important part of that history themselves.

Historical secrets can also serve as a great way to introduce exposition about the politics of your campaign. Uncovering the hidden truths that lie behind the alliance of two great kingdoms, for instance, should give the players interesting insights into how they might break that alliance.

# 1. Return of the Long-Dead Hero

Perhaps one of the long-dead heroes of your game world isn't really dead after all. Since this sort of secret is an obvious staple of comic books and soap operas, it needs to be well executed in order to be effective and interesting. A great deal rests on the quality of the explanation -- how or why did the "dead" hero survive? Come up with a detailed or novel answer and you've just created a powerful secret.

My version might go something like this: I'll invent a famous king who waged war across an entire continent in order to unite all its peoples under a single benevolent rule. Ironically, it is believed that the king was killed by the last arrow shot during the final battle of the great campaign, just over thirty years ago. In truth, the king wasn't killed. After winning the final battle, he abandoned his armies and was never seen again. Confused by the king's sudden absence and fearful that their newly forged coalition would

crumble in its wake, the king's advisors invented the story of his death and set about forging the new, united nation.

In reality, the king was concerned that his remarkable achievements were making him particularly susceptible to the dangerous sin of pride. In the end, he decided that taking up the throne after all his great military victories would constitute too many accomplishments for any one man. In order to "put himself back in his proper place," he resolved to abandon his armies shortly after his final victory and spend the rest of his life living as a humble beggar in his former capital city.

This secret might set you up for a series of adventures in which the players first discover that the king is still alive, then discover the king's whereabouts, and finally attempt to convince the king to return to his armies and lead them against a menace threatening the kingdom he created.

## 2. A Secret Debt to Evil

This is a secret about a powerful and prosperous nation that overcame great odds to defeat a malevolent rival almost a century earlier.

Unknown to just about everyone, the triumph came at a great price. During the final battle against their rivals, the rulers of the prosperous nation found themselves in desperate circumstances, and they were forced to employ the aid of a powerful demon to insure victory. In return for its services, the demon is entitled to the first daughter born to the ruling family every second generation. For the past one hundred years, the ruling family has secretly paid this price, each time carefully inventing a cover story to explain away the sudden death or disappearance of the princess.

During the campaign, the players might get their first inkling of this secret when they notice a strange outbreak of evil across the countryside. Eventually, they'll uncover the truth about the

ruling family and the source of the evil outbreak -- the current king is refusing to turn his daughter over to the demon, prompting the infernal creature to take revenge. In the end, of course, it's likely that the players will discover that the demon created the original conflict between the two nations as part of an elaborate plot to maneuver the royal family into accepting the pact. The second-generation daughters of this particular family have some mysterious value to the demon, nicely setting the stage for you to create yet another secret.

### **3. History Repeats Itself**

This one is a bit stranger than the first two examples. Across the course of the campaign, the players will gradually glean more and more details about the past history of the setting. Once they've accumulated enough of these details, they'll start to realize that the history of the planet is one huge cycle that repeats itself according to a definitive pattern over and over again. For

instance, maybe every 1,116 years two great nations go to war, the smaller of the two nations always wins after exactly 23,411 lives have been lost in the conflict, and exactly twelve years later, the victorious general always loses his life to unexpected treachery.

This secret is particularly valuable to the players because of the way they can use it to predict future events, allowing them to accomplish great things while simultaneously giving them the feeling that they are true "movers and shakers." It also nicely sets you up to create still more interesting secrets -- what is the exact significance of the historical pattern, and how did it come into being?

#### **4. When is a King not a King?**

Most D&D game worlds boast dynasties of great kings who have ruled wisely over a particular kingdom or empire for generations on end. Typically, the citizens of these kingdoms thank



fortune that each successive generation always seems to produce a fitting heir who turns out to be as wise as all his ancestors.

Suppose, though, that the kings are not the real font of wisdom behind the kingdom and never have been.

Unknown to everyone, including the kings themselves, the king's hereditary sword has been secretly governing the affairs of state since the foundation of the kingdom many generations ago. The sword is intelligent and capable of subtly manipulating its wielders to insure just rule. Perhaps it even houses the intellect of the very first king, who had the sword forged because he couldn't stand the idea of giving up his kingdom after death.

There are a number of ways such a secret might become important during the campaign. If the sword is stolen, for instance, the whole kingdom might unravel until it can be returned. Another

possibility is a newly-crowned king discovering the secret of the sword and deciding that he doesn't want to make use of its capabilities. After the king attempts to rid himself of the sword, the sword begins plotting his downfall and drifts from owner to owner, hoping to find someone who can depose the king.

## **Character Secrets**

Secrets about characters -- both PCs and NPCs -- provide another set of possibilities rich with opportunity. The classic character secret is a surprise revelation about a character's past, though the true possibilities are nearly limitless. Character secrets are particularly useful for encouraging good roleplaying and prompting your players to examine their characters a bit more closely. Nothing adds depth to a character like a good secret, and deep characters enhance your campaign in all sorts of ways.

It's easiest to create secrets about NPCs since you completely control their backstories, mannerisms, and behaviors, but don't be afraid to occasionally create secrets about the PCs. After all, heroes who discover hidden details about their pasts are a staple of myth and legend. Of course, some players are likely to be more receptive to these "discoveries" than others. You'll occasionally encounter a player who likes to carefully control his characters and create every detail of the characters' histories himself. Fortunately, these folks are relatively rare and easy to spot. Your best bet is to avoid them altogether and save your secrets for a more appreciative audience.

## **5. The Unexpected Relationship**

Even though this old chestnut has been parodied to death (thanks to Star Wars), it's still surprisingly effective. The bit, of course, is that one of the characters in the campaign is secretly related in some way to one of the other characters. Maybe an evil wizard turns out to be

the long lost brother of one of the PCs, or an NPC beggar discovers that he is actually a member of the royal family and the rightful heir to a throne.

Because secrets such as these can be kind of goofy if incorrectly executed, it's important to get them right. First of all, such secrets are rarely effective unless a long period of time elapses between the point at which everyone meets the two characters in question and the instant the hidden relationship is uncovered. In other words, don't introduce a brand new NPC in an adventure and reveal that the NPC is actually a PC's mother by adventure's end. The revelation will be much more powerful if you delay it for several adventures to come. Give everyone a chance to get acquainted with the new character and a chance to think they know her before you spring your big surprise.

It's equally important to devise a clever explanation for why the relationship has remained a secret for so long. Silly plot devices like

amnesia and "stolen by gypsies" generally won't cut it without lots of additional details to shore them up and make them interesting. A workable example might go something like this: Suppose you've decided that one of the PCs is secretly the son of the evil baron who serves as the master villain in your campaign. All his life, the PC has assumed that he is actually the son of the good baron who is a lifelong foe of the villain. This mystery is explained by a strange pact the two barons forged long ago. In a desperate attempt to keep the peace between their two armies, the barons decided to secretly swap sons -- each would raise the other's child, making it difficult for either baron to attack the other without risking harm to his own son. Although the pact served its purpose for many years, the whole scheme finally went awry when the biological son of the good baron was killed by the PC during a craven attempt to assassinate the good duke, his "father's" lifelong enemy. Over the years, both barons became very fond of their charges and grew to think of them as their own sons. The evil

baron now blames the PC for the death of his adopted son and has sworn revenge.

## **6. I'm a Murderer?**

This is a great surprise to pull on a good-aligned player character. Every now and then, the PC should receive strange looks and such until one day a group of inquisitors finally arrives to confront him. The inquisitors have been pursuing the PC for several months and claim to have eyewitness evidence that the PC committed some unimaginably horrible crime. The campaign then proceeds for a time like a crime novel, with the PC and his companions struggling to prove his innocence, but becoming frustrated at each turn. If you orchestrate things properly, the remaining PCs might even begin to doubt their friend themselves. Things finally take the ultimate turn for the worse when some sort of unassailable method of establishing guilt (possibly magical) proves that the PC did, in fact, commit the crime even though he has no memory of it.

From this point, there are a number of ways you might explain the discrepancy, most involving magical mind control or similar means. My own explanation might go something like this: The PC is not whom he believes to be and never has been. In fact, the PC is a highly trained assassin from a land notorious for producing the most skilled assassins in the world. After performing a particularly difficult mission (the crime he is accused of), the PC was forced to drink a magical potion to escape. This potion effectively made the PC an entirely different person, giving him new memories and a new alignment. Once he had quaffed the potion, it was possible for the PC to evade various magical spells (like detect evil) that might have prevented his escape from the target's home. Even if he was captured and magically compelled to tell the truth, the PC would have no incriminating memories. Naturally, part of the plan called for the assassin's colleagues to recapture him at some point and restore his old memories, but that never happened. In fact, maybe the PCs first get wind of this secret when

they foil the assassins' seemingly mysterious attempts to recapture their old colleague.

Once the scheme is in motion, of course, the PC is in quite a pickle. As a consequence, maybe you should wait until all the PCs have gained a few experience levels before springing this little gem. That should give them plenty of options when they deal with the fallout.

That wraps up another installment. Join me here in thirty days for "I've Got a Secret, Part II."



## 22

# I've Got a Secret, Part II

**Last Month** I began discussing the hows and wherefores of keeping effective secrets in your D&D campaigns. As part of that discussion, I identified five general categories of secrets: historical secrets, character secrets, divine secrets, geographical secrets, and "just plain weird" secrets. In last month's column I discussed the first two categories and provided a series of examples.

**This Month** I'll tackle the final three.

## Divine Secrets

Because their nature tends to imply mystery and hidden truth, the gods of your campaign world

can often provide an excellent springboard for secrets. Since so many of the fundamentals of your world -- its creation, its history, and its destiny -- are likely to be intimately entwined with the activities of the divine powers, secrets about the gods are often among the most ancient and powerful mysteries you can devise. Of course, the epic scale of such secrets can be a double-edged sword. Plausibly drawing the players into contact with godly entities and their hidden truths can be difficult, not to mention the obvious play balance problems. Cleverly constructed secrets, though, can certainly skirt around these difficulties.

Assuming you do discover a way to pull one off, one of the truly interesting characteristics of a really good divine secret is the sense of power and participation it can lend your players. Little can do more to reinforce the characters' importance than uncovering a deep secret of the gods themselves. Such a discovery tends to almost automatically bestow a sort of legendary

status upon the PCs, making the players more fond of their characters.

## **8. One of the Gods Walks Among Us**

In most D&D campaigns, the gods are all-powerful distant beings who live on a remote plane of existence. Under normal conditions, any direct contact between the PCs and the divine powers is extremely unlikely.

This particular secret revolves around the notion that one of the gods secretly resides on the physical plane in the guise of a being or character with whom the PCs can meet and interact. This ploy is particularly effective if a lot of time passes between the point at which the PCs first encounter the disguised entity and the moment when they uncover his secret. It's much more interesting when the secret involves a character with whom the players are quite familiar. The mysterious beggar who keeps turning up along

the PCs' route is a much better choice than the fourth guard from the left on that random caravan they passed on the way to the capital city last year.

Another choice that makes or breaks this secret is your explanation of how and why the divine entity decided to leave its home and walk among mere mortals. In most cases, such an undertaking would be extremely out of character for a god. A very interesting and unique set of circumstances should exist to justify it.

My own version of this secret goes something like this: The patriarch of the pantheon (your version of Zeus or Odin) is getting very tired and looking to retire from his divine duties. To find a replacement, he holds a contest among the remaining gods to determine who might be wise enough to replace him. The contest consists of an enormously complex riddle the patriarch devises to test his colleagues' wisdom. The first to solve

the riddle shall inherit the divine throne and tend to the mortals.

Unfortunately, none of the other gods manage to arrive at a solution. Still looking to retire, the patriarch decides that instead of passing the throne along to another god, he should simply destroy the mortal world and wash his hands of the problem, leaving him free to retire. To this end, he unleashes a series of six plagues that will eventually consume the mortal realm.

Shortly after the plagues are unleashed, one of the other gods (the favored daughter of the patriarch) discovers the patriarch's plan and pleads with him to reconsider. The goddess tries to convince the patriarch that the mortal world has become a rare treasure, much too valuable to simply cast off. Although reluctant to accept this argument, the patriarch proposes a simple experiment. As a favor to his daughter, he agrees to spend exactly ten years roaming the physical world in the guise of a mortal. If he witnesses truly unique beauty

on his travels, he will call back the plagues and continue to serve as lord of the heavens.

This secret opens up plenty of opportunities for interesting gameplay. Beyond the fact that the players get to interact with the king of the gods, there are also the six mysterious plagues to deal with and the possible involvement of the goddess. You might even think of a way to include the patriarch's riddle. Suppose, for instance, that an evil mortal cleric discovers the riddle and devises a plan to solve it himself, hoping to catch the attention of the patriarch and claim the heavenly throne!

## **9. The Gods are Dead!**

As I noted earlier, the gods play a pivotal role in just about any D&D game world. The gods and the religions that have sprung up around them are probably instrumental in defining the culture, history, and tone of your campaign. On a more practical level, the gods are the ultimate source of

the magical energies that allow clerics to cast their spells.

Or so everyone believes. Suppose, though, that the gods haven't been the real source of that magical energy all these years. Instead, all the gods are dead, and for some mysterious reason, nobody knows this.

Once again, to do this right, you should wait to spring this particular secret until you are well into your campaign -- probably not until the PCs reach 10th level or above. Although this secret can be quite a shocking and interesting revelation when properly handled, it's certain to have severe consequences for the campaign moving forward. As part of your implementation of the secret, you should prepare yourself to deal with this fallout -- how can there be clerics in a world without gods? How do clerics get their spells?

A decent explanation of how the gods died without attracting the attention of their followers

is also in order. I have a couple of possibilities. Suppose the gods were secretly defeated and destroyed by a rival faction of new gods. Ever since the defeat, the rivals have answered the clerics' pleas and granted them spells in the guise of their fallen peers. The rivals believe the original gods failed their followers when they allowed evil into the world, jeopardizing all of creation. By seizing control themselves, the new gods hope to manipulate the faithful into destroying evil once and for all.

Properly staged, this particular variation on the secret should lead to plenty of opportunities for in-depth roleplaying. As an example, think about how a lawful good cleric might react. Once the cleric finally discovers the big secret, she learns that her beloved deity has been slain (itself an evil act), but the usurper plans to bring about an even better world and might just have the power to do so. What role might the cleric decide to play in the unfolding events?



Another possible explanation is that the gods' death was entirely natural. Finally, after billions of years, the heavenly powers grew old and weak. The gods had always hoped that by the time they reached the twilight of their lives, their mortal followers would no longer need their guidance or assistance. Unfortunately, this never came to pass -- the mortals are still at least a couple of centuries away from achieving a truly harmonious civilization. As a final act of devotion, the gods decided to end their own lives a few decades early and drain the last ounces of their energies into a heavenly wellspring. For the last several years, this wellspring has been the real source of the clerical spells granted to the mortal faithful. By draining the remainder of their own lives into the spring, the gods used all their available powers to guarantee that the mortals will continue to receive spells for as long as possible.

Figuring out just how much energy remains in the wellspring is the biggest decision you'll face if

you decide to go this route. Is there energy enough for fifty more years of cleric spells? Twenty years? Five years? Depending upon how your campaign is unfolding, it might be interesting to let your cleric characters know that all but their simplest magical powers (such as the various cure spells) will suddenly stop working in the near future. Figuring out how to deal with such a tragedy should prove quite a challenge for an experienced hero. Ideally, though, you might want to allow the PCs to discover a means of reversing the tragedy or recharging the wellspring. Suddenly taking away all of a PC's major powers with little recourse is a great way to frustrate and lose a player.

## **10. The Champion**

Another possibility for a divine secret revolves around a special destiny bestowed upon the PCs by the gods themselves. Allowing the players to discover that one or more of their characters have been specially selected by the gods to perform

some important mission is another revelation that you can use to underscore the PCs' importance in the campaign.

My own version of this secret might go something like this: One day, the matriarch of the gods decides that she is too old and weak to sit upon the heavenly throne and desires to retire. Almost immediately after she breaks the news to her fellow deities, a battle breaks out among her three divine children over who is most fit to replace her. Since war is not an appropriate pursuit for gods, the matriarch is ultimately forced to devise a special contest to head off the conflict. She instructs each of the three pretenders to secretly beget a mortal child. She will then see to it that these three mortals come into conflict when they reach adulthood. The winner of the resulting struggle will decide which of the matriarch's children shall sit upon the heavenly throne. The matriarch insists upon two additional rules: Each pretender can aid the mortal child only three times across the course of the mortal's

life, and any god who willingly reveals the existence of the contest or the true heritage of the three champions to a mortal is disqualified.

As you might guess, one of the three champions is one of the PCs. Perhaps the first hint of the secret the chosen one receives is a sudden and miraculous escape from danger. Many game sessions later, the PC will discover that the miracle was due to the intervention of his divine parent using one of the three allowable "assists." Properly implementing this scheme also requires you to create two worthy rivals for the PC and skillfully set up a three-way conflict. While this might take a while, it certainly gives you lots of opportunities for interesting adventures and storylines once you've pulled it off.

## **Geographical Secrets**

Secrets about the geography of your campaign world give the players opportunities to discover exciting new places to explore. When I presented

my tips for developing local area maps in Chapters 10 and 11, I noted that it's often handy to have a mechanism you can use to keep players relatively confined to small areas, allowing you to open up new lands when you are good and ready. Appropriate geographical secrets are an excellent tool you can use to achieve this goal. Suppose, for instance, that your campaign area is bounded by a seemingly impenetrable mountain chain. From time to time, though, mysterious strangers appear in the area who must be coming from somewhere beyond the mountains. Eventually, after you've had time to fully develop the area, you can allow the PCs to discover the secret that allows them to pass under the mountains. Such a tidbit can be anything from the mundane (a secret pass known only to the most experienced rangers) to the fantastic (a magic doorway that opens only with the appropriate command word, á la Ali Baba).

Here are a couple of other ideas...

## 11. The Disappearing Village

Fantasy literature and pop culture are rife with legends of magical cities and villages that only appear under certain special circumstances (Brigadoon, Kaddath, and so on). Although these stories have become something of a high fantasy cliché, such a locale can be a remarkably effective device in a Dungeons & Dragons campaign.

Making this concept work usually boils down to two things. First, you have to make the conditions under which the city appears interesting and exciting. This is a fine opportunity to inject an interesting puzzle into your game. (For the importance of puzzles, see the "Dungeoncraft" installment in *Dragon* 266.) Even after the PCs discover the existence of the disappearing village, they should still have to figure out how to get there. Usually, this involves being in exactly the right spot at exactly the right time (maybe the village only appears for the first day of each year)

-- but calculating the precise place and time might be very difficult. Perhaps the village appears in a different location each time, and the appearances combine to form an intricate geometric pattern. In order to predict the next place the village will appear, the players might have to figure out how to complete the pattern.

The second bit you need to figure out is how and why the village disappears. Is there a magical curse involved? A strange rift in the spacetime continuum? The interplay of powerful divine forces? A nice piece of backstory goes a long way toward capturing the attention of your players, and making the village more than just a cliché.

My own disappearing village might look something like this: Many thousands of years ago, there existed an ancient city that was home to a large and prominent temple dedicated to the goddess of wisdom. So splendid was this temple that it housed the goddess' favored oracle, a mystical pool that allowed the faithful to gain

knowledge by gazing upon the images mysteriously reflected in its waters. Eventually, it came to pass that the goddess of wisdom left on a lengthy quest to seek new understanding in distant dimensions. At first, the goddess' absence extended across several years, and later across several decades. Many of the inhabitants of the ancient city began to feel abandoned and betrayed as a result. Over time, their faith in their patron began to wane until the temple was finally dismantled. The oracle still stood, though it was no longer consulted in reverence for the goddess, but in contempt of her. Before long, the oracle was being used for all sorts of unseemly purposes -- everything from grave robbers gazing into the waters to uncover the whereabouts of local tombs to infidels attempting to glean hidden secrets of the gods themselves.

When the goddess of wisdom finally returned from her quest and discovered what had happened to her temple, she was so outraged that she decided to punish the entire city and its



inhabitants by banishing them all to one of the frightful dimensions she discovered on her quest. Only a single soul escaped the god's wrath: the only one of the city's 4,126 inhabitants who kept the faith and honored the god every single day during her absence. Because of the loyalty of this single citizen, the goddess of wisdom allows the city to return to its rightful place in the material world one day out of each 4,126 (roughly once every eleven years).

Note that this scheme offers an excellent opportunity to make an interesting puzzle out of the situation. In order to actually enter the disappearing city, the players must not only discover its former whereabouts, but they must also deduce the nature of the city's curse and ferret out its exact population in order to calculate when the city will next reappear.

## 12. The Message

This one is simple, yet quite strange and effective. It can provide an interesting means of testing the players' memories and perception.

Somewhere on your very first area map, place a lake with a distinctive (though natural) shape. Many adventures later, somewhere in a deep dungeon, the players should discover a pile of scrolls covered in ancient runes that are the remnants of a long-dead language. After the appropriate investigation and analysis, the players might even learn to decipher several of the old runes and pick up some useful knowledge from the scrolls.

It just so happens that the lake from that first area map is in the exact shape of one of the elder runes: the symbol that translates as "danger." There is a powerful extradimensional entity trapped in a crypt at the bottom of the lake. The lake itself was created by the ancient and

powerful civilization that trapped the entity, and its shape was selected to warn interlopers.

If you don't call any special attention to the map or lake once the players have uncovered the ancient writings, it's quite likely that it will take them several game sessions to notice your clue. Once they finally do, their reaction (and the series of ensuing adventures in which they attempt to uncover the meaning of the warning) should prove priceless.

## **Just Plain Weird Secrets**

This last category covers secrets that are so unusual they defy description. Most of the secrets that fit into this category are odd enough to have a pretty profound impact on the game world. So much so, in fact, that you should introduce this sort of material with care. Some players really respond to this type of stuff, while others are put off by it. You should probably try a ploy like this

only if you know your players all fit into the first category.

Again, the best way to illustrate a really weird secret of this sort is through an example. . . .

### **13. The Dream**

I've borrowed this idea from H.P. Lovecraft. Eventually, after a couple dozen game sessions, the PCs might discover an entirely new fantasy world that exists in their dreams. Each night as the PCs sleep, they have an opportunity to enter this new realm, where they take on personae that are similar to themselves yet different in the way "dreamselves" often are. You can even conduct entire adventures set in the dream realm. Anything bad that befalls the characters there somehow spills over to their actual selves in the "real" world. (Perhaps dream wounds become real through some sort of psychic trauma.) Properly pulled off, this campaign should draw all sorts of interesting parallels between the

dream realm and the physical world, and raise interesting questions about who created the dream world and why.

## 23

# Migrating to Third Edition

As I write this installment, I've just returned from the Gen Con 2000 Game Fair, where the new edition of the Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook was released amid much fanfare. Many of you who have written over the last several months have asked if and when I'll begin referencing the new edition's rules in "Dungeoncraft." Now that the project's veil of secrecy has been lifted, I can answer those two questions: (1) yes, of course; and (2) right now. From this installment forward, I'll refer exclusively to the new rules when preparing this column.

Does this mean I'll go back and rewrite the previous twenty-three installments for the new

rules? Well, no. Fortunately, the rules haven't changed enough to invalidate the majority of the advice I've offered over the last two years. For the most part, building a world and preparing a campaign under the new rules is much like building a world and preparing a campaign under the old rules. I'll occasionally revisit and revise some of my old advice in the installments to come, but for now you can safely assume that most of what I've presented so far is as valid under the new rules as it was when you first read it.

This doesn't mean that the new edition doesn't change the DM's job description. In some ways, the new game is very different from its predecessor and requires some very different approaches. In order to make this transition over to the new rules as easy as possible, I'm devoting this installment and the next to a discussion of how the new rules might impact the Dungeon Master. I can guarantee you that the first thing your players are going to do after getting their

brand new copies of the Player's Handbook is to start looking for ways they can use all those new rules, feats, and skills to their advantage.

Consider these two installments our opportunity, as DMs, to do the same.

## **When Should I Switch Over to the New Rules?**

Before I consider the rules themselves, it's worth spending a few paragraphs discussing when -- or if -- you should migrate your existing campaigns over to the new rules. The most important thing to remember when you are considering these questions is that you shouldn't be in any sort of hurry to fix something that isn't broken. Sudden change can be bad. If your campaign is progressing well and your players are having fun, take your time before making the big switch.

Give yourself and your players an opportunity to fully digest the new rules and familiarize yourselves with their idiosyncrasies.



In the meantime, you might try running one or two new edition "one-shot" game sessions outside the bounds of your regular campaign. This insures that everyone has some combat experience before you risk your real game and the players' beloved PCs.

The easiest way to organize a one-shot session, of course, is to pick up a copy of Dungeon Magazine and run one of the excellent adventures within. If your players are really dedicated to your current campaign, though, completely abandoning it runs the risk of dampening their interest and interfering with your momentum. In this case, you might design a special one-shot scenario set on the same world as your regular campaign, but using entirely different PCs. Take advantage of this opportunity to give your players a brief glimpse into an entirely different facet of your setting. Two particularly interesting tactics immediately come to mind:

- 1. Design an adventure that allows the players to assume the roles of their traditional adversaries.**

Suppose, for instance, that your campaign regularly pits the players against an infamous tribe of orcs (like the Aris campaign I've built in these articles). The adventure you run to introduce your players to the new rules might put them in the roles of the orcs for a change. Maybe they have to kidnap a princess or acquire a powerful magic item from a nearby band of elves. If you do this right, you might even leave yourself with a great springboard for an adventure in the "real" campaign. Once they've successfully captured that princess, maybe the players must resume their traditional roles to pursue the orcs and retrieve her!

- 2. Give the players the opportunity to play legendary and long-dead characters**

## **from your campaign setting.**

In the Aris-based adventure "Secrets of the Scar" from Dungeon 80, a legendary order of clerics once operated a hidden temple, and some of the world's most interesting and formative events took place within the confines of their secret stronghold. An interesting "practice" adventure might place the players in the roles of those clerics and call upon them to protect the stronghold as it stood several hundred years ago. Not only would such an adventure give your players the sense that they are making an important contribution to the history of your game world, it might also give them the added pleasure of playing high-level characters for a change.

Even after you are sure that you and your players have plenty of experience with the new game rules, you should only migrate

your campaign once you're certain that you've had enough time to carefully consider all the implications of the conversion. Whatever methods you employ, though, the full process is certain to be time-consuming and require a lot of care. Again, don't feel rushed. Your players have waited this long for the new rules, and they can wait another couple months if necessary.

A few of you might be wondering if you should ever switch over to the new rules. While it might seem like a lot of work to migrate to the new edition, I guarantee that the exciting opportunities the new rules open up will make the transition worthwhile. You should also note that not adopting the new rules will eventually make it more difficult to play the game. Unless you are using the new rules, you'll no longer have easy access to new game elements introduced in products and magazines published by Wizards of the Coast. Eventually, you'll find it harder and

harder to locate players who are familiar with your chosen flavor. As a consequence, your decision should probably center around "when" and not "if." Even those of you who are heavily dependent on special 2nd edition rules are likely to see new edition replacements come your way eventually. Again, feel free to delay the conversion until you are completely comfortable.

## **The Heart of the New Edition**

A large portion of the rules changes introduced in the new edition fall into a single bracket. Despite its voluminous rulebooks, old fashioned D&D was simple and unsophisticated at its core. The old rules handled lots of sticky situations by not handling the situation at all. Whenever something unusual happened or a player decided to take an unexpected action, the DM was forced to resolve the situation by making an arbitrary judgment or inventing a new rule on the fly. Suppose a non-thief is forced to scale a wall in order to escape

pursuit, or a fighter tries to bluff an enemy into making a tactical blunder. Do their efforts succeed? The old rules provided no real guidance for resolution, forcing the DM to improvise. It was situations like these that inspired the Third Rule of Dungeoncraft.

Although the old approach usually worked well once you got used to it, it also stymied some beginning DMs and forced them to "freeze up" during play. With absolutely no rules advice to fall back on, these beginners sometimes found the process of making snap decisions daunting. In turn, they would develop all sorts of bad habits in order to avoid being put on the spot.

The new rules adopt an entirely different philosophy and attempt to provide a much more comprehensive set of guidelines for resolving a wide variety of actions and situations. The best illustration of this philosophy is the interlocking series of ability and skill checks that can be used to resolve just about anything a player might

attempt. Although the DM is still forced to decide exactly what attributes and skills apply to an action and how difficult the action is, it's often easier to make these simple decisions than to make a completely arbitrary ruling with no guidance at all. Another illustration of the new philosophy is the series of comprehensive rules for handling unique situations presented in the new *Dungeon Master's Guide*. Although the new rules don't really allow us to get rid of the Third Rule of *Dungeons & Dragons* altogether, they guarantee that we're forced to invoke it less often.

The new edition gives you more tools to work with, but it's worth noting that the new approach has a particularly interesting repercussion. The new, meatier rules spell out a comprehensive set of modifiers, difficulty classes, and special situations in great detail. Although it's much easier to keep track of all these rules than it might seem, it's quite easy to forget a stray modifier or improperly compute a difficulty class here and there in the heat of the moment. What makes this

a problem is the fact that the players are often just as familiar with the rules as you are, and you'll find that many of them take great delight in pointing out each and every modifier or dice roll you blow. Many times, these protests come after you've already resolved the roll in question and moved on -- sometimes long after. "Hey everybody! I just realized that when she killed my cohort in that last battle she forgot to take into account the penalty for fighting with two weapons!" Sometimes these lapses might seem so egregious that your sense of fairness will tempt you to "back up" the game and replay the situation. In fact, I found myself in this position so often during the early test games I ran using the new rules that I was inspired to debut a Fifth Rule of Dungeoncraft.

### **Fifth Rule of Dungeoncraft:**

Once a roll has been made and you've moved on, you should never reset events to an earlier state in order to correct a mistake.



Doing so can only interrupt the game's momentum and runs the risk of confusing your players. If you need to rationalize such a decision, put it down to fickle fate -- a lucky (or unlucky) break caused by potent karma or the intervention of capricious gods. After all, in the real world unusual and unexplainable things happen all the time. In fact, you might even use a particularly significant gaffe as a springboard for an adventure that explains the error. With that big (but forgotten) modifier in his favor, how could Lokir have possibly missed when he attacked that hill giant? If the blow had connected, Lokir might have killed the giant in time to save Mokka, his fallen comrade! A few adventures later, maybe Lokir discovers that he accidentally offended the high priest of a war god on one of his previous exploits and the god has since cursed him with horrible luck in battle. To remove the curse, Lokir must right his earlier wrong and beg for the high priest's forgiveness.

Of course, the Fifth Rule doesn't imply that you should never accept a player's advice on how to resolve a situation or refuse to acknowledge any forgotten modifiers pointed out by the players before the dice are rolled. The fact that you can count on your players to be on the lookout for modifiers you've forgotten is one of the reasons why it's easier to keep track of the new rules than it might seem. Once a situation has been resolved and play has moved on, though, all outcomes should be considered final. Although some players might find this stance a bit difficult to deal with at first, they'll quickly get used to it as long as you're consistent.

Well, that wraps up another installment. More thoughts on the new edition next month.

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## Newfangled Fighting

Many of the rules changes introduced in the new edition ripple outward from a new approach to character creation. As I noted last month, the real heart of the new edition's philosophy is a move toward providing concrete rules for a greater number of actions and situations. Where previous editions of the game forced the DM to guess or make an arbitrary ruling whenever the players attempted an unusual action, this new version provides an open-ended set of specific rules that can be used to resolve almost any situation. Want to trick a guard into releasing your friend the thief? Make a Bluff check. Trying to hunt for enough game to feed your party? Make a Wilderness Lore check. In short, the new rules

handle many more situations by giving each character a wider range of abilities to check.

One byproduct of this new philosophy is that character creation can be a lengthier process than it was during previous editions of the game, though the final results are considerably more detailed and interesting. Properly selecting and collating all those new abilities certainly takes time. The designers have provided detailed, pregenerated character templates you can ask your players to select in order to save time, but I recommend that you use them only if your players are rather inexperienced. While the "starting packages" certainly save you a little time, they'll also make it more difficult for your players to truly personalize their characters and grow attached to them.

In fact, character generation has been beefed up so much that I think it's appropriate to reconsider some advice I provided in an earlier column. I now believe it is good idea to hold a separate

session for the sole purpose of creating characters. I used to recommend against this practice because my experience shows that campaigns that begin in this fashion tend to have a fifty-fifty chance of never getting off the ground at all. Generally, the play maintains the interest of your fellow gamers, and any session during which you don't actually play is just another chance for one or more players to lose interest. Under the new rules, though, it's difficult to conduct an effective session long enough to allow all the players to create their characters with enough time left over to get a good start on the first adventure. Players who are experienced with the new rules might pull off such a feat without a problem, but there aren't too many people out there who are all that experienced with a set of rules that's a few months old.

One way to avoid this dilemma altogether is to ask your players to show up at the first session with their characters already created. While this works well for some people, I generally don't

favor it for a number of reasons. Having all the players in a single location while they create their characters definitely results in a more effective and well-balanced party. The D&D rules and most D&D adventures assume that the adventuring party will be made up of a variety of character classes. If the players don't cooperate as they create their characters, it's far too easy to end up with a weak or unwieldy party. In fact, this risk is somewhat compounded under the new rules -- it's now important that your players select not only a variety of character classes, but a variety of skills as well. A party without a single character who possesses the Bluff or Spot skills, for instance, might run into trouble. Another reason why it's often not a good idea to ask the players to create their characters on their own is the fact that players can easily make mistakes during the process. If you and the other players aren't around to notice some of these discrepancies, you run the risk of not spotting an error until it's already had an unfortunate impact on your game. During a recent session of my own

game, for example, I discovered that one of my players accidentally spent too many skill points at first level, making him much more effective in my first few adventures than he should have been.

If you do decide to run a special session for character creation, there are a couple of strategies you might use to get your players' juices flowing despite the fact that the game isn't actually starting yet. If your players are particularly creative and oriented toward good roleplaying, you might ask each of them to create a brief "life story" for his or her character and relate it to the whole group. In order to keep things interesting, you can ask the players to judge the tales after all the stories have been told. Pass out score cards that instruct each player to secretly rate each story on a scale of one to ten. After you collect and tally the scores, you can bestow a special prize upon the winner ranging from a few additional skill points all the way up to the privilege of beginning play at 2nd level. This scheme has the added benefit of not only making that first session

a bit more interesting for the players but also going a long way toward establishing their characters as well.

Another ploy you might try is the old "cliffhanger trick." Start playing during the character creation session, but don't attempt to undertake an actual adventure. Instead, run the players through a quick teaser designed to get them hooked and interested in the things to come. A quick combat encounter that gives the players a chance to test out their new abilities is usually in order here, along with some brief exposure to your campaign environment. Most importantly, though, you should try to end the teaser with some sort of shock or twist. Get the players hooked by confronting them with a compelling mystery or puzzle that won't be resolved until the next session. For example, your teaser might end with a hooded assassin murdering an important townsman right in front of the party. The adventurers give chase, but fail to catch the fiend. Just before he makes good his escape, though, the



assassin's hood is torn off and the PCs are shocked and horrified by what they see. You don't reveal exactly what that is until the next session. Note that if you decide to go this route, it's important that you actually deliver on the mystery you created during the teaser. If you capture the player's imagination but then fail to invent a revelation that lives up to the dramatic buildup you've given the situation, you'll only do more harm than good. Returning to my example, for instance, it's probably not enough to simply reveal that what the players found so shocking was an ugly face or a bad scar. Instead, you might reveal that the assassin is inexplicably an exact duplicate of a player character, or that the assassin is an old friend whom the PCs believed to be dead. This sort of solution provides you with a great springboard for adventures that allow the players to uncover further revelations and delve even deeper into the mystery.

## Newfangled Fighting

Like character creation, the new combat rules are home to many of the new edition's innovations. In general, combat is more stringently codified and the various actions the combatants can select are more rigidly defined. It's still possible to run a battle entirely within the imaginations of the participants, but doing so definitely makes it harder to effectively wield all the interesting new maneuvers that the new rules have to offer. Now more than ever, I recommend employing some sort of counters or visual aids to track the positions of characters in battle. Detailed miniatures and scenery are obviously the ideal tools for this purpose, but not everybody has the time or money to invest in building an appropriate collection. In an earlier column, I suggested using a large whiteboard in lieu of miniatures to map out your battles. The idea is that you can quickly draw up battle maps on the board using dry erase markers, and plot the players' positions using makeshift tokens like

coins or dice. The board also gives you a convenient way to record the positions and effects of spells and obstacles. Should a wizard cast wall of ice, for instance, you can quickly sketch the ice wall right on the battle map and even record a helpful note right next to it ("36 hp/10 ft., Break DC 27").

While the new rules make the whiteboard approach more useful than ever, they also add an additional wrinkle that you should consider. Many of the new combat rules become much easier to administer if a grid is overlaid atop the battlefield to designate 5-foot by 5-foot squares. Such a grid will make it much easier to keep track of the "threatened areas" that provoke attacks of opportunity (Player's Handbook, page 122) and easier to adjudicate various movements and special maneuvers. In fact, the new Dungeon Master's Guide provides some detailed guidelines on how to employ a grid on pages 67-69. Unfortunately, redrawing a grid on your whiteboard at the beginning of each battle isn't

very practical. I've skirted this problem by using a box cutter to lightly scratch a 1-inch square grid directly into the surface of my whiteboard, allowing me to draw on the board and erase to my heart's content without ever removing the grid. You can also add a permanent grid to your battle board with very thin black or gray tape (available at office supply stores).

Beyond the more rigidly defined actions, the most important changes in the combat rules are the various measures taken to clean up some of the awkward mathematics that sometimes plagued earlier editions. In addition to fixing the obvious problems that frequently befuddled newcomers ("Now, let me get this straight . . . a -1 shield actually adds one to my Armor Class?"), the new rules also eliminate some of their predecessor's cumbersome charts and formulae. While the old game forced you to repeatedly look up what a 3-Hit-Die creature needs to hit Armor Class 5, for example, the new system makes such calculations irrelevant. Of course, some of the trimmed

complexity has been reintroduced in the form of new modifiers and options, but it's generally easy for the players to keep track of their own bonuses and modifiers, allowing you to concentrate solely on the monsters and NPCs. It's also easier than ever to conceal the Armor Classes of your monsters. Now, just ask each player for a total attack roll. If the roll equals or exceeds the monster's Armor Class, the attack is a hit. The players need never know what they're shooting for.

Equally worthy of attention is the new initiative system. Before, all the combatants on one side of the battle took a turn, then all the combatants on the other side took their turns. A single simple die roll decided which side went first. Now each character rolls his own personal initiative score. Although this system produces more interesting battles, it's sometimes hard to calculate the exact sequence in which all the combatants act, particularly when you're resolving a large battle with a wide variety of participants. To minimize

your difficulties, you should closely follow the advice that appears in the *Dungeon Master's Guide* and scribble down a quick sequence at the start of each combat round. I'm experimenting with my own system that is even faster, though it certainly requires some advance preparation. I've created an "initiative board" on a small (8 1/2 inch by 11 inch) piece of corkboard. With a marker, I've divided the board into two rows of twenty columns and numbered the resulting squares from one to forty. I've also labeled a set of pushpins with the initials of my PCs and reserved a few extra pushpins of different colors to represent monsters. At the start of the round, when everyone rolls initiative, I can simply place the pushpins in the appropriate squares to quickly log the combat sequence, sparing me from the sometimes difficult task of scrawling down notes while eight players are simultaneously shouting their initiative scores. Later, I can place additional pushpins on the board to represent the timing of spells and other effects.

Beyond these simple mechanical matters, the one thing about the new combat rules that every DM should note is that they can be much more brutal than their predecessors, particularly at low character levels. An orc with a battleaxe can now inflict a maximum of 30 points of damage in a single attack (orcs have a Strength of 15, and a battleaxe inflicts triple damage on a critical hit) -- more than enough to kill all 1st- and most 2nd-level characters outright. Under the old edition, the same beastie could never inflict more than 8 points of damage -- not enough to kill any PC in a single blow (if you used the optional "death's door" rule). While the circumstances that produce such extreme combat results are certainly quite rare, it's important to remember just how many battles the average PC will engage in across the course of his career and how many opportunities the monsters get to make such a devastating attack.

The upshot of all this is that you should follow the advice in the Dungeon Master's Guide very

carefully when it comes to balancing your fights. Until you've gained experience with the new rules, you should mistrust any "conventional wisdom" you acquired playing the old game, particularly while your players' characters are at low levels.

That wraps up another installment. Drop back in thirty days to watch me raise the curtain on a whole new phase of Dungeoncraft.



# 25

## Let's Take It From the Top

In the last two installments, "Dungeons & Dragons" took a long look at the new game rules and briefly discussed ways in which Dungeon Mastering under the new rules might be different than DMing under the old rules. In the twenty-odd columns prior to that, we stepped through the entire process of creating a brand new Dungeons & Dragons campaign, from the initial inspiration right up to the first adventure and beyond. Those of you who have been reading from the start should have more than a passing familiarity with the art of dungeons & dragons by now. In fact, you're probably already zooming past the materials covered here to explore interesting ideas of your own.

At this point, the best way to continue your education is to back up and start an entirely new campaign from the ground up. This will allow us to illustrate some alternate approaches to those taken in the past. It gives us an opportunity to continue exploring the new rules and to revisit my old advice when necessary. Most importantly, now that we've been through the entire process once, we can attempt something a bit more ambitious this time around. Aris was essentially a traditional D&D game world with a few twists all its own; let's aim for something that's unique on this outing. "Dungeoncraft" will focus energies on both demonstrating the flexibility of the D&D game and providing advice on how to occasionally modify the game's rules in order to further lend the campaign its own flavor. We'll continue to presume that you've read all the previous installments of the column, though, so if you haven't, now is a good time to hit the website and catch up.

Those of you who have grown fond of Aris over the past couple of years shouldn't despair -- it needn't be abandoned. Any and all interested readers are encouraged to flesh out Aris to your hearts' content. If you post the results on a personal Web page, send me the URL, and we'll be sure to give it a mention here.

## **Baiting the Hook**

Let's begin this new campaign in much the same way the last one began. In the second installment of "Dungeoncraft," it was noted that a good first step in creating a new campaign is to develop a fundamental concept or "hook." What you're really searching for is the single idea or characteristic that will set your campaign apart from all the others. You know you've developed an appropriate hook when your players can effectively describe your campaign in one or two sentences. Those of you who have played D&D for some time now probably know that TSR and

Wizards of the Coast published a number of official game settings over the years. Notice how easy it is to quickly describe the characteristics that make each of these settings unique? The Al-Qadim setting was D&D in an Arabian land. The Dark Sun setting was D&D on a rough world that seemed to share a lot of influences with the works of Edgar Rice Burroughs. The Ravenloft setting was D&D in a gothic environment. The Spelljammer setting was D&D in space.

The real value of a good hook is that it gives your players' imaginations something to grab onto and immediately begins to lend the game a life of its own. Any one of the hooks associated with these official D&D game worlds immediately tells you something about what sort of characters are appropriate, what sort of adventures you're likely to have, and what the world generally looks and feels like. In order to fulfill these missions, your hook must be simple and easily expressed. If it takes several paragraphs to explain why your world is unique, there is a good chance that your

hook won't hit the players on a visceral level and fuel their imaginations like you want it to.

In the second installment of "Dungeons & Dragons: The Art of Game Mastering," we identified five different types of effective campaign hooks.

1. **Cultural:** The world is based on a culture that is interesting and unusual. Examples include a game world with a Japanese flavor or a campaign set in ancient Greece. Several official D&D settings have chosen this approach, including Kara-Tur, Maztica, and Al Qadim.
2. **Environment:** An unusual environment dominates the game world. Imagine a campaign set entirely below ground or a game that takes place on a water world with a handful of tiny islands providing the only available land. Aris, the game world developed here previously, is based

on this option -- it's entirely blanketed by forests.

3. **Classes/Races:** These campaigns limit all the player characters to a single class or race. Imagine, for instance, a campaign in which all the player characters are rogues or all the PCs are elves.
4. **Opposition:** Sometimes, basing the campaign around a particular monster or adversary can provide a workable hook. An effective game world might be completely dominated by undead or you might build an interesting world that is ruled by dragons.
5. **Situation:** Some effective hooks are simply the byproduct of an unusual situation that dominates the campaign setting. Imagine a game world that is on the brink of an impending apocalypse or a

world in which the sun never rises. Here's a sixth type of hook to add to that list.

Inspiration: Adopting the works of a specific author or artist as the inspiration for your world can sometimes provide a workable hook.

Examples might include a game that features the sort of whimsical fantasy often found in the films of Terry Gilliam (such as *Time Bandits* or *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*), or a campaign inspired by the florid fantasy of Lord Dunsany.

## **The New World**

This time, "Dungeons & Dragons" is going to focus on a hook based on opposition. This new campaign setting will be dominated by dinosaurs. In fact it's a world in which there are almost no mammals, and various sorts of dinosaurs are used as mounts and beasts of burden. Imagine an enormous apatosaurus sporting war paint and carrying a battle platform on its back, or a knight mounted

atop an ankylosaurus. In addition, wild and fearsome dinosaurs dominate the wilderness areas and prey upon any intruders who violate their territory. The aim here is to lend the world a "land that time forgot" atmosphere with primitive warriors wielding stone axes and struggling to survive amid harsh surroundings. Altogether, this new world will be less civilized than Aris, and its inhabitants will be a great deal more savage.

This path has several interesting implications, many of which will present some formidable design challenges.

## **Primitive Cultures**

First and foremost, the cultures that inhabit this new world will be a great deal more primitive than those that dominate a typical D&D setting. One obvious implication of this is that there will be a much lower level of technology available than the D&D rules presume. This lost world has advanced to roughly the level of Earth's early Iron



Age. While there are primitive metal swords and spears available, advanced metalworking (such as that necessary to create advanced armor types) should be almost nonexistent. This will change the choice of weapons available to the players, but more importantly, it might upset the game's balance. Restricting access to the more effective armors, for instance, might radically reduce the combat effectiveness of the average party, particularly against foes like dinosaurs.

Furthermore, the lack of advanced technologies might force us to reevaluate some of the D&D character classes. Without access to various weapons and armors, certain classes lose important capabilities and proficiencies that might throw them out of balance with the other classes. Most likely, it will be necessary to either restrict the available character classes or grant some classes new abilities or proficiencies to make up for these liabilities. Similarly, the primitive nature of the cultures that dominate this new world will force us to reconsider several of

the D&D character races. The idea of coarse, unrefined cultures clearly contradicts the vision of elves presented in D&D, for instance. Again, it might be necessary to either limit the selection of available races, slightly rethink some of the standard races, or evolve all new races.

## **Magic**

If you play "by the book," D&D's magic system isn't intended for this sort of primitive environment. The traditional D&D setting is dependent upon the classic notion of a wizard's workshop that is stocked with expensive laboratory equipment and dusty tomes full of arcane knowledge. Spellbooks, scrolls, and magical research all play prominent roles in the traditional setting. On this lost world, it's difficult to imagine encountering these things very often. Such primitive cultures certainly wouldn't develop many written materials of any kind, precluding an abundance of spellbooks and

scrolls. Similarly, conditions are so harsh that it is difficult to imagine any but the very richest inhabitants of the planet amassing the wealth necessary to construct even a modest wizard's workshop.

Perhaps the easiest way to address these problems is to exclude magic (in the form of wizards) from the campaign altogether or to make magic-using characters incredibly rare. Although both are perfectly valid approaches, it's usually not a good idea to alter the basic essence of the game so radically. Spellcasters and magic items give D&D a great deal of its unique flavor and play an important role in balancing the game. Removing them certainly changes the tenor of play, and it might also severely weaken the players' adventuring party, forcing the DM to take other steps to correct the problem as play progresses. For these reasons, we're going to allow spellcasters and retune the magic systems to tailor them to the new world.

## Harsh Reality

As hinted, this sort of "land that time forgot" atmosphere implies a harsh world in which mere survival is difficult. Although it's already decided that the humans and other intelligent inhabitants of the world have managed to tame some of the dinosaurs, the largest and most fearsome of the creatures are still the undisputed masters of their environment. This dominance is reinforced by the humans' lack of advanced technologies and sophisticated armors. Just to clarify the intent here, we don't imagine the adventures set on this new world to be any more difficult than the standard D&D adventure. Although the going is tough, the average player character should be as durable as ever. Rather, it's civilization as a whole that struggles. The life expectancy of a common inhabitant might be as low as thirty-five. The average human tribe spends so much time fleeing reptilian predators and natural disasters (such as volcanic eruptions) that there is little time to lay down any roots. As a consequence, food is

probably somewhat scarce, and many of the tools that adventurers from other worlds take for granted are relatively rare on this world.

At the same time, let's not forget that dinosaurs are formidable opponents in D&D terms. Take a look at their statistics in the new Monster Manual. Even a relatively small carnivorous dinosaur is more than a match for a low-level player character. If dinosaurs are common on the new world, such encounters won't be uncommon.

For these reasons, it's probably important to beef up the effectiveness of the typical beginning adventurer relative to the rest of the world's inhabitants. We'll want to make sure that the average adventuring party is capable of standing up to the occasional dinosaur and surviving the rigors that limit the population's life expectancy.

## The Past

Finally, the lost world approach has one other interesting implication. A compelling and vibrant past is usually a critical component of a successful D&D game world -- it's the past that propels most D&D adventures. Aren't all those dungeons usually the remnants of long-dead ancient civilizations and forgotten cults? Aren't most important magic items the subject of legends that date back several centuries?

In a lost world situation, it might be difficult for the players to easily grasp the campaign's past. If the cultures that presently inhabit the world are so primitive, what could have preceded them? Cultures that were even more primitive and even less refined? How could cultures like that leave any sort of legacy or lasting ruins in their wakes? In order to make it easy to create adventures set on this new world, we'll have to pay special attention to these questions as the campaign

develops and make sure to create a past capable of capturing the players' imaginations.

This brings us to the Second Rule of Dungeoncraft. Now that an important detail about the game world has been created (the hook), we need to create an appropriate secret that is tied to that detail. An effective secret will not only provide me with an interesting springboard for future adventures, but also will go a long way toward solving the problem with the past as well. When searching for an appropriate secret, we made a list of the fundamental characteristics of dinosaurs, looking for possibilities. An obvious one immediately leapt out: Dinosaurs are extinct. Thus, the dinosaurs on this new world are on the brink of extinction themselves. As play begins, the world is undergoing a formative change. Unknown to most of its inhabitants, control of the planet is slowly but surely passing from the ancient dinosaurs over to the scrappy human upstarts. Further, the dinosaurs are somehow connected to an ancient and long-dead

civilization of intelligent reptiles (lizardfolk in D&D terms). Somehow, long ago, the sorcerers of this once great civilization made a terrible mistake and unleashed some kind of terrible disaster that wiped their people from the planet and is still slowly killing off the last of the dinosaurs now. Thus, the world is probably dotted with the remnants of the lizardfolk civilization, making for some interesting adventure opportunities. As we continue to add details to the world, we'll have an opportunity to flesh out the nature of the ancient catastrophe and decide what it might mean for the modern adventurers.

Anyway, those are the most obvious problems cluttering up the road ahead. Come back in thirty days to see some solutions.



## 26

# Let's Take It From the Top II

Last month, we laid the groundwork for a new D&D campaign to take advantage of the options introduced in the new rules. Our new campaign is set on a primitive world dominated by volcanoes, jungles, and dinosaurs -- a sort of "lost world" environment that is home to primitive tribes and dangerous reptiles.

Way back in Chapter 3, the third installment of *Dungeoncraft* suggested that after selecting a "hook," the simple feature that should help root the campaign in the imaginations of the players, the next step in building a new campaign setting is to flesh out some rough details on the government and politics of the world at both the local and national levels. Hopefully, the details

you create will arm you with everything you need to start fleshing out the town or city that will serve as the players' "home base" in the early part of the campaign. Although there are many valid approaches to building a campaign's infrastructure, let's try to nail down the political situation as the next step in building the new world.

The last time we tackled politics, the focus was on the local level, since local politics have a greater impact upon the early events of the campaign. This time, let's start thinking about the bigger picture and use those details to help bring the small stuff into focus. This world is different from the usual D&D campaign on the local level. The customary D&D "home base" (a small, safe town or stronghold overseen by a noble) certainly doesn't fit the "rough-and-tumble" vision, and we need a better view of the whole world before we can be sure of how to replace it.

Thinking on a larger scale then, the primitive nature of the world suggests that there is no such thing as a large and powerful nation. Holding together such a union is always difficult and inevitably requires skills and technologies that don't exist on this world. It's difficult to imagine a government operating a large nation without first mastering basic road-building techniques or inventing a fairly sophisticated bureaucracy. Most of the inhabitants of this new world are far too uncivilized to possess such knowledge.

Given the details already mentioned, it seems clear that civilization on this new planet consists of a loose collection of tribal cultures -- perhaps a whole world analogous to the situation in North America prior to the arrival of European settlers. To make things more interesting for game play, each tribe has its own identity and customs. Guaranteeing that each tribe is different from its rivals makes it much easier for the various cultures to come to life in the imaginations of the players. In fact, as we think about the sort of

information we need to create for each tribe, it seems that there is probably very little difference between these tribes and the concept of a "race" in the D&D game.

We'll want to create between four and seven tribes to get the game started. In other words, just enough to provide variety, but not too many to flesh out quickly and cleanly. Although the planet is undoubtedly home to many more cultures, these few are the only ones near the region where the bulk of the action will be set for the first few months of play. Because we envision the tribes to be conceptually close to the D&D game's races, an obvious source of inspiration are the D&D races themselves. We can meet a nice chunk of our needs by simply adapting existing D&D creatures to the world and tribal structure that we have in mind. Retuning the classic D&D races is a time-honored technique for lending a world its own flavor. Great examples of this technique can be seen in the Dragonlance and Dark Sun settings -- Dragonlance reinvented halflings to help

establish a less Tolkienesque feel, while Dark Sun reworked most of the major races to create an alien atmosphere.

The first step in adapting the D&D races is to recognize their essential natures. The various races that appear in the Player's Handbook were each selected to fill a particular role, and each was inspired by a strong tradition of mythology and legend. A successful reworking taps into this lore and leaves the essence of the creature untouched, while providing new details to fuel the players' imaginations.

Before tampering with races, you should understand that players expect certain characteristics from each of them, and failing to satisfy these expectations is likely to cause confusion. Populating your game world with brutish elves cuts sharply against the grain of D&D tradition. After all, it's easy enough to create a beastly race of folks with pointed ears and not call them elves. Presumably, the only

reason you'd use the label "elf" to describe your creation is to convey something about the race's nature and behavior to your players.

Here are some reflections on the essences of the various D&D races. You might disagree with a few details here and there, and that's fine. The important thing is that you collect your own thoughts before beginning your redesigns.

## **Elves and Half-Elves**

**Essential Characteristics:** Old, wise, artistic, connected to nature, ancient civilization, rich traditions.

**Function in D&D:** Elves are a great font of knowledge. Players visit them when they need to learn something, particularly about the ancient past.

**Elves and Half-Elves:** Elves are often the oldest and wisest race inhabiting the typical D&D

world. Their extraordinary lifespans and the remarkable age of their civilization generally combine to result in a very advanced culture that is rich in tradition. As a result, elven society is often dominated by the fruits of this culture, such as poetry, song, and other artistic endeavors.

An important characteristic of elves that stems from the advanced age of their society is an unusual affinity with the mysteries of life. Typically, many centuries of study have allowed the elven civilization to penetrate several of the great secrets of the universe. This is why elves often make such great wizards and sorcerers, and why elves are usually responsible for so many of the magic items found in the typical D&D setting. This same characteristic also explains why elves often share some sort of special bond with nature.

In most campaign settings, elven society is consumed by an air of impending tragedy. The elves usually boast the oldest and most advanced civilization in a typical D&D setting, but these

same worlds are always invariably dominated by humans. This tends to imply that the great elven civilization is in its twilight years and slowly waning to make way for a great age of humanity.

## **Dwarves**

Essential Characteristics: Resilient, attuned to the underworld, strong sense of honor, master crafters.

Function in D&D: Like elves, dwarves are a source of knowledge. Their specialties are the underworld and magic weapons. Dwarves also give the players access to important skills and allies in dungeon environments.

Dwarves: Most often, dwarves are inextricably linked to the underworld. Dwarven citadels lie beneath stony mountains or at the bottom of deep dungeons. Their affiliation for these environments tends to define dwarves as master crafters. Since mining and stonecutting skills are so often the



key to its survival, dwarven civilization learned to place a high value on these arts long ago. While elven society is often focused on studying and understanding the world, the society of the dwarves is committed to reshaping it. Dwarves believe that the process of creation is the single thread that unites all the great mysteries of life, and they believe the only way to penetrate those mysteries is to become a creator. This is why they'd rather tend a forge than study poetry, and why they are better known as crafters than magic wielders.

Typically, beyond craftsmanship, dwarves respect nothing so much as personal honor. The concepts of self-sacrifice and heroism that fuel this attitude stem from the unique hardships and rugged environments that dwarves face from childhood. To a dwarf, life is a test that must be faced justly. The temptation to unfairly improve one's station at the expense of another is a cancer that threatens dwarven civilization. It's this characteristic that

explains their tendency toward the lawful alignments.

## **Halflings**

Essential Characteristics: Resourceful, clever, opportunistic, curious.

Function in D&D: Halflings live among other societies, taking advantage of whatever opportunities come their way. Halflings provide a good neutral source of adventure, either as people who need protection or as the instigators of problems PCs must solve.

Halflings: Halflings are distinguished by their opportunistic mindset. They've never found the motivation to build the sort of elaborate empires favored by elves and dwarves because they prefer to let other races do such things and then take advantage of all the opportunities those empires provide. As a whole, the halfling race is always on the move, finding a way to fit into whatever

society can offer them new gains and the comforts they enjoy.

Individual halflings tend to be amazingly resourceful and dedicated. Often curious to a fault, halflings can be lead on the path of adventure at a whim.

## **Gnomes**

Essential Characteristics: Inquisitive, ingenious, mischievous.

Function in D&D: Gnomes create unusual inventions that add flavor to the game world. Their creations can also help the players overcome specific obstacles.

Gnomes: Like the dwarves, gnomes tend to be defined by their craftsmanship. The difference is that gnome creations emphasize function over form and exhibit an uncanny technological sophistication. Whereas the dwarves are master

smiths and stonecutters, the gnomes excel at creating mechanical gizmos, alchemical concoctions, clockwork machines and various other complex gadgets. They can't resist the urge to tinker, prod, and explore. The gnome civilization has evolved a unique philosophy that lies midway between those of the elves and the dwarves. Gnomes simultaneously favor understanding and reshaping the natural world, and it is the unique combination of these beliefs that is always pushing them to the fringes of any art or science they decide to explore. Thus, gnomes are talented spellcasters (unlike dwarves), but they are not content to simply unlock the secrets of magic (like the elves). Instead, they're constantly tempted to innovate and create unusual new spells.

## **Half-Orcs**

Essential Characteristics: Outcasts, savage.

Function in D&D: Half-orcs allow players to create "fish-out-of-water" characters.

Half-Orcs: In most D&D game worlds, half-orcs are the ultimate outcasts. Orcs tend to see them as soft and weak, while humans usually regard them as coarse and ugly. The real value of the half-orc as a game concept is that it allows players to take on the role of a "fish out of water" or a "bad boy made good." Assuming the role of an outcast is an unusual challenge that often leads to lots of interesting roleplaying opportunities. Similarly, characters who must learn to overcome their own essentially violent natures to become great heroes are a staple of fantasy fiction and comic books (think Worf on Star Trek or Wolverine from X-Men). The idea of playing such a character is very appealing.

Now that we've boiled down the standard D&D races, we can identify possibilities for the "lost

world" and rule out those that don't fit. Right off the bat, for example, we'll rule out halflings. The tightly knit, clannish societies of this world are on a constant quest for survival, and they are unlikely to allow halflings in their midst. The opportunist mindset of the halflings would be detrimental. They simply don't exist on this world. You shouldn't be afraid to take a similar step when designing your own world. Just because a character race is listed in the Player's Handbook doesn't mean you have to offer that race in your campaign. In fact, if you don't have a clear idea of how the race fits into your plans, you're better off excluding it. If one of your players should select a race you're not completely comfortable with, you'll only be forced to expend a lot of valuable creative energy inventing details you're not ready for.

Similarly, the gnomes' fondness for wacky spells and inventions doesn't fit. Not only do we envision a primitive world that is far less advanced than the common D&D setting, we're

also looking to create an atmosphere of savagery and danger. The congenial, carefree nature of the gnomes might spoil that.

Elves, dwarves, and half-orcs remain. To this list, we add three human tribes. This assortment should work out just fine because it will insure that there are as many human options as nonhuman. That should help reinforce the notion that the balance of power is still tipped in favor of humanity.

That wraps up another installment. Next month, we'll flesh out the five tribes that will dominate the early phases of the new campaign and present guidelines for using the information in the Player's Handbook and Dungeon Master's Guide to draw up the game information necessary to turn these creations into full-fledged D&D player races.

## 27

# Off to the Races

Last month, "Dungeons & Dragons" hinted at the basic political situation of the new campaign world. Since it's a rough-and-tumble "land that time forgot" setting, the world is dominated by a loose collection of primitive tribes with little or no central organization. Five tribes were created to get the campaign off the ground -- one elven, one dwarven, one half-orc, and two human. The next step is to start adding details. In the spirit of the First Rule of Dungeons & Dragons, we only need enough information about each tribe to allow the campaign to get underway. Once simple details on the various tribes are decided, basic political and geographical characteristics about each of them can be created.



## **The Solaani (Elves)**

Elves usually enjoy the oldest and most advanced civilization on the typical D&D game world, so the elves of this world literally live higher up than the other tribes. They inhabit lofty citadels located in the mountains. As a consequence, they've managed to tame a variety of flying reptiles with whom they share an almost supernatural bond that is now several centuries old. An elite order of elven knights ride into battle mounted on these flying creatures.

As on most D&D worlds, the elven civilization is the oldest culture on the planet. This suggests that it was actually the elves who were responsible for the downfall of the lizardfolk civilization that once dominated the world (see Chapter 25). Combining this idea with the hint of tragedy that is usually implicit in the elven culture inspires an idea for an interesting secret, neatly taking care of the obligation to the Second Rule of Dungeoncraft. Somehow, during the final conflict

of that great war, the elven leaders were secretly forced to sacrifice the future of their own people in order to secure a victory over the lizardfolk. As a result, the elven civilization is gradually waning and doomed to die out.

Culturally, the elves are a people of ceremony and tradition. Although still less technologically advanced than the average culture on the average D&D game world, the elves are certainly the most sophisticated inhabitants of the lost world. Theirs is the only living culture that has evolved its own written language, the single most important tool the elves have used to safeguard and pass along generations' worth of lore and tradition.

Within the campaign, the elven civilization can function as a sort of library. The elves are a convenient source of mystical secrets and historical facts that will be needed upon occasion to serve as clues and springboards into adventures. This notion leads to the idea that

knowledge is somehow tied to the social hierarchy within elven civilization -- every time an elf attains a higher social status, the tribal elders entrust her with a few new secrets. This way, only the tribe's highest-ranking elders know everything, a fact that conveniently explains why PC elves don't begin play knowing many of the world's secrets.

## **The Inuundi (Dwarves)**

Dwarves are the great craftsmen of most D&D game worlds. This characteristic suggests that perhaps it was the dwarves who originally built all the cities and tunnels inhabited by the lizardfolk who once dominated the planet. This in turn suggests that the entire dwarven race was once enslaved by the lizardfolk. Just before the empire of the lizardfolk fell, a Spartacus-type hero led an uprising of the dwarven slaves and secured their freedom. In fact, the results of this upheaval were probably so catastrophic that it

seems natural to tie the revolt into the downfall of the lizardfolk. Thus, at some point the leader of the dwarven uprising made an alliance with the leaders of the Solaani and it was this pact that both bought the dwarves their freedom and sealed the Solaani victory. The elders of the dwarven tribe might even know the secret about the forthcoming end of the elven civilization.

Their background suggests that the dwarves of the lost world are somewhat isolationist.

Although they have reached a tacit understanding with the elves, their centuries of slavery have made them generally distrustful of outsiders.

Even now, several generations after they secured their freedom, only the hardiest dwarves have much contact with the outside world. The debate over whether or not to become more involved with nondwarves might be a major issue that divides dwarven society. A growing faction of younger dwarves might be urging their elders to strengthen ties with the rest of the world. The existence of such a faction provides a convenient

means to explain PC dwarves, who obviously don't spend their time hidden away with the rest of the tribe.

The fact that the dwarves are isolationists implies that their home is naturally cut off from the outside world. In observance of D&D tradition, a subterranean home seems to be in order. The dwarves of the lost world will inhabit an underground citadel they once constructed for the lizardfolk. This citadel is just one terminus of a huge network of underground structures and tunnels the dwarves constructed for their former masters. These subterranean passages allowed the lizardfolk to travel across the continent -- they were as important to the reptilian empire as roads were to the ancient Romans. Since the civilization of the lizardfolk collapsed, darker, less pleasant things began to occupy the tunnels, and even the dwarves fear to enter all but a few of them. This last bit of lore should guarantee an adequate supply of "dungeons" all over the continent. It also suggests an important role the dwarves can

play in the campaign. Theoretically, the dwarves might be the only inhabitants of the lost world who are familiar with the locations and secrets of all the dungeons and tunnels. Thus, the dwarves can easily serve as an important source of ancient maps and geographical tidbits that can be used as adventure hooks.

The Second Rule of Dungeoncraft requires a secret about the dwarves: The dwarves are actually a genetic offshoot of the elves.

Generations ago, before the dwarves were enslaved, the dwarves and elves were one people. The elf leader at the time voluntarily offered up half of his tribe into servitude to protect the remaining half. Over the generations, natural selection forced the enslaved elves to evolve and adapt to their work in the tunnels. Gradually, they became shorter, stockier, and more hairy.

## The Half-Breeds (Half-Orcs)

As noted last month, on most D&D game worlds, half-orcs play the role of the ultimate outcasts. Somewhat shunned by polite civilization and orcs alike, the half-breeds are often forced to look out for themselves and occupy whatever little niche in society they can manage to craft for themselves.

Figuring out how half-orcs fit into the world obviously forces one to figure out how orcs fit in, and you shouldn't create too much too fast. But what if the half-orcs aren't really half-orcs at all, but half-lizardfolk? In many respects, the new campaign is set up so that lizardfolk will play the role traditionally occupied by orcs: powerful evil humanoids who oppose elves and dwarves. Although their empire is now shattered, it's easy to imagine tribes of scattered lizardfolk still roaming the landscape and perhaps providing the lion's share of the players' opposition early in the campaign. Since it's already established that the

lizardfolk are slavers, it's easy to imagine them siring half-breed children, and these unfortunates would suffer the same fate reserved for half-orcs in the typical D&D game world. Another strong advantage of this plan is that the unique half-lizardfolk race helps reinforce the campaign's unique identity.

Most of the half-breeds on the lost world live on the fringes of other tribal societies and integrate into those cultures as best they can. Because the lizardfolk are so hated and mistrusted by most of the world's other inhabitants, the half-breeds are the victims of a lot of prejudice, and most of those who are accepted into other societies are only adopted reluctantly. Still, the hardships tend to make the half-breeds who survive resourceful and durable.

To make things a tad more interesting, there are rumors all across the lost world of a whole tribe entirely made up of half-lizardfolk. Most believe that this tribe lives somewhere within the ancient



dwarven tunnels and occasionally ventures forth to raid other tribes and liberate more half-breeds. Many half-lizardfolk dream of one day finding this tribe and joining its ranks.

The Second Rule of Dungeoncraft requires a secret about the half breeds: This semi-secret tribe exists, and its charismatic leader is not a half-breed at all, but an elf who uses magic to disguise her appearance. The elf has been secretly assembling the half-breed army to combat some enormous calamity she expects to arise over the next several years. She originally attempted to convince her fellow Solaani of the danger decades ago, but when it was clear they would not accept her warning, she began assembling her army. At this time, not even her followers are aware of her true nature or grand purpose.

## **The Bruun (Human)**

Most D&D game worlds are human-centric, and the lost world isn't an exception. At least two-

thirds of the campaign's player characters and important NPCs will be human. To encourage such a trend, the world needs a couple of interesting human tribes to attract the players' attention.

The largest and most populous band of humans in the campaign's starting area is a tribe of formidable warriors known as the Bruun. In many ways, the Bruun are an echo of the Spartans.

Bruun society believes that the best way to insure survival is to begin brutally training the young at the earliest possible age. By the age of twelve, a warrior of the Bruun is a fierce combatant who

has already learned how to survive alone in the jungle for several days. These harsh measures not only prepare the youngsters for life on the lost world, but they cull out the weak, allowing the tribe to expend its resources on those with the best chance for survival.

Across the lost world, the Bruun are known not only for their battle prowess and ferocity but also for their elaborate festivals. Several times each year, all Bruun take part in complex rituals that re-enact various parables, legends, and important moments in tribe's history. The ceremonies are the means by which the Bruun hand down important lessons.

Two distinct "subtribes" of Bruun inhabit the starting area of the lost world -- one basically good-aligned and the other mostly evil. Such a schism makes a certain amount of sense -- the larger a primitive tribe gets, the more difficult it becomes to hold the tribe together. The division also accommodates a broader range of Bruun PCs. The basic origin of the separation was a sharp disagreement among tribal elders as to how to insure the survival of the tribe. One faction believed in using conquest to consolidate the tribe's power, while a second refused to subjugate any free creature if it did not pose a direct threat to the Bruun. Eventually, some seventy-five years

before the campaign begins, the former faction left the main tribe to seek its own destiny. Both factions of Bruun now inhabit their own makeshift strongholds within the jungle and the surrounding hills.

The Bruun schism provides a good idea for a secret. The leaders of the evil-aligned "conquest" faction were actually subtly manipulated by a mysterious stranger, who is the real father of their beliefs. To this day, the stranger still visits the leaders of the separatist faction and exerts an influence over them. Inexplicably, he doesn't appear to have aged a day in the last three-quarters of a century. Over time, the stranger has taken his puppets down darker and darker paths, subtly fueling their bloodlust and need for conquest. Lately, he has introduced the leaders of the faction to an eerie magic ritual during which they drink the blood of a tyrannosaurus, the oldest and most powerful of all the creatures on the planet; in return, they receive incredible raging strength and prowess. Of all the Bruun, only the

elders of the separatist tribe have had any contact with the stranger and know he exists.

The stranger is actually a were-raptor, a shape shifter who can change between human and dinosaur forms. The were-raptors are servants of the tyrannosaurs, who possess a secret spiritual and malevolent intelligence. Although they are all but extinct and rarely encountered on the lost world, the tyrannosaurs are much more than mere dinosaurs and still subtly manipulate the affairs of the planet like some sort of dark gods. Through their servant, they are slowly guiding the Bruun separatists toward a secret sinister destiny.

## **The Vistiiri (Human)**

The second human tribe is a group of nomads known as the Vistiiri. Although they are not as populous or influential as the Bruun, the Vistiiri still comfortably out-number the Solaani and Inuundi in the campaign's starting area. Although they boast their own impressive army and they

are more than capable of defending themselves, the Vistiiri basically believe in peace. To them, life on the lost world is already hard enough without going out to seek additional conflict.

The Vistiiri do not inhabit any sort of fixed villages and instead wander from place to place, following a carefully calculated plan of migration. Their aim is to avoid the hunting trails followed by the larger carnivorous dinosaurs at various points in the year. Along their routes, they conduct a lot of trade with neighboring tribes, making them a good source of information about events in the region.

Thanks to their frequent contact with the Solaani, the Vistiiri have developed a true love of song, and just about every member of the tribe carries a musical instrument. In fact, an interesting tribal custom has arisen around the Vistiiri's fondness for music. Whenever an older member of the tribe is on his or her deathbed, the Vistiiri craft a unique musical instrument and place it at the

elder's side. When death comes, the Vistiiri believe that the voice of the elder departs the body and moves into the instrument, where it can be heard whenever the instrument is played thereafter. These special instruments have a number of important functions in Vistiiri society. Skilled bards seem to have the ability to commune with the departed spirits of the elders by playing elaborate compositions on them. Also, the Vistiiri prefer to go into battle with the voices of their ancestors before them; a whole troop of musicians producing a cacophonous symphony on hundreds of unique instruments always stands at the head of their armies.

Their secret? The head of the Vistiiri tribe carries an unusual musical instrument as his badge of honor. The instrument houses the voice of one of the oldest and wisest departed chieftains of the tribe. For generations now, unknown to all, the spirit of the departed chieftain has been the real ruler of the tribe -- the rulers who have followed him have done little more than unwittingly follow

his instructions. This explains why the Vistiiri chieftain is usually found alone in his tent, obsessively playing the instrument; he is actually receiving instructions from the elder. As sinister as this sounds, it's actually good for the Vistiiri people. The departed elder is an excellent leader and his spirit has already guided the tribe through calamities that his earthly ancestors could not have handled on their own.

## **Putting it All Together**

So now that the basic assortment of tribes has been decided, a quick summary of the overall political situation is in order. The chart below explains the relationship between the tribes. You can cross-index any two tribes to find out how they view each other.



	Solaani	Inuundi	Half-Breed	Bruun	Vistiiri	Lizard-folk
Solaani		0	-	0	+	--
Inuundi	0		-	0	T	--
Half-Breed	-	-		-	T	-
Bruun	0	0	-		-	--
Vistiiri	+	T	T	-		T
Lizard-folk	--	--	-	--	T	

Each tribe generally prefers dealing with its own kind.

T: The Vistiiri trade with all most other inhabitants of the lost world, including some lizardfolk. The one exception is the separatist Bruun faction. By and large, the Vistiiri have cordial, but not particularly friendly relations with their trading partners.

+: The two tribes favor each other and enjoy friendly relations.

-: The tribes view each other with suspicion, though they are not openly enemies.

--: The tribes generally view each other as enemies.

# 28

## Gotta Have Faith, Part I

Three issues ago, "Dungeoncraft" started crafting an entirely new D&D campaign to showcase the rules of the new D&D game. This time around, the goal is to build a rough and tumble "lost world" dominated by dinosaurs, volcanoes, and primitive tribes. So far, a basic overview of the world and a first look at the basic political situation in the campaign's starting area have been developed. Some of the D&D game's races have also been customized to make them more at home in this creation. This month, let's flesh out a few details about the gods, myths, and faiths of the lost world.

The subject of designing gods and faiths for D&D campaigns was first dealt with way back in

Dragon 258. That installment noted a few reasons why it was particularly important to start thinking about the deities and religions that will dominate your campaign setting as early in the world-building process as possible. In addition, a five-step process for creating a suitable faith from scratch was outlined. Rather than repeat that advice here, go ahead and either dig into your collection of Dragon back issues or point your web browser to the "Dungeoncraft" archive online. If possible, you might want to peruse the earlier column right now, before reading further.

Fortunately, almost all of the earlier advice is still sound even in the wake of the new edition.

Therefore, we're going to create the gods of the lost world by stepping through the same five-step process used last time, while selecting some different options on this go-round. This is also a good opportunity to demonstrate a technique or two for tweaking the D&D game rules to help lend your campaign its own flavor.

## Step One: Polytheism vs. Monotheism

Just in case you don't have your dictionary handy, "polytheistic" faiths believe in a multitude of interrelated gods, while their "monotheistic" counterparts believe in a single supreme deity. Since most D&D game worlds feature polytheistic religions, a monotheistic faith was incorporated into the last campaign just to be different. On that world, the only true god was Aris, the living consciousness of the planet itself. This time, in the interest of variety, we'll design a polytheistic faith. The next step, therefore, is to figure out roughly how many gods are necessary and how they are interconnected.

On most D&D worlds, the gods are organized into pantheons that give each god complete dominion over one particular realm. In other words, there might be a god of the sea, a god of the sun, a god of poetry, a god of war, and so forth. Similarly, most D&D campaigns are built

around gods who walk in human form and manifest larger-than-life human personality traits.

Because this is our second time around the block, let's avoid these D&D conventions when possible in the hope of creating something a bit more ambitious. The idea of all-powerful gods lording over the lost world just doesn't seem right. One of the campaign's major themes is that savagery is everywhere and survival is difficult. If possible, this theme should be reflected in the gods created for the world. Deities should find life every bit as rough as their mortal subjects. Also, since the dinosaurs are the real "stars" of this world and represent its major differentiating feature, there should be a way to reflect them in the gods as well.

It makes a certain amount of sense to turn some of the dinosaurs themselves into gods. As it's been presented thus far, the lost world is the ultimate venue for Darwin's concept of the survival of the fittest. What if the very oldest and

fittest survivors acquire a reverence from Mother Nature and their fellow creatures that is akin to a spiritual aura? In other words, somewhere off in the forest is a tyrannosaurus rex that is so old, so large, and so fearsome that it has become a sort of god. All the other inhabitants of the lost world immediately recognize the halo of power that surrounds this creature, and even the planet itself seems to shake with fear when it passes. The mysterious energies that emanate from the tyrannosaurus rex somehow stem from its long history -- all the battles it has won, the years it has seen, and the other creatures it has subjugated. These forces are so powerful that some of the world's humans, humanoids, and lizardfolk cultists who revere these beasts are capable of tapping into the energy themselves to manipulate the natural world (that is, through divine spells).

This concept is appealing for a number of reasons: Not only does it meet all the goals and establish that the lost world is quite unlike the

standard D&D setting, it also has the advantage of providing some interesting springboards for potential adventures. Although they should be rarely seen, the fact that the gods walk the earth alongside the player characters is appealing. The idea that the PCs might one day confront a god also provides some interesting adventure ideas. It's not clear exactly how or why this would happen just yet, but it sounds heroic and interesting.

This idea also fits well with the various concepts already created. The Solaani (elves) enjoy a special bond with pterosaurs, for instance. Undoubtedly they worship some sort of enormous pterosaur who has become one of these gods. Similarly, it's already been established that the tyrannosaurs possess some mysterious form of group intelligence and have actually hatched a scheme that has torn the Bruun, one of the human tribes, in half (see last issue). It looks like the great tyrannosaurus rex god is the source of that strange intelligence.

Of course, this concept does have one drawback: The gods usually suggest a few interesting details about the campaign setting: How was the world formed? What is the nature of good and evil? That most of them will have fascinating histories of their own is an easy assumption to make, but these gods are really little more than glorified animals. They didn't create their world; it created them. Most of the central mysteries still remain.

To solve this problem, a second set of even older gods can be created who are now extinct. These elder beings were much closer to human in composition and attitude, and it was their power that created the lost world. This second pantheon consisted of two arch-gods: one representing light and symbolized by the sun, the other representing darkness and symbolized by a moon. Each of these elder beings was totally consumed by a hatred for his rival and the pair of them spent the whole of their very long lives battling each other. In fact, they created the lost world to serve as their battleground, standing as it does at the



midway point between the sun and the moon. Over time, the lost world itself gave birth to the various creatures who came to dominate it, including the various dinosaur gods and the lizardfolk who built a civilization and a faith to celebrate them.

One day, the god of darkness finally struck a blow that was powerful enough to shatter the god of light into countless little fragments, each of which was an individual living being. These fragments became the Solaani (elves), the first mammalian inhabitants of the lost world. Over time, the Inuundi (dwarves) and the humans gradually evolved from the Solaani. Although these newly formed savages didn't realize their divine origins for many generations, most of them did manifest a natural aversion to darkness almost immediately, explaining perhaps why most of the humanoid inhabitants of the lost world favor nonevil alignments.

Once he destroyed his brother, the god of darkness was faced with a dilemma. His entire existence was defined by his hatred for his rival, and if the great battle was to come to an end, his life would have no more meaning. For about a century he tried to figure out how to continue the struggle against his hated enemy before he finally noticed the Solaani and resolved to destroy them. Since there was no effective way to battle so many Solaani in his singular form, he traveled back to the lost world and let the great tyrannosaur god and its followers devour him. That way, the beasts and their followers among the lizardfolk would absorb his essence and his hatred, driving them to hound and hunt the Solaani and their descendants. The tyrannosaurs' plot against the Bruun is probably a direct manifestation of the darkness god's evil influence.

Before going further, it's worth deciding how much of this backstory is generally known to the world's inhabitants. While it's safe to assume that the denizens of the lost world are aware of the

role the gods of light and darkness played in the creation of their world, only a few truly enlightened individuals should understand the elder gods' final fates. The idea of keeping the true origin of the Solaani a secret, as well as the fact that the spirit of the darkness god lives on in the tyrannosaurs is likewise appealing. This leaves a couple of big mysteries for the players to uncover and neatly takes care of the obligation to the Second Rule of Dungeoncraft: Most of the world believes that the old gods simply perished in one last cataclysmic battle.

Speaking of big secrets, this latest bit of backstory has provided some inspiration that allows the opportunity to plug an earlier hole. As you might recall from the last couple of installments, the Solaani were somehow responsible for the downfall of the lizardfolk, and this triumph is slowly leading to the end of their civilization. It was never established, though, just how the Solaani accomplished their victory. Now that the elves' true origins are set down, what if

the elves are secretly "reconstructing" the god of light? Since the elves are fragments of the elder god, several of them somehow reunited themselves to form a lesser version of the long-dead god. It was this measure that was finally necessary to defeat the lizardfolk, and it was this move that is slowly making the Solaani extinct. The reconstruction was accomplished through some sort of powerful magic spell, and a side effect of that spell is that the life essences of more and more Solaani are being drawn to the proto-god and rejoined over time. This phenomenon manifests itself as a strange plague contracted by the elves. The victims of this plague aren't really dying, though; their souls are simply being absorbed back into the god of light. Eventually, the god might be entirely reassembled.

All of this might also explain the strange plot of the tyrannosaur god and its followers. Perhaps the god of darkness knows what is happening and is influencing the dinosaurs to snuff out his newly

reborn foe and destroy the Solaani before the god of light can grow any more powerful.

These ideas are useful because they should provide lots of interesting ideas for adventures. A Solaani PC might contract the plague, the characters might find and confront the newly reformed god of light, they might get caught up in the plot of the tyrannosaur god, and so on. For maximum effect, this should be a secret for some time (as per the Second Rule). Only the very highest level elves understand the true nature of the plague that is slowly wiping out their civilization.

## **Step Two: The Nature of the Gods**

Now that the pantheon of the lost world has been sketched out, it's time to consider their basic natures. Fortunately, most of the information has already been created. But since the dinosaur gods

are going to have the biggest impact upon the game world for the foreseeable future, it's necessary to flesh them out just a tad more. How many of these gods exist, what are their spheres of influence, and how do they conduct themselves?

Although it's obviously an arbitrary decision, four dinosaur gods seems just about right. That provides enough gods for variety, but not so many that a lot of early effort is expended creating them. Fortunately, this decision isn't restrictive -- with the way the structure is set up, it will be easy enough to add more gods later should the need arise.

As indicated earlier, one of the dinosaur gods is a tyrannosaur and another is a pterosaur. This leaves two slots to fill. One obvious choice is some sort of sea creature, perhaps a giant plesiosaur (something akin to the Loch Ness monster for those of you who are dino-challenged). A second good choice might be an

ultrasaur (a classic bulky plant eater with a long neck and tail). Although the ultrasaur is not really sentient, it's necessary to assign a "personality" trait or two to each of the gods to help differentiate them from each other. Each god should also possess a mystical bond with certain aspects of nature. Finally, each god should get a name. "Tyrannosaur god" is getting old.

For maximum effect, the dinosaur gods should rarely show themselves. They spend most of their time hidden away in valleys and grottos unknown to the lost world's sentient inhabitants. When they do appear, they are always accompanied by a hefty retinue of lesser dinosaurs who serve as their followers. Although most of the dinosaur gods are generally disinterested in the affairs of the world around them (Kor being the obvious exception), they do occasionally use their considerable influences to defend their territories or aid the cults of worshippers who have sprung up to honor them. For now, these are probably the only important factors to worry about.

Next month, we'll translate this bizarre mythology into D&D terms and offer some tips on how to customize the game rules to lend your clerics a little extra flavor.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>"Personality"</b>	<b>Aspects of Nature</b>
Kor	Tyrannosaur	Vicious	predatory, regal The hunt, death
Abrexis	Pterosaur	Wise	inquisitive, free Skies, wind
Haali	Plesiosaur	Vain	tempestuous Seas, storms
Kalaar	Ultrasaur	Serene	matronly The land, family



## 29

# Gotta Have Faith, Part II

Last month, we looked at the major gods that hold sway over the Lost World. In this outing, let's conclude the design of faith and religion by taking a long look at those who worship the gods. Along the way, we'll consider some tips for customizing the D&D game rules to accentuate the unique flavor of the campaign.

Note that we're employing a five-step process for designing gods and faiths originally detailed way back in *Dragon* 258. You can find this piece in the "Dungeoncraft" archives.

Last issue, we completed steps one and two of the process, which leads us next to . . .

## Step Three: Faith and Worshippers

Most of the active gods in the campaign are essentially the oldest and largest dinosaurs on the planet. They earned their divine aspects by surviving the travails of the Lost World for ages, and this process has somehow translated into a mystical aura that surrounds them. The gods are rarely seen, but when they appear their presence inspires an overpowering sense of awe, and the planet itself seems to tremble in their shadows. It's important to note that, unlike the divine beings of the typical D&D world, these gods don't dwell in an extradimensional palace on another plane. They live right on the Lost World with everyone else, although they confine their wanderings to secret glens and grottos known only to their followers.

Although the dinosaur gods aren't overtly sentient, they do possess an undeniable intelligence and personality. They are clearly

capable of communicating with their own kind using some sort of unspoken language, and the few humans who have managed to interact with the gods have been left with an impression of great wisdom. We've already decided that one of the gods, Kor the tyrannosaur, is somehow involved in a mysterious plot that threatens the whole of the Lost World (see Dragon 283).

Now that we know something about the gods, the next task is to decide how the other inhabitants of the Lost World pay homage to them. One possibility is that the humans and other civilized residents of the planet don't worship the gods. Perhaps only the other dinosaurs recognize their sovereignty. Although this is an interesting idea, it's pretty easy to reject. After all, faith and religion are important parts of the D&D game. If the humans and other intelligent races don't honor the gods, it's difficult to imagine clerics and paladins, and the whole game changes radically. While it's certainly possible to run a campaign like this, it's not what we have in mind for the

Lost World. We aim to create a game world with a distinctive "feel," but one built on familiar D&D concepts.

Somehow, then, the civilized inhabitants must pay their respects to the dinosaur gods. This presents a slightly sticky situation, since few of the traditional reasons why a culture worships its deities are applicable to these gods. Typically, one might pray to the god of the skies for good weather before setting out to sea, or pray to the goddess of bounty to guarantee a good harvest. It's pretty clear, though, that these dinosaur gods don't have this sort of direct control over the environment. Other than not eating him, it's hard to say exactly how one of these gods might reward a loyal follower.

Our best bet is to take advantage of this mystery. Perhaps no one knows why certain members of the civilized communities of the Lost World swear their allegiance to the dinosaur gods -- not even the faithful themselves. Let's suppose that

each of the gods has a cult of priests. Each cult serves as a network of guardians and agents that looks out for the god's interests and carries out subtle instructions the god somehow communicates to them through instinct and intuition. Oddly, the priests cannot explain exactly why they serve -- it's simply a compulsion that has been with them for as long as they can remember. Shortly after birth, the priests-to-be receive a telepathic calling from the god and feel the mysterious compulsion to serve. This isn't to imply that the priests are mind-controlled by their lords, simply that they are guided through instinct and emotion; each priest maintains freewill and is theoretically capable of turning his back on his patron, though few have done so. No one understands the mechanics of how the gods select their followers. Heredity is certainly not a factor (for example, the son of a priest has no better or worse chance of becoming a priest than anyone else), and geographical location seems equally meaningless. It's clear that some receive the call

to serve even though their gods have never passed within hundreds of miles of their birthplaces.

These priests are the clerics of the Lost World. In addition to spiritual guidance, the gods also bestow powers upon them in the form of divine spells. Partially because of these powers, the priests are natural leaders in their communities. They are often able to assemble their own flocks of followers to help them do their master's bidding. This means that all the inhabitants of the Lost World are generally aware of the various priesthoods, and it guarantees that the dinosaur priests function almost exactly like the clerics who inhabit the traditional D&D game world.

Note that by keeping the true nature of the telepathic bond between the priests and their sovereigns somewhat secretive, we're hoping to lend the dinosaur gods an air of divine mystery. Clearly, these beings possess some strange power that is beyond the comprehension of most mere mortals. One day, we'll have an opportunity to

develop this secret further, perhaps giving the players an interesting revelation or two to uncover (don't forget the Second Rule of Dungeoncraft). When we finally do delve into this mystery, it might be an opportunity to develop the exact mechanics by which the Lost World chooses its dinosaur gods and bestows their strange powers upon them. Fortunately, such matters are best left for later in the campaign, after the players have a few experience levels under the belts, so we needn't worry about providing any of this detail just yet.

So far so good, but we still have to answer one obvious question -- exactly what sort of services do the priests perform for the dinosaur gods? First and foremost, the priests protect their lords and act as their eyes and ears. Suppose some formidable hero decides to make a name for himself by launching a quest to find and kill Kor. In that case, the tyrannosaur god would immediately mobilize his network of priests who would in turn mobilize their networks of

followers to dispatch the hero long before he even comes close to attaining his goal. Likewise, if a band of nomads builds a fortress in a dense forest that disrupts the feeding patterns of the large dinosaurs that live there, Kalaar (the ultrasaurus) might see the move as a threat to her "children" and mobilize her priests to drive away the invaders.

Beyond protection and intelligence gathering, the duties and activities of each priesthood depend upon the nature of the god in question.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Alignment</b>	<b>Domains</b>
Kor	Lawful evil	Evil, Death, Destruction
Abrexis	Lawful good	Good, Air, Knowledge
Kalaar	Neutral good	Plant, Protection
Haali	Chaotic neutral	Strength, Water

**Kor (Tyrranosaur):** As we decided in the last installment, Kor and his followers have absorbed



the essence of the great god of darkness. As a consequence, Kor is essentially dedicated to eradicating the humans, elves, and dwarves who reside on the Lost World. In accord with his wishes, the priesthood of Kor is constantly hatching plots designed to slowly chip away at the power amassed by the civilized societies. Ultimately, all of these efforts are part of a coordinated plan of attack masterminded by Kor himself.

Obviously, all of Kor's priests are evil, and most are lizardfolk. There are, however, a few renegade humans among the faithful who act as spies and operate secret cults inside the Lost World's civilized societies.

**Abrexis (Pterosaur):** As a creature of the air, Abrexis values freedom above all else. Because he understands that freedom goes hand-in-hand with peace, his priesthood is dedicated to ending conflict and promoting harmony. In essence, Abrexis abhors the savagery of the Lost World

and uses his priesthood to help the planet evolve beyond its harsh realities.

Clearly, this mission often brings Abrexis's priests into conflict with the priests of Kor. In fact, the two sects are sworn enemies.

**Kalaar (Ultrasaur):** Kalaar and her "children" (the various brachiosaurs, apatosaur, and other large plant-eating dinosaurs of the Lost World) are especially dependent upon the planet's forests for survival. As a result, she and her priesthood are dedicated to safeguarding the planet's wilderness and helping the great herds of herbivorous dinosaurs migrate across the planet's surface to avoid the elements and large concentrations of predators.

In many ways, Kalaar is a balancing force between Abrexis and Kor. Although she too appreciates the value of peace, she believes that the ever-expanding civilizations erected by the humans, elves, and dwarves might one day pose a

threat to purity of the wilderness and the well-being of her children.

**Haali (Plesiosaur):** Haali is a vain god who is chiefly concerned with protecting his domain, the world's oceans, from encroachment. Although the seas of the Lost World are too big for Haali and his followers to patrol with complete efficiency, Haali is attempting to ensure that no one can cross the oceans without his permission. His priesthood is dedicating to making sure that fishermen and others who travel by sea pay their god his proper respects. Although the priests of all four gods occasionally organize rituals and festivals to honor their lords, Haali is far more interested in these activities than any of the others.

## Clerics

What we've created so far should work quite nicely and provide the Lost World with plenty of pizzazz. Unfortunately, the cleric character class

as described in the Player's Handbook doesn't quite sound like the dinosaur priests I've just described. The typical D&D cleric has certain abilities (such as turning undead), that don't logically stem from the dinosaur gods, while our dinosaur priests should clearly possess certain powers not germane to the cleric class. (Shouldn't a priest of Kor receive some sort of protection against tyrannosaurs?) Once you start creating more ambitious and distinctive faiths, it's fairly easy to run into this problem. Fortunately, it's not too difficult to modify the standard D&D character classes to bring them in line with your vision. In fact, this can be a powerful means of lending your campaign its own distinctive flavor.

Just because such measures can be effective, though, doesn't mean they should be undertaken lightly. You should realize that the D&D rules are carefully balanced and sometimes fit together in ways that aren't obvious. Too much tampering with the rules can result in an unbalanced game that is no longer fun. Think about what might

happen, for instance, if you gave your clerics a new power that turns out to be a lot more useful than you thought it would be. Suddenly, your modified cleric class is more powerful than the other classes, and you might end up with a campaign in which the clerics hog all the attention. Before long, you might even discover that nobody is interested in playing anything else.

Performing major surgery on a class, therefore, is a task best left to more experienced DMs who will do a better job of predicting the impact their changes might have on the campaign.

Fortunately, there's a simple strategy for "tweaking" a class that doesn't run too much risk. The basic philosophy is not to add or subtract any abilities to the class but to replace a few key abilities with nearly exact equivalents. Let's look at a few of the cleric's abilities and think about how we might apply such a philosophy.

**Skills:** Sometimes the cleric's listed class skills don't adequately reflect your campaign. On the

Lost World, for instance, dinosaurs serve as mounts and beasts of burden. Since the priests of the Lost World all have a special connection with dinosaurs, shouldn't Animal Empathy be a class skill available to them? After all, it's hard to imagine any resident of the Lost World handling a dinosaur better than a priest.

Again, the basic philosophy is not to add or subtract any abilities but to replace a few key abilities with near exact equivalents. Thus, if we replace a few of the cleric's class skills with completely different skills, we shouldn't run too great a risk of unbalancing the class. For example, Animal Empathy is normally not a class skill for clerics. We can give our clerics Animal Empathy as a class skill, though, so long as we're willing to give up one of the cleric's existing class skills and make it unavailable to the class altogether. In this case, Scry might be a good skill to forfeit.

**Turning Undead:** Given what we know about the dinosaur gods, it does not necessarily follow that the clerics of the Lost World have any special powers over undead. On the other hand, our clerics do have a special relationship with certain types of dinosaurs that is clearly not reflected by any of the standard cleric's abilities. Thus, let's eliminate the cleric's ability to turn undead and replace it with the ability to "turn" dinosaurs. A priest of Abrexis has the ability to dismiss (or turn) flying dinosaurs, making them leave the area. This ability requires a standard turning check and has the exact same effects as the standard turn undead ability. Similarly, priests of Kor can turn tyrannosaurs and similar predatory dinosaurs, priests of Kalaar can turn large herbivorous dinosaurs, and priests of Haali can turn aquatic dinosaurs. Again, we're not adding or subtracting abilities, merely replacing some abilities with nearly identical equivalents.

**Spells:** Some of the cleric spells listed in the Player's Handbook look like they'll fit well with

our conception of the dinosaur priests, while others look wholly inappropriate. This is another good opportunity to customize the class to give it some unique flavor. Once again, the easiest way to do this is to apply our general philosophy of replacing abilities with near exact equivalents. In this case, we have two options:

- First, we can replace some key spells with spells of an identical level drawn from the lists of wizard spells.
- In addition or instead, we can replace the specifics of a spell with a near equivalent.

See the sidebars for specific notes on these two processes.

## **Step Four and Five: Two Myths and Other Faiths**

Fortunately, both of these stages are already complete. The last installment laid down the



framework for the dinosaur gods, creating myths that account for the creation of the Lost World and the "deaths" of the elder gods. As for other faiths, the elder gods aren't really dead, leaving open the possibility that a few of the Lost World's inhabitants still worship these older deities directly.

## **Cutting and Modifying Spells**

Spells that should be modified or eliminated on the Lost World include:

### **0-level**

- Create water (eliminate this spell because it doesn't fit our conception of the gods, and it can't be this easy to get fresh water on the harsh Lost World)
- Purify food and drink (eliminate this spell for the same reasons as create water)

## 1st level

- Bless/curse water (eliminate these because "holy water" doesn't fit with our dinosaur gods)
- Detect undead (modify to detect dinosaur; instead of detecting undead, this spell detects dinosaurs of the sort the cleric can turn)
- Summon monster I (modify to summon dinosaur I; this spell summons appropriate dinosaurs based on the priest's deity)

## 2nd level

- Consecrate/desecrate (eliminate these spells because our clerics aren't particularly good at dealing with undead)
- Summon monster II (modify to summon dinosaur II)

## 3rd level

- Searing light (eliminate this spell for the same reasons as eliminating consecrate/desecrate)
- Summon monster III (modify to summon dinosaur III)

## 4th level

- Dimensional anchor (eliminate this spell because the dinosaur gods have no extradimensional power or presence)
- Dismissal (eliminate this spell for the same reasons as dimensional anchor)
- Lesser planar ally (eliminate this spell for the same reasons as dimensional anchor)
- Summon monster IV (modify to summon dinosaur IV)

## 5th level

- Ethereal jaunt (eliminate this spell for the same reasons as dimensional anchor)
- Plane shift (eliminate this spell for the same reasons as dimensional anchor)
- Summon monster V (modify to summon dinosaur V)

## 6th level

- Banishment (eliminate this spell for the same reasons as dimensional anchor)
- Create undead (eliminate this spell for the same reasons as consecrate)
- Etherealness (eliminate this spell for the same reasons as dimensional anchor)
- Planar ally (eliminate this spell for the same reasons as dimensional anchor)

- Summon monster VI (modify to summon dinosaur VI)

## **7th level**

- Summon monster VII (modify to summon dinosaur VII)

## **8th level**

- Create greater undead (eliminate this spell for the same reasons as consecrate)
- Summon monster VIII (modify to summon dinosaur VIII)

## **9th level**

- Gate (eliminate this spell for the same reasons as dimensional anchor)
- Summon monster IX (modify to summon dinosaur IX)

## Replacing Spells

After cutting the inappropriate spells from the list, it's time to select suitable replacements. Note that, when replacing a domain spell, you should assume that the replacement spell substitutes for the original spell on the domain list unless there is a compelling reason why it shouldn't. If there is such a reason, select a new entry to replace the spell on the domain list.

Also note that when selecting replacement spells, you should make sure you don't pick a spell that's already available to the cleric class at a different level.

### 0-level

- Daze
- Ghost sound

## **1st level**

- Mount (summons appropriate riding dinosaur)

## **2nd level**

- Detect thoughts

## **3rd level**

- Invisibility sphere (Sun domain)

## **4th level**

- Arcane eye (represents the ability to see through the eyes of distant dinosaurs)
- Charm monster (works only on dinosaurs)
- Locate creature

## **5th level**

- Nightmare
- Prying eyes (again, represents the ability to see through the eyes of distant dinosaurs)
- Seeming

## **6th level**

- Circle of death (Death and Evil domains)
- Eyebite
- Guards and wards
- Move earth

## **8th level**

- Trap the soul (Death domain)



## 9th level

- Dominate monster (dinosaurs only)

# Rules of Dungeoncraft

1. Never force yourself to create more than you must. (Chapter 2, page 23)
2. Whenever you design a major piece of the campaign world, always devise at least one secret related to that piece. (Chapter 2, page 39)
3. Whenever you have no idea what the probability of success should be for a particular situation, consider it 50%. (Chapter 9, page 165)
4. Always challenge both the players and their characters. (Chapter 12, page 214)
5. Once a roll has been made and you've moved on, you should never reset events to an earlier state in order to correct a mistake. (Chapter 23, page 407)