The Dungeon Master Experience

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

If you're interested in learning more about the world of Iomandra, check out the wiki.

–Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

Christopher Perkins

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

Compiled by Jeff

Where to Begin. . .

3/21/2013

I don't create a D&D campaign for profit or broad consumption. I create it for myself and for a select, handpicked audience. Even more rewarding than the act of creation is the opportunity to watch my players discover the world and unravel its secrets. I like watching a campaign transform from one person's idea into a shared experience.

The campaigns I create are fairly well defined from the outset. For me, the creative process starts up to year in advance, with me thinking of striking images, dreaming of great conflicts, and deciding what makes the campaign different from the ones I've created before. I also spend an inordinate amount of time thinking about what the campaign will be called and conjuring up names that evoke the right mood.

Eventually, one big idea emerges as the frontrunner and crystallizes to form the "hook" of the campaign (also called its key conceit), around which everything else will be built. My 3rd Edition campaign, Arveniar, was built around the idea of a kingdom in the sky. My 4th Edition campaign, Iomandra, was built around a draconic empire scattered across islands on a vast sea. My D&D Next campaign, Valoreign, is about a chivalric kingdom transformed by a mysterious magical event.

Lessons Learned

I begin by putting words to paper, in a fashion. The first and most important document that I create for my new campaign world is the "campaign bible." It's the document that tells the players the fundamentals and what character options are available to them. I created campaign bibles for Arveniar and Iomandra, and I've created one for Valoreign as well. The campaign bible is written to spark the players' imaginations and help them make characters with strong ties to the world, and it's a great way to codify the essence of the setting and seed it with adventure hooks. It's also a great way to tell your players that you're serious and committed to the campaign's success. Rather than tell you how I craft my campaign bibles, I thought it would be more fun to show you what I've done for Valoreign thus far:

This is the first time I've shared this document — even my players haven't seen it until now. Admittedly, it needs some work both in terms of content and presentation, and it could use a few pieces of pick-up art to catch the eye. However, it's a good beginning, and I like the overall organization. Feel free to use it as a model for your own campaign bibles. As you might expect, the Valoreign campaign bible will continue to evolve over the next few months, up to the point when I'm ready to schedule the first game session.

In my humble opinion, there's no better way to begin a campaign than to give your players a tantalizing first glimpse into the world. However, before I wrap up this column, let me give you one final piece of advice: If you're not sure how the players will react to your new campaign setting, hold off on the campaign bible until you've floated some of your ideas past them. Solicit their input, and think about working some of their ideas into the campaign before the writing begins. After all, it's their campaign world, too.

Until the next encounter!

Until Next Encounter...

3/14/2013

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. *It's been months since the PCs sacrificed themselves to destroy Vecna and save their home island of Irindol from annihilation. Well, we finally reconvened for a campaign epilogue, during which I tied up loose ends before initiating an out-of-game conversation with my players to answer campaign-related questions and "pull back the curtain" on a few unsolved mysteries. Once the players knew everything there was to know, we talked a little about my ideas for the next campaign.*

I began writing this column two years ago, at the urging of friends and colleagues who felt I had

a lot to say about DMing. Turns out they were right. The trick was to find things to say that (a) haven't already been said ad nauseum in books, blogs, and other works, and (b) foster intelligent discourse on the art of Dungeon Mastering. By pulling examples from my home campaign, I've tried to share the lessons I've learned from my own successes and failures. Having now written over one hundred articles on the subject, I feel the time is right to highlight several key bits of advice — things I consider important above all others — for readers who don't have the wherewithal to read every installment of The Dungeon Master Experience that has come before.

Without further adieu . . .

Lessons Learned

Here's my Top 10 list of DM tips in no particular order.

1. Honor the social contract. If your players are behind you and behind the game, do them the service of running the campaign fair and square.

2. Forget what the rules say about building encounters. A rollercoaster needs peaks and valleys to be fun. Design encounters that you think your players will enjoy. Easy encounters can be just as fun and memorable as hard ones, and a TPK doesn't have to spell the end of the campaign.

3. Look to storytelling giants for inspiration. I'm not talking about other DMs, but rather actors, writers, and directors with a gift for storytelling. In previous articles, I've shared several of my great inspirations. What are yours?

4. Think of three big stories. Make them the pillars of your campaign. Let the PCs' actions and decisions determine which of these stories becomes important, but keep the other stories moving forward to make your world feel alive.

5. Record everything that happens. If a player says something clever, write it down. If you name a tavern or NPC on the fly, write it down. If the session ends with one character lying face down in a pool of blood with two failed death saves, write that down, too. Don't trust your memory; it will betray you.

6. Let the players bring the food. You have plenty of other things to worry about.

7. Do what you must to keep the campaign alive. Sometimes that means swapping out players from time to time. Surround yourself with supportive players, and they'll keep the campaign alive for you. Other times that means ditching storylines that aren't going anywhere and taking the plot in a new direction.

8. Lighten up. It's a game. If you and your players aren't having fun, you're doing something wrong. Don't let the campaign get too dark. D&D offers a welcome reprieve from the doldrums of the real world — or at least it should.

9. Don't forget to roleplay. It's a roleplaying game. Get into character. Practice your funny voices. Usually I urge people to be themselves behind the screen, but don't pass up a chance to be someone else for five minutes.

10. Don't be afraid. Tell your story, let the players tell their stories, and make the most of it. Pull out the big guns, aim high, and don't let up. Not everything will be perfect, but every game session is a new chance to get it right. The only thing you have to fear is running out of ideas, and that will never happen.

There you have it.

Next week's article will be the last in this series — at least for a while. As much as I enjoy writing the column, it takes a large chunk of my time, and other projects are demanding more of my attention (not just D&D Next stuff but personal

projects as well, including my next campaign and that Star Frontiers screenplay I've been hammering on). The articles I've written thus far are enough fill two Dungeon Master's Guides, and I'm feeling pretty good about that, and there's a decent chance I'll revive the column once my D&D Next campaign gets underway, but no promises. Thanks to everyone who offered praise and criticism, who embraced my advice or challenged it. I urge you to tune in next week for the farewell installment, and I hope my experiences behind the screen have helped you and your campaign.
Until the next encounter!

Make it BIG!

3/7/2013

Monday Night: *An iron shark golem chews holes in the heroes' ship. A flying citadel races across the ocean atop a 1,000-foot-high waterspout. A villainous spymaster threatens to launch the halfling rogue out of a giant cannon. The party shaman traps himself in an iron flask after being devoured by a giant awakened crocodile. An illithid vessel under the party's control crashes into an evil warlock's rocket-ship observatory moments before blast-off. Throw in earth sleds, water chariots, and fire gliders (read: jet-packs), and . . . well, you probably have a better sense of what the Iomandra campaign is like, and less respect for me as a DM. But then, I never promised to deliver the perfect campaign — just a memorable one.*

A few months after I joined Wizards of the Coast, Monte Cook told me about a new D&D campaign designed to test some experimental rules. He offered me a seat at his game table, and once a week for three years we explored the world of Praemal (the lesser-known precursor to Monte's more famous Ptolus campaign) and playtested rules that would gradually evolve into what is currently referred to as "3rd Edition." The Praemal campaign ended spectacularly with the PCs crashing a moon into a planet. It sounds absurd, I know, but really it seemed like a good idea at the time.

The Praemal and Ptolus campaigns are distant memories. I don't remember the names of all the player characters or all of the villains we faced, just the really weird stuff and the really big stuff . . . like the time my elf rogue/wizard/fighter banished his dark elf nemesis to the sun's core. That doesn't happen every day.

When my long-time players wax nostalgic about my 3rd Edition campaign, it's the weird stuff and the over-the-top stuff that survives the test of time. The blimp-like soar whales and creepy-crawly centipede carriages, the city carved out of giant mushrooms, the myconids with the funny voices, and those crazy cartwheeling clowns that showed up for, like, 5 minutes! The players also remember big sky-battles and my treacherous gnome villain, Erellak Golgof, plunging thousands of feet to his death.

Campaigns don't survive the test of time by being timid. The Dragonlance campaign setting is a textbook example, with its larger-than-life locations, amazing villains, and epic storyline. As a DM, I feel driven to tell the biggest stories I can without breaking the campaign world's internal logic. The pressure's on me to push the limits of my special FX budget and deliver images and encounters that leave crater-sized impacts in my players' collective memories. When I look back on my 4th Edition campaign, I can point to a number of mega-awesome moments where nothing was held back. These are the moments I know my players will remember ten years from now.

But let's forget about all the whackadoo stuff in my campaign . . . the iron shark, the rocket-ship observatory, the fire gliders, and so forth. When I aim to "make it big," I'm striving to ensure that my campaign has heroes doing more than just clearing out dungeons and slaughtering monsters. Don't get me wrong; I love a good dungeon crawl. But what happens in the dungeon usually stays in the dungeon. To really make an impact, the characters also need to butt heads with evil tyrants, face real dilemmas, and pull rabbits out of their hats when things are at their bleakest. The locations they explore need to be wondrous, majestic, magical places like something out of a Dragonlance painting or Guillermo del Toro's imagination. Shoot for the

moon, I say! Go for broke, I say! Make it BIG!

Lessons Learned

My advice to "make it BIG" comes with a really big caveat: Every campaign has its upper limits, beyond which it becomes a farce. I'm not suggesting that all campaigns would benefit from having warlock towers that can launch into orbit, giant blimp-whales, crashing moons, or Death Stars for that matter. I'm not suggesting that you abandon reason and mock the rules of good storytelling. Of course you need to make choices that fit within the context of your specific campaign. "Make it BIG!" takes on an entirely different meaning if you're running a campaign that's modeled after feudal Japan, ancient Rome, or the Dark Ages. How you "make it big" in a low-magic setting is different from how you "make it big" in a high-magic one. Ultimately, a DM needs to define the limits. My advice boils down to this question:

What can I do to amaze my players without compromising the integrity of my campaign?

Or, put another way:

What are the biggest ideas I can think of that fit my campaign?

These are not always easy questions to answer, and believe me, I've missed the mark and crossed the line from time to time. In the Monday night campaign, I thought it would be fun to introduce an elder star-spawn that could alter reality on a global scale. At one point, I realized that I'd gone too far and twisted reality so much that the players couldn't keep track of what their characters knew, and I had to rein myself in and contrive a means to undo what I'd done using a time-traveling mercury dragon that "flattened out" wrinkles in reality with an enormous clock like device called a Time Hammer. I sh*t you not.

A BIG idea could be anything: a plot twist, a striking bit of imagery, an audacious villain, a new monster, an army of monsters, a special "toy" or magical super-weapon for the heroes to play with . . . you name it. In a D&D campaign modeled after feudal Japan, is it too weird to have an evil samurai vampire with a god-slaying sword and a clockwork tiger controlled by a magical diamond? Would it be over-the-top to have an adventure that takes place in a floating palace inhabited by a green dragon empress and her shuriken-throwing kobold ninja assassins? Ultimately, that's for the DM to decide.

When you go for broke and pull out all the stops, is there not the risk of losing everything — your integrity, your campaign's integrity, your players' interest and respect, your grasp on reality? Perhaps, but I wouldn't worry about it. In fact, it's been my experience that players enjoy watching the DM flex his or her creative muscles and stretch the campaign beyond safe tolerances once in awhile. I wouldn't worry about jumping the shark. I'd worry more about a campaign that didn't dare to live large in the players' minds. Until the next encounter!

Master of Suspense

2/28/2013

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. *The party's dead. No corpses or body parts means no Raise Dead rituals, begging the question of what happens next? Will the spirits of the slain adventurers somehow find their way back into the world? What kind of deus ex machina will the DM invoke to set everything right?*

I have often said that my primary role behind the DM screen is to entertain my players, which includes keeping them in suspense. Suspense heightens anxiety and uncertainty, and one way to create suspense in a D&D game is to put characters in jeopardy and then cut away to something else, thus leaving players anxious. Take the Wednesday night group, which was all but obliterated in our penultimate game session. Instead of picking up where the campaign left off and answering the big question on their minds — Are the characters truly dead? — I went somewhere else entirely and kept the players in suspense for 20 minutes.

The game session began with me describing a weirdly bucolic scene — clouds shaped like gnomes and devils drifting above autumnal trees, curled leaves raining down upon a garden filled with diabolical topiaries and brilliant flowers — viewed through the parlor window of a rustic estate in the Feywild. Looking out the window is Xanthum Zail, the gnome bard (played by Curt Gould). He's sitting across from a styx devil advisor who's staring at a chessboard and contemplating his next move. There's a knock on the parlor door, foreshadowing the arrival of Xanthum's elderly tiefling manservant. Ambling behind him is a gnome-sized straw golem that's the centerpiece of the Burning Gnome Festival, a seasonal event hosted by Xanthum in which the straw golem is set ablaze and unleashed in the gardens while giddy gnome children chase after it and beat out the flames with shovels. I'm particularly proud of this little bit of imagery because of the laughter it elicited from my players, and nothing's better than a laugh to disarm the audience before ratcheting up the suspense.

I chose to open the session with images of devils and burning gnomes for a reason: In the middle of the epic tier, Xanthum was separated from the party and trapped in the Nine Hells. During his absence, he managed to claw his way up the infernal ranks to become a Duke (he is epic level, after all). He tried to rejoin the party but was no longer welcome. His former adventuring companions tossed Xanthum off their ship, believing he was now an emissary of evil, and so he retired to his Feywild residence. Consequently, the gnome bard wasn't with the party in its final moments. (Curt's other character, Divin, took Xanthum's place and paid for it with his life.)

My plan was to use Xanthum as a point-of-view character to explain what had happened in the wake of the previous session's events. It presented Curt with a fun roleplaying opportunity and a chance to close the book on his surviving character. Meanwhile, the other players sat around the table, wondering whether their characters were truly dead and if they'd somehow get drawn into Xanthum's unfolding story. The suspense was finally shattered as Xanthum returned to Iomandra, made contact with a number of important NPCs (as well as Rodney Thompson's other surviving character, Nevin), and learned what the players already suspected: the party was really dead, and the campaign was truly coming to an end. Several months of in-world time had elapsed since the party's demise, and the world was in a much better state. The Black Curtain had fallen, there was peace among the Sea Kings of Iomandra, and old disputes were finally being laid to rest. Many beloved NPCs had moved on to bigger and better things, and Xanthum — the great gnome bard — took it upon himself to ensure the party's legacy would not be easily forgotten.

Lessons Learned

You might think that the other players were unhappy with the attention lavished upon Xanthum, but let's be honest: It didn't take long for them to realize I was using the gnome as a plot device to show the results of their characters' sacrifice, and that justified their lack of participation in the Xanthum storyline. For suspense to work, you need to keep the players emotionally invested in the story; otherwise, suspense is quickly replaced with boredom. With suspense, timing is everything. A second too short, and the audience isn't wound up enough. A second too long, and the audience's pent-up tension turns to exasperation. Film directors who specialize in taut thrillers will tell you that suspense is created not in front of the camera but in the editing room, where bits of film can be added or removed to get the timing of a scene just right. These same directors will also tell you that music and sound are great contributors to suspense, but these aren't tools that most DMs can use to great effect, making timing even more important in a D&D game.

Suspense can't last forever, of course. Eventually, it needs to pop like a balloon so that the audience gets some well-deserved relief.

Once I was done with Xanthum and the world of Iomandra, all attention shifted to the Raven

Queen's palace in the Shadowfell, where the spirits of the dead adventurers were gathered to witness the goddess of fate putting the final nail in Vecna's coffin. (The heroes sacrificed themselves to ensure the evil god's demise and deliver his soul into the Raven Queen's waiting arms.) Before releasing their spirits to the afterlife, the Raven Queen gave each character the chance to help decide the fates of those they'd left behind. Speaking for his goliath battlemind, Ravok, Andrew Finch urged the Raven Queen to let faith in the new gods flourish in a world of religious intolerance. Nacime Khemis, speaking for the warforged warden Fleet, asked that fate conspire to free his people from servitude. Divin, Curt Gould's dead cleric, asked the Raven Queen to salvage an old canoe that once belonged to the party (it was lost during the heroic tier) and let it transport some new hero on a great adventure. Deimos, Chris Youngs' tiefling sorcerer, declined the Raven Queen's offer to meddle in the fates of others, certain in his belief that people should rule their own destinies. That brought us, finally, to Rodney Thompson's character, a champion of the Raven Queen named Vargas, who'd spent the entire campaign struggling to find his place in the world, and finally ending up by his god's side. It was Vargas who uttered the campaign's final words, striking at the heart of what makes me love this game . . .
And with that, I now leave YOU in suspense. Until the next encounter!

A World Worth Saving

2/21/2013

MONDAY NIGHT. Two party members landed in prison for meddling in the affairs of the Vost Miraj, the counterintelligence agency of the Dragovar Empire. The Vost Miraj prefers to incarcerate enemies of the state rather than kill them not only because it's good politics but also because it makes more sense in a world where people can be raised from the dead. The imperial prison-island of Zardkarath, ruled by an adamantine dragon named Mheletros, makes Alcatraz look like a youth hostel.

Conventional DM wisdom suggests that the logical course of action is to plan an adventure around a jailbreak. Not a bad idea, but the party members who aren't behind bars have bigger problems to deal with. I decided to have a good-aligned group of NPCs called the Knights of Ardyn storm the prison to free one of their own members. In the course of doing so, they freed the imprisoned PCs as well. It all happened quite fast, with the prisoners being taken to safety through a portal, and there were a couple good roleplaying moments, as one might expect. But in the end, it was a group of NPCs who brought the PCs back together. You might call that "stealing the party's thunder," but my players weren't complaining. Their characters had more important things to do.

A campaign needs to earn the players' respect if it has any chance of survival. Too many potentially awesome campaigns get ripped to shreds by disaffected and disenfranchised players, and for good reason.

In a few weeks, I'll be traveling to Boston for PAX East, and I guarantee there will be DMs in attendance whose campaigns have been turned into chew-toys by players driven to obnoxious behavior. Are your players doing their utmost to sabotage your campaign and make your life behind the DM screen a living hell? Are you players so apathetic to the events of your campaign that they'd rather kill time in a tavern — or set it on fire — than chase a quest? If the answer is yes, I have a good guess as to why: Your NPCs aren't doing their jobs very well.

Last year, I was listening to the DVD commentary that accompanied an episode of Mad Men, the award-winning TV series about commercial advertising in the 1960s. Matthew Weiner, the show's creator and lead writer, hit the nail on the head when he said (and I'm paraphrasing here) that audiences will forgive a character's many faults as long as that character is really good at his or her job. In other words, no one wants to hang around people who are unpleasantly incompetent. I hold that a D&D campaign is no different: If the PCs think they're the only ones capable of doing their jobs well, they see the

campaign world as a nightmare and begin to attack it directly. If your players think your NPCs are a bunch of ass-hats and nincompoops, they're doing themselves and you a big favor by setting fire to the world.

If you want your campaign to resonate with players, you need to create a world worth saving. The easiest way to do that is to make the majority of the non-hostile NPCs in your world good at what they do and well disposed toward the adventurers. If the village priest is sympathetic without being sanctimonious, the PCs will care what happens to him and his flock. If the local bartender charges fair prices, tells a good joke, and throws the heroes the occasional free ale, the players will feel less inclined to burn his establishment to the ground. If the king is smart, politically savvy, and fond of adventurers, the players will be more likely to put their characters on the line when the kingdom is threatened than if he's a condescending jerk with no regard for his most worthy subjects. It sounds so simple, but many campaigns are left in shambles by player characters who couldn't, for one reason or another, abide the people they were supposed to protect.

Lessons Learned

Almost every creature that appears in a typical D&D adventure is dead-set on killing the PCs or making their lives miserable, and most players expect that. (You can't have a campaign without conflict, after all.) However, when the PCs return to town after slaying the dragon, they don't expect the sheriff to treat them like 1st-level chumps or the innkeeper to charge them 1 cp for a good night's sleep. They don't expect the mayor to immediately shove another quest down their throats because the village has proven itself completely unable to defend itself from anything more than a rat infestation.

You want to create a world worth saving? Here are three keys to help you succeed:
Have an NPC show some initiative. Here's a good example: While the characters are investigating a series of murders in a large city, a gang of assassins jumps them in a darkened alley. During the fight, one of the assassins is wounded and flees. Instead of making the PCs chase down the miscreant, have a city guard or helpful passerby tackle the assassin and thwart the escape. Or, have a couple irksome street urchins on a rooftop hurl rocks at the assassin to harry him. Suddenly, it feels like the world is on the party's side for a change!

Have an NPC throw the party a bone. Imagine the party is paying an NPC wizard to craft a magic item or an NPC priest to raise a dead character. In addition to doing what he or she is paid to do, the NPC might throw in a free "upgrade" to the magic item or a free batch of healing potions the party can use at some later date. Of course, you don't need to bribe players with magic items to make them like your world. Even the simplest gesture, such as a farmer tipping his hat to the PCs or offering them fresh apples as they wander by, does the trick.

Have an NPC solve a problem. Hapless NPCs are constantly looking toward the adventurers to solve their problems for them, but players are more inclined to respect an NPC who isn't useless. If a mystery has the party befuddled, an NPC might volunteer a helpful bit of advice that steers the party in the right direction. If the characters visit a town threatened by orcs, an NPC woodsman or scout might single-handedly capture an orc that the heroes can interrogate to find out where its fellow orcs are hiding. The PCs shouldn't have to solve all of the world's problems alone.
Until the next encounter!

Where's the love

2/14/2013

MONDAY NIGHT. *Their love was a tempest. Yuriel (played by Nick DiPetrillo) was a stormy genasi sea captain, and Pearl (a nonplayer character) was the prickly genasi first mate who questioned his every order. They argued a lot, and then out of nowhere, Yuriel proposed. The next session, after the fastest whirlwind romance in history, they were hitched. The session after that, they were both dead.*

A successful D&D campaign incorporates many different genres and themes. Variety keeps the players entertained week after week, and so a good DM routinely shakes things up. A single campaign might include swashbuckling on the high seas, a harrowing exploration of a haunted house, a murder investigation at a local carnival, a political scandal between rival merchant houses, and a tense negotiation with a greedy dragon. When I look back at the campaigns I've run, I see a lot of familiar themes again and again: deception, isolation, intrigue, horror, humor, war, loss, and vengeance, just to name a few. However, one important theme is consistently underplayed.

Love may be a many-splendored thing, not to mention the most fertile of dramatic themes. However, I've never run a campaign — or played in one, for that matter — in which two player characters were married or in love, nor have I made a concerted effort to create interesting love triangles between PCs and NPCs. For one thing, I find real-life romance awkward. Also, I'm pretty sure that my players enjoy D&D because they get to beat up the bad guys, win the treasure, and become more powerful and influential in the campaign world. They don't play D&D because they're looking for some vicarious romantic thrill to fill heart-shaped voids in their lives. They also have understandable misgivings about their characters having serious relationships with NPCs because their DM is of a mind to put those love interests in jeopardy. (What DM could resist?) The Yuriel–Pearl debacle wasn't what you'd call a "love for the ages." When Pearl screamed "Yes!" and threw herself into Yuriel's arms, the other players laughed their asses off because the love affair had all the romance of a sardine sandwich.

My concerns with love as a D&D theme are that (a) it takes a long time to develop naturally and (b) it's a hard thing to fake without it seeming weird. I can make vengeance, hatred, and loss feel real, but love? Not so much. The last thing I want to do is make my players uncomfortable by turning the campaign into a soap opera. That doesn't mean I can't have fun portraying a playful and promiscuous tiefling spy who likes to tease men and women with her tail, or a genasi first mate so lovably prickly that she makes sea urchins blush. These are caricatures bereft of serious emotional depth, played mainly for laughs. However, I'm deluding myself if I think I can create an NPC guaranteed to capture the heart of one of my player characters. I'm not saying it couldn't happen, but at the pace my campaign moves, it's hard to carve out the time it takes to make that relationship seem real.

I'll be the first to admit that the Yuriel–Pearl relationship never got a fair shake. Yuriel died rather unexpectedly (mostly due to bad die rolls, as happens often). However, rather than go the Raise Dead route, I had the grieving widow petition an emissary of Vecna to reanimate her dead husband, replacing his heart with an artificial one that pumped necrotic sludge through his undead veins. (Necrophilia . . . now there's a theme for your next D&D campaign.) Not long thereafter, the party's ship came under attack, and Pearl was killed in the crossfire. A few rounds later, Yuriel (again the victim of bad die rolls) literally had the necrotic heart ripped out of his body before he was unceremoniously tossed overboard. The other characters were never cool with Yuriel's undead transformation. As his corpse sank to the bottom of the ocean, the party wizard put the last nail in Yuriel's coffin by blowing his necrotic heart to bits with a magic missile.
Take THAT, love.

Lessons Learned

I'm cool with a player creating a character who has strong emotional ties to other characters or NPCs. In fact, I think that's awesome and very brave. I'm also not against relationships evolving as the campaign matures. Relationships add drama and dimension to any campaign. However, I'm happy to let my players take the lead on that one. If they want to pursue romantic liaisons with NPCs or with each other, I would like to think I'm man enough to let those relationships blossom or run their course and not go out of my way to destroy them (my heart-wrenching Monday night antics notwithstanding).

Over the years, I've chatted with players and DMs for whom love is a major campaign theme. Usually that's because their gaming groups include married couples or lovebirds who've created characters with strong emotional ties to one another that reflect their own relationships (which is not to say all groups with mated players have emotionally entangled characters). Call me a terrible person, but when two character are in love, I wonder what happens if one of them is eaten by an otyugh. When I ask other DMs how they deal with this sort of "typical" D&D situation, I get all sorts of great answers — everything from "My campaign is more about relationships than fighting monsters, so it's not really an issue" to "We have a real-life funeral and wake for the fallen character." I remember meeting one enthusiastic D&D player who told me that her character, a paladin of Helm, had been married to an assassin for twelve years . . . and I'm talkin' real time AND in-game time. Not surprisingly, her husband of fifteen years played the assassin. I couldn't help but think, Lucky for them I'm not their DM. Putting aside my wonder at a campaign lasting twelve years, I was impressed that their DM could exercise such restraint in allowing the relationship to survive. I also had a tough time reconciling the paladin's conflicting vows . . . until I reminded myself that (a) love has no boundaries, (b) internal struggles are fun, and (c) stranger things can happen in the D&D multiverse. It tells me so much about the power of this game, if not the power of love.

When I analyze the prevailing themes of my campaign, I ask myself, "Where's the love?" It's nowhere to be seen. That's because my players and I aren't looking for a campaign with serious emotional overtones or undertones. We err toward action, adventure, and the very manly swinging of swords, but we so rarely flirt with romance. Methinks one cannot slay a dragon and love at the same time, and my players would rather slay dragons and then go home to their significant others. As for me, I like to lavish attention on my campaign. I'm not ashamed to say it's been a real love affair—five good years with no complaints. I'm sad it will be over soon, but that's the way it goes.

Until the next encounter!

Ulterior Motives

2/7/2013

MONDAY NIGHT. *Arkhalia Kelx is a noble dragonborn widow who, according to some, hides a dark secret. There are rumors that she was involved in the assassination of her husband — a high-ranking officer in the Dragovar Empire. However, no proof of her involvement was ever found. Still, the scandal pushed her to the fringe of noble society. Much earlier in the campaign, two of the PCs (the elf ranger Kithvolar and Oleander the halfling rogue) broke into Arkhalia's residence, hoping to find something they could use against her. Finding nothing, they concluded that she was either innocent or masterful at covering her tracks. Recently, the heroes thwarted another conspiracy against the Dragovar Empire, this time a plot to supplant the legitimate imperial heir with a usurper with ties to two corrupt noble houses. The heroes killed the usurper and exposed the various conspirators in the midst of a dragonborn masquerade. Many in attendance were grateful to see the vile conspiracy thwarted, including Arkhalia Kelx, who was counted among the guests. As things settled down, she took Kithvolar aside and quietly confessed to the murder of her husband. When asked why, she replied, "I see now that the Dragovar Empire can no longer survive on secrets." If the admission was a clever ploy to gain the party's trust, it worked perfectly. Kithvolar was so struck by the confession that he didn't even think to ask Arkhalia why she conspired to murder her husband. He simply let her go. As the campaign spirals toward its imminent conclusion, one wonders if her reasons will ever come to light. . . .*

I relish campaigns laced with intrigue, and I enjoy the depth it brings to the worlds I create. However, creating intrigue is not easy. For intrigue to exist at all, you need the player characters to feel like they're tangled in a web from which there's no easy escape. As I've stated previously, one way to add intrigue to your campaign is to give every NPC a secret. Secrets make your world a much more interesting and confounding place. But it takes more than secrets to create intrigue. Secrets must somehow be revealed, preferably when it makes the most dramatic sense. What could be worse than a

campaign littered with secrets that never come to light, or a secret revealed without so much as a gasp or shriek?

So let's talk about ***motives*** and ***ulterior*** motives, and how we can use them to deliver and exploit NPC secrets.

NPCs need ***motives*** — logical reasons why they act and behave they way they do. Player characters want to understand what makes an NPC tick, and a logical motive does exactly that. A motive by itself doesn't need to intrigue players; it merely provides context to help players make sense of the NPC's mindset and behavior. Here are three examples of NPCs with motives around which we can build some serious intrigue:

NPC #1: The overprotective half-orc sheriff of a rural township gives adventurers a hard time because he thinks they're a threat to his authority .

NPC #2: A racist innkeeper incessantly badmouths the half-orc sheriff because he's a cantankerous dwarf with an unbridled hatred of orcs and their ilk.

NPC #3: A shady tiefling wizard pays the innkeeper a hefty sum for a private room because she's working on a new spell and doesn't want to be disturbed.

The half-orc sheriff wants to protect the town, the dwarf innkeeper wants to make the sheriff's life miserable, and the tiefling wizard wants to be left alone. These motives define what the NPCs want and provide clues to how they might act.

Now imagine building an adventure around the idea of the local inn catching fire shortly after the PCs arrive. How might these three NPCs react to the situation? Well, the half-orc sheriff might organize a chain gang to help put out the fire, hoping to win points with the cantankerous innkeeper while accusing the PCs of starting the blaze. The innkeeper might hire the PCs to determine the cause of the fire because he wants to make the sheriff look bad. Whether she had anything to do with the fire or not, the tiefling wizard might try to sneak away amid the chaos, or she might stick around, blame the incident on her invisible imp familiar, and promise to pay damages to avoid a drawn-out investigation. Players can usually figure out NPC motives by using logic, by paying attention to described behavior, or through roleplaying (coupled with the occasional Insight or Intimidate check, perhaps). It's the ulterior motives they have trouble discerning.

Ulterior motives are the bedrock of great intrigue. The wonderful thing about them is that they're logical, and yet not readily apparent. You have to dig to learn an NPC's ulterior motive, and when you find it, you realize that it makes perfect sense given what you know about the individual. NPCs keep their ulterior motives hidden because to expose them would cost them some advantage or opportunity, and there's something sinister about that. The other important thing to note is that any NPC — even the good-aligned ones — can have ulterior motives.

Not every NPC needs an ulterior motive. The shopkeeper who tries to sell the party an overpriced magic item doesn't need a more sinister underlying agenda. Save ulterior motives for NPCs who are more inclined to get a lot of "face time" in your campaign, if only because it takes time to unearth ulterior motives. Like regular motives, ulterior motives must be logical. They must always run parallel to an NPC's more obvious ambitions and desires, such that the motive and ulterior motive never collide. An insane wizard trying to summon a demonic horde can't have an ulterior motive that involves the restoration of his sanity; that just doesn't make any logical sense. If the wizard knew he was insane, he probably wouldn't be opening a portal to the Abyss!

By way of illustration, let's dream up some logical ulterior motives for the three example NPCs described earlier:

Half-Orc Sheriff (NPC #1): The overprotective sheriff wants to impress the king by maintaining law and order, but he feels politically threatened because of his mixed heritage. A bitter rival

sends spies to watch over him, and the sheriff is convinced that the dwarf innkeeper has been feeding them false reports. The innkeeper's dealings with adventurers fuel the sheriff's worst fears, and he'd like nothing more than to change the innkeeper's opinion of him or, failing that, run the dwarf out of town.

Clear Motive: The overbearing sheriff wants to protect his charges.
Ulterior Motive: The sheriff wants to remove a thorn in his side.

Dwarf Innkeeper (NPC #2): The innkeeper has been trying to ruin the sheriff for a while, and not just because the sheriff is a half-orc. The sheriff's predecessor was secretly allied with evil brigands and relied on the innkeeper to serve as a "middle man." The innkeeper's establishment was used to shelter fugitives and sequester stolen goods. The innkeeper would like nothing more than to rekindle his relationship with the brigands, even if that means setting fire to the inn to make the sheriff look bad.

Clear Motive: The innkeeper opposes the sheriff because he's a half-orc.
Ulterior Motive: The innkeeper wants to do business with evil brigands.

Tiefling Wizard (NPC #3): The tiefling wizard means no harm, but she seeks to join a secret society of mages, and her acceptance into the lower ranks hinges on the successful casting of a difficult and complex spell. She has summoned an imp to help her in the days leading up to a fateful meeting with a member of the society, but time is running out. The conniving imp has convinced the wizard to entreat with infernal forces that have the power to help her achieve her goal, but at greater cost.

Clear Motive: The wizard needs seclusion to research a spell.
Ulterior Motive: The wizard will do whatever it takes to gain membership in a secret society.

By ascribing motives and ulterior motives to a small cast of NPCs, we can set the stage for an adventure in which a half-orc sheriff, a dwarf innkeeper, and a tiefling wizard all have reasons for setting fire to the local inn. It then becomes the your job to embroil the PCs in the mystery and the players' job to discover who actually did it. Intrigue, after all, is about possibilities, doubts, and the discovery of truth.

Lessons Learned

"There's the truth . . . and then there's THE TRUTH."
— Troy McClure (Phil Hartman)
The Simpsons

Years ago, before I started writing The Dungeon Master Experience, I brainstormed a list of topics that I hoped to cover before the end of the series. "Intrigue" was the #1 topic on that list. Sadly, it's not the easiest thing to talk about. In fact, I have an easier time creating intrigue in a D&D campaign than I have explaining how to do it. (Would it surprise you to learn this article took six hours to write? It sure surprised the hell out of me.)

It's easy to create simple, straightforward motives for NPCs that help to steer their behavior and actions: A bandit lord robs from the rich to feed the poor. A nobleman conspires to murder his tiresome wife and marry his younger mistress. A knight hires the heroes to help slay a marauding dragon and deliver its head to the king. Motives get at the truth of why people think and act they way they do. Motives never lie. In a D&D campaign, you need NPCs with motives to foster intrigue, which comes when you start layering on secrets. Ulterior motives are secrets, but coming up with good ones is a challenge for which I have no simple workarounds.

An ulterior motive makes a terrific secret because it speaks to an NPC's hidden desires, and while most NPCs don't care if their base motives are readily apparent, they usually try to keep their ulterior motives under wraps. It's not enough that the bandit lord robs wealthy caravans to feed the poor; he also carves his initials into the sides of plundered wagons because he's vainglorious and wants to be remembered in the history books as a true "man of the people." The noble who marries his secret paramour does so because he's

strapped for coin and needs her dowry to pay off his gambling debts. The dragon-slaying knight is a coward at heart and knows he cannot face the wyrm alone, so he expects the PCs to do all the fighting while he stands before the king and takes the credit. Every time an NPC's ulterior motive comes to light, the players feel like they've just turned over another stone in the campaign and found something crawling underneath. But that's not even the best part . . .

Once players begin to realize there's more to your NPCs than superficial motives, they begin to see mysteries and conspiracies and ulterior motives everywhere (sometimes where none exist), and in that exhilarating and terrifying moment, you see the intrigue begin to take on a life of its own, and you realize how readily it feeds on itself and grows, and how little effort it takes to keep it alive.
Until the next encounter!

Best Supporting Character

1/31/87

MONDAY NIGHT. *Jeremy Crawford plays Alex von Hyden, a respected wizard who carries within him the spirit of an ancient dragon sorcerer. Peter Schaefer plays a greedy halfling rogue named Oleander, who commands a vast network of spies. Whenever the party is beset by indecision, it's usually Alex or Oleander who pushes the group in a particular direction. Whenever the party faces a new threat, it's usually Alex or Oleander who steers the party's response. Whenever a roleplaying opportunity arises, it's usually one or the other who drives the conversation. Alex and Oleander are actively engaged in the politics of the Dragovar Empire, and their fortunes are tied to the empire's ultimate fate, whereas most of the other characters have no such connection or interest. When neither Alex nor Oleander is present, things get weirdly interesting, as happened this week when both Jeremy and Peter were absent. Suddenly, player characters accustomed to supporting roles were thrust into the limelight — and into an awkward roleplaying situation for which they were sorely underequipped. The previous session had ended with the party crashing a dragonborn masquerade. The time had come to confront several nobles guilty of conspiring to overthrow the Dragovar government, and both Alex and Oleander had ideas about how to proceed. With neither character present, the torch got passed to the party's quintet of uncouth halfwits (played with great aplomb by Matt Sernett, Nick DiPetrillo, Jeff Alvarez, Shawn Blakeney, and Stan!). They tried using hats of disguise to pass themselves off as agents of the Vost Miraj, the imperial spy agency. However, when their accusations were adroitly deflected back at them, they did what you'd expect them to do. They dropped the charade, gave up the war of words, and turned the masquerade into a bloodbath.*

This past Monday night reminded me of one of those episodes of The X-Files where FBI agents Mulder and Scully are, for the most part, completely absent, and instead we get a whole hour of the Lone Gunmen and their wacky hijinks. When the characters who usually drive the plot aren't around, what's a DM to do? Cancel the game? I think not.

Although I try to shine the spotlight on every player character in my campaign, the truth is that not all PCs get equal "screen time." Certain characters become more prominent and crucial to the unfolding story than others. In this respect, the PCs in my campaign are a lot like the adventuring company in The Hobbit, which contains both "lead" characters and supporting characters. Imagine The Hobbit without Bilbo, Thorin, or Gandalf. In the absence of these "leads," the story begins to lose its relevance and impact.
As a D&D campaign unfolds, it gradually becomes clear which PCs are core to the campaign and which ones are tangential. Sometimes the campaign will shift focus in a way that elevates a supporting character to lead status or turns a lead character into a supporting one. This can also happen when a new player joins the group or when a player leaves. Either event can change the party dynamic.

Recently, I started watching The West Wing — a show I'd put off for years because I was too busy to allow myself to watch it. The show was supposed to revolve around various members of the presidential staff, in particular the character of Sam Seaborn (a speechwriter played by Rob Lowe). The show's creator, Aaron Sorkin,

envisioned that the President would play only a minor role. However, as the series developed, President Jed Bartlet (played by Martin Sheen) became the central character, and Sam Seaborn became ancillary until he was eventually written out altogether. The show's other supporting characters are given more-or-less equal attention, moving in and out of the spotlight on a week-to-week basis, but there's no question that Bartlet is the heart of the show. It's no coincidence that the series ends with him leaving office at the end of his second term.

An ensemble TV show features a combination of lead characters and supporting characters. Offhand, I can't think of any show with a large central cast whose characters carry equal weight and relevance; not everyone can play Jean-Luc Picard or Spartacus or King Henry VIII. Your typical D&D campaign is similar in this respect: there are both lead characters without whom the campaign would lose much of its dramatic oomph, and supporting characters without whom the party would be "bland and undermanned."

'Tis the season for awards shows, the Oscars being foremost among them. Were you to hand out nominations for Best Supporting Character in your home campaign, which of your PCs would qualify?

Lessons Learned

As with characters in episodic TV shows, a D&D character's importance is determined largely by its connection to the story and, to an equally large extent, by the personality of the player portraying it. Players who want their characters to be the fulcrum of the campaign tend to spend more time fleshing out their backgrounds and chasing quests that contribute to their characters' development. Players who don't mind supporting roles tend to be less interested in character development and more interested in having fun at the game table. They see their characters as important contributors to the party, but not necessarily drivers of the story.

The distinction between lead characters and supporting characters is an academic one. While I'm DMing at the game table, I'm too busy to care about such differentiation, and in play, I'm more interested in keeping all of my players entertained. It's something I'm more apt to think about between sessions, when I'm deconstructing the campaign. Which characters are monumentally important to the campaign's survival? Which characters have become peripheral, and to what extent are my players okay with that? I'll talk to my players and solicit their opinions. They like to reflect on the campaign, imagine what might happen next, and talk about what their characters (or the party as a whole) should try to accomplish. It's these sorts of between-session discussions that led to my realization that there are these two kinds of characters in the party.

Here's a question that you, the DM, might try asking your players at some point during your campaign (if you haven't done so already): Do you see your character as more of a "plot driver" or a "supporting character"? I think it's a fair question to ask, and you'll probably get some thought-provoking answers. Also, it's not a loaded question; there isn't a "wrong" answer. In fact, there's nothing wrong with choosing to play a supporting character. I, for one, prefer the supporting character role when I'm not behind the DM screen. As a player, I find it less of a burden. It lets me to do something I'm rarely inclined to do as a DM: relinquish control. When a player tells me that he envisions his current character as more of a "supporting character," I don't need to spend an inordinate amount of time thinking of ways to make the character more pivotal to the plot, or the plot more connected to the character.

The truth is, many players are comfortable letting other party members drive the story (for the most part), and it's not the DM's job to push players outside of their comfort zones. While it's satisfying to play a character instrumental to the campaign, some player characters would rather steal the spotlight occasionally than have it shining on them constantly. Besides that, if you look at any ensemble TV show, it's usually the

supporting characters that are the most fun to watch and have all the best lines!

Lastly, it's important to remember that your campaign can survive without its leads, at least for a session or two, particularly if you have players who don't mind "stepping up" when the usual plot-drivers are absent. It worked out well in my Monday night game, but don't think for one minute I'm ready to throw my leads by the wayside. After all, the Lone Gunmen worked great as supporting characters on The X-Files, but their spinoff show tanked. I wouldn't want my campaign to suffer the same fate.
Until the next encounter!

Let the Conversation Begin!

1/24/2013

MONDAY NIGHT. *The session begins in medias res, picking up where we left off the previous week. The heroes are trapped inside a military stronghold, fighting off dragonborn soldiers and wizards in league with a secret organization called the Vost Azaan. The organization's leader, Zarkhrysa, lies badly wounded at the heroes' feet, reduced to single-digit hit points. Oleander, the party's halfling rogue, deals the first attack of the evening, dropping Zarkhrysa to zero hit points before she can utter a single word. However, unbeknownst to the players, the villain has a special ability that revives her to 1 hit point and lets her "play dead." When a squad of bluespawn godslayers storms the fortress, the heroes retreat into an extra-dimensional space created using Oleander's exodus knife and take Zarkhrysa's "corpse" with them. Baharoosh, the party's dragonborn rogue, makes a successful Insight check and realizes that the villain is playing dead. He tries to stab her but misses, giving her time to chide the heroes for opposing her plot to bring stability to the Dragovar Empire by installing a new emperor on the throne. However, her villainous monologue is cut short by Baharoosh's second attack, and she dies from a slashed throat.*

A nonplayer character (NPC) is nothing but a cardboard figure without the DM to flesh it out, and nothing makes an NPC come alive more than good dialogue. But here's the thing: You can't really prepare the dialogue ahead of time. You have to wait for opportunities to arise and then wing it, and sometimes the results are underwhelming. Believe me, I know. I was delighted when Baharoosh slashed Zarkhrysa's throat, because that conversation was going nowhere.

Much of my "adventure planning" involves me thinking about the NPCs in my campaign and ways to make them "come alive." I like to think of clever things for them to say—rebukes and rebuttals that don't sound too clichéd. Unfortunately, I tend to forget these little gems by the time the game session rolls around. Writing them down doesn't help. I've tried that, and more often than not, the opportunity to use a pre-planned snippet of pithy dialogue never comes up. My players are too unpredictable. Still, it's a fun thought exercise.

Dialogue between PCs and NPCs is largely improvised, as you well know, and sometimes you get lucky and spark a really interesting conversation. A good tête-a-tête adds drama and realism to any encounter. However, we can't all be Aaron Sorkin. It's the supreme test of a DM's skill to keep the conversation interesting and to portray NPCs in a way that's both honest and memorable.

Every DM, like every actor, has a different range. Some actors transform themselves so completely that they vanish into their roles, while other actors tend to play every role the same way. Not every actor can portray a schizophrenic or a samurai. My range is limited, so when I am confronted with an impromptu roleplaying opportunity, I draw upon four distinct aspects of my own personality and vacillate between caricatures and realistic portrayals using these four archetypes as touchstones. Once in a blue moon, I'll make a concerted effort to stretch beyond my range, with mixed results. For example, you might be awesome at portraying emotional or loquacious NPCs. Alas, I am not.

Lessons Learned

Every NPC with a major speaking role has a base personality trait that governs how he or she acts and reacts to the player characters. Here are four

base archetypes I use often.

The Authority: Here's an NPC whom the players love to hate. The Authority speaks with conviction (not unlike Kevin Spacey in Se7en). No matter his alignment, he believes what he's saying is true, either because it IS true or because he has a warped sense of reality. His tone can be dictatorial and condescending, or it can be genuinely sincere and well meaning. Here are some sound bites the arrogant NPC might use in conversation:
"Don't play the fool."
"You're not making any sense."
"You know I'm right."
"The discussion is over."

The Authority doesn't mince words. He's blunt. He gets to the point. He's willing to listen to the rabble (up to a point), but he's no diplomat. The purpose of conversation is to communicate his point of view and present well-reasoned arguments, and to quash debate. When flustered by all the stupid people around him, he might resort to insults or sarcasm to assert his superiority.
"It's like I'm talking to an ogre."
"What am I, a crystal ball?"
"Alas, if only your mind were as sharp as your sword."

Quick Trick #1: The Authority likes to steer the conversation. When speaking in character, I try to interrupt the players and talk over them. I treat the exchange like a flurry of punches: short, forceful jabs building to a knockout conversation ender. "And that's why I'm better than you," is a nice one.

The Sage: Players who lean on this chap for answers or guidance are rarely disappointed, because the Sage has great clarity of thought and diplomacy. Unfortunately, he often has a roundabout way of getting to the point, relying heavily on cautionary tales or verses that sound like they were plucked from fortune cookies. This can be both funny and infuriating to players. The Sage knows that it's unwise to offend a powerful band of adventurers, so when called upon to assist the party, he's careful not to make decisions for the heroes or express his arguments is a disrespectful way (rather like Pete Postlethwaite's lawyer character, Mister Kobayashi, in The Usual Suspects). Here are some sound bites the Sage might use:
"There's an old saying . . ."
"Would that I had all the answers. I'd be as rich as a king."
"Forgive me for saying so, but perhaps you're going about this the wrong way."
"Do you know the story of the farmer who lost her family to a pack of werewolves? Consumed by grief and rage, she spent her family's wealth on a silvered blade and hired a skilled ranger with silvered arrows to lead her to the monsters' den in the heart of the Fellhaunt Forest, and together they slaughtered the pack. To her dismay, the ranger was grievously wounded in battle. Before they could reach civilization, the curse of lycanthropy took hold. No one knows what became of the farmer, but the ranger formed a new pack and terrorizes the realm to this day. Evil, my friends, can't always be slain with a sword."

Sometimes the Sage is "out of touch" with the world around him, not unlike the Sphinx from Mystery Men. He might spew the occasional cryptic non sequitur, mention things that have no relevance to the topic at hand, or hearken back to earlier conversations, making his train of thought hard to follow.
"What was I saying?"
"The well is dry, friend. The well is dry."
"I'm reminded of the time I met Sultan Malak al'Harran and his third bride, what's-her-name."
"Of course, I could be wrong. Many of the books I've read were written by wizards, and one should always be suspicious of their works."

Quick Trick #2: If I'm stuck, I'll have the Sage veer off topic or lapse into storytelling mode. He might tell a story that sheds light on his past, or he might recount a fable from his childhood. He might share his latest conspiracy theory or a cryptic bit of verse that holds no real meaning. It buys time, and with luck, one of my players will discern some connection or shred of relevance and make something of it. If not, the NPC can simply shrug his shoulders and say, "Come to think of it, I'm not entirely sure that's relevant."

The Schemer: The Schemer wants to elevate his status or reap the rewards he feels he so richly deserves, and the adventurers can be useful tools for achieving his ends. That doesn't mean he's evil. A benevolent temple priest might play upon a paladin's sense of duty to bring a criminal to justice, knowing full well that the criminal's capture will garner favors from the king. The Schemer might even regard the player characters as close friends, directing his plots toward others who are less likely to uncover his shenanigans and rip out his lungs. The Schemer fills the party's ears with compliments and platitudes, cleverly or not so cleverly redirecting conversations so as not to lose credibility or advantage. Think of Paul Reiser's spineless corporate parasite, Carter J. Burke, from Aliens as you weigh the following Schemer-worthy sound bites:
"I sleep very well at night, thank you."
"A thousand apologies. I meant no offense."
"Can I give you some friendly advice?"
"You, sir, are much smarter than I. Or is that 'smarter than me'? I'm not really sure."

If the players are aware of the NPC's scheming nature, they can put his skills to use for their own gain. It never hurts to have a friend who lies like a rug for a living and who can turn a clever phrase or help untangle complex plots.
"You wound me with your accusations!"
"What can I say? I'm a polecat in a dog-eat-dog world."
"If I help you put down this assassins' guild, what's in it for me?"

Quick Trick #3: A Schemer likes to answer questions with questions, and practically speaking, a question framed as an answer can create tension and make conversations much more lively. A question such as "Where's your boss?" might lead the Schemer to reply, "What makes you think I have a boss?" or "That's not really the question you should be asking, is it?" This was the stock-and-trade approach for nearly every government character in The X-Files, and it's hilariously infuriating.

The Brooder: Far from the scintillating conversationalist, the Brooder rarely speaks unless spoken to, and even then the player characters need a crowbar to pry words from his lips. (I'm reminded of Peter Stormare's brooding blond psychopath in Fargo.) He's a godsend for the DM who has trouble weaving dialogue on the fly—a monosyllabic utterance here, a fractured half-sentence there, and that's that. The Brooder might have a hundred things on his mind, but he keeps his thoughts to himself. His actions, however minimal, speak volumes. Occasionally, he might open up and spill his guts, but only when the stars are perfectly aligned or circumstance warrants. He might talk openly with one character while avoiding conversation with everyone else. Some players like the mystery that surrounds him, while others harbor grave suspicions and question the reasons behind his unyielding silence. He comes up thin in the sound bite department:
"Oops."
"Go away."
"Don't make me hit you."
"I'll take first watch."

One of the more brooding characters in my campaign is a dragonborn assassin who recently converted to Bahamut's faith. Unlike Zarkhrysa, he survived having his throat slashed, although it pains him to speak. He doesn't talk often, but when he does, his whispered words carry a ton of weight.

"Oh, shi—"
"Your skin will make a fine cloak."
"That makes me very angry."

Quick Trick #4: NPCs who decline to speak or lack the capacity to speak are fun for DMs because they shift the burden of conversation to the players. A mute NPC might communicate through misspelled written words or crude drawings, while an NPC who has taken a vow of silence might communicate using a rudimentary sign language taught to him by a reclusive order of monks. A DM can have a lot of fun with that.

Of course, these are but a sampling of NPC archetypes. I've included a few more in this week's poll. If you can think of another archetype, feel free to mention it in the comments

field. Don't be afraid to throw in a few dialogue snippets for good measure, but be warned: I might steal your ideas for my home campaign. Until the next encounter!

The Old DM and the Sea

1/17/2013

WEDNESDAY NIGHT *The campaign has ended, and my players are hounding me for information on when the next one will get underway. Before I kick off what I assume will be a multi-year, multi-level campaign, I want to make sure the character-building and encounter-building components of D&D Next are more or less locked down. Until then, I remain confined to my cabin, poring over navigational charts while my players go stir-crazy on deck, wondering when the ship will finally leave port and begin its long and glorious voyage.*

Before work began in earnest on the next iteration of the D&D game, folks in R&D (myself included) ran a series of 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th Edition games for the express purpose of reminding ourselves what makes every edition withstand the test of time. For me, it was a great opportunity to rediscover old rules and relive moments that turned me into a lifetime D&D gamer.

More recently, I was one of several Wizards employees interviewed by filmmakers working on Dungeons & Dragons: A Documentary, which got funded through Kickstarter last fall. As we reminisced about past editions of the game, it occurred to me that my DM experience is not confined to any one edition. I ran 1st Edition games for nine years, 2nd Edition games for eight years, 3rd Edition games for eight years, and 4th Edition games for five years. That's what you call a well-rounded DMing experience. Throw in a few non-D&D RPGs for variety's sake (Marvel Super Heroes, Top Secret/S.I., Gamma World, and Star Frontiers, to name a few), and it's no wonder I have so much to say on the topic of DMing.

I found 1st Edition exhilarating and terrifying. Most of the time I had no clue what I was doing. I didn't know how to create balanced encounters, and many of the rules that sounded very important were also very difficult to remember and/or adjudicate (case in point, the rules for surprise). Is it okay for the PCs to fight thirty trolls? What do you do when the party's 7th-level fighter is turned into a 1st-level fighter by a pack of energy-draining wraiths? Is it kosher to demand system shock rolls if the party finds itself standing in the presence of a god? You get the idea. In the back of my mind, I always felt I could be a better DM if only I had a ring of invisibility and used it to sneak into Gary's house on game nights so that I could watch the master at work. It never occurred to me that Gary might break or reinvent rules on the fly, which, I'm told, he did often and without regret.

I found 2nd Edition a little more liberating and much more forgiving, mostly because the core rulebooks went out of their way to tell me, "Hey, DM, only use the rules you like. And, by the way, if you can't remember how a rule works, make it up. It's your game." The 1st Edition rulebooks said the same thing, but this advice really took center stage in 2nd Edition. I was the boss, so naturally I started making up all sorts of crazy house rules. If a fighter could have 18/00 Strength, why couldn't a wizard have 18/00 Intelligence? Why can't elves and dwarves have dwelf babies? Heck, let's dispense with the class level caps placed upon nonhuman races and the alignment restrictions placed upon certain classes. Say "YES" to chaotic good half-orc paladins named Haxx Two-Pieces! (Remember, I was still a young DM.) If 2nd Edition taught me anything, it's that I can make the game my own, and to my credit, not all of my house rules tanked. I had standardized XP advancement rules for characters long before 3rd Edition did, and while I can't claim "at-will spells" are a Perkinsian invention, I remember tinkering with the notion in the early 1990s. I also did away with energy drain for the sake of sanity. The great thing about 2nd Edition, if I recall correctly, is that a DM could do no wrong . . . because there was no right way to play. I still had no clue how to create a balanced encounter, but vive la difference!

Third Edition rebuilt the game on a sturdy and level foundation. It had strong mathematical underpinnings and put more effort into balancing the various classes. The game demanded a lot from DMs (particularly at higher levels), but I appreciated the strides taken to determine how to make a challenging encounter. For the first time, I felt that I could rely on the rules to settle arguments at the game table, and thus focus my attention on creating adventures and wrapping my head around monster stat blocks. It was the first edition I worked on as a TSR/Wizards employee, so I was seeing the game from a whole new angle. The term "Behind the Curtain" springs to mind; the phrase was used in rulebook sidebars that explained why the game worked in certain ways, although the "behind the curtain" advice for magic item creation still causes my head to rip from my shoulders and fly about the room, screaming like a deranged penanggalan. Third Edition taught me that if I wanted to run a really good campaign, I needed 250,000 hours of prep time, but the payoff would be worth it, and my campaign would forever be immortalized in the hearts and minds of my players. And to its credit, 3rd Edition was kind enough to provide several excellent Adventure Paths, not to mention Return to the Temple of Elemental Evil, for DMs without thousands of hours of prep time to spare. Fourth Edition focused on making life easier for the DM, if not the player. Simpler monsters, easier ways to mix-and-match monsters by role, treasure parcels for fair magic item distribution, you name it. It got me thinking about how to build adventures that were not only fun roleplaying challenges but also tactically engaging. How can I use terrain to make this encounter more memorable? How can I combine two disparate monsters in a way my players have never seen before? Like every edition before it, it has flaws. It's hard to make an epic-level adventure that doesn't just feel like a heroic-tier adventure with higher attack bonuses and damage output—a challenge I hadn't really faced before as a DM. I remember when the Wednesday night group busted out of paragon tier into epic tier, and then promptly got blown to bits when their ship exploded the session after they turned 21st level. I remember thinking, "Ten more levels to go. How do I top that?" It takes a lot of gumption to keep a campaign alive for five years and thirty levels—a real test of a DM's fortitude and mettle. Fourth Edition forced me to deal with that particular problem, making me a better DM in the process.

Lessons Learned

During the filming of the documentary, I was asked what "D&D Next" will mean for every previous edition of the game. My response was emphatic: No edition ever dies. Everyone has an edition they like best, and all of them are D&D through and through. Do we hope lots of people make D&D Next their experience of choice? Yes. Are we bothered if someone wants to play 1st Edition instead? No.

DMing, like D&D, is about exploration and discovery. It's safe to say that every edition survived has made me a better DM, because every edition is like a sea to be navigated, with its own storms and reefs and fog banks and remarkable discoveries. No two seas are the same, but once you've sailed them all, you know the world.

This year, we're celebrating the journey home, and as much as I hate trumpeting products in my advice column, I would like to draw your attention to some products that will help you as a DM—and not in the traditional advice-giving or time-saving way. These aren't new products, per se, but rather re-releases of some golden oldies. In the back half of last year, we re-released the 1st Edition and 3rd Edition core rulebooks as premium-edition reprints, and very soon we're re-releasing the 2nd Edition core rulebooks in much the same fashion (not to mention hardcover compilations of the classic "S" and "A" series adventure modules). If you haven't tried any of these earlier editions, I urge you to assemble your players, get them to roll up new characters, and enjoy some kickass D&D the way we used to play it . . . the way some of us still play it. The experience will make you a better DM because you will face challenges you've never faced before and discover new ways to succeed and fail in the role.

Until the next encounter!

Unflappable

1/10/2013

MONDAY NIGHT. *It's one of those nights when the party's on the ropes. Two players are absent, leaving the group without its fighter and shaman. The wizard just dropped to –9 hit points while trying to fill the "tank" role, the paladin takes 151 points of damage from back-to-back critical hits and has 1 hit point remaining, the ranger is fighting a huge blue dragon by himself, the artificer is imprisoned thousands of miles away, and the rogue can't decide if it's in his best interest to remain invisible or risk discovery by stopping the main villain before she escapes amid the chaos. My players do the clever thing: they slow things down, take their time, and look toward the clock. It's 9:15 PM. We typically play until 9:30 or 10:00, but their body language tells me they're ready to call it a night, not because they want the session to end but because they know time will freeze just long enough for the fighter and shaman (and maybe even the artificer) to miraculously reappear next week with their triple-digit hit points and unspent encounter powers. Is that cheating? Don't care. Like I said, they're a clever bunch.*

A couple years ago, at one of the big conventions, someone asked me what's the best piece of DM advice I'd ever received. I don't remember my reply, but were you to ask me the question today, I would respond as follows: **A smart DM sees room for improvement.** In other words, a little humility is a good thing.

I don't profess to know everything about DMing, and gods know I can be lazy behind the DM screen. Only two things qualify me to write a weekly column focused on DM advice: (1) I've made more than my share of mistakes, and (2) I've learned from many of them. There's no substitute for experience, and everyone knows you learn more from mistakes than success. Every serious DM, like every serious storyteller, develops a unique style. Just like skiers and painters, first you learn the basics, and then you experiment. I can tell you about all the things I do behind the DM screen, but my style is not your style. My education is not the same as your education. The things that inspire me as a DM aren't the same things that inspire you.

My education as a DM began by absorbing the contents of the AD&D Dungeon Master's Guide (1st and 2nd Edition), but it took years of running adventures and campaigns for me to develop a DMing style that made me comfortable. I didn't have the Internet to fall back on, so I pilfered tricks from other DMs as well as actors, directors, screenwriters, and novelists. I made a lot of conscious and unconscious choices along the way to suit my preferred style; for example, I've met DMs who are very animated behind the screen. My style is the polar opposite, being much more relaxed and still, except when necessity or variety demands that I flap my arms and honk at the top of my lungs like a loon.

These days, I develop my DMing skills through weekly practice and occasionally learn new tricks by reading blogs written by other DMs. My favorite is the ENnie Award-winning Gnome Stew, which has the advantage of having several different contributors. Check it out; it's well worth your time. There's also a really good article written for a blog called Beneath the Screen titled "Top 10 New Dungeon Master Mistakes". The blog is no longer being updated, but the article presents sound DM advice in a clear, concise fashion. It focuses on constructive suggestions, which makes it doubly valuable to DMs looking to step up their games. Clearly, if you're reading this article, you're the type of DM who doesn't mind wasting a few minutes online reading about other DMs' experiences, so I figured I'd share a couple of my favorites.

Lessons Learned

What **one word best** describes your DMing style? If you can answer this question, then you're probably self-aware enough to know your strengths and limitations as a DM. If I had to describe my DMing style in one word, it would probably be unflappable. If you've ever watched the live D&D Penny Arcade games or listened to the podcasts, I think you'd probably agree with me. I wouldn't say it comes naturally; it's takes

effort to be **unflappable**, but it's made DMing so easy and stress-free that I'm rarely thrown off my game by anything the players might do or say. Case in point, here are three things that used to drive me crazy at the game table. They used to be pet peeves, but they no longer bother me. In fact, I've come to accept these behaviors as part of the default D&D game experience:

Players texting during the game: Don't care. All of my players have iPhones, which are like extensions of their bodies and brains. If by texting their friends or spouses they become momentarily distracted from the game, I don't take offense. They're just optimizing their time. When their turns come around, I'll get their attention easily enough.

Players not taking the bait. Don't care. In any given game session, I like to know where the characters are headed. However, my players are smart enough to know when I'm trying to lure them in a particular direction. As much as I hope they'll move forward, sometimes they veer left or right. Sometimes they stand still. Sometimes they turn around and walk back the way they came, just for the hell of it. Whatever. If they don't take the bait, I'll wing it. No problem. Hopefully they'll have a good time regardless.

Players who "cheat." Don't care. Sometimes the line between player knowledge and character knowledge gets blurry, and my players "forget" that their characters don't know as much as they do. Every so often, they make tactical decisions based on information their characters don't actually possess, typically when the party's in dire straits and a little "cheating" could save thousands of gold pieces in Raise Dead expenses. I'd probably do the same thing in their shoes, and as far as cheating goes, that's pretty mild. It used to bug the heck out of me for some reason. Not anymore. At least I don't have players who fudge their die rolls. ("Woohoo, another crit!" Yeah, right.)

So, what's your style?

Until the next encounter!

Dial M for Melora

1/3/2013

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. *Curt Gould plays a devout cleric of Melora named Divin. As the god of nature and the sea, Melora has aspects that are both benign and malevolent, and over the course of the campaign she has intervened three times on the party's behalf. The first intervention occurred when Divin fell into a water-filled chasm and was swept into a whirlpool. With no means of escape, he called out to Melora to save him, and the water itself hoisted him onto a safe ledge. This act of divine charity not only bolstered Divin's faith in Melora, but also made one of his companions — a Raven Queen-worshiping fighter named Garrot (played by Mat Smith) — an instant convert. The second intervention occurred when an evil fog trapped the party's ship. Divin prayed to Melora for guidance, and a giant octopus latched onto the vessel and pulled it free of the vile miasma. The final intervention occurred when bad guys seized control of the party's home base — a warehouse built on pylons inside a sea cave. With their proverbial backs against the wall, the characters once more pleaded for divine intervention. Within a few rounds, a colossal sharktopus (one of Melora's exarchs) swam into the sea cave and took a giant bite out of the warehouse, doing considerable damage to the structure but also swallowing a dozen bad guys in the process. The Wednesday group had two other brushes with Melora that don't qualify as divine intervention but certainly contributed to her mystique. While searching the wreckage of a sunken ship, they angered a 5,000-foot-diameter giant crab buried in the sand and coral nearby. (Believing it to be one of Melora's exarchs, they fled rather than fight the behemoth.) Later, when Garrot found himself trapped in the Far Realm, Melora and the Raven Queen appeared to him as coquettish vixens vying for his love and attention. Mind you, these weren't the gods but rather Garrot's imagination made manifest by the Far Realm, but it proves that you can have a lot of fun with campaign deities.*

If the supernatural powers of the various Outer Planes could and would continually and constantly involve themselves in the affairs of the millions upon the Prime Material Plane, they would not only be so busy as to get neither rest nor relaxation, but these deities would be virtually handling their own affairs and confronting each other regularly and often. If an entreaty for aid is heard one time in 100, surely

each and every deity in the multiverse would be as busy as a switchboard operator during some sort of natural disaster. Even giving each deity a nominal number of servants able to supply aid to desperate adventurers, the situation would be frenzied at best. Add to this the effects of various spells — commune, contact other plane, gate. It is obvious that intervention by a deity is no trifling matter, and it is not to be allowed on a whim, even if characters are in extremis!

So sayeth the grandfather of roleplaying games, Gary Gygax, in the original AD&D Dungeon Masters Guide. However, Gary goes on to mention that his legendary Greyhawk campaign featured a number of appearances by divine beings. His rule for spur-of-the-moment intervention was simple: If the character beseeching help has been exemplary in faithfulness, the rules advised a straight 10% chance that some creature will be sent to his or her aid if this is the first time the character has asked for help. The rules applied bonuses and penalties based on the circumstances and the number of previous attempts made to call for divine aid. Gary also recommended a few ground rules, one of them being that no deity would send aid to any plane inhabited by other deities, ruling out most of the Outer Planes except for the Astral, Ethereal, Positive Material, and Negative Material Planes. You could do worse than follow Gary's advice.

The gods of Iomandra, like everything else in my campaign, are toys to play with. However, I don't profess to be so intelligent and wise that I could portray one honestly, nor do I want them stomping around my world like 100-foot-tall giants, flattening castles and cottages as they "throw down" with one another. In my mind, gods are like the monsters in great horror movies; the less you see of them, the better they are and the more frightening they become. And all gods, even the benevolent ones, should terrify the player characters to some extent. If and when a god answers a cleric's call for aid, it should be a scary, humbling experience. It should NOT be a "Yo, Melora, how's it hangin'?" experience.

Lessons Learned

I use Dogma, the Kevin Smith film starring Matt Damon and Ben Affleck, as inspiration when running encounters with divine beings and their direct reports. In my book, the film handles divine intervention brilliantly. With the exception of a brief encounter with God toward the end of the film, the protagonist, Bethany, is mainly dealing with intermediaries who are wise but not omnipotent. Because they're not gods, these emissaries can have humanlike intelligence as well as various faults and foibles, making them easier to relate to. When God actually appears in the film (played with quirky charm by singer Alanis Morissette), we discover that she has surprisingly little to say. She's an enigma. Why? Because Kevin Smith knows it's easier to write dialogue for a being with an IQ of 130 or less than a being with an IQ of 1,000.
Here's my advice on roleplaying gods:

1. Use intermediaries rather than have the gods themselves appear. An intermediary might be a weaker aspect of the god, an appointed exarch or champion, or a creature that resides on the deity's plane of existence.
The good thing about intermediaries is that they aren't all-knowing, all-seeing, all-powerful beings with whom the characters cannot identify. They can have their own personalities, eccentricities, and goals, as well as their own reasons for doing their god's bidding.

2. If the situation demands that a deity make a personal appearance, keep its appearance brief, and have it say as little as possible. The more a deity speaks, the less godlike it will seem to the players and the more chance you, the DM, have of inadvertently putting dumb words in its mouth. (Trust me: Been there, done that.)
As Mark Twain says, "Better to keep your mouth closed and be thought a fool than to open it and remove all doubt." Demon lords and certain evil gods are exceptions in my book. In terms of how they interact with the characters, they're more like powerful evil monsters than divine beings. That's why I didn't shy away from having Vecna show up at the end of the Wednesday night campaign. Even so, I made sure he spoke as little as possible. My Wednesday night group likes to

talk down to every antagonist they encounter, and the last thing I wanted was for Vecna to sink to their level and get swept up in the usual back-and-forth smack talk. (Mind you, it could've worked. I just didn't want to risk making Vecna anything but the most terrible and calamitous force the heroes had ever faced.)

3. If there's a cost or consequence associated with divine intervention, so much the better. The cost or consequence should be in keeping with the deity's nature, and it shouldn't be so punishing that the players think their DM is coming down on them unfairly.

If you can't think of a cost or consequence, no worries. Players, being suspicious of "freebies," will naturally assume one is forthcoming. Once a deity or its appointed minion has aided the adventurers, it might require that the party complete a quest as payment, or it might simply urge the characters to make a donation to their local temple. In my campaign, I had Melora's sharktopus collect payment immediately by taking a giant bite out of the party's warehouse; the god of nature could care less about property damage, and the repair bill alone would set the heroes back a few thousand gold pieces. On the other hand, when the party's elf ranger Alagon (played by Andrew Finch) got in the proverbial sack with the Raven Queen, she burned the names of five powerful undead creatures into his hand and told Alagon he had to destroy each and every one of them. I don't recall the heroes knocking on the Raven Queen's door too many times after that.
Until the next encounter!

Yippie Ki-Yay in D Minor

12/20/2012

MONDAY NIGHT. *In his youth, Alex von Hyden (played by Jeremy Crawford) was one of several children subjected to a magical experiment. An arcane sect of the Dragovar Empire called the Shan Qabal trapped the spirits of ancient dragons inside these children, with the goal of raising and training them as elite imperial assassins. However, a change in the political landscape forced the sect to abandon the project and terminate its subjects. Alex and a handful of other children were spirited away, and the Shan Qabal spent years hunting them down. This led to the first major conflict of the campaign as a Shan Qabal operative named Serusa arrived on the island of Kheth and discovered Alex, now a young wizard of formidable power, in the company of several friends who would eventually become his adventuring companions. Although she was ultimately thwarted, Serusa managed to wreak all sorts of havoc throughout the heroic tier before her eventual—and well-deserved—demise. Throughout paragon tier, the Shan Qabal resurfaced occasionally to deal with Alex and his companions. Serusa was replaced by her master and mentor, Hahrzan, who proved a difficult adversary to eliminate because of his clones. Eventually, the heroes fought their way through enough Hahrzans to reach the supreme leader of the Shan Qabal, the venerable Lenkhor Krige, the dragonborn archwizard responsible for binding the spirits of ancient dragons to Alex and the other children. Confined to his deathbed and kept alive by magic, Lenkhor regretted having to terminate the experiments and finally made peace with Alex, even offering him a seat within the Shan Qabal. Hahrzan would have none of it, of course, and so the Shan Qabal splintered in two. Now an agent of the Shan Qabal, Alex set out to destroy Hahrzan's splinter sect. However, those plans were derailed when a new threat emerged in the form of the Dragovar Empire's spy agency, the Vost Miraj, charged with defending the empire against "outside threats." Its leader, Zarkhrysa, believed that Alex and his companions were too great a threat to ignore, so she planted an agent in their midst to spy on them—a dragonborn rogue named Baharoosh (played by Stan!). Eventually, the heroes made Baharoosh a believer in their cause, and Zarkhrysa realized he was no longer following orders. She summoned Baharoosh to the Vost Miraj headquarters, signed his death warrant in front of him, and ordered him to carry it out. When he refused, she had him disposed of. Although quite adept at staying alive, Zarkhrysa knew her day of reckoning was fast approaching. The epic-level adventurers were out of control and gunning for her. Her best hope of survival was to forge an alliance with someone as powerful as she . . . someone who had fought the heroes and survived countless times. And thus the alliance between Zarkhrysa and Hahrzan was born.*

'Tis the season for Christmas movies, from saccharine-sweet classics such as Miracle

on 34th Street and It's a Wonderful Life to the holiday-gone-awry slapstick comedies of National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation and Home Alone. Me, I'm more of A Nightmare Before Christmas guy. However, my all-time favorite Christmas movie is Die Hard. The movie's premise is simple: a police officer travels to Los Angeles to be with his family at Christmas and ends up trapped in a high-rise with a gang of terrorists. Part of what makes the movie work is the oh-so-perfect combination of the action-adventure storyline set against a holiday backdrop. But the thing that makes the movie's narrative superlative is the ever-shifting balance of power between our "everyman" protagonist, John McClane (played by Bruce Willis), and his ruthless Scrooge-like antagonist, Hans Gruber (played by Alan Rickman).

In any narrative, the most interesting and memorable conflicts occur when the balance of power shifts back and forth between protagonist and antagonist. This "dance" is what keeps the audience on edge. If the protagonist always has the advantage, then the villain never feels like a genuine threat. Conversely, if the protagonist never gains the advantage, any victory he achieves at the end of the film doesn't feel earned. It feels more like a cheat.

Here's how the dance of power plays out in Die Hard:
Terrorists seize control of a high-rise during a corporate Christmas party, trapping our hero inside and taking his wife hostage. (Advantage: Antagonist)

Our hero uses the element of surprise to knock off terrorists one by one. (Advantage: Protagonist)

The terrorists catch on and begin scouring the building for our hero, who's forced to hide. (Advantage: Antagonist)

Hopelessly outnumbered, our hero clambers to the rooftop and contacts the police using a terrorist's walkie-talkie. (Advantage: Protagonist)

The terrorists trick the police into thinking the hero's call was a hoax. (Advantage: Antagonist)

Our hero throws a terrorist's corpse out of a window and onto a police car, providing irrefutable evidence that something's amiss. Within minutes, cops are everywhere. (Advantage: Protagonist)

The terrorists begin executing hostages and threaten to kill more of them unless our hero surrenders himself. (Advantage: Antagonist)

A chance encounter places the main villain temporarily at our hero's mercy. (Advantage: Protagonist)

The main villain escapes and uses superior firepower to force the hero's retreat, during which our hero is wounded while running barefoot across a floor covered with broken glass. (Advantage: Antagonist)

And so it goes, from the beginning of the movie to the end. One can dissect a lot of stories and find, at their very heart, this seesaw dynamic. The hero gains ground then loses ground; every setback is followed by a victory. You see the same thing in pro wrestling rivalries. Say what you want about Vince McMahon, but he and other ringmasters like him propelled professional wrestling into the stratosphere because they understood what makes great drama. When you analyze the greatest pro wrestling matches in history, one constant is the back-and-forth shift in advantage between competing wrestlers, rather like a dance. It's readily apparent, even formulaic, but absolutely necessary for creating real conflict.

Unfortunately, this wonderful seesaw dynamic is very hard to accomplish in a D&D campaign, where the outcome of any direct confrontation is resolved through random die rolls, and let's face it: most players will go to extremes to make sure the villains never get the chance to turn the tables or seize the advantage. They're not looking to dance or play your narrative reindeer games; they want to win.

Lessons Learned

The first time the hero and villain meet face-to-face in Die Hard, the hero has the advantage. He has a gun; the villain does not. The villain tries to buy time until he can escape, which he does. The second time they meet, the balance of power is reversed. The villain has the advantage, not to mention the hero's wife at gunpoint, and it seems like only a Christmas miracle will save the day. As a DM, I don't have that level of control over my campaign. Were I to place one of my major villains at the characters' mercy, I have little doubt that the villain would be taken out. And though I could probably contrive some means to facilitate the villain's escape, my players would think I was going to excessive lengths to steer the campaign—and they'd be right. It's a big turn-off. After running campaigns for many different groups, I've come to the conclusion that I can't let my appreciation for the back-and-forth power shift between good guys and bad guys affect my DMing style. If it happens, it happens. Sometimes die rolls can work in my favor, allowing a beloved villain to gain the upper hand or perpetrate a daring escape. I savor those moments, but I don't plan for them. Better to let the dice fall where they may.

That said, there have been a few nice power shifts in the Monday night campaign of late, mostly due to the fact that the heroes are fighting villainous organizations as well as individuals. The good thing about using villainous organizations such as the Shan Qabal and the Vost Miraj is that they can survive the loss of particular members, and it takes more than a few lucky dice rolls to dispose of them once and for all. If you're like me and you crave that ever-shifting balance of power, I recommend spending more time fleshing out your villainous organizations than worrying about any one particular member. Apart from being durable and resourceful, an evil organization can itself become a character in your ongoing campaign, and a rewardingly multifaceted one made up of members who don't always see eye to eye and sometimes work at cross-purposes. Evil organizations can be sabotaged, undermined, and infiltrated. They can be turned against themselves and transformed. They can be defeated, only to return with a vengeance.
Well, that's all I got for 2012. Y'all have a great holiday. As for me, I'll be watching How the Grinch Stole Christmas for the umpteenth time and trying to track down my DVD copy of Die Hard, which I think I might have loaned to someone — I can't remember who. Speaking of Die Hard, this particular installment of The Dungeon Master Experience was written while listening to Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 in D Minor, portions of which feature prominently in the film's musical score. (Like I need another reason to love that movie.)

No column next week, as Wizards of the Coast is closed for the holiday break, but I'll be back in January with some advice on playing gods and divine intervention, not just from me but also from the Grandfather of Roleplaying Games himself, Gary Gygax.
Until the next encounter!

Humpty Dumpty Conundrum

12/13/2012

MONDAY NIGHT. *The heroes are trapped inside a military stronghold in Io'calioth, capital of the Dragovar Empire. A dragonborn villainess named Zarkhrysa is determined to annihilate them for their constant meddling in her plans. The characters know she's part of a conspiracy to overthrow the government, but how exactly remains a mystery. There you have it: one plot, one NPC, and one secret. If this represented the entirety of my campaign, my job as the DM would be relatively easy. Alas, that's not the case. Over the past five years, I've littered the campaign with a plethora of plots, myriad NPCs with dreams and desires, and scores of secrets scattered everywhere in little fragments. All the king's horses and all the king's men, indeed!*

Every time I run an adventure for my Monday and Wednesday night group, I'm adding complexity to the campaign — new plot details to sort through, new NPCs to throw in the party's path, and new revelations to uncover. The longer a campaign runs, the more pieces there are to pick up and put together into something . . . whole. I could make the campaign shorter, include fewer NPCs, and reduce the number

of fiendish plots, but then the campaign world wouldn't feel as big, and the players might one day find themselves out of things to do. It's a conundrum.

The three biggest contributors to campaign complexity are **plots**, **NPCs**, and **secrets**. Every new plot that brews, every new NPC who shows up with an agenda, and every secret I plant in the world has the potential to sweep the player characters away on an adventure that lasts for hours, days, weeks, or months. The Iomandra campaign has scores of plots, hundreds of important NPCs, and too many secrets to count. The adventurers are not only dealing with the quest-of-the-day but also dealing with the consequences of leaving other quests unfinished, and here I am, the not-so-blameless DM, trying to make the most of it.

The only things that keep me sane are my notes. As I've mentioned before, I go into every game session with a one-page printout that summarizes key beats from previous sessions, lists the names of NPCs likely to be of importance, and spells out what I think might happen over the course of the session. Throughout the game, I'm scribbling notes on this page — the name of an NPC who makes an unexpected appearance, names of things I'm forced to create on the fly, reminders to myself, strange things that happen during an encounter that might have bearing on future events, and the occasional funny quote. Once in a while, a character will do something crazy but memorable; I'll jot that down, too. At the end of the session, the page goes in the back of my campaign binder, which has, over the past five years, become a chronicle of the party's shenanigans (albeit an unpublishable one). Here's an sample page from my campaign binder:

Life of the Party

Plots. NPCs. Secrets. These are the things I'm most interested in keeping track of. Why? Because in order to pull the campaign together and turn it into something more than just a string of adventures, I need to keep bringing old plots, NPCs, and secrets back into play and finding ways to pay them off. If I can't remember them, then I'm just littering the campaign with bits of debris — plots that are never thwarted, NPCs without destinies or arcs, and secrets lost forever. That's not the campaign I'm trying to build.

I don't need horses or men to gather up the bits of my campaign and start piecing things together. My campaign binder contains everything I need to assemble my campaign: one-sheets from every single game session, in chronological order. Some barely have a mark on them; others are covered with notes, scrawls, and half-baked thoughts that don't really amount to much but serve to jog my memory of events from Way Back When. When I'm worried that my campaign might be falling apart, I open my campaign binder and start leafing through past episodes, sometimes going all the way back to the beginning. Look! Here's a quest the characters abandoned . . . what are the consequences of their negligence? Here's an NPC with some unfinished business . . . I wonder if there's a way to bring her back into the story? And behold, here's a little secret the players never figured out . . . maybe it's time they learned the truth!

Plots, NPCs, and Secrets

A couple sessions ago, the characters knocked off a major campaign villain and the last of his surviving clones. It was the kind of fate you wish upon super-villains in James Bond movies: violent with a dab of poetic justice. (The last clone was made to suffocate to death in his own cloning tank while the heroes watched.) I was concerned because I didn't know quite where to take the campaign from there . . . or how to make the next few game sessions just as thrilling. After all, once the campaign hits a dizzying high, the natural tendency is to go down from there. It takes a lot of thought and effort — or pure delirium — to keep going up. I had a few ideas (odds and ends rattling about in my brain), but I needed to go back to my campaign binder to find inspiration . . . or, more precisely, to find things that would resonate with my players. As it happens, I found several.

Here are some pieces I have to work with:

1. When last we left the PCs, they were nearly out of resources. Our sly villainess, Zarkhrysa, allowed them 10 minutes to craft a teleportation circle, but with no intention of letting them escape. She and her wizards have been secretly scrying on the party and casting a ritual to disrupt their circle once activated. It seemed like a surefire way to get rid of the whole party at once, once and for all.

2. The players suspected something was amiss when Zarkhrysa held her forces back instead of steamrolling over them. Only one of the characters (a warforged artificer named Triage, played by Nick DiPetrillo) actually ended up using the teleportation circle, and now he's separated from the rest of the group. The party's attempt to reach him via sending stone didn't work, suggesting that he might be dead. (Triage's sending stone is embedded in his brain, making it unlikely that the item was simply lost.)

3. Speaking of missing party members, when Michele Carter moved to Baltimore, her character (an eladrin warlord named Andraste) left the party to become an NPC. The last time the PCs spoke with her, she was trying to get Alethia, her aunt, out of prison. Aunt Alethia is a member of the Knights of Ardyn, a good-aligned terrorist group dedicated to destroying corrupt elements within the Dragovar Empire. The party thinks she's being held in Zardkarath, an underground Dragovar prison on the island of Mheletros (ruled by an adamantine dragon overlord).

4. Speaking of the Dragovar Empire, it's been without an emperor since the start of the campaign (hence the never-ending upheaval). The party's human wizard, Alex (played by Jeremy Crawford), recently captured a purple dragon because he needed her heart as a ritual component. In a bid to save her own life, the dragon informed Alex that the emperor was alive but refused to divulge his location.

5. Zarkhrysa was a high-ranking member of the martial caste, which, in the absence of an emperor, has imposed martial law throughout the empire. Recently ousted from the Vost Miraj (the imperial spy agency) after a botched operation, she now wants to install a dragonborn noble on the imperial throne who shares her political ideology. However, no noble can claim the throne without the approval of the Council of Viziers, all members of the divine caste who are painfully fastidious when it comes to scrutinizing a candidate's royal bloodline. However, with the aid of a dragonborn archmage named Hahrzan, Zarkhrysa recently imbued a secret squad of dragonborn assassins with doppelganger-like shapechanging abilities. She plans to command this squad to assassinate the viziers, lay the blame on her replacement in the Vost Miraj, and use the resulting anarchy to push the Dragovar nobility into acting quickly to restore order with a new emperor on the throne.

6. Zarkhrysa's choice for emperor is a terrifyingly evil member of the noble caste, a Tiamat-worshiping dragonborn named Menes Narakhty. Shielded by his equally vile mother, he seeks an alliance through marriage with the popular and influential House Irizaxes. Menes plans to marry Lord Irizaxes's eldest daughter, Taishan. She's the opposite of Menes — caring, giving, and passionate about her faith in Bahamut. It's a disaster waiting to happen.

7. Amid my campaign notes is an idea that never actually got used: a dragonborn masquerade. As a prelude to the wedding of Menes Narakhty and Taishan Irizaxes, I thought it might be fun to have the heroes crash the masquerade. Unfortunately, the PCs were always too distracted with other things to get involved in the political machinations of the Dragovar nobility, and so the masquerade idea fell by the wayside.

8. At present, Peter Schaefer and Stan! both have secondary characters who were written out of the campaign at different times in the past year. You could say that both succumbed to "misadventure." As noted in my campaign binder, Metis (Peter's morose changeling warlock) was knocked unconscious and

taken prisoner by Vost Miraj agents several months ago, and the players quickly gave up on trying to rescue him. (At the time he went missing, he'd managed to place his companions in great peril and wasn't very well liked.) Stan!'s previous character, Baharoosh (a dragonborn assassin) was a member of the Vost Miraj sent to spy on the party. The party never trusted him (not surprisingly), even though he sided with them against the Vost Miraj multiple times. When Zarkhrysa realized he'd gone rogue, she separated Baharoosh from the other PCs and promptly made him disappear. The other characters, unaware of the risks he'd taken to help them, weren't sad to see him go.

And here's how all the pieces are coming together:

Shapechanging dragonborn assassins: The idea began to germinate in my brain when Metis, Peter's changeling warlock, was captured by the Vost Miraj. I made a note to myself: The Vost Miraj turns Metis over to Hahrzan for experimentation. By experimenting on the changeling, Hahrzan learned how to imbue Zarkhrysa's dragonborn assassins with doppelganger-like traits. Now we have the "doppelborn," whose Vost Miraj training enables them to infiltrate the divine caste, worm their way into the Tower of Law, and assassinate the Council of Viziers. The fact that they believe they're working for the Vost Miraj exonerates Zarkhrysa, who no longer leads the organization. The blame falls squarely on her oblivious replacement, who will surely be branded a traitor and a fool.

The conspiracy to overthrow the government: I decided to keep the changeling alive and imprisoned in Hahrzan's cloning lab. Last week, while scrambling to escape the villain's stronghold, Peter's new character, Oleander, found his previous character, Metis, trapped inside a cloning vat and unable to change his form. But here's the fun part: as a doppelganger, Metis is really good at reading minds and reading lips. He knows a secret, which Peter is told by me in confidence: Zarkhrysa is planning to assassinate the Council of Viziers to expedite the coronation of a new emperor, while simultaneously placing her best candidate front and center. Moreover, as a prelude to the marriage of House Irizaxes and House Narakhty, a dragonborn masquerade is set to take place concurrent with the assassinations. Everyone in attendance, including Zarkhrysa and Menes Narakhty, will have an ironclad alibi. Metis also knows that the masquerade is taking place aboard a ship, and the only way to reach it is via teleportation circle. Zarkhrysa carries an invitation with the circle's arcane address printed on it.

The Dragovar Empire's missing emperor: Having just killed the last of Hahrzan's clones, Jeremy hit upon the idea of using Hahrzan's research to create a clone of the imprisoned purple dragon. If he's successful, he'll get the heart he needs for his ritual from the purple dragon's clone, and the real purple dragon can be set free. Were this to happen, the characters might suddenly learn the whereabouts of Emperor Azunkhan IX. I won't divulge that secret here, for the sake of keeping the Monday night group in suspense, but as a point of fact, it is the single oldest unresolved secret in the entire campaign. The question then becomes: what happens if the characters return the real emperor to the throne before Zarkhrysa can install Menes Narakhty in his place? There we have the makings of a campaign-ender, don't you think?

The other missing party members: Poor Triage. Zapped into oblivion by a sabotaged teleportation circle! What the heck do I do with him? Is there some way I can connect his latest misfortune to some other unresolved piece of the campaign? Why yes, there is: The prison of Zardkarath. Interestingly, the location has never been explored but has come up many times in the campaign (the name first appears on page 5 in my campaign binder, which must be at least 500 pages thick). It occurred to me that the Vost Miraj would probably have a secret level of the prison where they keep captives who are too important to kill and too dangerous to mingle with the "rank and file." No doubt the level

would be scry-proof and sending-proof, its cells teleportation-proof. If you want to dispose of an epic-level party without the risk of them being brought back from the dead, there's no better place than prison, particularly if they show up sans gear. (Naturally their precious stuff would be teleported elsewhere. Thank you, Tomb of Horrors, for teaching me that old trick!) The only good news is that Triage is not alone — he has Stan!'s former character, Baharoosh, to keep him company. Two characters who never really liked each other . . . reunited at last! Surely it doesn't get any sweeter than that.
Au contraire.

Lessons Learned

Obviously, I can't have Triage locked up in an escape-proof penitentiary for the rest of the campaign. As a player, poor Nick would be bored to tears! (And based on the party's track record, there's a 97.1 percent chance that Triage's companions wouldn't bother mounting a rescue.) However, it stands to reason that the Vost Miraj would keep other important prisoners there as well, including Andraste's aunt, Alethia. It doesn't take a genius to imagine what might happen next.

By scouring my campaign notes and piecing together various unresolved fragments, I've stumbled upon a way to put Humpty Dumpty back together again — by having Andraste and the Knights of Ardyn infiltrate Zardkarath and attack the Vost Miraj-controlled prison level in a desperate attempt to free Alethia from captivity. What better way to liberate Triage and Baharoosh as well? Since neither Triage nor Baharoosh are in any condition to "duke it out" with the prison's ardent defenders, I imagine it playing out more as a roleplaying opportunity than a combat encounter. Coincidentally, Andraste never liked Triage or Baharoosh because she always doubted their motives; it's a laughable bit of irony to have her show up and accidentally rescue them.

In the end, managing a D&D campaign is about knowing what you have to play with and fitting the pieces together as best you can. That's where the campaign binder (or whatever device you need to capture your notes) comes in. If you can't see all the pieces, you can't put the campaign back together again.
Until the next encounter!

Lego my Ego

12/6/2012

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. *As the campaign shifted from paragon to epic tier, one of my players suggested between sessions that I gather input from the players as I put thought toward how to wrap up the campaign. Every player has things he's like to see happen before the end, things they'd like their charac*
ters to *accomplish, and story threads they'd like to wrap up. I thought that was a great idea and asked each of them to email me their "wish lists." It reminded me that the campaign isn't mine alone. As the screenwriter/director John Milius says in his DVD commentary for The Wind and the Lion (the 1975 period epic starring Sean Connery), "It's an adventure . . . and you're all in it together, and there's a wonderful quality to that. It's no more your ego . . . you're just serving the story."*

Like most DMs, I enjoy the occasional turn on the players' side of the DM screen. I don't profess to be anything but an average D&D player, but it's refreshing to play a character that isn't omnipotent and doesn't know what's behind every corner of the dungeon.

Most of my player experiences are one-off adventures — lots of fun, memorable experiences to be sure, but poor substitutes for a lively, ongoing campaign. It's been over a year since I was a player in a campaign, and in the past 35 years, I've probably played in only a half-dozen long-running campaigns. This week, I'd like to tell you about three DMs from my past. Let's call them Nosnra, Grugnur, and Snurre to keep things on the level. For those of you who don't know, these names belong to three giants immortalized in a trilogy of adventures written by the late, great Gary Gygax. As you'll see, the names are well earned.

Dungeon Master #1: "Nosnra"

Nosnra liked to play by his own rules and call the shots. He ran the campaign he wanted to run,

not the campaign his players wanted to play. He didn't care what was written in the rulebooks, and his campaign was riddled with all sorts of house rules catering to the style of play he preferred. If he didn't like a rule, he'd throw it out, which is of course the DM's prerogative. A wonderful thing about D&D is that you can ignore the rules you don't like or that don't suit the style of game you're running. However, Nosnra liked to create new rules or combine rules from different systems more than he liked coming up with adventure ideas. His campaign invariably became an exercise to flex his game designer muscles rather than tell an exciting story. In the absence of a good story, we did a lot of dungeon crawling and monster slaying. I remember a couple sessions during which I dozed off because every encounter was the same tedious battle over and over, albeit with different foes. Invariably, the players' lukewarm reactions would frustrate Nosnra, and that would be it. He'd shake his fists at the game's inadequacies, lose his personal investment in the campaign, call it quits without admitting his own hand in the campaign's downfall, and try to talk us into starting over at first level.

Dungeon Master #2: "Grugnur"

Grugnur had his campaign thoroughly mapped out — to the absurd extent that nothing the players tried ever took him out of his comfort zone. For him, preparation was the key to victory. On those rare occasions when we tried to venture beyond the invisible fence he'd erected around the campaign, something momentous would occur that lured us back from the fringe toward the heart of Grugnur's domain. We were his prisoners and, at least for a while, didn't even know it. But we caught on eventually, and like prisoners, we'd occasionally rebel. We'd undermine every carefully constructed attempt at suspense. For example, whenever a bad guy appeared on the scene, we'd give him or her a stupid name that would stick for the rest of the session, if not the entire campaign. Grugnur would shake his head and sigh when we dubbed his villain "Lord Melonbrain," and when Lord Melonbrain started ruining the game with every appearance, he would unceremoniously vanish, only to be replaced by "Captain Chamberpot," "Count Donkeyface," or some other walking joke . . . I mean bloke. Grugnur took strides to punish us for defaming his NPCs — the "uppance" might come right away, or he might stew for weeks before unleashing his cold-blooded fury upon us.

Dungeon Master #3: "Snurre"

"Snurre" was the absolute authority on the rules — knew every one inside and out. A tad sadistic, he also believed that good drama resulted from a relentless increase in tension, and thus he rarely let the player characters gain the advantage. They were threatened or cajoled into completing quests by NPCs much more powerful than them, they were insulted and put down by peasants and nobles alike, they were poorly equipped (with nary a healing potion to split between them), and every dungeon was a harrowing slog that wouldn't just kill characters but also scar and maim them. In other words, there was no frying pan — just the fire. My first character in Snurre's campaign was a wizard, and given that the campaign was a low-magic one, Snurre insisted on choosing my spells and equipment for me. My 1st-level spell list consisted of two choices, erase and ventriloquism. These are, as you well know, two of the most useless spells in the AD&D game . . . particularly when you're fighting an ankheg. I was given no weapons to fight with, only a 50-foot coil of rope. I hit upon the idea of using the rope to lasso and snare the ankheg, but Snurre would have none of that silliness. As soon as he caught wind of my plans, the ankheg burrowed underground and devoured my wizard from below. That'll teach me for trying to outfox the DM!

Nosnra, Grugnur, and Snurre aren't upstarts. All three DMs are seasoned pros with tons of XP under their belts (and the trophy-corpses of many slain adventurers to prove it). However, they all share a common flaw: They let their egos get in the way of the fun.

Ego is like a shield that protects us against embarrassment and other things that threaten our pride, confidence, and self-esteem. I control my ego by first acknowledging that I have one; everyone does. I like to say that I have no ego,

but it would be more accurate to say my ego is kept in check, and I think that makes me a better DM. Letting go of the ego allows one to play the fool and focus on what will make the players happy. It incentivizes one to prepare less and improvise more. Once the ego gets out of the way, it's easy to see that you don't need to be in total control to run a good game.

Nosnra likes to DM because it pleases him, but he's rarely satisfied with the game system enough to give his players the same sense of pleasure. When he can't deal with the campaign he's created, he quickly abandons it. Grugnur is the opposite; his campaign is so cleverly and proudly constructed that it's virtually indestructible, but it doesn't allow players as much free reign as they sometimes crave. Snurre doesn't like it when the players win; in his campaign, the house always wins, and that makes him feel mighty and bolsters his reputation as a Killer DM.

Ego manifests in many different ways. Recognizing this fact is the first step toward dealing with it. Ego's not a monster to be slain; it's more like a beast to be tamed.

Lessons Learned

Being a Dungeon Master means putting yourself out there, on center stage, with only a thin DM screen (and sometimes not even that) separating you from the players, all of whom are counting on you to deliver a memorable gaming experience. In many respects, you're like an actor standing on a stage.

Let's run with the actor analogy for a moment. When I think of actors whom I admire, most of them are razor-sharp, funny people who are looking for more than self-gratification through their art. They also tend to be a bit awkward and uncomfortable in their own skin. The "greats" such as Robert DeNiro, Helen Mirren, Clint Eastwood, and Meryl Streep use ego to spur great performances and drive professional success, but somehow they've figured out how to keep their egos in check. It's no wonder people enjoy working with them; they come across as modest, humble, and self-effacing. While they take their careers seriously, they don't take themselves that seriously. They have the power to laugh at themselves — a rare gift, and a surefire way to keep the ego from ruining their careers. It's the ones who can't control their egos who are the Hollywood train wrecks. I don't need to name names. Good entertainers derive the most pleasure from entertaining others, not themselves.

Let me be the first to point out that everyone wrestles with his or her ego, and sometimes ego gets the better of us despite our vigilance. I could be the most self-effacing and humble DM in the world (although I admit that I'm not), but woe to anyone who cuts me off on the freeway or thinks they know more useless Star Trek trivia than I do. You want to see my ego take charge? There are plenty of arenas in which I let my ego go a little wild, but the gaming table isn't one of them. Here's what I do to keep my ego from wreaking havoc with my campaign, which, I imagine, is what a lot of humble actors do when they walk out on stage to face a captive audience:

- **I remember that every session is a fresh start . . . and a chance to take a risk.**
- **I expect to make mistakes (and never fail to disappoint), and I hope to learn from them.**
- **I tell myself I'm on my players' side. The campaign is not about Me vs. Them.**
- **At the end of every session, I look for smiles on the players' faces. If I don't see any, I know something's not right.**

Along with the creative ability to improvise, DMs need self-awareness and the ability to poke fun at themselves. Every DM who reads this article thinks he or she has the ability to do both. Yeah, well, we all have the ability to breathe out of the nose instead of the mouth; doesn't mean we all do it. If you're truly self-aware and willing to laugh at yourself, you don't need a true seeing spell to know when your ego is getting in the way and doing more harm than good. It will always be there to protect you, but sometimes you gotta let it go.

Until the next encounter!

All Around the Campfire

11/29/2012

MONDAY NIGHT. *Hahrzan, an evil dragonborn wizard, was holed up in a heavily defended military stronghold located in the heart of Io'calioth, the capital city of the Dragovar Empire. The player characters used a True Portal ritual to teleport directly into his secret cloning lab, where they set off a glyph of warding that brings the fortress defenders down upon them in droves. As if the guards weren't bad enough, they also faced a black dragon that could phase through solid walls, not to mention the aforementioned dragonborn wizard. In the course of the battle, several canisters of poisonous gas were shattered, filling the lab with deadly fumes.*

What made this particular session stand out were the daring heroics of the adventurers. Every character got to do something cool. Never mind the plot! These are just fun stories to tell:

Bartho, the human fighter *(played by Matt Sernett): He trapped the dragonborn wizard on a spiral staircase, preventing his escape. He also absorbed a crap-load of damage while drawing multiple attacks from every hostile in the room, and yet somehow he survived.*

Alex, the human wizard *(played by Jeremy Crawford): Alex spent much of the battle teleporting into and out of sealed cloning tanks to reduce the amount of poison damage he took from the lingering gas. He also polymorphed several bad guys into rabbits and dominated one of the dragonborn guards, ordering him to remove his gas mask and hand it to the party's gasping rogue, Oleander.*

Oleander, the halfling rogue *(played by Peter Schaefer):Hopping invisibly around the battlefield, Oleander used a power that tricked the dragon into accidentally attacking the dragonborn wizard. The dragon rolled a critical hit and, much to its chagrin, bit the bloodied wizard's head off. This caused the wizard's life force to transfer into one of his clones, which I'll get to in just a moment.*

Varghuum, the dwarf paladin *(played by Stan!): His Sturdiness was thankfully immune to the poison gas, but not to the wizard's spells and domination power. While dominated, Varghuum nearly decapitated one of his companions, but later redeemed himself by scoring a crit against the black dragon, cleaving it in two.*

Triage, the warforged artificer *(played by Nick DiPetrillo): Triage created a simulacrum of himself using a new power. This clever trick enabled him to benefit from his own buffs, which is something he'd never been able to do before. He also spirited himself and Varghuum away to an astral demiplane of his own design, where they could recuperate for a round before rejoining the battle.*

At various times throughout the evening, three of the five characters were dropped to negative hit points, but no death saves were rolled because their steadfast comrades got them back on their feet in no time. The session ended on a fun yet dark note, with the characters trapping the dragonborn wizard's last surviving clone inside a cloning tank and watching him slowly suffocate to death.

Every time I sit down to write an installment of this column, I try to offer something of substance, whether it's concrete advice or some kind of useful "takeaway." However, this week I find myself waxing philosophical. I think you'll find something in here worth contemplating, but the article falls short of offering anything concrete. Hopefully it will spark some discussion and debate.

Like many folks at Wizards, I occasionally do press interviews at conventions, and every year someone invariably asks me how D&D — specifically the tabletop RPG — has managed to survive despite ever-growing competition in the digital universe. I usually get asked this question at conventions ruled by digital games (such as PAX), where our more traditional and beloved tabletop RPGs are viewed as sideshow attractions. So, how has the game managed to survive for 40 years despite the expanding range of entertainment options?

I believe tabletop D&D's longevity can be attributed to a primal need born in the dawn of human civilization: the need to tell stories around a campfire. As a social activity, it's one of the earliest forms of group entertainment. Humans have been doing it for so long that it's part of our social evolution. There are very few modern-day experiences that serve this primal need. You can't get it reading J.R.R. Tolkien's The Hobbit (or listening to the audiobook or watching

the movie), and you can't get it playing World of Warcraft or Assassin's Creed. To serve this primal need, the experience requires moment-to-moment, back-and-forth interaction between the storyteller and a captive audience. Alas, we can't conjure J.R.R. Tolkien to appear across the campfire and tell us everything he knows about hobbits. The designers of World of Warcraft and Assassin's Creed can't see you react to the worlds they've created, nor can they adapt their work to serve your personal needs of wish fulfillment. Conversely, a D&D campaign is created in the moment. It's not recited or recorded or immutable. Even a published D&D campaign setting such as the Forgotten Realms or the World of Greyhawk isn't meant to be run exactly as written (and, as far as I know, never has been). Campaign settings are books, not campfire stories. Like novels and movies, they merely contain ideas that a clever DM can bring to life as interactive stories around a dining room table among friends who bring their own contributions to the story, be they emotional reactions, commentary, characterizations, plot wrinkles, or what-have-you.

The D&D RPG successfully replaced the traditional campfire with a table, but the social experience feels like a campfire experience, and that's why D&D continues to hold its own despite the plethora of new entertainment options vying for our attention. As fun as it is to curl up with a favorite novel or play a video game, there's still that human need for the campfire experience that beckons us to gather in small groups and share stories that exist in the moment, if not for all time. Often, for better or worse, these stories remain with us for the rest of our lives.

If you believe what I'm saying is true, then there's nothing weird about being a Dungeon Master. DMs merely do what humans have been doing since the dawn of recorded history: oral storytelling. It's as human a pastime as any other social activity, and certainly one of the most creatively engaging. The sad truth is that a lot of our D&D stories exist only in the memories of the players, for they are rarely recorded. Fortunately, this is where the digital universe can help us. Humans in the 21st century have so many different ways to chronicle what happens in their D&D games, and if you're a Dungeon Master, you have an important decision to make: You must decide if the stories you plan to tell — what amounts to your living campaign — is something you wish only your players to experience. Until I started writing this column, that's pretty much how I felt. My 3rd Edition campaign exists, for the most part, in the memories of the dozen or so players who participated in it. There are no blog posts, YouTube videos, or wikis to capture the events of the Arveniar campaign, and there might never be, and that's fine by me. However, you might feel differently about your campaign. How will your great stories be remembered?

Lessons Learned

Since our topic-du-jour is storytelling, I'd like to share a few great quotes about the storytelling experience, some of which inspired me to write this article, and some of which reflect my own storytelling style and sensibilities. Each quote reminds me of game sessions that I've run, but in the interests of brevity, I think I'll save those tales for another campfire. Without further adieu, here they are:

"People have wanted to narrate since first we banged rocks together & wondered about fire. There'll be tellings as long as there are any of us here, until the stars disappear one by one like turned-out lights."

— China Miéville
(author of Perdido Street Station)

"Stories have to be told, or they die, and when they die we can't remember who we are or why we're here."

— Sue Monk Kidd
(author of The Secret Life of Bees)

"All great literature is one of two stories; a man goes on a journey or a stranger comes to town."

— Leo Tolstoy
(novelist and essayist)

"I have stolen ideas from every book I've ever read."

— Philip Pullman

(author of the His Dark Materials novel trilogy)

"When someone is mean to me, I just make them the victim in my next book."

— Mary Higgins Clark
(suspense novelist)

"There's a great tradition in storytelling that's thousands of years old, telling stories about kings and their palaces, and that's really what I wanted to do."

— Aaron Sorkin
(American screenwriter and playwright)

"Human stories are practically always about one thing, really, aren't they? Death. The inevitability of death . . ."

— J.R.R. Tolkien

"The world is shaped by two things — stories told and the memories they leave behind."

— Vera Nazarian
(fantasy and science fiction writer)

"Whatever story you're telling, it will be more interesting if, at the end you add, 'and then everything burst into flames.' "

— Brian P. Cleary
(humorist and grammarian)

Next week, I'll climb into the skin of a D&D player and tell you what I think of some of my past Dungeon Masters. The good ones have one important trait in common, and I bet you'll never guess what it is.
Until the next encounter!

Sudden Death

11/15/2012

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. *The heroes' ship is destroyed in an explosion and sinks to the bottom of the ocean. Its tiefling captain, Deimos (played by Chris Youngs), cuts a deal with Dispater, an archduke of the Nine Hells, to raise the party's ship from the ocean's depths. The cost? His immortal soul. A contract is drafted, and in exchange, Deimos must also take a succubus concubine named Tyranny.*
Dispater releases the soul of Samantia Carnago, a powerful archmage trapped in the Nine Hells. Samantia not only raises the Morrow but also transforms it into an infernal warship with a flag made of fire and sails made of smoke. The revamped ship is dubbed the Sorrow. The rest of the party isn't altogether comfortable with this latest development, but they go along for the ride. When the gnome bard, Xanthum (played by Curt Gould), winds up trapped in the Nine Hells later on, he uses his time there to hatch a plot not only to free himself but also to free Deimos from his infernal pact. Using information and secrets he gained from a dead pit fiend named Kosh (played by Chris Champagne), Xanthum climbs the infernal ladder, gains the title of duke, rejoins the party, and tries to kill Tyranny aboard the Sorrow. This interference breaks one of the conditions of Dispater's contract—that no agent of the Nine Hells will threaten the Sorrow or its crew as long as Deimos draws breath. Deimos's soul is saved, but Xanthum is cast out of the party for his hellish affiliations. Fortunately, one of the items he leaves behind is an hourglass talisman—a magical pendant that allows one to briefly travel back in time.
A common enemy forces a temporary alliance between the heroes and a group of agents of Vecna, led by a lich named Osterneth who also happens to be Vecna's ex-wife. Within Osterneth's rib cage floats a black, shriveled heart, and when the alliance goes south, Deimos's succubus concubine stabs Osterneth in the heart with a dagger. Osterneth kills the succubus, and the party's warforged, Fleet (played by Nacime Khemis), knocks Osterneth off the ship before she can cause any further harm. Later, the heroes learn that is Osterneth is actually a phylactery of sorts, and that the black heart trapped in her rib cage belongs to Vecna, not to her. By piercing it, Tyranny imbued that dagger with the power to not only inflict terrible damage to the god of undeath but to prevent him from reforming when slain in the natural world.
Months later, after destroying two Vecnite sanctuaries and killing one of Vecna's exarchs, the heroes incur the Whispered One's wrath. Vecna launches a full-scale attack on the party's ship and their secret base on the island of Irindol—where the campaign began. After defending their ship, the heroes retreat to their base, only to find it overrun. Moreover, the Vecnites are in the midst of building a necroforge on the party's turf. This monstrous device captures spirits of the dead and implants them in the bodies of newly built warforged

constructs under Vecna's command. As the party launches an assault on their own base, Vecna appears to put them in their place (as it were). The battle takes a promising turn when Vargas (played by Rodney Thompson) stabs Vecna with Tyranny's dagger, dealing damage equal to the god's bloodied value (790 hit points!) and trapping him in mortal form. Now, at last, the god of undeath can be killed—a task easier said than done.

Vecna's priests are quick to heal their ailing god, and though the characters put up a great fight, they find themselves running out of resources and hit points, with more of Vecna's allies on the way. Divin, the party's cleric (also played by Curt Gould), receives some unexpected help from his god, Melora, who sends her colossal sharktopus exarch to take a bite out of the party's coastal stronghold, devouring nearly a dozen of Vecna's 30th-level warforged troops. Divin is also saved from certain death by an exarch of Ioun, who takes the form of a tiny fish encased in the glass eye of an eladrin seer named Starra. The fish gets Divin back on his feet and back in the game, but it's still not enough.

Divin and Vargas are both slain by Vecna's evil warforged defenders. Fleet finds himself in hand-to-hand combat with the one-eyed god himself, but while Vecna is keeping the party's warforged busy, the evil god's underlings are overloading their half-built necroforge and preparing to send out a necrotic shock wave that will kill every living creature on the island. All seems lost.

A warforged scout assassin takes down Deimos, but thanks to his epic destiny, the tiefling sorcerer transforms into a huge spectral dragon and flees to a safe corner of the stronghold. Once there, Deimos pulls out the hourglass talisman taken from Xanthum. It's the perfect escape hatch, an ideal if convenient way to undo everything that has transpired. It's the last, best hope of avoiding a sudden end to the campaign. However, Deimos has no intention of pushing the "reset button." Killing Vecna once and for all is simply too tempting. . .

Sometimes the end comes before you expect it. I'm reminded of Monte Cook's Ptolus campaign, which, like mine, featured two different groups playing on two different nights. In that sweeping campaign, I was the one player fortunate enough to be in both groups. My characters were elf twins named Serai and Sercian, and occasionally they'd playfully switch parties without the other players knowing it. The Monday group was a thoughtful, cautious bunch that triumphed over adversity, and that particular campaign ended in victory. The Wednesday group was more reckless and daring, and that campaign ended in failure, not to mention the brutal deaths of the PCs—everyone except Sercian, that is, who fled to the manor of his twin brother and continued to make appearances in the Monday night game. The Wednesday night group died in a fight so unremarkable that I can't even recall who the enemies were — certainly no one important to the outcome of the campaign. Even Monte was surprised by the Wednesday night campaign's sudden end, and it was a far less satisfying conclusion than the one I experienced as part of his triumphant Monday night group.

My Iomandra campaign has a few things in common with Monte's Ptolus campaign. I have a cautious Monday night group and a somewhat more reckless Wednesday night group, and the Wednesday bunch recently came to a violent end. However, that's where the similarity ends, for unlike the Wednesday night Ptolus game those many years ago, this conclusion proved extremely satisfying. Why? Because the player characters had given their all against a supreme foe, had the perfect escape, and chose to sacrifice themselves instead to ensure the villain's destruction and the safety of the entire world. At a certain point in the evening, it dawned on Chris, Nacime, Rodney, and Curt that their characters were losing the climactic battle against Vecna and his followers. And yet, Vecna was trapped in mortal form, and it seemed unlikely that they'd get another chance to rid the world of him once and for all. I could see the grim determination in their eyes . . . the dawning realization of what had to be done.

Rather than use the hourglass talisman to alter what has transpired, Chris's character uses it to go back in time just far enough to put all his affairs in order. He notifies the other captains in the party's fleet (yes, at epic level, they have their own fleet of ships) that they must carry on without him. Deimos even contacts his uncle, who raised the orphaned tiefling, and thanks him. He then makes plans with Nevin, a halfling rogue-turned-submarine captain (one of Rodney's "retired" characters) to transport

a massive, iron-plated torpedo into the party's stronghold on Irindol using a teleportation circle. The bomb, built by dwarf artificers and "liberated" by the party during a previous adventure, has the power to obliterate the stronghold and everyone in it. Nevin's been hauling the damned thing around for the entire epic tier . . . and now, at long last, the final chess piece is about to be moved into play.

To borrow a quote from Aliens: "Nuke them from orbit. It's the only way to be sure."
After Deimos says his goodbyes and makes final preparations, the hourglass talisman "flings" him back into the battle with Vecna and his forces. The necroforge is on the verge of releasing its terrible shock wave when Nevin's giant bomb materializes atop the stronghold's teleportation circle, right on schedule, ticking madly down to its final second. Deimos and Fleet are obliterated along with their fallen companions, Vecna, the necroforge, and a sizable corner of the island.

I could see wicked gleams of satisfaction and enthusiasm in the players' eyes as their characters went up in smoke. The last thing Fleet saw before his warforged body was torn asunder was the shock and horror burning in Vecna's soulless eye before the dark god was consumed utterly in the blast. And thus the Wednesday night Iomandra campaign ended, not with a whimper but a bang. Last week I spoke of explosions and what they bring to my campaign. Well, sometimes they bring my campaign to an end.

Lessons Learned

Last week, after the destruction of the Wednesday night party, I saw the new James Bond movie, Skyfall, which has a splendidly poignant and satisfying denouement that makes you think they could end the whole series right then and there, and it would be a fitting capstone on James Bond's 50-year legacy in film. I felt much the same way at the end of last Wednesday's game session. Later, upon reflection, this feeling of satisfaction was mixed with relief. Had things unfolded differently and the party survived, I'm not sure I could've planned a more suspenseful final encounter to end the campaign. I mean, how do you top a showdown with Vecna, where the consequence of failure is the end of all life on the party's home island?

My players take comfort in the knowledge that Vecna's destruction will have far-reaching consequences for the world of Iomandra, including the dissolution of the Black Curtain—a barrier of necromantic mist that has been slowly engulfing the islands of the Dragovar Empire while concealing the secret kingdom of Vhalt beyond. Ever since his name was first whispered in the heart of the heroic tier, Vecna has loomed like a shadow over the entire campaign. He is undeniably the single greatest threat to the world, and my players know that you can't destroy a god and walk away unscathed. As Rodney Thompson told me afterward, it's the first time he's ever been in a campaign in which the characters triumphed by blowing themselves up.

What's especially fascinating to me is that the decision to throw Vecna at the party was a spontaneous one; it just so happened that the second-to-last game session was on Halloween night, and I wanted to scare the crap out of my players. I couldn't think of a better way than to have the god of undeath show up and wag his bony finger at the party for thwarting his evil plans time and again. Little did I know that I was setting the stage for the campaign's end the following week. But then, you can't have a memorable campaign without taking risks. Sometimes those risks pay off, and sometimes not. A DM can't always predict what the player characters will do from one moment to the next, and that alone makes every risk worth taking.

I would be lying if I said the conclusion was perfect. As it happens, one of my players (Andrew Finch) was regrettably absent for the last session, and his character has an incomplete story arc. Ravok, the goliath battlemind, was dead set on returning to his tribe before the business with Vecna got in the way. (To his credit, Andrew took the news of the campaign's sudden end very well.) There are also a few other dangling plot threads that weren't tied off properly. For these and other reasons, I am

thinking about doing something I've never done before: running a campaign "epilogue." It wouldn't be a normal game session by any stretch—more of an excuse to bring the players together one last time, gobble up some pizza, tidy up a few odds and ends, and answer their lingering questions about the campaign. The trick is how to pull it off.

As it happens, one of the deceased characters is a champion of the Raven Queen, a driving force throughout the campaign. The god of death (as opposed to the recently slain god of undeath) has appeared on occasion to guide Rodney's character, Vargas, toward his ultimate destiny—the destruction of Vecna and his necromantic warforged. My plan is to have the Raven Queen gather the souls of the slain party members before allowing them to "pass on." They'll watch as she toys with Vecna's mortal soul before destroying it utterly, and hopefully that sweet moment will provide the characters with the same sense of closure that their players received the week before. Moreover, the Raven Queen might allow a certain character to complete one piece of unfinished business before reclaiming his soul. At least that way, every player gets to experience a fitting end to the campaign.
Until the next encounter!

Gang Aft Agley

11/8/2012

MONDAY NIGHT. *Paragon tier. The characters thwart Sea King Senestrago's plot to sink an island using a very expensive ritual and several catastrophic dragon eggs plucked from the Elemental Chaos. Not only that, but the PCs manage to steal one of the eggs and tuck it away in a bag of holding for safekeeping. Two years and fifteen levels later, the egg finally comes into play.*

Fast forward to epic level: The characters are told that two major campaign villains, Hahrzan and Zarkhrysa, are imbuing dragonborn spies with doppelganger-like traits, allowing them to shapechange naturally. Moreover, Hahrzan and Zarkhrysa plan to use these shapeshifting spies in a nefarious plot to seize control of the Dragovar Empire. Shortly after the spies are sent on their way, the heroes corner the villains in a battered citadel along the coast of an island ruled by a green dragon named Emerlas. The citadel, damaged years ago by a tidal wave, still has some ancient magic on it that guards against scrying and teleportation magic — hence the decision to use it for a not-so-secret rendezvous.

In anticipation of a glorious battle in the ruined stronghold, I drew a multi-level map on a wet-erase battle map. I went so far as to show the various gaps in the walls and floors through which characters could maneuver, allowing me to place well-armed minions on multiple levels. I also added the island's green dragon overlord to the roster of bad guys in attendance, just because fighting a dragon is always fun.

Rather than assault the citadel as I'd anticipated, most of the PCs hung back while the halfling rogue, Oleander, mounted his ebony fly (everyone's favorite figurine of wondrous power), flew over the citadel, and dropped the aforementioned catastrophic dragon egg into the roofless structure, whereupon it exploded.

The Monday night group had seen a catastrophic dragon egg explode once before, so they were aware of its destructive capabilities (in my campaign, anyway). Still, they were surprised when the citadel collapsed in on itself, burying the villains under tons of rock. Everyone inside took 500 points of damage. Hahrzan, Zarkhrysa, and their forces were killed outright. Only the green dragon survived. Bloodied by the explosion, it burrowed out from under the debris and chased after Oleander. However, Oleander was able to catch up to the rest of the party, who finished off the wounded dragon in one round. Then they cast Speak with Dead on the dragon's corpse, learned where Emerlas hid his treasure, and looted the dragon's stash.
You know what they say about the best-laid plans.

It took me about thirty minutes to draw the map of the citadel. Pity I never had a chance to use it . . . but that's the way the castle crumbles. A smarter DM probably would've remembered

that the party had a Weapon of Mass Destruction from an earlier adventure; usually, my players are more apt to forget about that stuff than I am. On this particular occasion, however, they had the perfect work-around to my clever plans.
The REALLY interesting thing is that my players had fun ruining my plans and circumventing the requisite battle with the bad guys. They spent most of the remainder of the game session excavating the corpses of the bad guys and casting Speak with Dead rituals to glean information about their wicked plans. Oleander's bomb-drop had saved them hours of dice rolling while basically achieving nearly optimal results. (I say "nearly" because a good-aligned NPC — a captive of the bad guys — was inadvertently killed in the blast. Fortunately, the PCs were able to raise this NPC from the dead.)
As one of my players put it afterward, "Cheating is fun!"

In the end, that's the important thing: the players had fun. So what if I wasted 30 minutes prepping a useless map. Maybe I can put that map to use somehow in my Wednesday night game!
Another thing worth mentioning is that the destruction of the citadel and the deaths of Hahrzan and Zarkhrysa didn't spell the end of the adventure. The "doppelborn" spies are still out there, for one thing, and rumor is they're backed by two powerful and unscrupulous dragonborn noble families. (There's a campaign motto buried in there somewhere: Kill two villains, and four more sprout in their place!) Oh, and the party hasn't seen the last of Hahrzan or Zarkhrysa, either. One of the wonderful things about epic tier is that the villains tend to be as resourceful as the PCs. Hahrzan's an archwizard with a clone or two, and Zarkhrysa stole an hourglass talisman from the party's rogue a few levels ago. This time-traveling device allows its user to step back in time for one hour. Using the talisman, Zarkhrysa murdered herself in the past, stuffed her own corpse into a bag of holding, brought it back to the present, and raised it from the dead . . . effectively creating a "temporal twin" in the present timeline.
"Cheating is fun," indeed!

Lessons Learned

Here are this week's takeaways, in three nutshells:
1. You reap what you sow. If you give your PCs the equivalent of a Weapon of Mass Destruction (be it a catastrophic dragon egg, a wish spell, an iron flask containing a trapped god, or whatever), they will probably use it . . . and rarely how or when you expect them to.

2. Players like to play D&D on "Easy Mode" once in a while. (Thank you, Matt Sernett, for this analogy.) I don't get annoyed when my PCs outsmart an adventure . . . whether it's a published adventure or something I've whipped up on my own. It's like that classic confrontation in Raiders of the Lost Ark when Indiana Jones circumvents what might have been an awesome swordfight with one shot of his pistol. Very entertaining, if unexpected! Just be ready to plow onward. Worst-case scenario: the players spend the rest of the game session patting themselves on the back and sorting out the loot.

3. You can never have too many explosions. (Thank you, Rich Baker, for that observation.) If I can rig something to explode without making the players think I've gone insane, I will. If I can swing it so that the PCs are the ones setting off explosions, so much the better!

Until the next encounter!

The Third Rule

11/1/2012

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. *As the campaign draws to a close, the epic-level adventurers still have a lot of unfinished quests. Fortunately, they have a pretty good idea who the good guys are, who the bad guys are, and where the bad guys are hiding. In fact, there isn't a lot of investigation left. The characters are powerful and wealthy enough to sustain a veritable network of underlings, including spies and well-connected information gatherers. One of their finest is a doppelganger NPC named Leshiv, who used to work for one of the campaign villains until the party realized that his loyalty could be bought.*

The party first "acquired" Leshiv in the middle of paragon tier, but it took a while for Leshiv to demonstrate his trustworthiness and discretion. I basically use him to feed reliable information to the PCs, particularly when the players are at their wits' end or distracted by other concerns. Recently, he's even joined the party as an NPC companion, putting his shapechanging talents to good use. Now that the party trusts Leshiv, I'm not about to betray that trust.

Trust is a hard thing to come by in most seasoned adventuring parties. ("Seasoned" is a polite way of saying groups with more than ten collective years of D&D gaming experience.) Putting aside those backstabbing, self-serving PCs who like to stir up inter-party conflict with their crap (something which most seasoned groups barely tolerate), there's also a profound lack of trust in the NPCs. Why? Because DMs can't resist the urge to stage encounters or build adventures around an NPC's betrayal. Some DMs do it because the theme of betrayal is nearly irresistible; others want to see how characters react when the party's trust is violated. I'm guilty of planting seeds of betrayal myself, so I'm not casting any stones. Heck, I'm not even saying it's a bad thing, particularly given how prevalent the theme of betrayal appears in fiction and real-world history. But in the D&D game, NPCs betraying PCs creates trust issues, and this can sour players on the campaign and adversely affect their treatment of NPCs thereafter.

The truth is, my campaign has three kinds of NPCs:

- Those who are clearly and consistently trustworthy
- Those who are clearly and consistently untrustworthy
- Those whose trustworthiness cannot be easily or reliably ascertained

One could apply this same schema to real-life humans, by the way. I've met people who are so plainly untrustworthy that I won't leave them alone in a room that contains anything I deem of value. There are others I trust implicitly and have no reason to believe will ever betray that trust. And then there's the other 98% of the world's population who are closer to being actual human beings, capable of being both trustworthy and untrustworthy depending on the circumstances. My D&D campaign weighs the percentages more equally. I have a higher percentage of clearly trustworthy NPCs and clearly untrustworthy NPCs, mostly because I believe players get tired of psychoanalyzing every NPC they meet. They don't want to be concerned about some nameless dude who just sold them a horse to replace Kikkers McHoofenstein, the paladin's trusty mount that was devoured by a bulette in the last adventure. They don't want to cast detect poison on every flagon of ale they get from the tight-lipped half-orc proprietor of the Fat Fanny Tavern, either. And last but not least, they'd rather not have to do a background check on every hapless sod that pitches them a new quest. The flipside of the coin is that players like crossing paths with NPCs who are so blatantly untrustworthy that they practically have the words LYIN and SCUM tattooed on their fingers. It makes the NPC predictable and easy to deal with.

In my campaign, I aim for equal percentages of obviously trustworthy NPCs, obviously untrustworthy NPCs, and everyone else. That way, my players know (or if not "know" at least have a sense) that one-third of the NPCs they encounter are wearing their trustworthiness on their proverbial sleeves. This is oddly reassuring. After all, the percentage is clearly higher than what players typically experience in the real world, making my campaign a less stressful place to hang out. (Granted, the chances of being eaten alive by monsters on 21st century Earth is much lower than 8th century Iomandra, although one must still be wary of sharks, lunatics, drunk morons, bureaucrats, water moccasins, muggers, Muggles, and other potential threats.)
Wholly trustworthy NPCs are worth their weight in gold. They remind your players that the campaign world is worth saving, and they often come with a built-in sympathy and appreciation for the characters and all that they do to make the world a safer place for civilized folk. In my Monday night campaign, there's a blind tiefling rogue NPC named Kzandro Kazanaar. The

party saved his life and furnished him with a robe of eyes so that he can see, and so now he serves them as a "field agent," doing the sorts of investigative work and mystery-solving the epic-level PCs might have done back in heroic and paragon tier. He's similar in many respects to the Wednesday night group's doppelganger spy, Leshiv. Were Kzandro to suddenly betray the party, my players would never forgive me (nor should they) because it's a clear misrepresentation of Kzandro's character. He's earned and deserves the party's trust.

On the other side of the "trust scale," we have Zaidi Arychosa, a tiefling soprano with known ties to the Horned Alliance, a guild of tiefling assassins and spies. Zaidi entertains the guild's influential business associates and spends much of her time with the guildmaster, Zaibon Krinvazh, who collects and bleaches the bones of his enemies. Everything about Zaidi (and Zaibon) screams "Untrustworthy!"

And then there are NPCs such as Lorelei Kalas, a savvy sea merchant who commands hundreds of loyal ship captains. She's demonstrated over and over that she wants to be the most powerful Sea King in the world, but is she trustworthy? Well, that depends. When faced with a clear and present danger to her fleet, she can be trusted to act against it. But can the characters trust her enough to form an alliance against a common enemy? Well . . . there's no easy answer. The heroes have been Sea King Kalas's rivals in the past, but right now their fleet is smaller than hers, and they're doing more good than harm, so she leaves them well enough alone. And if they were to ask her for help, there's a decent chance she would provide it. But there's also the risk that something might cause her to turn against the party, and so they are duly cautious in their dealings with her.

Lessons Learned

As much as I hate falling back on color metaphors, every campaign needs white, black, and shades of gray. Just as in film and fiction, there are supporting characters who are easy to read and others who aren't. One example that springs to mind is True Romance, written by Quentin Tarantino and directed by the late, great Tony Scott. This film is an object lesson in the importance of creating a world that contains supporting characters that fall into all three categories of trustworthiness.

The Trustworthy: Dennis Hopper plays Clifford Worley, the film's likeable father figure — clearly trustworthy (which is doubly impressive given Hopper's history of untrustworthy character portrayals). Ditto for Christian Slater's goofy sidekick, Dick Ritchie, played by Michael Rapaport. (Incidentally, Rapaport has made a career playing this kind of character. In the less memorable shark film Deep Blue Sea, his goofy sidekick actually utters the line, "Trust me. Why? Because I'm trust-WORTHY." And we believe it because it's true.)

The Untrustworthy: Gary Oldman plays Drexl Spivey, a white drug dealer who thinks he's black; he's probably the most blatantly untrustworthy character in the film. We also have Bronson Pinchot's cocaine-snorting weasel, Elliot Blitzer. And let's not forget Christopher Walken, who, with Dennis Hopper, delivers what many film aficionados consider one of the best scenes in modern cinema. Is Walken's character, Sicilian mob enforcer Vincenzo Coccotti, trustworthy? Walken tells you within his first minute of screen time when he says, "Sicilians are great liars. The best in the world."

The Uncertain: Brad Pitt plays a couch-potato pothead named Floyd. We're not too sure about his trustworthiness. Ditto for the film's two bullying cops, played by Tom Sizemore and the late Chris Penn. Their trustworthiness seems to vacillate depending on the scene and the circumstances. The same is true of Saul Rubinek's egocentric, stick-to-his-guns film producer character, Lee Donowitz.

If you haven't seen the film, you are missing a sublime story . . . not to mention cameos by Val Kilmer and James Gandolfini — two brilliant bits of casting that represent polar opposites on the trustworthiness scale.

What True Romance reinforces in my mind is the audience's need to quickly identify characters

they can trust, characters they can't trust, and characters they're not sure can be trusted. The same rule (which might be too strong a word, but I'll use it anyway) applies to supporting characters in a D&D campaign. I think it's a mistake to flood your campaign with potentially trustworthy or untrustworthy NPCs. It creates too much uncertainty. The players need a larger group of supporting characters they can trust and who won't willingly betray that trust . . . and not just no-names who run the local taverns and plow the fields but also important "named" NPCs whom the party can rely on to accomplish tasks on their behalf. They also need some readily identifiable untrustworthy NPCs to spurn.

The "third rule" works well for me:

- One-third of my NPCs are identifiably and unfailingly trustworthy
- One-third of my NPCs are identifiably and unfailingly untrustworthy
- One-third of my NPCs fall somewhere in between these extremes on the "trust scale"

My players don't fuss over an NPC's betrayal because they're either expecting it or they know they're dealing with a member of that last third of the campaign's NPC population. Usually if there are "trust issues" to be worked out, it's within the party itself.

And for the record, there isn't a horse named Kikkers McHoofenstein or a drinking hole called the Fat Fanny Tavern in the Iomandra campaign, although if you ask my Wednesday night players, they'll say there probably should be.
Until the next encounter!

Spin the Cliché

10/25/2012

Monday Night. *The characters have been searching for Hahrzan, a dragonborn wizard who's experimenting on doppelgangers in order to create a "super race" of dragonborn shapeshifters (dragonborn that can naturally alter their appearance). When you get right down to it, it's a story as old as Mary Shelly's Frankenstein about a mad wizard and his fiendish experiment. However, several elements to the story make it unique, one of them being the villain himself.*
A botched alchemical experiment several years ago left Hahrzan unable to breathe air. To survive, he is forced to inhale a gaseous admixture, and he must wear a sealed leather body suit and gas mask, with a nest of hoses attached to a pump strapped to his back. When he is first bloodied, his suit ruptures, creating an aura of poisonous gas around him. Add to that a twisted sense of patriotism and a determination to replace key figures in the government with "doppelborn" operatives, and you have an antagonist who's a far cry from a cackling wizard in a pointy hat.

One of my favorite books is Save the Cat! — a how-to guide written by the late, great spec screenwriter Blake Snyder. It carries a somewhat immodest (yet entirely deserved) subtitle: The Last Book On Screenwriting That You'll Ever Need. In it, Snyder says:

A screenwriter's daily conundrum is how to avoid cliché. You can be near the cliché, you can dance around it, you can run right up to it and almost embrace it. But at the last second you must turn away. You must give it a twist. And insisting on those twists, defying that inner voice that says, "Oh, well, no one will notice," is a universal struggle that good storytellers have been fighting forever.

Snyder goes on to say that every Hollywood film fits snugly into one of ten categories based on its setup and plot. For example, Jaws, Alien, and Fatal Attraction are all "Monster in the House" films, while Die Hard, Titanic, and Schindler's List are all "Dude with a Problem" films. He also goes on to illustrate how some films are, beat for beat, the exact same movie only with different titles and characters.

Snyder's storytelling insight applies as much to DMing as screenwriting. Although there's no limit to the number of D&D adventures that can be created, the number of adventure setups and plots is remarkably short. There's the rescue adventure, the mystery adventure, the kill-the-monster adventure, and a handful of others. For every category, there are plenty of examples. However, if you're a DM looking to delight your players with a "slay the dragon" adventure,

you'll need something more than just a dragon in a cave. A great adventure needs elements that make it stand out as a unique piece of work, even if the basic story is a cliché.

Let's run with the "slay the dragon" scenario:

A red dragon terrorizes a small kingdom. Agents of the king hire brave adventurers to mount an expedition to the dragon's lair, slay the creature, and recover its treasure for the crown. In exchange, the adventurers get fame, experience, and a portion of the dragon's trove.

Without altering the basic storyline, a DM can add elements to the adventure to make it unique, turning a groaner into something that feels fresh. Here are some examples:

– The adventure takes place in the dead of winter, and the dragon has taken to hibernating in its lair. Snow and blizzards make the trek particularly dangerous.

– Two guides are tasked with leading the PCs safely to the dragon's lair. The guides are a pair of bickering dwarves, one of whom thinks the other is sleeping with his sister. As the characters get closer to the dragon's lair, the truth comes out, and the characters must break up a fight between them.

– The dragon has a bit of history. When it was younger, it served as a mount for a brutal hobgoblin warlord who died in battle. The dragon keeps the warlord's skeletal remains (and possessions) hidden in its lair, and maybe even talks to them.

– The dragon has allied itself with an evil wizard who is teaching it how to cast spells. The wizard has been living in exile for years and plans to win the dragon's trust.

– The dragon is extorting a local village, threatening to burn it to the ground if the villagers don't provide it with tribute in the form of cows and sheep. The characters have the option of slipping past some of the dragon's defenses by posing as shepherds delivering a flock of sheep to the dragon's den.

– The dragon has a crystal orb through which it communes with the ruler of an enemy kingdom. This evil king or queen is using the dragon to spread terror and foment unrest as a prelude to invasion.

– The dragon's cave provides access into a lost dwarven tomb, within which the characters find an intelligent magic axe. The axe might have a quest of its own, or it might be useful in defeating the dragon.

– The dragon's lair contains a magical waterfall that serves as a fey crossing. Characters can use this as a sanctuary if they're really hurt, and there might be a dryad or nymph there to advise or hinder them.

Granted, not all of these ideas are original (the crystal orb idea is clearly inspired by the Palantiri in The Lord of the Rings), but I think some of them are pretty good. This sort of exercise is called "spinning the cliché." It's fun to take a tired D&D cliché and find ways to spin or twist it into something original. In my "slay the dragon" adventure, only half of the twists are directly related to the dragon itself; the rest have to do with the dragon's lair or ancillary elements of the adventure. It just goes to show that you can twist the framing elements of the story just as much as its core elements to surprise and delight your players.

My ultimate goal, as the DM, is to find the perfect spin or twist to make my players forget that they're partaking in yet another "rescue the _____" adventure or "kill the _____" quest. If they're concerned about their characters freezing to death or bemused by a pair of bickering dwarves, then the cliché can do its work, and my players are none the wiser.

Lessons Learned

I love creating adventures, and once I realized there aren't very many different adventure plots to choose from, I became obsessed with finding clever ways to spin these well-worn stories. For my Monday night group, I wanted to turn a plot about an "evil wizard's experiment" into something that felt original.

Really good players can spin a cliché just as handily. When you look at the character options

available, certain clichés immediately rise to the surface, from the sly rogue who pilfers coin pouches off drunken tavern patrons, to the holier-than-thou paladin who turns a blind eye to the rogue's shenanigans. A clever player knows all the tired character clichés and looks for a twist or a spin. As a DM, you can learn a lot just by observing what these players come up with.

"Give me the same thing . . . only different." According to Blake Snyder, that's what storytelling has always been about. There's nothing wrong with sending adventurers after red dragons and evil wizards. Once you realize you're wrestling with a cliché, you can start to spin it around in your mind, and suddenly the creative possibilities begin to bubble to the surface. If you don't believe me, try this exercise: There's a ruined tower on a hill just outside town. The locals believe it's haunted, and occasionally strange lights can be seen floating amid the ruins at night. The adventurers are hired to investigate. It's a classic "haunted house" scenario. How would you spin the cliché?
Until the next encounter!

Acts I, II, III

10/18/2012

WEDNESDAY NIGHT *Act One. The heroes search for their elusive enemy, Sea King Senestrago, on the island of Whitestag, where the evil merchant has gone to ground after losing most of his fleet in a daring bid to wipe out several of his rivals. The heroes believe that Senestrago might be holed up in a warehouse belonging to the widow of a deceased trader who secretly worked for Senestrago. A search of the warehouse turns up no signs of their quarry but yields two clues: a barrel of sea salt concealing the mummified corpse of the widow's dead husband, and a wooden holy symbol of Melora lying nearby. The heroes try to question the widow at her estate, but she's gone horseback riding, and her household servants have no clue when she'll be back. It occurs to the heroes that she might be meeting with a secret lover, namely Senestrago. Searching the desk in the widow's parlor, they find scrolls indicating that large donations were made in her husband's name to three local churches (dedicated to Erathis, Melora, and Pelor, respectively).*

Act Two. Divin, the party's half-elf cleric of Melora (played by Curt Gould), doesn't know what to make of the wooden holy symbol found at the warehouse. An eladrin seer offers a cryptic clue: A lightning strike points the way, but beware the unfaithful. The heroes check out the church of Melora first and notice that the church's steeple is scarred by fire and partially collapsed, as though it was recently struck by lightning. The heroes approach with caution. The resident priest, Davian Smyte, claims the steeple was damaged in a storm, but it doesn't take Divin long to realize the priest is a charlatan. It's also clear that the party has found Senestrago's secret lair. "Father" Smyte leads a small gang of halfling assassins disguised as altar boys and a trio of human thugs posing as gravediggers. A fight ensues, and the good guys prevail. Not only that—the heroes discover a secret staircase in the church that connects to a hidden sea cave. But still no sign of Senestrago!
Act Three. The heroes interrogate captives, hoping to learn some clue to Senestrago's whereabouts. The gods smile on them as they see two figures approaching on horseback, galloping toward the church. One of them appears to be Senestrago, the other a dragonborn bodyguard. The heroes set an ambush, but Senestrago realizes something is amiss and tries to flee. With the aid of various epic-level powers, the party manages to thwart Senestrago's escape and quickly slay him. Much to their surprise, the dead Sea King transforms into a dragonborn before their eyes. Could it be that Senestrago was a dragonborn all along? Not likely. Based on other events happening in the campaign, the characters conclude that the Dragovar Empire's imperial spy agency replaced Senestrago with one of their own to sow discord among the Sea Kings and shatter their tenuous alliance. But is the real Senestrago alive or dead? The plot thickens . . .

A lot of scriptwriters, playwrights, and novelists use a three-act narrative structure to tell their stories. They use the first act to introduce the important characters and set up the conflict. The second act ratchets up the tension as things spiral from bad to worse and the story heads toward its climax. The third act typically resolves the conflict and provides a worthy denouement, giving the story a sense of closure or, in some cases, a hook upon which to hang a sequel.

I am a diehard adventure designer. I've been

writing adventures for almost thirty years, and I've got more adventure ideas in my head than I can ever commit to paper. Lately, however, I've turned to screenwriting as a second hobby, and I've concluded that scriptwriting and adventure writing have a lot in common, insofar as they're both heavily structured forms of writing. The structure is far less malleable and forgiving than, say, the structure of a novel or short story.

The first thing a fledgling screenwriter learns is that 99% of all movies cleave to a three-act format. The reason is simple: it's a tried-and-true narrative structure that most humans on the planet find intuitive and pleasing. We're all wired to think of a story as having a beginning, a middle, and an end. Conflict, climax, conclusion. It's that simple. You can't have the conclusion before the climax, or the climax before the conflict. Screenwriters can tamper with the traditional three-act structure, but deviation often leads to a narrative that feels uneven or unnatural.

My favorite game sessions are the ones that have a readily identifiable beginning, middle, and end. I like to think of them as stand-alone episodes of a serialized television show. My players like them because they get what feels like a complete adventure in a single session, as opposed to a slice of a much larger, seemingly never-ending adventure (which is what a campaign often feels like).

Our most recent Wednesday session started with a clear quest (catch Sea King Senestrago) and ended with the completion of that quest (with a surprise twist at the very end). By the end of the session, I wanted the characters to come face-to-face with their quarry, although the actual outcome was far from predetermined. (For one thing, had my players made poor decisions or bad die rolls, the villain could've easily escaped.) If you've ever tried writing an adventure, a movie script, or a novel, you know as well as I do that the hard part isn't the beginning or ending; it's the stuff in the middle that takes the most brainpower. As a point of fact, more writers get hopelessly lost in the middle of a script or novel than at the beginning or the end. Similarly, a lot of DMs have really clear ideas of how and where to start their campaigns, and they can imagine how their campaigns should end, but there's a vast and empty expanse in between that needs to be filled with something, and it's easy to become lost or overwhelmed.
Fortunately, I have some tricks that I use to help me get the characters from Point A to Point Z. It begins by imagining the game session as a three-act play.

Lessons Learned

If you've been following this column, you know that I "sketch out" every game session on a single one-sided sheet of paper that contains very basic information, including the names of important NPCs and a recap of important events that occurred prior to the session that might be relevant. This single sheet of paper contains everything I need to "wing" the adventure.

My recent foray into screenwriting has reminded me to think of game sessions as three-act narratives, and I've begun adding a brief three-act summary at the bottom of my page of notes. Here's the one-sheet I created for the Wednesday night adventure described above:

"Long Live the King"
Previously in Iomandra . . .
Sea King Senestrago tried to wipe out his rivals during a summit meeting at Krakenholt, but ended up losing most of his fleet. Senestrago escaped after the heroes stormed his flagship, the Advantage. Several months later, with the help of a doppelganger spy named Leshiv, the heroes "captured" the sister of one of Senestrago's few remaining loyal captains and used her as leverage to persuade the captain to divulge the Sea King's whereabouts.

CAST OF CHARACTERS (in alphabetical order)
Deimos(a.k.a. Sea King Impstinger), male tiefling sorcerer (played by Chris Youngs)
Divin, male half-elf cleric of Melora (played by Curt Gould)
Fleet, warforged warden (played by Nacime Khemis)
Ravok, male goliath battlemind (played by

Andrew Finch)
Vargas (a.k.a. Sea King Silvereye), male eladrin wizard/avenger (played by Rodney Thompson)

IMPORTANT NPCs
Davian Smyte, male human mercenary disguised as a priest of Melora
Nyrrska, male dragonborn ex-assassin and Sea King Impstinger's first mate
Leshiv, doppelganger spymaster working for Sea King Impstinger
Vivian Tattersail, female human widow (former wife of trader Armin Tattersail)
Hobbs, Lady Tattersail's likeable gardener
Starra, female eladrin fortuneteller
and
Evan Senestrago, male human Sea King (actually a dragonborn doppelganger and Vost Azaan agent)

EPISODE SUMMARY
The hunt for Sea King Senestrago leads heroes to an epic confrontation on the island of Whitestag.

Act I: The Warehouse
The heroes track Senestrago to a warehouse owned by the widow of a deceased human trader named Armin Tattersail. They find the dead trader's mummified corpse hidden in a barrel of salt, as well as a holy symbol of Melora accidentally left behind by one of Senestrago's henchmen.

Act II: Wrath of Melora
The holy symbol leads heroes to the local temple of Melora that serves as Senestrago's redoubt. The church's steeple was recently struck by lightning during a storm (a sign of Melora's displeasure, perhaps). The resident "priest," Davian Smyte, works for Senestrago and tries to keep the heroes from discovering Senestrago's secret redoubt—a sea cave hidden below the temple.

Act III: The King Is Dead, Long Live the King
"Senestrago" returns to the church after a clandestine meeting with Vivian Tattersail. He tries to flee on horseback rather than fight against overwhelming opposition. In truth, he's actually a dragonborn doppelganger working for the Vost Azaan, a mysterious new sect whose members are culled from the Dragovar Empire's arcane and martial castes. If the heroes interrogate the dragonborn, they uncover a plot to keep the Sea Kings from forging a powerful new alliance.

When writing the text for "Act I," I try to imagine how the session might begin and what needs to happen to drive the heroes toward their ultimate goal. "Act II" is where I add complications that stand between the player characters and their goal. "Act III" describes the likely climax and aftermath of the adventure. These are all guidelines, of course; sometimes player decisions and actions will take the game session in an unexpected direction, but at least I've thought about how the session might play out.

Ignoring the three-act structure for a moment, I could've created a much more straightforward adventure by having the characters encounter Senestrago in the warehouse, dispensing with the rich widow, the clues, and the temple of Melora. That's the equivalent of going from Point A to Point D, without bothering with Points B or C. I can imagine situations in which a more straightforward, mystery-free plot is preferable. However, I wanted Senestrago to be a "moving target," and the three-act structure forced me to think of complications that made logical sense in terms of the story.

In the Wednesday night game, everything the heroes are told leads them to the obvious hideout — the warehouse. But the villain isn't there, and so the players are faced with their first complication. Fortunately, a thorough search of the warehouse yields a clue: a discarded holy symbol of Melora. This clue (in theory) leads the party to the villain's true hideout below the temple of Melora. Time for another unexpected complication: the villain isn't there, either. Fortunately for the heroes, they don't have to wait long for the villain to show up, and if they're clever, they can catch the villain by surprise. At last, we come to the climax! Let the dice fall where they may.

Creating a complication is easy: I think about how the adventure would play out if everything fell neatly into the players' laps, and then I add a little bad luck or bad timing, a red herring or distraction, or something else to give the players pause. It can be as simple as having the villain not be where they expect him to be. Some players find too many complications annoying, so I try to keep the number small. For example, I planned to have a squad of dragonborn assassins hidden in the sea cave under the church of Melora, but I realized the encounter would make the session run long, so I cut it. It would've added a nice bit of foreshadowing (what are Dragovar assassins doing in Senestrago's secret lair?), but it would've added another hour to a game session already packed with intrigue.

Here are a couple things to keep in mind when thinking of a game session as a three-act play:

- **The three-act structure should be mostly invisible to your players**
- **You don't need very many complications (two or three, at most)**
- **It's okay to add or change things as the session unfolds**

When it's working perfectly, the three-act format provides a framework that makes the game session feel to players like an adventure unto itself, with a satisfying beginning, middle, and ending. Even if the adventure is far from over, there's still a sense that the characters have reached the end of one chapter, and most people would rather fight their way to the end of a chapter than stop somewhere in the middle.

For the most part, the three-act format is meant to help you as a storyteller. The players might never know that you're using it as a tool to help you plot out your weekly adventures, and that's probably a good thing. It's also good that you keep an open mind and not let the three-act structure rule the game session. If the adventure takes an unexpected turn, you'll need to improvise. Case in point, I thought the wooden holy symbol of Melora found in the warehouse was a strong enough clue to point heroes straight to the church, but they went after Lady Tattersail instead, and it took them a little time (and a gentle nudge) to realize that the holy symbol — not the corpse in the barrel — was the real clue to finding Senestrago's secret lair.
Until the next encounter!

Goldfingers

10/11/2012

MONDAY NIGHT. *Nick DiPetrillo plays a warforged artificer who doesn't have any friends. The other characters tolerate him because he infuses their weapons with lots of fat, juicy bonuses. The warforged is also a bit of a sociopath, so he doesn't really care what others think of him anyway. The idea of "friendship" does not compute.*
Recently, Nick's character was swallowed whole by another PC who was transformed (unwillingly) into a giant star spawn resembling a purple worm. (That's what happens when you have a bunch of purple worm miniatures lying around.) The "star worm" had a trans-dimensional gullet that spit the warforged onto a far-flung moon with very little gravity and even less air. Fortunately, warforged don't breathe or require sustenance. However, the bitter cold of space proved a touch uncomfortable.
The moon was covered with the dust and desiccated bones of millions of dead corpses from across the multiverse. Nick decided that his warforged had found paradise . . . a quiet demesne far removed from the tiresome politics, conspiracies, and quests of Iomandra, and a realm he could call his own where enemies dare not follow. After figuring out a way to survive the cold, the warforged began to sift through the dust in search of artifacts and relics. Much to his surprise, he found a dismembered warforged arm made of gold — how lucky is that? (It comes with lots of mystery, too. Who was the arm's previous owner, what happened to that warforged, and are there more golden body parts hidden beneath the dust?) Nick immediately had his character amputate one of his own arms and attach the golden arm in its place. I, as the DM, was pleased. I was also left with the challenge of determining what powers or properties — if any — the golden arm possessed.

I have decided to incorporate a particular element from the current D&D Next playtest documents into my 4th Edition campaign. I'm glad the campaign still has a few months of life

left in it because the next iteration of the game isn't so far in it's development that I'm ready to kick off a full-blown "D&D Next" campaign anyway.

As the master of my own campaign world, I'm free to plunder from past and future editions of the game as I see fit, and that's really the point of this article. My 3rd Edition campaign, Arveniar, began as a 3rd Edition playtest, and toward the end I started to allow some 4E-isms into the game. My 4th Edition campaign, Iomandra, started as a playtest of the 4th Edition rules, and once again I'm pulling in elements from the next iteration of the game. When the time comes to start my next campaign, it will almost certainly be a D&D Next game, but I see no reason why I can't take a few of its rules for a "test drive."

D&D Next introduces a game term called advantage, which is similar in function to 4th Edition's combat advantage but different in execution. Just like combat advantage, a creature can gain advantage in different ways, but the benefit of gaining advantage in D&D Next is that you get to roll two d20s instead of one and take the higher result. (For example, a character might gain advantage when attacking a prone enemy with a melee weapon.) The corollary mechanic, disadvantage, works similarly, except that you must take the lower result. Attacking while prone, for example, is a surefire way to gain disadvantage.

I decided to work the new advantage mechanic into my 4th Edition campaign in a somewhat limited fashion using Nick's golden arm as the means. I briefly entertained the notion of swapping out the 4th Edition combat advantage mechanic and using the new advantage/disadvantage system in a more widespread fashion, but making such a large-scale systemic change months before the campaign's end seemed like a bad call. Also, I wasn't prepared to deal with potential game balance issues; after all, 4th Edition wasn't designed with that system in mind (although there are plenty of "roll two dice, take the higher/lower result" mechanics lurking in the edition). Nah. Better to let the warforged artificer tinker with the mechanic for a while and see what happens.

Golden Arm Level 30 Rare

This golden arm was torn from the body of a warforged of unknown origin.

Wondrous Item 3,125,000 gp

Requirement: You must be a warforged to use this item, and the golden arm must replace one of your existing arms.

Special: Attaching this item to your body requires 1 hour and a successful DC 42 Arcana or Heal check. If the check fails, you lose a healing surge but may try again.

Property

Three times per day, you can gain advantage on one attack roll, skill check, or saving throw.

Here's what the golden arm looks like written up as a simple, straightforward, and undeveloped 4th Edition magic item:

So far in the campaign, the arm's property has been used once only. Nick made an attack, pulled out two d20s with a twinkle of excitement in his eyes, and rolled a natural "1" and a natural "2" on the dice. Not great. Just goes to show you that even a kick-ass magic item can't save you from angry dice gods.

Lessons Learned

The D&D Next playtest documents are out there for everyone to play with. I encourage any DM who's not running a D&D Next game to see if there's something in those documents worth exploring for his or her current campaign, be it 3rd Edition, 4th Edition, or whatever. I'm betting there is.

My next campaign is still several months away, and as much as my Monday night players seem to enjoy the current campaign, some of them are chomping at the bit to make new characters and start fresh with a new set of rules and new character options to explore. Anything I can do to whet their appetites seems like it's worth trying, but I don't want to turn my Iomandra campaign into something it's not. So, at the same time I urge you to explore what D&D Next has to offer, I caution you against implementing widespread

rules changes to your campaign unless you're fairly certain the risk is worth the reward. Until the next encounter!

Death-defying D&D

10/4/2012

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. *In their quest to retrieve the fabled cutlass Fathomreaver, the adventurers took their ship into the Elemental Chaos. The vessel cast itself into a swirling vortex, emerged atop a frozen sea, and skidded sidelong across the ice until it came to rest at an angle, tilted on its keel. Trapped in ice all around them were other ships sheathed in glittering white frost, and trapped along with them, a small island bearing a frozen assemblage of ships' hulls that someone had turned into a stronghold.*

Not long after the party arrived, an army of frost giants and fire giants marched across the surface of the frozen sea and began laying siege to the stronghold in the hopes of retrieving an artifact that some pirates had stolen from them—an iron flask containing a trapped god named Tuern. As the giants began pummeling the stronghold with chunks of ice and balls of fire, the heroes stepped out onto the frozen frontier and confronted the threat head-on.

Garrot, a human fighter played by Mat Smith, stood toe-to-toe with the fire giant boss. The fire giant pounded Garrot into the ice repeatedly with the anvil-sized mallet of his mighty hammer, but each time Garrot dropped to 0 hit points, his epic destiny or some healing power would kick in, and he'd spring to his feet . . . much to the fire giant's chagrin. Round after round, Garrot would do exactly what epic-level defenders do — draw attacks and soak up damage. And every time he came close to dying, more hit points would magically appear out of nowhere to keep Garrot in the game.

The giants were eventually defeated and driven off. By Mat's reckoning, Garrot took somewhere in the neighborhood of 650 points of damage that night and survived. Speaking as the DM, I don't think I could've killed Garrot if I tried.

A Dungeon Master can sometimes forget that the player characters aren't enemies to be destroyed. Rather, it's the DM's job to create challenges for the heroes to overcome — to play the role of the benevolent adversary who secretly roots for the PCs even when the monsters roll critical hits against them. Creating a worthy challenge is a tough tightrope to walk, and believe me, I know it can be frustrating to see the PCs run roughshod over adversaries who should've posed more of a challenge . . . to see a major villain fall in the first round of combat without so much as a memorable one-liner. As the characters advance in level and power, challenging them can be a difficult and frustrating experience. When faced with a seemingly unstoppable party, a DM might begin to wonder whether the system simply breaks down at a certain point. I don't buy it . . . but then, I'm not the sort of DM who blames the system for a poor experience. I would rather build encounters differently next time.

I can tell you that, after running epic-level campaigns both in 3rd Edition and 4th Edition, it's HARD to kill high-level characters. They have so many healing options, resistances, temporary hit points, and ways to pump up their defenses and saving throws that the only sure way to kill them off is to flat-out cheat, or so it can seem. And I can't recommend doing that.

Many DMs struggle with seemingly indestructible characters not because they long to kill them off but because it's damn hard to make them feel threatened. For example, my Wednesday night group includes a goliath battlemind named Ravok who gets a staggering number of temporary hit points every time he drops an enemy to 0 hit points, which basically means that I'm actually doing the party a favor whenever I throw minions onto the battlefield — and y'all know how much I like minions. I might as well throw healing potions at Ravok instead; he'd get back fewer hit points, and there's a slim chance he might slip on one of the potion bottles and break his neck. The party also has a warforged warden named Fleet, who's a walking tank with seemingly endless healing reserves. I honestly can't remember the last time he fell in combat.

Of course, not all of the characters in the

Wednesday night group are as invincible as Ravok or Fleet, but the defenders do a great job of sheltering the physically weaker characters against threats from all quarters. And let's not forget the party cleric, Divin, who has healing up the wazoo. I've run gigantic battles that take entire sessions to play out, and I've seen the party lose thousands of hit points without feeling like the battle might be lost. The only time they get scared is when they're down a player or two, and the party has fewer defenders or leaders to rely on.

So how do I deal with death-defying PCs? I'm glad you asked . . .

Lessons Learned

There are worse things than death in D&D, particularly at higher levels when death is more of an inconvenience than a character-ender. One of them is the risk of failure.

In their quest to find Fathomreaver, my Wednesday night heroes braved the dangers of the Elemental Chaos and faced off against a major campaign villain who had the weapon in his clutches. The villain and his crew were defeated, but unfortunately, the cutlass was hurled into a sea of acid and lost. As fate would have it, one of the PCs perished in the battle as well, but what stung the players most was the loss of that sword. They had failed in their quest, and that loss would echo throughout the rest of the campaign.

A lot of players assume that the DM wouldn't give them a quest without expecting the party to succeed—even if it takes a little "DM intervention." After all, the DM has a vested interest in ensuring the party's success, since completion of a quest makes players feel good and often helps move the campaign along. Humbug, I say. Victory is hollow without a genuine risk of failure. If the party fails in its task, maybe their hometown is pillaged by orcs. Maybe the king is assassinated. Maybe the evil demon prince is released from its ancient prison. Maybe the artifact they seek is destroyed right before their eyes.

For a long time, I struggled with creating worthy adversaries for my nigh-invincible player characters until I realized that my time was better spent coming up with interesting quests that couldn't be completed simply by slaughtering everything in sight. When I sit down to create an encounter or adventure, I'm not the least bit concerned with how tough it might be or how likely I am to kill off one or more party members. I set out to create encounters with memorable antagonists, plenty of roleplaying opportunities, and a smattering of complications that add surprise and tension to the proceedings. I also present moral dilemmas and problems that can't be hacked with a greataxe or blown away with a spell. Failure (unlike death) cannot be undone with a Raise Dead spell, and that's scary. Failure (unlike death) can have campaign-rippling consequences.

What's fascinating to me is that my players would rather face death than failure, and that fear of failure makes them take greater risks that put their death-defying characters in harm's way. That's more than a touch ironic, wouldn't you agree?
Until the next encounter!

Necessary Evil

9/27/2012

MONDAY NIGHT. *Peter Schaefer plays a 28th-level halfling rogue named Oleander who moonlights as the leader of a spy network rapidly spreading throughout Iomandra. For the past several levels, his organization has been trying to infiltrate the Dragovar Empire without incurring the wrath of the Vost Miraj, the thoroughly corrupt imperial secret service. Thanks to the party's efforts in thwarting a conspiracy to assassinate the imperial heir and the Vost Miraj's complicity in said plot, Oleander's unnamed spy network has found a crack in the proverbial firewall. However, in the time it has taken Oleander to establish relationships with influential Dragovar nobles and officials, two of the party's sworn enemies have joined forces and set into motion a plan that could wipe out everything Oleander has accomplished.*
The Monday night campaign has two major dragonborn

villains. One is Zarkhrysa, the former leader of the Vost Miraj, who was forced into hiding after the botched assassination plot against the would-be Emperor. The other is Hahrzan, the wizard mastermind behind a government-sanctioned experiment to trap the spirits of dead dragons in humanoid hosts, and the one tasked with eliminating all evidence of the experiment (including Jeremy Crawford's character, Alex) after the plan fell out of political favor. Lately he's been experimenting on doppelgangers in an effort to create dragonborn who can naturally alter their forms. Both Zarkhrysa and Hahrzan support the ascension of someone other than the current heir to the imperial throne, and more important, they have formed a secret society that welcomes wizards and rogues in defiance of the traditional imperial caste system, which separates wizards into the arcane caste and rogues into the martial caste.

Using her private network of contacts, Zarkhrysa learned of a secret meeting in Io'galaroth between Oleander and a dragonborn noble named Vahadin, who supports the rise of the imperial heir. She also caught wind of a rumor that Oleander was trying to entice members of various other spy networks to join his guild. Hahrzan took one of Zarkhrysa's dragonborn operatives and turned him into a test subject, imbuing him with doppelganger-like shapeshifting abilities. This mole then assumed the form of a dwarf with known ties to a defunct spy network and made the necessary overtures to attract the attention of Oleander's guild. Hahrzan also gave Zarkhrysa's spy a very powerful bomb, built with the aid of elemental research stolen from Hahrzan's former sect, the Shan Qabal.

That's a lot to take in, I know. But here's the fun part: Oleander believed the dwarf spy would be an asset to his organization and arranged a face-to-face interview. Moreover, Peter wanted the dwarf to be impressed, and so Oleander made sure the dwarf was present during his meeting with Vahadin, the influential dragonborn noble who had powerful connections throughout the empire. When the magic bomb went off, Vahadin's daughter and several high-ranking members of Oleander's guild were killed in the blast. A few were disintegrated. Vahadin survived thanks to one of Oleander's NPC friends, who used his own body as a shield against the collapsing ceiling. Oleander survived because his NPC lieutenant, a blind tiefling named Kzandro, "saw" the dwarf's true form with his magical robe of eyes moments before the bomb detonated. Kzandro threw himself between the shapeshifting assassin and Oleander, saving his boss at the cost of his own life.

None of the other player characters were present. The meeting with Vahadin and the disaster that followed played out in the first few minutes of the session while the other players listened and waited for their cues to join the action. After surviving the bomb blast, Oleander paid to have Vahadin's daughter and key members of his organization brought back to life—assuming their bodies hadn't been disintegrated, of course—including the brave Kzandro. As breath returned to Kzandro's body, Oleander leaned down and told him, "You deserve a raise."

The attempted assassination of Oleander was, for all intents and purposes, a spectacular teaser for the session. The plot was orchestrated and ultimately thwarted by NPCs, with most of the PCs in no position to alter the outcome. The only one with a "say" in the proceedings was Peter-slash-Oleander, and after nearly five years of running the campaign, I have a pretty good sense of what Oleander's about. I left it to Peter to decide whether Oleander would meet with the dwarf spy before or after his meeting with the dragonborn noble, and I was positively giddy when he opted to have the dwarf attend the meeting, as a way to show how well connected Oleander was. (Ah, the arrogance of epic-level characters!) Without knowing any better, Peter-slash-Oleander had played right into the villains' hands. Not only would they kill Oleander, but Oleander's new ally in the Dragovar Empire as well—or so it seemed.

Killing Oleander was never the intent of the teaser, as evidenced by the likable NPC throwing himself in harm's way to keep Oleander alive, not to mention the inevitable raising of the dead. (It's worth noting that, in my campaign, Raise Dead and similar rituals don't always work on NPCs.) My intent, for the record, was to start the session with a bang and set into motion a storyline that would carry us through the evening.

Usually, it's the player characters who are bringing the fight to the bad guys, not the other way around, so having the villains score the first touchdown of the evening was a refreshing change of pace. The assassination attempt gave the player characters a mystery to solve (who wants Oleander dead?) and laid the groundwork

for the eventual resurfacing of two major campaign villains whose alliance might come as a surprise to the players, since the PCs had always encountered Zarkhrysa and Hahrzan separately in the past. We're rapidly approaching the campaign's grand finale, so I thought it would be efficient (and fun) to bring these two forces of evil together. Villains are, after all, best encountered in pairs. (Buffy the Vampire Slayer taught me that.)

Lessons Learned

A plot device is something that drives the narrative forward, usually without the involvement or interference of the protagonists. It's the sh*t that happens when the story needs a push. Plot devices come in all guises. One of my favorites in film and television is the character who must suffer and/or die to fuel the protagonist's thirst for revenge. For example, in the 1989 Bond film License to Kill, the main villain nonchalantly feeds CIA agent Felix Leiter to sharks (a plot device borrowed from Ian Fleming's novel Live and Let Die). This plot device needs to exist, for it carries the story and gives James Bond, our hero, all the motivation he needs to make the villain pay. Another great plot device in TV and film is "the wedding," which is often used as a ratings gimmick to bring lots of characters together into one scene and bring simmering conflicts to a boil. Forgive the bad pun, but how many weddings on television go off without a hitch?

I am torn when it comes to using plot devices. They are, in my mind, a necessary evil. Sometimes you need one to move the campaign from Point X to Point Y, but a poorly staged plot device can be an eye-rolling experience for players and viewed by them as a ham-handed attempt by the DM to shove the adventure down their throats. I think the trick to making a plot device palatable in D&D is to find things—even small things—for the players' characters to do, so that they don't feel completely paralyzed as things begin to happen around them. To take the recent Monday night example, my plot device du jour was the deadly explosion in Oleander's lair, but leading up to that moment, Peter got to enjoy a little roleplaying and make at least one decision that could've moderately altered the outcome. It wasn't like Oleander was tied down and blindfolded as events played out. Quite the contrary; without Oleander's contributions, the plot device wouldn't have had as deep an impact.

I like to compare a plot device to a staircase connecting two levels of a dungeon. The only way to get from Level 1 to Level 2 is via the staircase, and the players know as much. They can refuse to go down the stairs, or they can spend hours searching it for traps and other interesting features, but what really needs to happen for the adventure to continue is simple: The adventurers need to walk down those stairs. Ideally, the stairs are nothing more than a means to get the characters where you want them to be AND where the players want them to be. The trick is not to make the players suspicious of the staircase or give them reasons to dawdle or turn back.

I try to use plot devices deliberately and sparingly. As a DM, the last thing I want is to turn my player characters into spectators, with zero influence over the unfolding of events. Here are a couple key points I try to keep in mind:

- The best plot devices don't overstay their welcome.
- The best plot devices can be undermined or turned to the party's advantage.

Crafty players like to tinker with plot devices for their own ends, and in some cases, they can cleverly undo the damage that a plot device causes, thanks to Raise Dead rituals and other resources. That's okay in my book. It doesn't matter that Oleander used magic to undo some of the more devastating results of the bomb blast. The plot device basically accomplished what it set out to do, which was to tell the PCs there's a problem demanding their immediate attention and someone who needs to brought to justice. How they proceed from there is up to them.

After sifting through the wreckage and making a few skill checks, the Monday night group

concluded that the magical bomb was built using research stolen from a Shan Qabal library, which pointed the heroes in the direction of Hahrzan. That was my intention all along, of course.
Wicked things, plot devices.
Until the next encounter!

By the Nose

9/20/2012

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. *The gaming group was shy two players, leaving the party without its two defenders. The remaining players were understandably hesitant to throw their characters into harm's way. Luckily, I had an idea — a goal the players could accomplish with minimal bloodshed if they were clever.*
The Wednesday night group had a lengthy "to do" list of stuff to accomplish before the end of the campaign. One of the tasks near the top of the list was to hunt down Sea King Senestrago, who had gone into hiding. Senestrago's fleet had ambushed the other Sea Kings during a summit in neutral waters, but the heroes intervened and stormed Senestrago's flagship. In the wake of this latest defeat, Senestrago fled on dragonback to one of his secret island strongholds, which the heroes found and plundered. Again, Senestrago escaped, after which the trail went cold. Other important matters came to the fore, and the pursuit of Sea King Senestrago slipped farther down the "to do" list.
Although the party had more pressing matters, I decided the time had come for the Sea King Senestrago storyline to resurface. The session began with a doppelganger spy in the party's employ telling them about a theft of 15,000 platinum pieces from a warehouse belonging to Sea King Kalas. What did this theft have to do with Sea King Senestrago, you ask? Well, early in the campaign, the PCs heard rumors that Senestrago's poor leadership had resulted in the defection of several of his captains to rival Sea Kings. It turns out the defections were orchestrated by Senestrago himself. One of these defectors, flying under Sea King Kalas's flag, plundered her warehouse and set out to deliver the stolen funds to Senestrago so that he could begin to rebuild his shattered fleet. The party's doppelganger spy caught wind of the betrayal, and the characters now had the means to find their elusive quarry. All they needed to do was find this errant sea captain and follow him straight to Senestrago. Unfortunately, the captain's vessel had not made port since the theft, so its exact whereabouts was unknown.
Through their spy network, the characters discovered that the elusive captain — a half-elf named Rance Urvilgar — had a beloved younger sister named Lydia who owned a successful tavern on a backwater raft-town called Underkeel (which, incidentally, is ruled by a crafty pseudodragon named Dart). Based on some well-reasoned advice from their well-informed doppelganger spy, the player characters decided that they could capture Lydia, use a Sending ritual to get in touch with her brother, force a confrontation, and blackmail Urvilgar into divulging Senestrago's location. The rest of the game session was unscripted. The heroes visited Lydia's tavern and gave her every impression that her brother was in danger. Captain Urvilgar, in turn, was given the impression that his sister was the one in danger, and this deception led to a confrontation between the party's flagship and Urvilgar's ship. Unwilling to risk Lydia's life and unable to match power with the heroes' well-armed vessel, Urvilgar eventually caved and told the heroes what they wanted to know.
Not everything went as planned, however. The players decided they wanted the platinum coins that Urvilgar had stolen and hidden in a booty safe (a small extradimensional vault) aboard his ship. They allowed Urvilgar and his first mate — a tiefling henchwoman named Violence — to return to their ship unsupervised to retrieve the platinum in exchange for Lydia's safe return. While Urvilgar retrieved the stolen booty, Violence secretly used a sending stone to warn Senestrago of the imminent threat to his life.

I don't mind leading the player characters by the nose once in a while, and my players don't mind it either provided I play by certain guidelines. What are these guidelines, you ask? I'll get to that in just a moment. But first, let me clarify what I mean.

There are times, I've noticed, when my players (and by extension their characters) aren't sure what to do next. They have a "to do" list, but it's not always easy for them to prioritize which objectives or quests are the most crucial or time-sensitive because they don't necessarily have all the information they need to make the call. Moreover, some of the stuff on their "to do" list is keyed to specific characters, such that if certain player characters are absent, it's hard to justify moving forward on those particular quests. Once

you omit the character-specific quests, it can still be a challenge for a short-handed group to decide what to handle next. Fortunately, my players don't freak out if I give them a gentle nudge in one direction or another. They trust that I will nudge them toward something fun.

There are also times when players can't reach consensus on what to do next, and a nudge from me can settle the matter or provide a little direction (or "divine intervention," if you prefer). The alternative is to let the players spend twenty or thirty minutes debating or arguing over which item on their combined "to do" list takes precedence and why . . . which, incidentally, isn't necessarily a bad thing if they enjoy this sort of discussion.

Finally, there are times when a particular story arc comes to an apparent dead end, and the players have no clue how to get their characters back on track without the DM providing some clues or additional information to set further events in motion.

It's easy for a campaign to drag, so when I lead players by the nose, it's seen as an attempt (elegant or ham-handed, depending on the execution) to overcome inertia and provide momentum. That said, my players rarely need my help; most of the time, they are self-motivated and can pick a direction or decide on a course of action with little or no DM intervention. Leading them by the nose is something I do only rarely, and that's probably a good thing.

Lessons Learned

I can tell when I'm leading my players by the nose: the campaign becomes much more "scripted" as things begin to happen without the characters taking an active hand in the unfolding events. In the case of my Wednesday night campaign, the characters had reached a dead end in their quest to find Sea King Senestrago, so I used an NPC to feed the party some information.

I could've given the friendly doppelganger spy the exact location of Sea King Senestrago, but where's the fun in that? Leading players by the nose doesn't mean circumventing the adventure. If the goal is to help players "find the fun," the last thing I want to do is take away all of the challenges, complications, roleplaying opportunities, and suspense. Instead, I offer them another chance to catch Senestrago . . . if they play their cards right and everything goes as planned. Well, the truth is, nothing ever goes exactly as planned, and that's part of the fun.

To catch Senestrago, the characters had to travel to Underkeel, negotiate with the raft-town's pseudodragon overlord (who enjoys parties, and perches like a parrot on the shoulder of an ex-pirate captain who lost his marbles), trick Lydia into helping them, pretend to hold her hostage to force a confrontation with her seafaring brother, and convince Captain Urvilgar to give up Senestrago's whereabouts. These weren't options that I forced on them; in fact, I assumed they would simply kidnap Lydia and hold her hostage, but instead they tricked her into thinking her brother was in danger, which incentivized her to be cooperative. I also figured they'd resort to violence to pressure Rance Urvilgar into divulging Senestrago's whereabouts, but they used innuendo and intimidation instead, allowing them to accomplish their goal without ever once drawing swords.

Here, as promised, are the guidelines I follow when leading my players by the nose:

- **Thou shalt always lead players toward fun, not boredom.**
- **Thou shalt use this opportunity to advance the story of the campaign.**
- **Thou shalt not betray the players' trust by leading their characters into a trap.**
- **Thou shalt never tell the players what their characters say or do.**

If my players are going to allow me to lead them by the nose, they need to trust that I will make the experience anything but dull. My players must also trust that the journey will be worth it in terms of pushing the campaign forward. There's

no point nudging them toward nowhere.

If following my lead is going to result in the characters falling into a trap, the players will be less inclined to follow my lead next time, and that's ultimately counterproductive. The trap idea can work, but the players either need to suspect a trap from the outset and try to work around it, or I need to drop big clues along the way to foreshadow whatever betrayal I have planned. Both are risky propositions, I'll tell you right now, which is why the general rule stands. The last point is very important. When running a heavily scripted encounter designed to nudge the player characters in a particular direction, some DMs make the mistake of putting words in the characters' mouths or — gods forbid! — dictating that characters take specific actions. Unless the characters are possessed, dominated, or otherwise under DM control, that is not the DM's role, and this kind of "leading by the nose" is sure to elicit player contempt.

Next week, assuming I don't get any other bright ideas, I plan to discuss the extent to which I rely on plot devices — by which I mean events that need to happen regardless of the PCs' actions or decisions — and how much I love and loathe them.
Until the next encounter!

Leap Year

9/13/2012

MONDAY NIGHT. *The game has been cancelled for the fifth week in a row. Despite having eight players, I haven't been able to pull enough players together for various reasons mostly having to do with summer vacations and conventions. Not surprisingly, my players are anxious for things to settle down and for the weekly game to resume, but so much time has passed that they can barely remember where we left off. Under normal circumstances, I would kick off our next session with a recap similar to what many serialized television shows do, but not this time.*

I have taken a cue from Battlestar Galactica (the reimagined TV series, not the 1970s original) and advanced the timeline of my Monday night campaign by one year. It's a risky move so close to the end of the campaign, but as a DM, I'm always looking for ways to excite my players. I originally planned to surprise them by announcing the timeline advancement at the start of a game session but changed my mind when I realized that they would need time to reflect on what their characters had done during the intervening months. Instead, I sent them the following email (rollover the red links for explanatory text):

I'm advancing the in-world timeline. When last we left the heroes, they'd captured Starlord Evendor and left it to Ardyn, the leader of the Knights of Ardyn, to determine Evendor's fate. The next game session will pick things up approximately one year later. In the intervening months, your characters have been lying low and doing non-adventure-related things. As a homework assignment, I'd like each of you to send me what you imagine your character has done in the intervening time. Here are some major world developments of which your characters are aware:

1. Ardyn ordered Starlord Evendor's execution, considering him too great a threat to be kept alive.

2. The death of Starlord Evendor and the attack on the Dragovar warship by the Knights of Ardyn basically ended any hope of reconciliation between the knights and the empire. The Dragovar Empire is more convinced than ever that the Knights of Ardyn are terrorists who must be destroyed. Ardyn's island lair has been abandoned, and the knights have gone into hiding. Several of them have been hunted down and exterminated, but Ardyn is still alive. Her whereabouts are unknown, and she isn't reachable via Sending rituals.

3. The coronation of Hlastro is imminent. His mother will serve as Imperial Regent until his coronation, although the Dragovar Empire's martial caste has not formally recognized her title or ended its declaration of martial law in light of the Vhaltese threat (see below). If he lives long enough to be crowned, Hlastro will be the

youngest Emperor in the history of the Dragovar Empire. (He'll be 15 years old.)

4. The Narakhty and Irizaxes noble houses are currently united through marriage and gaining support and influence throughout the Dragovar Empire. They openly oppose Hlastro's impending coronation. Menes Narakhty is being positioned as a more adequate candidate for the imperial throne, and rumors abound that his mother, Kaphira Narakhty, is actively plotting against the legitimate imperial heir. House Narakhty has powerful friends in the nobility, the Temple of Tiamat, and in the military.

5. The Myrthon Regency no longer pose s a threat to the empire. The Dragovar navy patrols Myrthon waters, and the military has rounded up and executed hundreds of high-ranking Myrthon officials convicted of conspiracy and treason. Tsarana Faijhan, the daughter of the late Myrthon regent Tsar Dakor, has been installed as a puppet regent (mostly to appease the Myrthon citizenry), and her dragonborn advisors are secretly affiliated with the Knights of Ardyn. If the Dragovar authorities discover this fact, it's likely that Faijhan and her advisors will be arrested and and/or executed.

6. The evil General Kamal didn't make many friends when he declared martial law and tried to install himself as Emperor. Kamal was recently stripped of his rank and ousted by his military rivals, with the full support of the Dragovar clergy and concerned nobility. He is under house arrest, and his mental state has deteriorated markedly. The highest-ranking member of the martial caste is currently General Rhutha. Although she's popular within her caste, her support among the other castes isn't great. Rhutha is under pressure to deal with the threat posed by Vhalt, and some believe she's reluctant to take orders from an Emperor as young as Hlastro. It's unknown whether she supports Menes Narakhty or not.

7. The new leader of the Vost Miraj is a dragonborn named Khoda, who reports directly to Rhutha. Khoda recently uncovered a conspiracy to assassinate General Rhutha and personally interrogated several captured conspirators with suspected ties to Vhalt before condemning them to death or life in prison. A warrant has been issued for the arrest and capture of Sea King Valkroi, who is allegedly involved in the conspiracy to assassinate Rhutha. The Vost Miraj has much less free reign than it did under its prior leadership.

8. The Magocracy of Vhalt has "invaded" Arkhosia. Dozens of Vhaltese flying citadels have taken up positions over the islands of Bael Nerath, and Vhalt has signed a mutual defense treaty with Bael Nerath and supports the humans' declaration of independence. Having just crushed the Myrthon secession, the Dragovar Empire has no intention of allowing Bael Nerath to break away. The imperial navy has reinforced its blockade around the islands, but the ships cannot stop the Vhaltese citadels from coming and going, so the blockade is ineffective.

9. According to rumors coming out of Bael Nerath, some of the Vhaltese citadels are populated by eladrin, elves, and wilden. Groups of these fey creatures have been seen meeting with Bael Nerathi leaders and officials.

10. The dragonborn wizard Hahrzan and the remnants of his evil sect have gone underground. Meanwhile, the Shan Qabal has been officially dissolved and its members disavowed by the arcane caste in order to appease the other castes that hold the Shan Qabal responsible for the terrorist attack on Io'calioth. Former members of the Shan Qabal not associated with Hahrzan have formed a secret society that still reports to Lenkhor Krige, and they still refer to their order as the Shan Qabal.

Time is one of the most overlooked and ignored elements of a D&D campaign. Some DMs are fastidious when it comes to tracking it, but most of us aren't. For the sake of our own sanity, we're willing to put matters of time aside. We don't care if the party wizard achieves 30th level before his 30th birthday, and we're okay with an entire campaign transpiring within a year of game time, despite what history books teach us about medieval life, the Middle Ages, and how long it really takes for important events to transpire. In

most D&D campaigns, character age is irrelevant; the chance that the party's dwarf paladin or elf ranger will die of old age is virtually nil. A pity, really.

Once in a while, I get it in my noggin to tinker with time. Playing with time is risky, but it can also be fun and rewarding. I experienced the benefits firsthand when I allowed the Monday night group to travel back in time, and now I'm using time as a narrative device in a different way.

When the producers of Battlestar Galactica advanced their show's timeline by one year, they knew they were taking a creative risk, but the potential rewards were irresistible. The show's writers were excited by the drama that might unfold as a result of this narrative leap forward, and the decision allowed the show's primary and secondary characters to explore new relationships and grow in interesting ways. We (the audience) were thrown for a loop at first, but if nothing else, the one-year leap gave us the chance to see Admiral Adama with a mustache, Lee Adama with a potbelly, Kara Thrace with long hair, and Saul Tigh with one eye. These aren't the same high-ranking, gun-toting, Cylon-hating combat junkies we've seen week after week. We get to see how time transforms them. By advancing the timeline in the Monday night game, I'm inviting my players to develop their characters and contribute to the overall narrative of the campaign — much like a team of writers on a serialized television show. How many times in the campaign do their characters get to enjoy an extended break and exist more or less as normal people? Will my players seize this opportunity to transform their characters and set up future adventure possibilities? I certainly hope so, or this leap forward will be for naught.

Lessons Learned

There are several advantages to advancing my campaign's timeline:

- I can show longer-term consequences of the heroes' actions
- I can reinforce which story arcs are most important going forward
- I can give characters extra room to evolve and become part of the world
- I can let my players tell some of the story

Moving forward in time shows the players that their characters' actions have consequences. Nearly all of the NPCs mentioned in the email are individuals with whom the PCs have interacted in the past, and in many cases, the changes that have transpired are direct results of the party's actions. For example, the heroes thwarted a conspiracy to assassinate the imperial heir, Hlastro. As a consequence, Hlastro is on track to become Emperor, and the Vost Miraj (the imperial secret service) has new leadership. One could argue that it would have been implausible to show so many consequences of the party's actions without advancing the timeline. When concocting these narrative developments, I try to strike a balance between positives and negatives. To some extent, I want the players to feel like their characters' decisions have changed the world for the better, but there also needs to be a few things left to "fix." I also like to dream up consequences that are logical yet unexpected; for example, the heroes were responsible for several changes in leadership within the Dragovar Empire, one of which resulted in a warrant being issued for the arrest of Sea King Valkroi, whom the heroes consider an ally.

The leap forward also lets me encapsulate the most important story arcs of the campaign, which is important as the campaign spirals toward its conclusion. Buried within this email are hints at the various threats the PCs should be concerned about. Some major campaign villains no longer pose an imminent threat, while others clearly have parts to play in the drama yet to unfold. I can also plant seeds for future adventures. For example, the ninth item on my list includes a passing reference to wilden; until now, the only wilden to appear in my campaign is Shawn Blakeney's wilden shaman, Kettenbar, who's spent a sizable chunk of the campaign trying to get back to his home in the Feywild. Perhaps

Shawn will seize this opportunity for Kettenbar to reunite with his people; the fact that they're associated with worshipers of an evil god adds an element of mystery and drama.

My players have a golden opportunity to reinvest themselves in the campaign world and imagine ways in which their characters might have evolved in the intervening span of time. After months of bloodshed and running around, the characters are given ample time to accomplish things they wouldn't be able to do in a more compressed or urgent timeframe. They also have a chance to strike off things on their "to do" lists and get into all sorts of player-instigated mischief.

I want my players to have a say in how the campaign unfolds, and if I'm lucky, their ideas and thoughts about what their characters do during a year of "down time" will add new layers of drama to the campaign and inspire future adventures as we resume our breakneck sprint toward the big finish. The next step for me as the DM is to see what ideas they come up with, answer any questions they might have, and figure out what to do with all of this great stuff. I not saying it's easy, but then good storytelling never is.
Until the next encounter!

Trust Gnome One

9/6/2012

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. *Until recently, Curt Gould played a character in my campaign named Xanthum Zail. As a gnome bard, Xanthum provided some useful healing and battlefield control powers, but he never earned the complete trust of his adventuring companions. Curt had imbued the character with one fatal flaw, an attribute which wasn't reflected at all in his statistics: Xanthum brought ill luck to any ship he set foot on.*
When he conceived Xanthum's back-story, Curt made specific mention of past expeditions gone awry, but never once did Xanthum willfully bring ruin to any of his traveling companions. It was more like a series of unfortunate coincidences. When he first joined the party, Xanthum thought it prudent to keep his previous misadventures under wraps. Fortunately for him, the other players were more interested in Xanthum's healing ability than his back-story, and he was welcomed aboard. I exploited Xanthum's "curse" on more than one occasion, but the most damaging event happened at the beginning of epic tier. While he was possessed by a powerful star spawn entity, Xanthum set off a Far Realm mine that sank the party's ship and killed nearly everyone aboard, including several PCs. The dead characters were eventually restored to life, their ship was salvaged from the ocean's depths and made to sail again, and the star spawn invader in Xanthum's brain was banished. However, the damage was done; the party would never trust Xanthum again.
Gnomes are stereotypically hard to trust. They are the Puckish rapscallions and madcap inventors of the D&D game. But Curt didn't play Xanthum as an instigator or troublemaker. Quite the opposite: Xanthum was actually very trustworthy and never set out to jeopardize his fellow adventurers. However, I took advantage of any opportunity to place Xanthum in the midst of misfortune — to make his "curse" readily apparent. Once, he was banished to the Nine Hells, tortured, and scarred for life by the ordeal. Sometime later, a pit fiend used Xanthum as a receptacle for its life force, and although the fiend was eventually exorcised, Xanthum retained some of the devil's knowledge and put it to use, plotting revenge against his infernal torturers. None of this sat well with the other player characters. After all, what could be more dangerous than a mentally unhinged gnome out for revenge?
Using political information and secrets gained from the pit fiend, Xanthum not only survived a return trip to the Nine Hells but also rose quickly through the infernal ranks, earning the title of duke. Upon returning to his companions, Xanthum tried to summon diabolical aid to repel an invading force, but his adventuring companions didn't want devils in their midst, so they turned against the gnome. Xanthum was cast off the ship and barely escaped with his life.

Xanthum's recent misadventures not only represent the culmination of a rather gratifying character arc but also illustrate the risks of allowing inner-party conflict to drive campaign narrative. As I've stated before, conflict between characters can be extremely rewarding if all the players are "on board" with it, but if even one player finds the idea off-putting, it's best avoided.

This year's "Ask the DM" seminar at PAX was a packed house and included a half-hour Q&A session, during which the panelists (myself included) fielded all sorts of great questions. Every year, without fail, the topic of inner-party conflict arises. Some DMs encourage it, while others discourage it, but as Rodney Thompson pointed out (and correctly so), neither approach is wrong. Every game group has a social contract that the DM must honor and uphold — an unwritten code that defines what is acceptable and unacceptable at the game table. If your players are cool with inner-party conflict and you deem it an essential element of your campaign, then have at it!

One of the obvious outcomes of inner-party conflict is the loss of one or more characters, and everyone at the game table needs to understand and accept the risks; if they can't, you should urge players to focus on external conflicts rather than internal ones. But even experienced DMs who foster inner-party conflicts can't always predict the outcome. I was surprised by the turn of events that resulted in Xanthum getting punted off the party's ship, particularly given that his recent behavior hardly represented his worst campaign offense, but on this occasion he was cast off in no uncertain terms. It became a matter of trust: the other heroes finally reached the point where they stopped trusting Xanthum, and so he got the boot. (It didn't help, I suppose, that one session earlier a gnome NPC named Barnacle Trizm blew up the ship's rudder, hindering the party's ability to escape an attacking vessel.)

So, yeah, Xanthum was forced out of the party rather suddenly and unexpectedly. It was as much my fault as anyone's. At the end of the session, I asked Curt whether he wanted to continue playing Xanthum or not. I reassured him that it wouldn't be hard to dream up a way for the gnome bard to worm his way back into the party. I am, after all, the DM, with the power of a thousand djinn to shape the world and manipulate events to suit my dark whims. Curt ultimately decided to give Xanthum a break. He had another character in reserve that he was itching to play. (The sudden departure of a character isn't necessarily a bad thing, particularly when you have a player who isn't married to the character and who likes to try different things.) As far as I'm concerned, the player decides what he or she wants to play, and it's my job as the DM to make it work within the context of the campaign.

Curt's back-up character is a human cleric of Melora named Divin, who traces his origin back to the start of the campaign. In fact, Curt "retired" Divin midway through the paragon tier to make way for Xanthum. I asked Curt to contrive a way by which Divin would suddenly find himself twelve levels higher, and ultimately he settled on the notion of Melora investing Divin with a fragment of her power, basically using him to help the rest of the party in its time of greatest need. So, Divin jumped from 17th level to 29th level and was instantly back in play. The rest of the party welcomed him back into the fold, and Xanthum became the gnome that time forgot. (Although just between you and me, I don't think we've seen the last of him.)

Curt was lucky to have his old character lying around. If Curt didn't have Divin to "dust off," I suspect Xanthum would have found his way back into the party through some bit of narrative legerdemain (just to spare Curt the pain of creating a brand-new 29th-level character). However, as much as I love Xanthum as a character (he's one of my all-time favorites), I can't say I'm disappointed to see him fade away — that's a gnome trait, by the way. The best characters never overstay their welcome, and in a way, the reintroduction of Divin at the end of the campaign takes the Wednesday night campaign back to where it began. The party can finally unite against some of the campaign's big external threats without having to worry about that chipper little gnome tripping them up.

Lessons Learned

There are two ways in which inner-party conflict is instigated:

- **A player does something to put two or more characters in opposition**

- **A DM does something to spark conflict between two or more characters**

I won't speak to the former except to say that players who are hell-bent on evoking inner-party conflict are free to do so if your campaign allows it, and as a DM it's your job to "direct" that conflict in a manner that ultimately entertains the players and propels the campaign forward. The conflict needs to be constructive, not destructive. It needs to fuel the narrative. If it starts to get out of control, to the point where the game's participants are no longer having a good time (as be sure to count yourself in the mix), then you might need to intervene and remind the players that conflicts between characters need to be resolved eventually . . . and in a manner that everyone can appreciate and enjoy.

The Xanthum conflict is an example of the latter — a conflict sparked by the DM. I created a situation in which Xanthum's "curse" would cause his fellow party members to turn against him. It was a risk, but I knew Curt would enjoy the roleplaying challenge. I also knew that Xanthum was well liked by the other players (if not their characters), so the chances of him getting killed or dumped were minimal. In this instance, I bet against the house and lost.
You might think that the Xanthum incident would discourage me from instigating further inner-party conflicts, but you'd be wrong. I'm a sucker for character-driven conflict, particularly at higher levels when my players know their characters really well and I'm looking for new ways to challenge them. Trust is a major theme in the Iomandra campaign, and any time I can contrive scenarios in which trust is strained or put to the test, the more tense (and hopefully fun) the campaign becomes.

Case in point, Rodney Thompson's character is a sworn champion of the Raven Queen, and he has a holy quest to wipe out all warforged. In my campaign, warforged aren't living constructs; they're powered by necrotic energy, specifically the distilled essence of trapped souls, which is why the Raven Queen cannot abide their existence. The problem is that one of my other players, Nacime Khemis, plays a warforged character. It's a bit of a conundrum, and without Xanthum around to provide a worthy distraction, Rodney and Nacime are going to have to deal with it. And I'd be lying if I said the Wednesday night group didn't have other trust issues to work out before all's said and done. Meanwhile, Xanthum can lie low and plot his revenge. . . . Until the next encounter!

Old School

8/23/2012

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. *The weekly game was postponed because of Gen Con. A bunch of us flew out to Indianapolis, where the weather was surprisingly enjoyable, particularly given the horrendously warm trends of the weeks leading up to the show. I have since returned to Seattle, and I dare say the highlight of my show was getting a big, warm hug from Wil Wheaton, who told me some Aeofel-related secrets that won't be revealed until the D&D Next Live Game at PAX this Labor Day weekend. I also ran a few D&D games, including a session with Ed Greenwood that was a bit randy. (Quelle surprise, as the drow say.)*
My "DM travel kit" this year consisted of a short, homespun FR adventure (a sequel to the one I ran for the writers of Robot Chicken a couple years ago), a small plastic container of dice and miniatures, some rolled-up wet-erase battle maps, and the D&D Next playtest rules and pre-generated characters. No DM screen. No laptop. No special apps for the iPad. I like to travel light.

The summer evaporated quickly this year, like an ice cube in the sun. I suspect a lot of D&D campaigns will be evaporating as well, or at least going on hiatus as students segue into the fall semester. Meanwhile, other campaigns will be starting up in high school and college D&D clubs (I trust such things still exist) across the country, if not across the entire world, both "for reals" and on the Internet.

A lot has been published for DMs over the years for various editions of the D&D game, including a half dozen Dungeon Master's Guides, dozens of apps, scores of DM screens, hundreds of campaign-building accessories, thousands of adventures, tens of thousands of miniatures,

hundreds of thousands of monsters, thousands upon thousands of websites and chatrooms, and millions upon millions of words of advice that basically distill down to "It's your game; do what you want, just don't be a jerk." If you want to be a DM, there is no shortage of materials out there — for free and for purchase — designed to help you. If you don't believe me, spend an afternoon roaming the floor of the exhibit hall at Gen Con. While waiting for my flight home in the Indianapolis airport, I had a chance encounter with a fairly new DM who recognized me from the Penny Arcade D&D videocasts. After thanking me for ushering him safely through D&D's terrifying wrought-iron gates, he confessed that he was having some problems keeping his new campaign afloat. He then asked me a couple of back-to-back questions which I get asked a lot, namely: What do I use to create and run my campaign? Are there specific products or resources that I use to run my game? My answer surprised him.

Although I place a number of DM resources on pedestals and swear — up, down, and sideways — that they made me into the DM I am today, I'm what you'd call an "old-school" DM. In other words, I use very little. When I started running D&D games, I had one Dungeon Master's Guide (as big, heavy, and monumentally important as the stone slabs borne by Charlton Heston's Moses in The Ten Commandments), one campaign setting (Greyhawk), three books of monsters, a few dozen published adventure modules with cool duotone maps on the inside covers, a few issues of Dragon magazine, and that's about it. No initiative trackers. No magnetic condition trackers. No pre-painted plastic miniatures. No foldout battle maps. No boxed sets. No Dwarven Forge. No Internet.

A little later came Dungeon magazine, which I hold up as the best DM accessory ever created (and no less helpful today than it was back in 1986). And though my opinion is colored by the fact that I consider myself the magazine's biggest fan, in truth I (like many DMs) run very few of its adventures as written and rely on it more for ideas and inspiration. A DM without a Dungeon subscription is like a boy without Lego. It's just . . . unwholesome.

"My brain," I replied to that young fellow in the airport. My brain contains pretty much everything I need to run my D&D campaign: ideas, imagination, improvisational know-how. It also contains the memories of lots of previous game sessions both successful and disastrous (mostly successful), not to mention old adventures and 87.333% of everything that Gary Gygax packed into the original three AD&D hardcover rulebooks. As for the other 12.667%, well, let's just say my mind is not the steel trap it used to be.

Lessons Learned

Miniatures and iPads are great and all, but as far as I'm concerned, a DM doesn't need much to create a long-lasting and memorable campaign beyond the three I's:

- **Inspiration**
- **Imagination**
- **Improvisation**

I must admit that I don't read or collect a lot of RPG products, nor do I have a single RPG-related app on my cellphone or iPad. I also don't have much time to surf the net. However, adventure and campaign ideas can come from anywhere. If you've read previous installments of this column, you already know where I get most of my inspiration — from television shows, movies, nonfiction, fiction, and published D&D adventures. Imagination is what takes all of those ideas — those influences — and combines them with my own in new and wonderful ways to create something that feels fresh. It's also the thing I rely on to help me decide how to start a session and how to end it. Improvisation is the coping mechanism I use in between to energize my players and propel the story forward. It's more of a muscle or a skill than an inherent power of the human mind, so unlike ideas and imagination, it takes practice and repetition to develop it.

In a live Gen Con "Gamer to Gamer" podcast

hosted by The Tome Show, I was asked what advice I could offer with regard to helping DMs improvise better. In retrospect, I am not altogether satisfied with the answer I gave in the moment, which was something like (but not nearly as articulate as): Let down your guard around your players, and overcome that fear of playing the fool in front of them. It actually bothered me that I couldn't conjure a more satisfactory response or offer up something more tangible, something like "Eat lots of Frosted Miniwheats!" or "Don't skip gym class!" It was, in short, a poorly improvised answer, if I do say so myself (proof positive that even the strongest human muscle gives out under enough weight). I have no background in theater or any formal training in "improv" (which is why I feel like a skydiver leaping out of a plane without a parachute whenever I do a D&D live game), but this is one deficiency I've taken strides to overcome. Improvisational skill is fueled by inspiration and imagination, but it is born out of self-awareness, and a very smart teacher once told me that you can't begin to improve without first realizing your own shortcomings. Although it's not one of the three I's mentioned above, improvement is very much a part of being a DM. There's always room for it, and I don't care how good of a DM you think you are, you can do better. A self-aware painter improves with every painting, a self-aware actor improves with every performance, a self-aware writer improves with every story, and a self-aware DM improves with every game session.

One last remark about improvisation, and then I'll wrap up: When you look at the vast amount of material produced for DMs over the years, very little of it helps Dungeon Masters become better improvisers. If you know of any resources out there designed specifically to help DMs pump up their improvisational muscles, feel free to leave a quick comment. This old-school DM may not use a lot of fancy tools and toys at his gaming table, but he's just as eager to improve as that other Dungeon Master he met in the Indianapolis airport.

P.S. I lied. There's one other thing every DM needs: a velvet napping pillow shaped like a d20. Why didn't anyone tell me these things existed?! They used to sell them on thinkgeek.com, but now they're gone! If you have a drool-free d20 pillow you don't need anymore, feel free to send it my way.

Until the next encounter!

From Jose Chung

8/9/2012

MONDAY NIGHT. *The session begins underwater. Bartho, the party's beleaguered human fighter, is staring at the floating corpse of a doppelganger he'd slain the previous week. Suddenly, a dark shape emerges from the inky depths . . . a 15-foot-diameter bathysphere shaped like an eye of the deep (an aquatic beholder). As it passes by, Bartho spies a familiar figure at the helm. He's faced this evil eladrin warlock before, and Bartho can almost smell the blood in the water.*

I watch a lot of serialized television dramas, and by studying the best of them, I've learned how to sustain and pace my weekly D&D game. In terms of narrative, a D&D campaign is a lot like a serialized TV show, the difference being that a D&D campaign is performed as it's being written, and consequently the action and dialogue are mostly improvised.

Having watched a great deal of serialized drama, it occurs to me that what happens in the middle of an episode is ultimately less important than what happens at the beginning and the end. If you're a show runner, your ultimate goal is to create a dedicated following. You want to keep your audience engaged and turn them into diehard fans who will follow the story from beginning to end. You need to make sure they never get bored and never lose touch with the story you're trying to tell. The same is true if you're a Dungeon Master running a campaign, only in this case your players are both the actors and the audience.

I would argue that in a typical 45-minute episode of a serialized TV show (and most hour-long network shows are roughly that length), the

most important minute occurs in the first thirty seconds and the last thirty seconds. The first thirty seconds of an episode tells the audience what they're in for. The last thirty seconds gets them pumped for the next episode. Within these short spans of time, a good storyteller can hit emotional beats that will not only resonate throughout the episode but also make the audience feel a certain way at the end of the episode and "tide them over" until the next one. Thirty seconds.

That's how long I have to set the atmosphere and mood of a game session. It's also how much time I need to set up a cliffhanger or evoke some other emotionally resonant endpoint for the session. The notion first occurred to me while watching a rerun of an episode of The X-Files titled "Jose Chung's From Outer Space." If you haven't seen it, you're missing one of the most brilliant hours (or, rather, 45 minutes) of network television EVER. It's the one with the cigarette-smoking alien, Jesse "The Body" Ventura and Alex Trebek (yes, the game show host) as "men in black," and arguably the most infamous and oft-quoted nod to Dungeons & Dragons ever spoken onscreen. The episode opens thusly: We're standing on a dark, lonely stretch of road in Washington state, staring up at the sky. Suddenly, a massive starship hovers into frame and blots out the night . . . or not. What we thought was a starship is actually the underbelly of a hydraulic crane lift carrying a power line repairman. He gripes to his boss on a cell phone while being hoisted up into the air.

Instead of proof of alien visitors, we get a rather mundane counter-revelation, a scene so banal that it makes us wonder how we could ever believe aliens were anything but figments of our childlike imaginations.

The next 44 minutes of the episode are outstanding, but I won't spoil anything. Instead, I'll jump to the ending:

In the middle of the night, a lovelorn teenage boy stands on the rain-soaked lawn outside his girlfriend's house and throws a small rock at her bedroom window, rousing her. He tells her how much he loves her, to which she replies, "Love. Is that all you men think about?" The boy, dejected, walks off into the night, and we're reminded (in the immortal words of Jose Chung himself) that we humans may not be alone in the universe, and yet (tragically) we ARE all alone.

The first thirty seconds of "Jose Chung's From Outer Space" tell us to expect the unexpected. The last thirty seconds tell us what the whole crazy episode was about. That, my friends, is TIGHT.

Think of other episodes of other television shows that you like. Recall, if you can, the first and last scenes of those episodes and ask yourself, how important are they in (a) communicating the overarching theme or mood of the episode and (b) carrying a specific emotional tone. In similar fashion, a Dungeon Master can, in the first thirty seconds, tell players any one of a number of things (not necessarily EVERYTHING) about the next three hours, or at the very least, remind players where the previous session ended by picking up where it left off in an emotionally satisfying way. The DM can also end the session whenever he or she wishes, preferably with some kind of emotional beat. It could end with excitement (in the form of a cliffhanger), a sobering sense of closure (in the form of a resolved campaign arc), a tearjerker, a revelation, or in any one of several other emotionally satisfying moments.

Lessons Learned

While it's true that Dungeons & Dragons can teach you a lot about courage, it can also teach you a lot about the power of strong narrative, the goal of which is to hit certain emotional beats — to brace players for what's to come and ultimately make them feel a certain way by the end. If you think back on the best game sessions you ever ran, they probably got off to a good start and also ended well. If you pay particular attention to the first thirty seconds and the last thirty seconds of your game sessions, I think what happens in between has a better chance of making the time investment well worth it for all concerned.

- **The first thirty seconds set the tone for the session that follows.**
- **The last thirty seconds make the players glad they stuck around.**

Our last Monday night game session (or episode, as I like to call it) almost ended with the characters thwarting a villain's escape by flash-freezing him inside of his beholder-shaped bathysphere, but it didn't feel right to end the evening at that moment, so I let the session continue a few minutes beyond that point. To my surprise and delight, the players began discussing whether or not to let the villain suffocate in the ice. The party was torn down the middle, with three PCs in favor of letting him die and three wanting to keep him alive. They agreed to let Ardyn, a silver dragon NPC, cast the deciding vote. That's when I ended the session. In the wake of battle, the PCs had a cool ethical debate, and I got my cliffhanger. What would Ardyn decide? The players would have to wait until the next game session to find out!

If you were DMing the Monday night game instead of me, how would you kick off the next session? You might begin precisely where I left off, with Ardyn deciding to spare the villain's life or let him die. You might contrive a third option and have Ardyn make that choice instead. You might begin the session at some other point in some other place with some other character, such as a PC who was absent the previous week. You might begin the session ten years after Ardyn's decision and spend the rest of the campaign dealing with the consequences of her decision. Depending on what happens in those first thirty seconds, your players will respond a certain way. Hopefully they'll react exactly as you'd intended, and that reaction will set the tone for the hours that follow, leading to a denouement that will convince the players that your campaign is worth "tuning in" for next week.
Until the next encounter!

The End is Nigh

8/2/2012

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. *A few sessions ago, the Raven Queen summoned Vargas (played by Rodney Thompson) to her domain in the Shadowfell and charged him with one "final" quest: the destruction of the warforged. You see, in my campaign the warforged aren't living constructs. They're unliving constructs, animated by the souls of the dead, which are abducted en route to the afterlife by agents of Vecna. The Raven Queen doesn't expect Vargas to destroy the warforged one at a time, of course. Instead, she sets him on a course to wipe them all out at once, first by urging Vargas to "seek out the walking dead that does not speak." This clue leads Vargas to Anchor, a mute warforged plucked from the bottom of the sea and currently residing aboard the party's ship. It turns out that Anchor holds the key to finding one of the necroforges where the warforged are built and animated, and (ironically) this warforged becomes the instrument of his race's destruction by aiding Vargas in the fulfillment of the Raven Queen's quest.*
Anchor helps Vargas construct a teleportation circle to the necroforge where he was built, on the island of Zaarnath deep inside the Black Curtain — a dangerous region where traditional healing magic doesn't function (rather like the Mournland in the Eberron campaign setting). However, Vargas isn't the only party member keen on visiting Zaarnath. The party's warforged character, Fleet (played by Nacime Khemis), has spent much of the campaign searching for answers to important questions, such as who built him and why. The truth lies with Klytus Zandrau, a human wizard residing on Zaarnath. Fleet hopes that Zandrau will help him free the warforged from Vecna's tyranny. Fleet wants his fellow warforged to abandon their destructive cause, live in peace with the other races of Iomandra, and discover what it means to feel alive. He's about to learn that his buddy Vargas has a different calling.

The Mayans believed that 2012 marks the end of one world and the beginning of another. I can relate. As the Wednesday night group closes in on 30th level, the time has come to batten down the hatches and make final preparations to end my five-year campaign . . . and free up precious mind-space that can be put toward the next world, whatever it might be.

The extent to which a DM needs to "plan" for the end of the campaign depends on the campaign. For example, if I'm running a

published Adventure Path such as Scales of War or Age of Worms, or a campaign based around a published mega-adventure the likes of Return to the Temple of Elemental Evil or Return to the Tomb of Horrors, I don't need to do a whole lot of planning because the campaign's destiny is pretty much written in ink. However, there might be a few loose character threads to tie up, particularly if I've given the player characters room to develop beyond the confines of the written campaign setting. In a more fluid campaign such as Iomandra, where the events are largely character driven and the climax isn't preordained, planning for "the big finish" is far more crucial.

It's too early to predict when exactly the Wednesday night campaign will end. I would venture to guess that the game has about ten sessions remaining, give or take a session. My mission, then, is to determine what needs to be crammed into the thirty or so precious hours that remain. I've walked this road before, but the last time was over five years ago (and here I'm speaking of my 3rd-edition Arveniar campaign, which now seems like ancient history). My end-of-campaign planning tips, some of which I'm about to share with you, stem mostly from that experience and from various campaign-ending experiences before that. Take them with a sprinkling of pixie dust.

Lessons Learned

My Wednesday night players would be unhappy if the campaign ended before Vargas and Fleet reconciled their opposing quests, or if Xanthum (played by Curt Gould) didn't get sweet revenge for his six-year imprisonment in the Nine Hells, or if Deimos (played by Chris Youngs) didn't get to take his supercharged flagship into one final, glorious battle and solidify his candidacy for supreme Sea King of Iomandra. When it comes to "paying off" the campaign, my goals are shockingly simple:

- **Deliver on the players' expectations.**
- **Add some things the players won't expect.**

It's not enough to end the campaign in a manner that the players expect. I also need to weave in a few surprises as well, but I'll get to that in a moment.

After almost five years and thirty levels of game play, I have what I believe is a fairly clear picture of my players' expectations. In fact, I think my players' expectations are similar to your players' expectations, and indeed, every D&D group's expectations. I would summarize these expectations as follows:

- **Bring the major campaign arcs to a fulfilling end.**
- **Bring each character's arc to a fulfilling end.**

My first step in plotting the end of the campaign is to remember its major story arcs. They are, after all, the lighthouses that keep the campaign from running aground or slamming into the rocks.

My campaigns tend to have three major campaign arcs, for reasons discussed here. It's time to consider how far along these arcs have come and the extent to which I want them resolved. I don't think every arc needs to be fully resolved, let alone resolved in a similar fashion. For example, not every arc needs to culminate in a world-shaking clash of swords and hit points, with the bloodied heroes standing over the dismembered carcass of some immensely powerful villain the likes of Tiamat, Kyuss, or Third Demon Prince from the Left. (Still, this being D&D an' all, it's nice if at least one arc ends in bloodshed.)

The Campaign Arcs
Here, you may recall, are the campaign arcs I need to wrap up in some fashion:

Campaign Arc #1: A Far Realm incursion ignites a war that threatens to wipe out the Dragovar Empire. As it happens, this arc is 99% done. The Far Realm incursion was crushed when the heroes killed the elder starspawn Allabar, whose death triggered a psychic shockwave that killed every last mind flayer on the planet. Only one piece of unfinished business remains: the defeat or capture of Starlord Evendor, a mad eladrin

warlock who triggered the Far Realm incursion to begin with.

Campaign Arc #2: A secret kingdom of Vecna worshipers lurks beyond the Black Curtain, poised to unleash an army of warforged powered by dead souls. This arc, neglected for much of the campaign, gained a lot of momentum in the epic tier and is playing out nicely. The secret kingdom of Vhalt isn't irredeemably evil, and there's hope (among some of my players, anyway) that the Vhaltese wizards in charge can be brought to heel once their warforged army is neatly dispatched. Recently, I added a few complications to this storyline by tying the Vhaltese threat to a pair of recurring villains named Kharl and Nemencia, who are collectively the bane of the Wednesday night group's existence.

Campaign Arc #3: The mercantile Sea Kings vie for financial superiority in a war-torn world. This final arc is well on its way toward a resolution of some kind, though as yet I know not what. Two of the characters are Sea Kings with mercantile fleets under their command, and together they have united most of the Sea Kings against a common enemy (see Campaign Arc #1 above). Once the common enemy no longer poses a threat, the question becomes whether the alliance will hold. One constant thorn in the party's side is Sea King Senestrago, who not only refuses to join the Sea King alliance but threatens to undermine it at every turn. Some kind of resolution involving him seems inevitable, although maybe not the sort of resolution the players have in mind. Here is where I might surprise them.

The Character Arcs

NOTE TO MY WEDNESDAY NIGHT PLAYERS: The remainder of this article contains major campaign spoilers. Read at your own risk.

Just as important as the campaign arcs are the individual character arcs that still need to be resolved. With a very large group of player characters, resolving every single character arc might be too great a chore even for a seasoned DM, but one can aspire toward that lofty goal. Fortunately, my Wednesday night group includes only five full-time player characters and one recurring special guest star, which I find to be a manageable size. (My Monday night group is slightly bigger.)

Although I've witnessed notable exceptions, I think most players want their characters to survive the campaign. Consequently, I try to ignore the imp perched on my left shoulder, urging me to concoct fiendishly ironic or fitting ways to kill them off. I'm not directing a slasher flick, after all. Whereas I'm well within my right to deal with campaign arcs as I please, character arcs require more care. They beg for a satisfying conclusion. Granted, a character might perish suddenly and unexpectedly for any number of reasons tied to the plot or otherwise, but at this point in the campaign, I think it's healthy and wise for the DM to imagine that all of the current party members will be around for the final session. Besides, it would be a shame (not to mention bad practice) to leave a particular character dilemma unresolved.

With scant few game sessions remaining, I find it helpful to imagine a fun, fitting end for each character. More specifically, I try to think of the ONE THING (or things, although one thing is easier to accomplish than several at this point in the campaign) that will give each player character a proper sense of closure. Here are the major character arcs for my Wednesday night group:

Character Arc #1: Xanthum the gnome bard (played by Curt Gould) breaks his "curse." Xanthum is a member of the Deeplantern Guild, a society of undersea explorers, but he thinks he's cursed. Maybe it's because every ship he's sailed on has (eventually) come to a terrible end. By the end of the last session, I want to find a way to make it clear that the curse is broken. That probably means I should refrain from blowing up the party's flagship (again). There's also the matter of Xanthum being imprisoned in the Nine Hells for six years, which has led to his deep-seeded resentment (and fear) of all things infernal. That little bit of character melodrama should be well on its way toward a resolution by

the time this article is published.

Character Arc #2: Ravok the goliath battlemind (played by Andrew Finch) discovers how he got his psionic powers. For more information on Ravok's destiny and his possible connection to the evil Starlord Evendor, click here.
Character Arc #3: Deimos the tiefling sorcerer (played by Chris Youngs) unites the Sea Kings and establishes his reputation as the greatest Sea King to ply the oceans of Iomandra. Sea King Impstinger (as Deimos is known) has one of the smallest fleets on the Dragon Sea, but he's turned his flagship into an infernally powered, nigh-invincible juggernaut. Deimos also has the spirit of an ancient dragon sorcerer living inside him, driving his ambition. Will this spirit give him the advantage he needs to humble Sea King Senestrago and convince to the other Sea Kings to look past Deimos' les-than-remarkable upbringing and recognize his true noble self? We've already seen the dragon spirit manifest in times of great need, and I would very much like to see it emerge once more before the campaign is through. It would also be cool if Deimos could achieve his goal without the fabled artifact that previous Sea Kings relied on to win their peers' allegiance—the legendary cutlass Fathomreaver, which the party lost many levels ago.

Character Arc #4: Vargas the deva wizard/avenger (played by Rodney Thompson) becomes the Raven Queen's one true champion — or not. Vargas has one more quest to fulfill for the Lady of Fate: the destruction of the warforged. However, he is torn. If he decides to let the warforged survive, all is not lost. Maybe Vargas will find another way to appease Her Majesty. And if that doesn't work out, he can (in the guise of Sea King Silvereye) strive to spread the Raven Queen's faith throughout the Dragovar Empire. There's also the matter of Vargas's race: he began the campaign as an eladrin who was, through his own designs, transformed into a deva, but now he's becoming more like his old self again. It's all part of his paragon path-slash-epic destiny, and one of those gradual bits of character development that helps to define the character, but the time has come for the "real Vargas" to shine through.

Character Arc #5: Fleet the warforged warden (played by Nacime Khemis) liberates his fellow warforged. Fleet has already achieved independence, and his messianic journey to free the rest of his kind has been a strong focus for the past several sessions, and will continue to play out over the course of the campaign. However, things are complicated by the fact that his ultimate goal conflicts with the goals of two of his companions. Ideally, this conflict will be resolved before all is said and done.

Character Arc #6: Thorin the warforged soldier (played by "special guest star" Tom LaPille) also wants to "liberate" the warforged. Thorin was recently persuaded to abandon his allegiance to Vecna and become a freethinking individual like Fleet. But Thorin is not like Fleet at all. Thorin is unusual in that he has a singular, dominant soul trapped inside of him instead of an admixture of souls. His dominant soul belongs to a disgruntled dwarf paladin who believes the warforged are walking prisons, and only by destroying them can he free their bound spirits and set them on a righteous path to the afterlife. As yet, Thorin's true intentions are unknown to the rest of the party . . . but clearly this "special guest star" is on the verge of wearing out his welcome. (And because he's a special guest star, his survival is — shall we say — not guaranteed!)
In terms of character and campaign arcs, recognizing what needs to be resolved before the end of the campaign is the first step in ensuring a satisfactory conclusion. Once I've reminded myself of the campaign arcs and character arcs that need to be addressed, I can set about brainstorming a "wish list" of what I'd like to see happen before the curtain falls.

The Wish List
My end-of-campaign wish list consolidates my own hopes and dreams with what I imagine are the hopes and dreams of my players — the things they most want to see happen before the characters ride off into the sunset. I think of it as a crude road map. The key to creating a manageable wish list is to keep the number of wishes few in number. I arbitrarily recommend no more than one wish-list item per game session

left in the campaign. Obviously, if you have only three sessions left and five character arcs to wrap up, some crunching or clever combining might be required.

Based on my initial assumption that the Wednesday night campaign has roughly ten game sessions remaining, I've compiled a wish list that tries to envision what the remaining sessions will cover based on the campaign arcs and character arcs described above.

End-of-Campaign Wish List

1. Xanthum is drawn back to the Nine Hells, but the trip proves surprisingly fruitful. (Character Arc #1)
2. Starlord Evendor is "dealt with" somehow. (Campaign Arc #1; Character Arc #2)
3. The heroes have a chance to destroy Vecna, with a little help. (Campaign Arc #2)
4. The fate of the warforged is determined. (Campaign Arc #2; Character Arcs #4, 5, and 6)
5. Ravok returns to his home island and discovers that his tribe needs him. (Character Arc #2)
6. The Sea Kings' alliance is tested. (Campaign Arc #3; Character Arc #3)
7. Sea King Senestrago rears his head one last time. (Campaign Arc #3; Character Arc #3)
8. Vargas achieves his true and final form. (Character Arc #4)
9. Fate allows the party to turn Kharl and Nemencia, their most hated enemies, against one another.
10. The heroes are drawn back to where the campaign began—the island of Irindol.

You'll note that many of these items have undetermined outcomes; that's because it's not enough to simply meet the players' expectations. Sometimes you need to reach beyond them—even defy them, on occasion. I don't have a crystal ball that tells me when it's a good idea to defy expectations rather than deliver on them, my general philosophy is that a DM should only defy expectations when the likely outcome is something that will increase the stakes in a way the players will probably enjoy. For example, everyone is expecting some kind of showdown with the evil Starlord Evendor, but in my Monday night game, I defied player expectations by letting a group of NPCs capture the villain. That didn't spoil the campaign arc, because a few sessions later the heroes were instrumental in thwarting an attempt by Evendor's evil apprentices to break him out of jail. It's unlikely I'll pull the same stunt with the Wednesday group, but I can mess with their heads in other ways. My main point is that I don't need to nail down every detail at this stage; I simply want to make sure I'm not forgetting anything important.

You'll further note that the last two items on my wish list aren't specifically tied to the major campaign arcs or character arcs, per se. However, based on various player conversations and murmurings overheard by yours truly, I believe these occurrences deliver on certain other player expectations, and more importantly, they could spawn really awesome game sessions. I haven't a clue which of these ten ideas — if any — will form the crux of the campaign's climax. A good DM remains silently attentive whenever the players speculate on the likely "climax" of the campaign — a topic too lengthy to discuss here and now, but one I probably should tackle at some point in the not-too-distant future.

Until the next encounter!

The Well

7/26/2012

MONDAY NIGHT. *Matt Sernett plays Bartho, a human fighter with little ambition or drive. For most of the campaign, Bartho has gone where the action is, happy to follow rather than lead. A few sessions ago, in a particularly climactic battle, Bartho not only witnessed the death of his childhood friend Melech (Bruce Cordell's former character) but also played an unwilling part in it. He had been polymorphed into a giant wormlike creature and actually swallowed Melech whole. That by itself didn't spell Melech's doom, but it had a profound impact on Bartho. It hearkened back to a childhood event*

I'd concocted many levels ago to explain, in simple terms, the relationship between these two characters.
Melech was always getting into trouble and, on one occasion, had climbed down a village well. Far more cautious and timid, Bartho refused to follow him. When Melech was unable to climb back out, he called to Bartho to fetch a rope. Instead, Bartho panicked and ran away, leaving his friend trapped in the well (for a while, at least). This event would be reflected later in their adventuring careers. Melech would blunder into danger, and Bartho would follow until things turned dire, at which point he would flee, much to Melech's chagrin. Now that Melech's gone, Bartho's snapped. Not only has he lost his rudder and his impetus to go on adventures but also he's succumbed to murderous bloodlust after twenty-seven levels of continuous slaughter. In a bold move, Matt's using Melech's death as a diving board and cast Bartho into a deep, drowning sea of madness.
Last session, some doppelgangers conspired to liberate a major campaign villain who'd been captured a couple sessions earlier. While the rest of the heroes tried to prevent the villain's escape, Bartho confronted and killed a doppelganger that had assumed Bartho's appearance. The tête-a-tête ended underwater, off the coast of an island called Ardynrise. Realizing that his bloodlust could not be quenched, Bartho found himself staring at his own dead self and, rather than rejoin his friends, elected to remain underwater until his air ran out.

One could argue that any good story — regardless of the medium through which it unfolds — needs to relate to its human audience. It tugs at certain themes that define the whole of human existence, including friendship, adversity, family, solitude, happiness, unhappiness, life, and death. It is through character, setting, comedy, and drama that these themes manifest and collide.

One of the most gratifying aspects of watching a D&D campaign unfold is seeing how a character that began as a concept built around a conglomeration of statistics can evolve into something more, be it a brilliant caricature or a fully realized character with as much depth as anyone real or imagined. When it happens, you start to really care about what happens to the characters and where the campaign is heading. As the Dungeon Master, I can "steer the ship" a little, but the players and the dice have just as much control. Bartho is one of the few characters who's been around since the very start of the campaign, and if you'd asked me what his ultimate fate might be back when the campaign was young, I would've guessed he might have gone the way of many frontline fighters, which is to say, he'd probably be eaten by a dragon somewhere in the paragon tier. I could not have imagined that Bartho would end up in a much darker place than a dragon's stomach, literally drowning his sorrow.

In the real world, there are people who are risk-takers and people who are risk-averse — and people can switch from one to the other depending on the magnitude of the risk and their current disposition. But all things being normal in today's day and age, I think it's safe to say that most people err toward being "risk-averse." The same thing could be said for D&D player characters. Many players are loath to risk characters they care about (as opposed to characters created for "one-off" games such as Lair Assault challenges or Tomb of Horrors-style slaughterfests). Others are quite willing to throw their beloved characters into deadly peril. So what if a character dies? At best, it'll be a memorable tale to be told at conventions and throughout Internet forums and chat rooms. It might even pave the way for a new character with greater potential. At worst, it'll be an ignoble end to a character best forgotten. Either way, in the mind's eye of the risk-taking player, there are plenty more characters where that one came from!

I am struck by how my Monday night players handle the upper epic tier. Most of them are just as protective and risk-averse as they were at low heroic tier — even the ones who are on their second, third, or fourth characters. I suspect they, having come this far, want to see their characters reach the very end . . . to neatly wrap up whatever character arcs are outstanding. They don't want their characters killed off with so few sessions remaining, and they certainly aren't keen on rolling up all-new epic-level characters with so little time left to develop their personalities.

Matt is bucking the trend with Bartho. In the "early years," he would've fled the battlefield before risking death (and did on multiple occasions). However, recent campaign events have awakened in Bartho some disturbing revelations, as well as given Bartho his most dominant storyline since the campaign's inception more than four years ago. Up until now, everything that needed to be said about Bartho could be written in big letters on the front of his shield. No longer. Out of nowhere, he's become infinitely more complex . . . and disturbing. Had events played out differently — had Bruce not left the game, had I not lured the characters in a certain direction, had Bartho not been transformed into a giant worm — Bartho might never have reached this grim (yet entertaining) nadir in his adventuring career. What does this mean? Will Bartho be "written out" of the story two-and-a-half levels before the campaign's expected end? Is Matt cool with that? Am I cool with that? Is Matt expecting me to contrive some other event that will push Bartho beyond his despair, or does he have something else in mind he's not telling me?

One of the greatest aspects of a D&D campaign, for me personally, is the romance of it all. Sometimes the romance is brief, and sometimes it endures for years. A DM needs some level of romantic attachment to his or her campaign to sustain it. The players need to feel that romance as well. When the romance is over, the campaign is over. That's why some players choose to leave, and though I can take steps to help keep the romance alive, different people fall out of love with a campaign for different reasons (or they fall in love with something else against which the campaign cannot rightfully compete). A DM must expect and honor that. Maybe Matt's tired of playing a complicated epic-level character. Maybe four years of playing the same character is enough. Maybe he'd rather spend his Monday nights with his daughter than coming to grips with Bartho's sad purpose in life. Or maybe, like me, he just wants to see where this latest character development will lead . . . or how much deeper his character can sink.

Lessons Learned

Regardless of Matt's intentions and desires concerning Bartho, my job as the DM is to conjure stories and character development opportunities out of the ether, and put them before the players to be judged as worthy or unworthy of their attention. My campaign is strewn with the flotsam and jetsam of stories and adventure hooks that weren't picked up by anyone. But the DM is a bottomless well of ideas. That is why, regardless of Matt's plans for Bartho, I've hatched a scheme to keep him in the campaign a little bit longer. Whether Bartho bites the hook or not isn't really up to me, but bait him I will. Because that's what the DM does.

When last we left poor, unhinged Bartho, he was sitting on the bottom of the sea, staring at the lifeless corpse of his dead doppelganger, counting the rounds until he runs out of air and has to start making Endurance checks if he wants to live. His adventuring companions are out of sight a half-mile way, fighting a pitched battle on a fleeing Dragovar warship. But all is not what it seems. If what the characters were told is true, then there's still one doppelganger roaming around unchecked, and by the sheer simple fact that Bartho is by himself, he's the only one who can stop it. Out of the inky depths, a small submersible shaped like an eye of the deep (an aquatic beholder with pincer claws) approaches, on its way to a fateful rendezvous that could change the course of the campaign. Will this mysterious arrival draw Bartho up from the depths to investigate? I guess we'll find out next week!

Speaking of next week . . . some community feedback on recent articles has prompted me to share some campaign-ending tips in next week's column. If you think my Monday night players have it rough, wait until you see what I have in store for my Wednesday night group.
Until the next encounter!

Die, DM, Die!

7/12/2012

MONDAY NIGHT. *The good-aligned Knights of*

Ardyn have captured the evil Starlord Evendor and are preparing to turn him over to the Dragovar Empire. This is a big deal for a couple reasons. First and foremost, Evendor has been trying to destroy the Dragovar Empire and the rest of the world since the start of the campaign, so making him answer for his crimes would give this particular campaign arc some closure. Secondly, the Knights of Ardyn have been propagandized as terrorists because they violently oppose corruption within the Dragovar Empire. By handing over Starlord Evendor to the Dragovar authorities, they can prove they are truly working in the empire's best interests.
The Knights of Ardyn arrange to have Starlord Evendor picked up and transported to the prison-island of Zardkarath. Unfortunately, the Dragovar warship that arrives is under the sway of doppelgangers loyal to Evendor, and the Knights are too blinded by the desire to improve their public image to imagine that security aboard the warship might be compromised. Fortunately, the heroes are here to set them straight. After learning of a doppelganger conspiracy to smuggle Starlord Evendor to safety, they arrive just as the prisoner transfer is concluded. When the warship captain refuses to return the prisoner, the heroes help the Knights of Ardyn take the warship by force. Things are complicated by the fact that many of the warship's defenders aren't even aware that their mission is a ruse. Even as Starlord Evendor is sequestered below decks, these misguided dragonborn soldiers accuse the heroes and their allies—the deceitful Knights of Ardyn—of showing their traitorous hearts. They call upon Bahamut to guide their weapons in the name of justice, and suddenly the forces of good find themselves in bloody conflict. Time to break out the dice!

In last week's article, I included a spreadsheet that outlines how much damage a monster of a given level and role should deal on its attacks. This reference, for example, tells me that a level 35 monster (non-brute) should be dealing an average of 43 damage with an at-will attack. The spreadsheet also provides different dice expressions to achieve such as result (4d8 + 25, 3d10 + 27, 2d12 + 30, and so on). When creating new monsters for my campaign or for published adventures, it's a fantastic reference. Dry as a 5,000-year-old mummy lord wrapped in sandpaper, yet fantastic all the same. I keep a copy of the spreadsheet in my campaign binder. However, I use it differently when I'm behind the DM screen.

What I'm about to say might be viewed as heretical, and it might even fly in the face of your own sensibilities as a D&D player and Dungeon Master, but I'll say it anyway: (deep breath) As much as I like rolling dice to achieve random results, as a DM working behind the screen, I prefer to roll as few dice as possible. In fact, I usually keep only two dice behind my screen. That's two dice total.

The first die is, of course, a d20 . . . for obvious reasons.
The second die is usually a d6. (Sometimes it's whatever random non-d20 die I pull out of my velvet dice bag or, on occasions what I forget my dice, whatever die I happen to have in my pocket or in my minis storage tray.) If I'm running an encounter with brute monsters, I'll sometimes double up on the second die and grab a pair of d6's. However, two dice is the norm.

Two dice behind the DM screen, you say?

Why the heck not. I know how much damage (on average) a monster's supposed to deal — I have a spreadsheet that tells me (with numbers derived from a fairly straightforward formula). Should my players care that I'm rolling 1d6 + 25 instead of 4d8 + 10, like the Monster Manual says I should? Why should they care? The only measurable difference is a narrower damage range with results edging closer to the average (26-31 damage instead of 14-42 damage), and my players have more important things to worry about than whether or not a monster's damage range is wide enough.

Here are truncated versions of the spreadsheet I shared last week:

Damage Tables for Non-Brutes (1d6 + X)

Non-Brute At-Will Attacks

Level	Avg	d6	2d6	3d6	4d6
		3.5	*7*	*10.5*	*14*
1	9	+6	+2	-+2	-+5
2	*10*	*+7*	*+3*	*-+1*	*-+4*
3	11	+8	+4	+1	-+3
4	*12*	*+9*	*+5*	*+2*	*-+2*
5	13	+10	+6	+3	-+1
6	*14*	*+11*	*+7*	*+4*	*+0*
7	15	+12	+8	+5	+1
8	*16*	*+13*	*+9*	*+6*	*+2*
9	17	+14	+10	+7	+3
10	*18*	*+15*	*+11*	*+8*	*+4*
11	19	+16	+12	+9	+5
12	*20*	*+17*	*+13*	*+10*	*+6*
13	21	+18	+14	+11	+7
14	*22*	*+19*	*+15*	*+12*	*+8*
15	23	+20	+16	+13	+9
16	*24*	*+21*	*+17*	*+14*	*+10*
17	25	+22	+18	+15	+11
18	*26*	*+23*	*+19*	*+16*	*+12*
19	27	+24	+20	+17	+13
20	*28*	*+25*	*+21*	*+18*	*+14*
21	29	+26	+22	+19	+15
22	*30*	*+27*	*+23*	*+20*	*+16*
23	31	+28	+24	+21	+17
24	*32*	*+29*	*+25*	*+22*	*+18*
25	33	+30	+26	+23	+19
26	*34*	*+31*	*+27*	*+24*	*+20*
27	35	+32	+28	+25	+21
28	*36*	*+33*	*+29*	*+26*	*+22*
29	37	+34	+30	+27	+23
30	*38*	*+35*	*+31*	*+28*	*+24*
31	39	+36	+32	+29	+25
32	*40*	*+37*	*+33*	*+30*	*+26*
33	41	+38	+34	+31	+27
34	*42*	*+39*	*+35*	*+32*	*+28*
35	43	+40	+36	+33	+29

Non-Brute Encounter Attacks

Level	Avg	d6	2d6	3d6	4d6
		3.5	*7*	*10.5*	*14*
1	13.5	+10	+7	+3	-+1
2	*15*	*+12*	*+8*	*+5*	*+1*
3	16.5	+13	+10	+6	+3
4	*18*	*+15*	*+11*	*+8*	*+4*
5	19.5	+16	+13	+9	+6
6	*21*	*+18*	*+14*	*+11*	*+7*
7	22.5	+19	+16	+12	+9
8	*24*	*+21*	*+17*	*+14*	*+10*
9	25.5	+22	+19	+15	+12
10	*27*	*+24*	*+20*	*+17*	*+13*
11	28.5	+25	+22	+18	+15
12	*30*	*+27*	*+23*	*+20*	*+16*
13	31.5	+28	+25	+21	+18
14	*33*	*+30*	*+26*	*+23*	*+19*
15	34.5	+31	+28	+24	+21
16	*36*	*+33*	*+29*	*+26*	*+22*
17	37.5	+34	+31	+27	+24
18	*39*	*+36*	*+32*	*+29*	*+25*
19	40.5	+37	+34	+30	+27
20	*42*	*+39*	*+35*	*+32*	*+28*
21	43.5	+40	+37	+33	+30
22	*45*	*+42*	*+38*	*+35*	*+31*
23	46.5	+43	+40	+36	+33
24	*48*	*+45*	*+41*	*+38*	*+34*
25	49.5	+46	+43	+39	+36
26	*51*	*+48*	*+44*	*+41*	*+37*
27	52.5	+49	+46	+42	+39
28	*54*	*+51*	*+47*	*+44*	*+40*
29	55.5	+52	+49	+45	+42
30	*57*	*+54*	*+50*	*+47*	*+43*
31	58.5	+55	+52	+48	+45
32	*60*	*+57*	*+53*	*+50*	*+46*
33	61.5	+58	+55	+51	+48
34	*63*	*+60*	*+56*	*+53*	*+49*
35	64.5	+61	+58	+54	+51

Damage Tables for Non-Brutes (2d6 + X)

Non-Brute At-Will Attacks

Level	Avg	2d6	3d6	4d6
		7	*10.5*	*14*
1	11.25	+4	+1	-+3
2	12.5	*+6*	*+2*	*-+2*
3	13.75	+7	+3	+0
4	15	*+8*	*+5*	*+1*
5	16.25	+9	+6	+2
6	17.5	*+11*	*+7*	*+4*
7	18.75	+12	+8	+5
8	20	*+13*	*+10*	*+6*
9	21.25	+14	+11	+7
10	22.5	*+16*	*+12*	*+9*
11	23.75	+17	+13	+10
12	25	*+18*	*+15*	*+11*
13	26.25	+19	+16	+12
14	27.5	*+21*	*+17*	*+14*
15	28.75	+22	+18	+15
16	30	*+23*	*+20*	*+16*
17	31.25	+24	+21	+17
18	32.5	*+26*	*+22*	*+19*
19	33.75	+27	+23	+20
20	35	*+28*	*+25*	*+21*
21	36.25	+29	+26	+22
22	37.5	*+31*	*+27*	*+24*
23	38.75	+32	+28	+25
24	40	*+33*	*+30*	*+26*
25	41.25	+34	+31	+27
26	42.5	*+36*	*+32*	*+29*
27	43.75	+37	+33	+30
28	45	*+38*	*+35*	*+31*
29	46.25	+39	+36	+32
30	47.5	*+41*	*+37*	*+34*
31	48.75	+42	+38	+35
32	50	*+43*	*+40*	*+36*
33	51.25	+44	+41	+37
34	52.5	*+46*	*+42*	*+39*
35	53.75	+47	+43	+40

Non-Brute Encounter Attacks

Level	Avg	2d6	3d6	4d6
		7	*10.5*	*14*
1	16.875	+10	+6	+3
2	18.75	*+12*	*+8*	*+5*
3	20.625	+14	+10	+7
4	22.5	*+16*	*+12*	*+9*
5	24.375	+17	+14	+10
6	26.25	*+19*	*+16*	*+12*
7	28.125	+21	+18	+14
8	30	*+23*	*+20*	*+16*
9	31.875	+25	+21	+18
10	33.75	*+27*	*+23*	*+20*
11	35.625	+29	+25	+22
12	37.5	*+31*	*+27*	*+24*
13	39.375	+32	+29	+25
14	41.25	*+34*	*+31*	*+27*
15	43.125	+36	+33	+29
16	45	*+38*	*+35*	*+31*
17	46.875	+40	+36	+33
18	48.75	*+42*	*+38*	*+35*
19	50.625	+44	+40	+37
20	52.5	*+46*	*+42*	*+39*
21	54.375	+47	+44	+40
22	56.25	*+49*	*+46*	*+42*
23	58.125	+51	+48	+44
24	60	*+53*	*+50*	*+46*
25	61.875	+55	+51	+48
26	63.75	*+57*	*+53*	*+50*
27	65.625	+59	+55	+52
28	67.5	*+61*	*+57*	*+54*
29	69.375	+62	+59	+55
30	71.25	*+64*	*+61*	*+57*
31	73.125	+66	+63	+59
32	75	*+68*	*+65*	*+61*
33	76.875	+70	+66	+63
34	78.75	*+72*	*+68*	*+65*
35	80.625	+74	+70	+67

The numbers highlighted in yellow tell me what to add to my d6 (or 2d6) rolls when dealing damage for monsters. For example, in my game, a level 35 monster (non-brute) deals 1d6 + 40 damage with an at-will power on a hit, not 4d8 + 25, 3d10 + 27, or 2d12 + 30. It saves me a few seconds of dice collecting and addition—a few precious seconds that are better spent thinking about the game, as opposed to practicing my math skills or testing my players' patience.
At the point where I'm rolling a single die for damage, one might ask, "Why bother rolling dice at all? Why not simply take the average every time?" Valid question, but a little damage variability is a good thing; otherwise, players might start meta-gaming. For example, if Player X knows that my hill giant is dealing 27 damage every round and his character has 28 hit points remaining, then Player X also knows that the giant won't pound his character into mulch with one swing . . . and I'd rather Player X not play that game.

Lessons Learned

There's something to be said for picking up a handful of dice and letting them tumble like an avalanche behind the DM screen. It can startle and horrify your players, particularly when they're not accustomed to the sound, and that's worth doing once in a while for the cheap, sadistic thrill. However, I'm not the kind of DM who likes rolling and adding up small piles of dice after every attack. I already spend a great deal of behind-the-screen time subtracting hit points and tracking conditions, so I seize every opportunity to minimize the extra math. One way to accomplish my goal is to reduce the number of dice I need to roll to achieve the desired effect.

If all I have behind the DM screen is a d20 and a d6 (or 2d6 for brutes), I can focus on the more important aspects of Dungeon Mastering: figuring out what my monsters and NPCs will do next, dreaming up witty retorts in response to something a player just said, or thinking of some wonderful complication that will make my players rethink their tactics.
So, when it comes to dice behind the screen, here's my philosophy:

- **D&D is all about the dice. To quote Rodney Thompson, D&D without dice is like jazz without saxophones.**
- **The quality of a DM is not measured by the number of dice he or she rolls.**
- **A DM has more important things to do besides math. The less time it takes, the better.**

Do I feel bad about leaving my d4's, d8's, d10's, and d12's in the dice bag? Not really. I try to imagine that they're all have a big party in there, and I still bust them out whenever I'm sitting on the other side of the DM screen. And let me be perfectly clear: I am a dice man, coo-coo-coo-choo. But I'm also lazy, busy, and pragmatic. If I have a choice between rolling 3d10 + 11 damage or 1d6 + 24 damage, I'll take the single die and the big modifier. It seems like an insignificant thing, but it's the kind of no-brainer shortcut that keeps overworked DMs like me alive and kickin'. Until the next encounter!

Whedonism
6/28/2012

MONDAY NIGHT. *One of the main story arcs of the campaign is a war that has largely unfolded offscreen. The Myrthon Regency, which is part of the Dragovar Empire, has been invaded and enslaved by mind flayers in league with Allabar, an elder star entity. However, the main villain is an eladrin warlock named Starlord Evendor, who's using Allabar to free the other evil star powers (entities such as Acamar, Hadar, Caiphon, and Gibbeth) from their celestial prisons. The characters first heard mention of Evendor's name late in the heroic tier, but it wasn't until paragon tier that they became concerned with the war and began taking steps to depose Evendor. And it wasn't until epic tier that*

they commandeered an illithid nautiloid (an alien mind flayer ship) and crashed it into Starlord Evendor's tower observatory, thereby provoking a face-to-face meeting with the eladrin warlock. That encounter didn't go well for the party, but most of them escaped with their lives and minds intact.

Another confrontation with Starlord Evendor seemed inevitable. He was, arguably, the campaign's "Big Bad." However, the players weren't eager to go charging after him a second time, and so he faded into the background for several levels while the heroes went after villains who were more, shall we say, accessible. Then, out of nowhere, came the surprise announcement that Starlord Evendor had been captured by the Knights of Ardyn, an organization of NPCs dedicated to preserving the Dragovar Empire. Ardyn, the group's silver dragon leader, contacted the heroes to let them know the surprising news, and they traveled to her island fortress to confront the villain.

The Knights of Ardyn needed the heroes' help to interrogate Evendor and determine the whereabouts of the missing Myrthon regent, whom they sought to rescue, but some of the heroes were determined to slay Evendor and pry the information from his corpse (using Speak with Dead rituals). Before Evendor could be slain, however, the true villain of the session appeared and revealed that Evendor, the heroes, and the Knights of Ardyn were pawns in a plot hatched by two dark and distant stars, Ulban and Nihal.

The session's "secret villain" was Melech, Bruce Cordell's former character. (When Bruce left the game, his character became an NPC.) As a tiefling star-pact warlock, Melech had received many visions from Ulban and Nihal over the course of the campaign, tracing all the way back to the early paragon tier. These evil star entities had also given Melech special powers, which he used quite willingly and often. Melech, played by Bruce as somewhat corruptible and a touch mad, was told that he would one day supplant Evendor and become a "Starlord" himself. That day had finally come.

After Bruce left the game, Melech transformed into a tiny mote of starlight that haunted the party from time to time when it suit him. He could enter the bodies of his companions and possess them, if they allowed it — which they did, on occasion. Little could they know, however, that their final confrontation with Starlord Evendor was at hand. Unknown to everyone but Melech and Evendor, the stars Ulban and Nihal were in perfect celestial alignment with Iomandra and its sun. Melech intended to use this rare conjunction to forcibly transform several of the PCs into gigantic star-worms — the Dread Spawn of Nihal and Ulban. To make it work, I decided that these party members had been born during similar alignments, and thus they were destined to become these horrific creatures. What made it work was Stan!'s new character, a dwarf Knight of Ardyn named Varghuum. The instant Stan! decided he wanted to play a Knight of Ardyn, it seemed natural that Varghuum would be the missing piece of puzzle. As one of Evendor's captors, he would be the final "sacrifice" to Nihal and Ulban.

Bound in chains, Evendor watched helplessly as Starlord Melech called upon Nihal and Ulban to transform Varghuum and three of the other PCs (played by Jeff Alvarez, Chris Dupuis, and Matt Sernett) into horrific star spawn. The resulting battle pitted PC against PC until, at last, Melech was put down. With his death, the alignment of stars was broken, and those who'd transformed into star-worms reverted to their natural forms, whereupon they lamented the death of poor Melech.

I have, in previous installments of this column, touched on writers whose work I find inspirational. I've also made mention of episodic television series that have taught me how to be a better storyteller. However, I have yet to shine the spotlight on Joss Whedon, about whom essays and books have been written. He is, for those unfamiliar with the name, the creative force behind such TV series as Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Firefly, not to mention the writer/director of this summer's mega-blockbuster, Marvel's The Avengers.

There are plenty of altars dedicated to the man already, so rather than bore you with fan-boy sycophancy, let me point out one thing that Joss does in his work that I've plundered and put to great use in my D&D campaign.

Once in a while, challenge the players' expectations.

I have this ongoing "meta-game" with my players, whereby I plan out my campaign and they try to anticipate how events will play out and plan accordingly. When they're feeling precocious, they also try to steer the campaign in directions that might be counter to what I have planned, just to see how well I improvise. This

game-within-a-game is endlessly challenging and fun.

Anyone who studies Whedon's work can see how he dances with his audience before yanking the rug out from under them. I recall a scene in the middle of the third season of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, in which the heroes are gathered in the high school library, planning their inevitable end-of-season confrontation with the evil Mayor Wilkins. Out of the blue, their meeting is interrupted by the villain himself. As a viewer, I was knocked off balance. Suddenly, I'm expecting a fight to break out. Then I'm surprised again when it doesn't happen. The whole scene catches one off guard.

Early in the same season, we see the introduction of Mayor Wilkins' right-hand man, a suave vampire named Mr. Trick. The audience is led to believe he'll be a major player in the unfolding season, and thus we're surprised when he gets dusted and supplanted by Faith, a rogue vampire slayer. We get another similar jolt in the fourth season, when the ruthless Professor Maggie Walsh meets a surprising end at the hands of Adam, her monstrous creation. Joss Whedon and his allies are never shy about killing off characters (even beloved ones) to shock the audience. No one, neither hero nor villain, is sacred.

As a DM, I try my best to anticipate what the player characters will do next, and what the likely outcomes of their actions and decisions might be. And then I try to find ways to surprise them — not all the time, mind you, just when I think the campaign could use a little twist or spark of uncertainty. My Monday night group was holding off on the inevitable confrontation with Starlord Evendor, but the introduction of Stan!'s new character spurred me to drop Starlord Evendor into the party's lap. As an added twist, I made Starlord Evendor a non-threat, which is risky. It's not my normal inclination to have a group of NPCs subdue a major campaign villain, nor do I usually place my villains at such a disadvantage, but that's the point. I knew it would surprise my players. The party had already confronted Evendor once, and another exchange of firepower was exactly what they were expecting. But when I took a step back and asked how things might play out differently, I realized that I could wrap up Melech's storyline and Evendor's storyline in one fell swoop. That intrigued me much more than saving Evendor for the usual end-of-campaign tete-a-tete.

Lessons Learned

Whedon is a master at shocking his audience, but that's not the only narrative trick or technique I've plucked from his large, juicy brain. Here are three other tried-and-true Whedonisms that I've stumbled across in my study of his work, which I'll only mention in passing as conversation starters:

- **Every character—hero, villain, or other—has a little dork living inside him (or her).**
- **Every hero should be allowed to do cool stuff.**
- **Before you make your players cry, make them laugh.**

Each of these bullet points is practically an article in itself. Moreover, there are other things that I do as a DM which remind me of things Whedon does as a writer, most of which I've touched on in previous articles (particularly some of the earlier ones). One Whedonism I'm reluctant to try is having characters and NPCs break into song. If I had any songwriting or singing talent, that would be the fourth point on my list. But, alas, I'm no Joss Whedon, nor do I profess to know all of his storytelling secrets.

What Whedonisms have you embraced in your campaign? Inquiring minds want to know . . . Until the next encounter!

Stan! Down

6/14/2012

MONDAY NIGHT. *Several months ago, a dragonborn rogue named Baharoosh (played by Stan!) joined the party. From the day he arrived, he made it clear that he was an agent of the Vost Miraj (the intelligence gathering arm of the Dragover Empire's martial caste), sent to aid*

the party in its fight against the more extreme elements of the empire, and to send back reports about their activities. The party was understandably suspicious of Baharoosh, but they were a bit perplexed as to what to do with a spy who showed his ulterior motives so plainly.
Over time, Baharoosh proved his loyalty to the group and revealed his conflict with his Dragovar masters (he was a devout worshiper of Bahamut who wanted to purge Tiamat's influence from the empire), but he was never quite able to garner the full trust of the other characters. They always wondered where his ultimate loyalties lay, and whether he could be trusted with sensitive materials and information.
In recent weeks, the party even came to question Baharoosh's dedication to their work. Whenever a fight commenced, he quickly fell to the ground and was spirited off by Vost Miraj minions. When the hostilities were done, Baharoosh would reappear, fully healed, with some new assignment from his spymaster, Zarkhrysa—the latest of these assignments being to secure the signature of a Grand Vizier on a document that would brand him as a traitor to the empire. Unfortunately, the document also implicated the Shan Qabal (the research arm of the arcane caste to which the party wizard, Alex, belongs) as having been behind a terrorist attack on the Dragovar capital city.
Baharoosh helped the other characters rewrite Zarkhrysa's document so that it more blatantly condemned Turazad but made no mention of the Shan Qabal. After the party ambushed the Grand Vizier and dominated him to get the signature, Baharoosh brought the document to Zarkhrysa who, upon seeing the modifications, looked coldly at her once trusted agent and said menacingly, "I am NOT pleased."

Hi, I'm Stan!, one of the D&D producers at Wizards of the Coast and the guy who plays Baharoosh in Chris's Monday night campaign. With all that's happened to my character lately (and the overview above is just the start of the story), Chris asked if I'd step in and take the reins of the column for a week to discuss what I think about the way Chris, as the DM, handled my character's latest predicament.

Let me begin by saying that over the last several weeks of game play, I've made more than a few questionable tactical decisions and suffered a phenomenal string of bad die rolls. In the previous half dozen or so major encounters leading up to this past week's session, Baharoosh had been poisoned, dominated, swallowed whole, and beaten into unconsciousness—generally within the first three rounds of combat in any given fight. I failed nearly every saving throw, Perception check, and death save that crossed my path. There was more than one occasion where Baharoosh should have died. The party was forced to leave him behind, or worse, didn't have any idea where he was. My poor dragonborn spy was on death's door, and all Chris had to do was let things proceed on their natural course to let Baharoosh pass silently from the campaign.

But he didn't.

Each time, Chris came up with an inventive, feasible, and logical (within the campaign parameters) reason for someone to save Baharoosh's life. Often it was the Vost Miraj, and at least once it was Zarkhrysa herself. And each time there was a price to pay for this intervention—a mission to be achieved or a piece of information to be delivered.

Of course, from the perspective of the other characters, it seemed like Baharoosh was constantly abandoning them during the battles—running off to hide under the hem of his spymaster's skirt, and only coming back when the coast was clear. *[DM Note #1: For the record, dragonborn spymasters don't wear skirts in my campaign. They wear Kevlar girdles.]* Consequently, Baharoosh had to prove his value to the team again and again. But every time he did, it was by performing an act that made it clear that he valued the party more than he did the spy organization, thus decreasing the likelihood that the Vost Miraj would be there to pull his fat out of the fire the next time.

In this latest session, Baharoosh had his loyalties very clearly and plainly tested. Zarkhrysa, tired of his failures, expressed her displeasure as described above and, when Baharoosh replied with a defiant "I know," she pulled out a death warrant, wrote his name on the document, signed it, and said, "You could save us all a lot of trouble if you simply do the job yourself, like any

honorable dragonborn would." He was alone in hostile territory, without the party to back him up. *[DM Note #2: The other characters were hiding not terribly far away, but to Stan!'s chagrin, they decided to pick a fight elsewhere.]* Faced with the head of the imperial spy corps who wanted him dead, Baharoosh drew his weapon and launched an all-out fight for his life.

Unfortunately, my recent spate of bad rolls continued—Baharoosh couldn't hit a blessed thing. Chris, on the other hand, was rolling particularly well, so Zarkhrysa and her minions had no trouble bringing the rebellious Baharoosh to his knees. Within three rounds, he was bloodied, having made no attack roll higher than an 8 the entire time. The kicker came when Baharoosh was dominated by the spirit of an ancient yuan-ti prince possessing one of Zarkhrysa's allies (really . . . look, I can't explain all this . . . I'm just a player).

When the opportunity arose to save against the domination, I rolled a natural 1.

"Now, do what you didn't have the guts or honor to do on your own," the yuan-ti commanded. "Kill yourself!"

Baharoosh raised his dagger, aimed it at his own heart . . . and I rolled a natural 20.

Although the self-inflicted blow dropped Baharoosh well below zero hit points, he didn't quite meet the death threshold of reaching a negative number equal to his bloodied score. On the next round, I made his first death save . . . and rolled a natural 1. Before I had a chance to fail two more death saves, though, Zarkhrysa picked up Baharoosh's own dagger and finished the job once and for all. Then her minions took Baharoosh's body away to make sure that it was disposed of in a place and manner that would ensure he was never going to be anything more than an unpleasant memory.

By the time the rest of the party finished their combat and got up to Zarkhrysa's office, she, the yuan-ti spirit, all the minions, and every last trace of Baharoosh were gone. Of course, from their point of view, this was exactly like what had happened at the end of the four previous fights. As near as they could tell, Baharoosh was off with his spymaster getting some new bit of information—he'd show up again eventually. Or not. You never can tell with spies.

And so my character died. Permanently. And no one in the party will ever know, or perhaps even care.

Lessons Learned

Telling this story to friends, a few of them remarked that they thought my DM had treated me badly. My character was put in a nearly impossible situation, with no resources and no access to the rest of the party. When things went (predictably) against my character, the villains killed him out of hand and removed the possibility that the party could retrieve and revive him.

Looks pretty bad for Chris and his reputation as a fair, quick-thinking, and fun-minded DM.

But, if you ask me, he did everything perfectly. While this fateful session began in medias res, the scene was one that Baharoosh had arrived at organically. I chose for him to make all the decisions that set up the scene, and I even decided to have him march into that chamber where he knew the deck would be stacked against him. I chose to make him defiant rather than apologetic. I shifted the encounter from a menacing social interaction into full-on combat. Indeed, from the very beginning, I chose to play a character that was an active member of a morally questionable organization and about whose loyalties the party could never be certain. In other words, it was a long road getting to the "no win scenario" that Baharoosh found himself in, and I willingly had him walk every step along the way. Chris certainly made it clear to me, at various junctions, that Baharoosh's actions would have consequences. I knew that he was offending Zarkhrysa, and that she had a well-earned reputation for taking revenge on those who crossed her—embodied most clearly by the skull of her predecessor that she kept as a trophy on her desk. *[DM Note #3: I thought it would be cool if Zarkhrysa kept the skull as a reminder of what could happen to her if she's not careful, and I liked the idea*

of the players never knowing if she had a hand in her predecessor's demise. But best of all, I hit upon the idea that Zarkhrysa would use Speak with Dead scrolls to solicit counsel from the skull. Seems like something a spymaster would do, don't you agree?]

It is always fair, I think, for the DM to give a character bad choices to make, as long as the player understands the repercussions. And, in the wake of that, it is always reasonable for the DM to follow up on those repercussions if the character makes those choices anyway. In fact, I'd say that it's worse for the DM to spell out specific consequences for risky behavior, then not follow through with them when the time comes. Doing that can lead the players to feel like their characters can do anything they want without fear of reprisal or ramification. For my part, every time Baharoosh played fast and loose with his orders from his Vost Miraj handlers, I knew that he was risking being cut loose or (worse) being made a target.

Additionally, one thing that we all accept—players and DMs alike—is that the dice can sometimes be cruel. And in a game where success and failure are determined by dice rolls, being unlucky can be deadly for a character. There are, of course, many varied and sometimes subtle levels of success and failure, and the DM is there to adjudicate that sort of thing. But when one failure follows another, when die rolls come up repeatedly in the lower 20% of all probabilities, they begin to have a narrative weight of their own. *[DM Note #4: Tell that to the employees of Acquisitions Incorporated.]*

My string of bad die rolls clearly bespoke of a character having a bad day. (A bad week, actually.) Anything that could go wrong pretty much did. A bad Perception check didn't mean Baharoosh merely failed to notice a detail—he focused on the wrong detail, or saw things in a false context. A particularly low attack roll became more than an errant swing; it was an embarrassing misstep.

When the session was over, Chris asked me what I wanted to do next. He kept a door open for Baharoosh to return—even from such a definitive and seemingly inescapable end—if that's what I wanted. But, after thinking about it for a day or two, I decided to let the poor dragonborn rest in peace. It's never easy to lose a character, and especially not so when that character falls in an embarrassing and ignominious set of circumstances. But there is something to be said for having the cold comfort of a story that makes sense. *[DM Note #5: I just didn't want to put Stan! through the pain of rolling up another 27th level character. I'd already tortured him enough.]* Chris's offer, though, reminded me that he always is open to possibilities. His campaign is vibrant, and flexible, and able to absorb any particular event and keep rolling on. Like in the real world, life in Iomandra goes on and adapts to whatever set of circumstances the characters happen to create.

I'm not sure what my next character will be. But I have a sneaking suspicion that no matter what choice I make, there will be a niche somewhere in the Dragovar Empire for him, and (more than that) somehow there will be intrigue, menace, and most of all adventure waiting for him. Now if I can only do something about my horrendous die rolls!

DM's Footnote

I'd like to thank Stan! for bearing the burden of this week's column. In previous installments, I've talked about how character death is handled in my campaign, and this is not the first time I've backed a player character into a corner. Did I set out to kill Baharoosh? No. But as the campaign reaches its end, I wanted to put the character in the most dangerous situation he'd ever faced and bring a long-simmering conflict between him and his temperamental superior to a boil.

The thing that keeps my campaign alive for years on end is the idea that conflict comes in many forms and can be resolved in different ways. Most of my energy is spent thinking about how the actions and decisions of the player characters might give rise to new conflict. Every new conflict I can imagine becomes the seed for a future encounter, or sometimes an entire adventure. And not every conflict can be

solved by the swing of a sword or a skill check. Sometimes it's about a character wrestling with his role in the party or his place in the world. Sometimes it's about choosing loyalties, turning enemies into friends, and turning friends into enemies.

If you ask me how Baharoosh died, I might say "bad dates" to be funny. [DM Note #6: That's a Raiders of the Lost Ark reference, for all you 20-somethings who've never seen the film.] A case could also be made that the Dice Gods were gunning for him, or that his demise was written into his genetic code at character creation. Or it could be that the fault lies with the other player characters who abandoned Baharoosh in his time of need. But the DM? I think not! After all, it's the DM's job to set up conflict and make it as interesting and immersive as possible. Okay, yes, it's true that I orchestrated the situation leading up to Baharoosh's death, but not because I wanted to kill off the character. If that were true, I wouldn't have given Stan! the opportunity to bring his character back. Ultimately, he chose Baharoosh's fate. The character had faced his demons and lost, and that's sometimes the way conflicts end.
Until the next encounter!

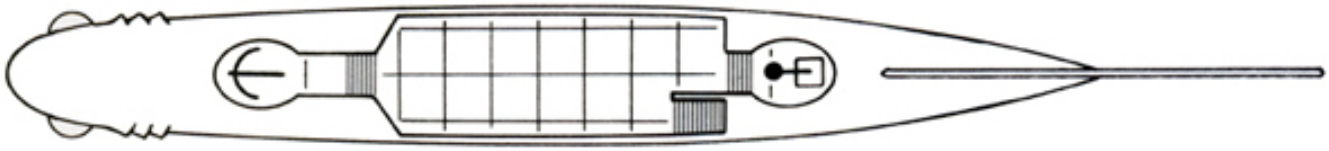
The Eel and the Stingray

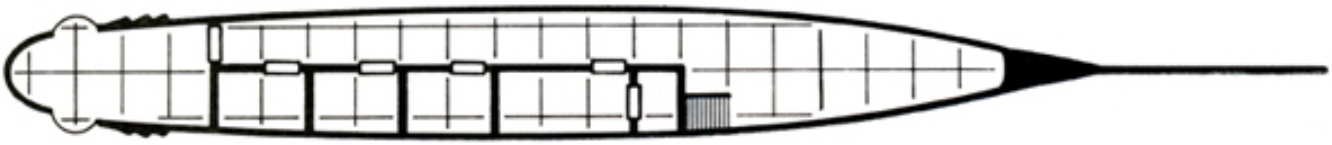
6/7/2012

MONDAY NIGHT. *Toward the end of paragon tier, the player characters decide to set aside their many distractions and make good on a promise to Arkyn Tavor, a dwarven undersea explorer to whom they owe a favor. He's a member of the Deeplantern Guild, and he needs the party's help to retrieve an artifact that not only symbolizes the bond between Moradin and Erathis but also symbolizes the unity of the dwarven clans. The hammer lies sealed in the vaults of Harth Fantaro, a sunken citadel that has since become home to a powerful aboleth mother and its slimy brood. To accomplish his quest, Arkyn spent his family fortune on a submersible resembling a stingray. Armed with this totally awesome ship, Arkyn, his crew, and the heroes descend into the briny depths*

Long story short, I needed a submarine map that could be blown up to miniatures scale without looking like total crap. However, there aren't many good submarine maps "out there" to choose from. Having already plundered ship maps from the Spelljammer campaign setting, I decided to go back to that source and search for a map that could be scanned and then modified using Adobe Photoshop. I didn't find anything in the boxed set proper, but I did find an "eel ship" map in a Spelljammer supplement called Lost Ships, written by (strangely enough) Ed Greenwood.

I'm a busy guy, as most DMs are, and it takes less time for me to modify a scanned image in





Photoshop than to create something entirely new. As much as I like creating maps from scratch, I decided to take the path of least resistance for the Deeplantern Guild submersible. The eel ship has a sleek submarine-like profile, but it wasn't until I'd scanned the image that it occurred to me how easily the design could be modified to look like a stingray. By the time I was through, the eel ship would be nigh unrecognizable. My players might even think I'd designed the entire craft myself.

The Eel

Here were my mental notes on the eel ship map:

1. Given the clean line work of the original, I would need to scan the map at 600 dpi — sufficient resolution to enlarge it for miniatures play as well as modify it to serve my needs.

2. To turn the eel into a stingray, I would need to add pectoral fins (the "wings") and a whiplike tail.

3. The staircase between decks is troublesome. There's the practical concern of flooding, but even the way the stairs are drawn rub me the wrong way: They don't snap neatly to the grid, which makes it hard for players to determine where to place their minis when their characters are standing on the stairs.

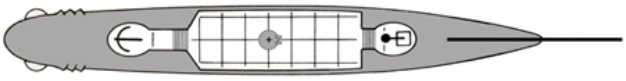
4. Finally, there are a lot of small, confined spaces below deck. That's true of submarines in general, but it doesn't allow for much tactical movement in combat.

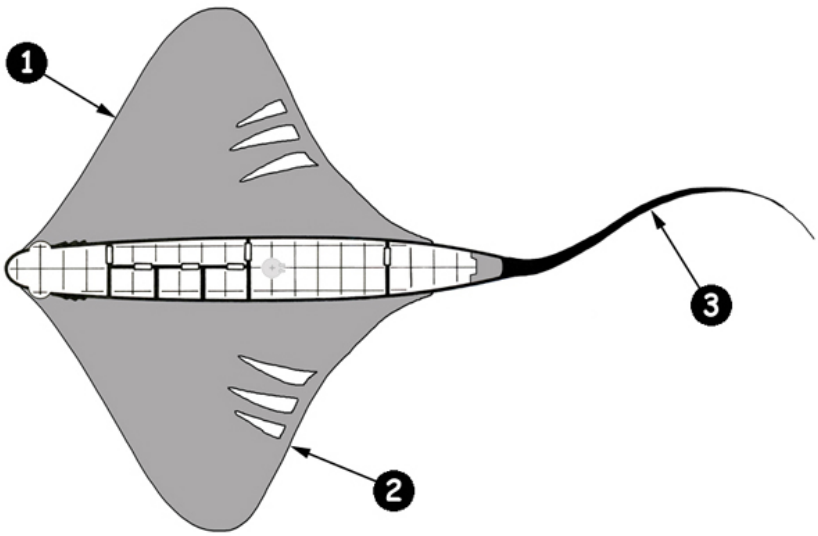
The Stingray

Here's how the stingray ship was created using the eel ship as its chassis:

Adding the Fins: As a separate layer in Adobe Photoshop (Layer :: New), I drew one of the ship's pectoral fins **[1]** using my mouse and the program's drawing tool. It took several tries to get the shape of the fin just right. Once I had the curvature I wanted, I duplicated the layer in Photoshop (Layer :: Duplicate Layer), flipped it (Edit :: Transform :: Flip Vertical), and positioned the duplicate fin **[2]** on the other side of the ship. The end result: two fins that are mirror images of one another.

Adding the Tail: I erased the back end of the eel ship to make room for the tail **[3]**, which was done freehand using my mouse and the drawing tool. Again, I drew the tail as a separate layer so I could safely delete the layer and start over if I





wasn't happy with the end result.

Remodeling the Interior: I used Photoshop's eraser tool to remove the stairs and any interior walls I didn't want, and then I used the software's copy and paste functions to create duplicates of grid lines, walls, and doors as separate layers that I could move around and reorient to my heart's content. I did a little bit of touching up using the drawing tool afterward, but not much. Like a LEGO set, I just rearranged existing elements. The hatch connecting the two levels was new, however. As a new layer, I made a circle and added some hinges, and then made a copy of it (another layer) for the lower deck, with the opacity reduced to 20% on that layer to give the impression it's set into the ceiling instead of the floor.

Finishing Touch: By the time I'd finished noodling, my map had multiple layers, from fins to doors. When I was satisfied with the overall design, I flattened the image (Layer > Flatten Image) and then used Photoshop's paint bucket tool to apply gray tones in certain areas (the fins and outer hull primarily).

Lessons Learned

I don't need an art degree to churn out a serviceable map, especially if half the work is done before I begin. As you can see, I can scan an existing map and modify it using Photoshop to suit the needs of my home game. Armed with sufficient hardware and software, so can you.

For the record, it took me less than 3 hours to "build" my stingray submarine. In a half hour, I can enlarge the map so that the grid squares are 1 inch across, slice the map into sections (saving them as separate files), print them out on sheets of paper, tape them together, and lay the finished map on my gaming table at work. If I had access to a printer that could handle oversized paper, that would be a different story, but I work with what I have. Depending on the printer I use, it could take a while to print the map at 600 dpi, so if I'm in a hurry I'll print out the maps at 300 or 150 dpi. Even at that resolution, my players won't need to imagine what it's like to run around inside a stingray submarine; they'll be able to see it.

Until the next encounter!

Extra Ordinary

5/31/2012

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. *The Sea Kings are powerful merchant lords who rule oceanic trade throughout the Dragovar Empire, and the party has two of them: Sea King Impstinger (a.k.a. Deimos), played by Chris Youngs, and Sea King Silvereye (a.k.a. Vargas), played by Rodney Thompson. For Deimos, becoming a Sea King represents the fulfillment of a lifelong dream, whereas Vargas never wanted to be a Sea King. As a champion of the Raven Queen, he won support among captains of similar faith, and they ultimately elevated him to his position of leadership. Such is the burden of the epic-level hero.*

Recuperating from their harrowing exploits in the Frostfell, the heroes withdraw to their sanctuary on the island of Damandaros, where Sea King Silvereye keeps a warehouse. Vargas has some private matters to attend to, so he separates himself from the party, albeit briefly. (Never a good idea.) To no one's surprise, he's attacked in his own warehouse by evil mercenaries working for one of the party's many enemies. Although things look grim for Sea King Silvereye, at least he's on his own turf. He turns invisible, hides, alerts his companions using a sending stone, and anxiously awaits their arrival.

As weapons clash and spells explode in the Silvereye warehouse, two young children (a human and a dragonborn) are drawn to the ruckus like moths to a flame. Through an open doorway, they watch the battle unfold, mouths agape with astonishment. Occasionally, one of the player characters takes note of the young ones, urging them to stand back. When the battle concludes and the villains have been subdued, Deimos dusts off his large captain's hat, winks at the awestruck children, and says with deadpan charm, "Stay in school." Speechless with fright, the children dart away.

Heroes are extraordinary individuals in my world, as they are, I expect, in many D&D campaigns. They don't act like ordinary folk, they don't dress like ordinary folk, and

they have little in common with ordinary folk. The world orbits around them, and wherever they go, the campaign follows. Because their characters operate at a much higher level, players easily forget that most people who populate the campaign world are plain, simple folks. Every so often, I like to remind my players that their characters live in a remarkable world of unremarkable people. When dealing with threats to the entire world, it's too easy for the heroes to forget what they're fighting for.

My campaign world is full of extras — nameless common folk who have little or no impact on the lives of the heroes. And yet, every time a villain threatens to sink an island or run roughshod over a city, the heroes are supposed to care about what happens to these poor sods. Why should they? I mean, who cares if a bunch of nameless nobodies get wiped off the campaign map? D&D is all about finding treasure and gaining XP, isn't it?

Well, there is a kind of D&D game that's all about treasure and XP, but for the Iomandra campaign to resonate with my players, it needs to do more than make the characters more powerful. It needs to feel like a real place, where the party's antics have real, tangible effects on the people around them. The battle in the Silvereye warehouse was a fun battle with the usual mixture of combat tactics and witty repartee. However, I think the inclusion of the children as innocent spectators added a level of realism to the proceedings. Suddenly, the session is more than just an epic-level throw-down between the forces of evil and not-so-evil. Because on some level we're seeing events unfold through the children's eyes, their presence alters the tenor of the battle ever so slightly. Some of the heroes are concerned that the children might be drawn into the fray. Others seem more interested in showing off for the kids' amusement. These nameless, inconsequential NPCs outshone the villains of the encounter without ever uttering a word, and that is extraordinary.

Lessons Learned

It's been my experience that when it comes to NPCs, most DMs focus on the ones that either want to kill the PCs or want something else from the PCs. It can be easy to forget the multitude of other NPCs who want nothing whatsoever; they exist simply to exist. Hundreds if not thousands of NPCs populate the average D&D campaign, and most of these ordinary folks have no dialogue and never interact with the heroes in any meaningful way. Thus, it can be surprising (in a good way) when they do.

Inconsequential NPCs add texture to any campaign world. Their actions, however innocent or banal, serve to remind the player characters that there's more to the world than dungeons, monsters, and treasure. It reinforces the notion that people actually live in your world, and most of them aren't out to get the heroes and want nothing from them, either. I use ordinary extras to make my player characters feel like the world is worth saving; consequently, they tend to be nice, honest people with no ulterior motives and no secrets to be laid bare.

If you're unaccustomed to using ordinary extras in your games, here are seven simple examples you might try throwing in as opportunity allows:

Example #1: A young girl selling kittens offers to give one to the player characters for free, out of simple kindness or thanks. (A new party mascot, perhaps?)

Example #2: A simple farmer apprehends a criminal who tried and failed to pick the pocket of one of the player characters. (Sometimes, even heroes need a helping hand.)

Example #3: A pair of bickering lumberjacks offers to share their fire with the player characters, or point them in the right direction through the woods. ("Odd couples" provide lots of great roleplaying fodder.)

Example #4: An old woman commends the heroes for who they are, then prattles on about her dead husband who fancied himself a "slayer of evil" like them. (Perhaps the heroes have heard of him.)

Example #5: A street magician spots the player characters as they move through the market and calls one of them up on his small stage to participate in a simple parlor trick, much to the joy of a small crowd. (How often do the PCs receive cheers from a crowd?)

Example #6: A town guard, whose wife just gave birth to a healthy baby girl, hands each of the player characters a cigar. (PCs are more inclined to save the world if they care about the people in it.)

Example #7: A tavern regular challenges a character to a friendly arm wrestling challenge (opposed Strength check) or drinking contest (opposed Endurance check). (Win or lose, the NPC is gracious and speaks well of his competitor. The world needs such nice people.) Until the next encounter!

Schley Stack

5/17/2012

MONDAY NIGHT. *Paragon tier. Thanks to a number of successful quests, the party has amassed more wealth than some of the characters can reasonably spend on magic items. Two of the characters—Bartho the human fighter (played by Matt Sernett) and Kithvolar the elf ranger (played by Jeff Alvarez)—decide to buy a base of operations for the party . . . a clubhouse, if you prefer. Matt and Jeff invest in a coastal tavern called the Crooked Capstan, located in a city built inside a series of interconnected coastal grottos. The tavern, a favorite watering hole among seafaring merchants and gossipy locals, is built into a rough-hewn cavern wall. With the aid of their halfling rogue buddy Oleander (played by Peter Schaefer), Bartho and Kithvolar build a secret complex behind the tavern. Within these chambers, the PCs hide their loot and plot their next move.*

I wasn't the least bit surprised when Bartho and Kithvolar decided to sink several thousand hard-won gold pieces into a run-down tavern, given the characters' rather limited imagination and given Matt and Jeff's admiration for good beer. It occurred to me almost immediately that I would need a map of the tavern and the secret lair hidden behind it . . . you know, just in case a fight broke out in the taproom or a campaign villain decided to pay the heroes a visit. It hasn't happened yet, but given the frequency with which the party retires to its secret stronghold, it's only a matter of time.

I keep a folder of published maps on my desktop, organized by cartographer and subcategorized by type (building, dungeon, ship, wilderness). Since I work closely with cartographers as part of my job, my brain is trained to associate maps with the folks who worked on them. Thus, when I recall a map from memory, it's usually "that Mike Schley map of the tower" or "that Kyle Hunter map of the caravel."

At the risk of shattering an illusion, I don't create new maps for every possible encounter location in my campaign. I could have created a new map of the Crooked Capstan if I really wanted to, but c'mon, there are so many preexisting maps of inns and taverns to choose from! I decided to plunder two Mike Schley maps originally published in the 3rd Edition adventure Expedition to the Ruins of Greyhawk. The map of the Green Dragon Inn was perfect for the tavern proper, and the map of the Iuzite Safe House would serve nicely as the secret lair hidden behind the tavern. The only thing I had to do was add a secret door leading from one to the other.

Lessons Learned

I love making maps, but like most DMs, I don't have a lot of time. When I need a map quickly, the first thing I do is rattle my brain for something that already exists, and when my brain comes up short, I go straight to my folder of maps — all of which are plucked from the map galleries on the Wizards website.

I try to be discriminating when it comes to adding new maps to my desktop map folder. In general, I avoid picking up maps that the players are likely to recognize. I get more use out of generic maps that players don't instantly know ("Hey, that's the Tomb of Horrors!") and maps that can potentially be used more than once, maybe with a few minor tweaks and modifications made on the fly. A tower is a

tower is a tower. And if World of Warcraft can get away with stock buildings, my campaign can, too! Fortunately for all of us, Wizards has created a multitude of versatile maps over the past two editions . . . more than any one DM can reasonably use, and more than most players can hope to remember.

This column often focuses on providing sage DM advice, but this week I'd like to give you something you can USE. I've compiled a number of maps from my personal stash and presented them below. They're all from the Mike Schley collection — he's one of my all-time favorites. I recommend you create your own desktop folder called "Maps," move all of these jpegs into it, and sort them in a manner to your liking. That way, the next time you need an inn, an alley, a temple, a wizard's tower, or a cave complex, you don't need to dig too deep to find inspiration.

Editor Note: Map files unable to be found

If you enjoy this sort of thing, let me know. I have a bunch more maps I'd be happy to send your way.

Until the next encounter!

Know-it-all

5/3/2012

MONDAY NIGHT. *It's the beginning of paragon tier. The player characters have just arrived in Io'galaroth, a major city hewn from a cluster of vast coastal grottos. The sheer number of adventure possibilities quickly overwhelms them, but one particular mystery proves especially alluring. A sea captain is murdered shortly after disbanding his crew, leaving his docked ship unattended. Rumor has it the captain was working for Sea King Senestrago, and Senestrago pays off the local magistrate to have the ship's secret cargo taken to a secure warehouse. Through their own investigations, the PCs learn that the Morkoth was transporting a clutch of catastrophic dragon eggs, which Senestrago and his genasi accomplice need for a devastating ritual that can sink an island.*

The player characters don't know much about Sea King Senestrago or his supporters in Io'galaroth, so they turn to a friend—a tiefling sexpot named Excellence. The PCs helped Excellence out of a scrape, and since then she's been their most reliable source of information. In fact, thanks in part to the DM and her well-traveled past, she knows a great deal about everything. You might say she's infallible, although her playfully conniving tiefling demeanor makes it somewhat difficult to take her at face value. When the PCs aren't sure how to proceed given what they've learned, Excellence tells the player characters that Senestrago's power has diminished of late, and he's losing ships to his rivals. Senestrago's ill fortune has bred discontent among his once faithful captains, as well as an unhealthy amount of animosity. Excellence's information spurs the player characters to investigate two local captains whose ships fly the Senestrago flag. It turns out that both captains have their eyes on Senestrago's secret cargo. The PCs decide to sow discord between the two crews and keep them distracted while they snatch the eggs from under Senestrago's nose.

There are many archetypal D&D characters, from the drunken dwarf fighter who doesn't get along with elves to the kleptomaniacal halfling rogue who picks the pockets of every merchant he meets. There are recurring archetypes for nonplayer characters as well. **One of my favorites is the know-it-all.**

I believe every campaign needs at least one know-it-all NPC, and the sooner the player characters make his or her acquaintance, the better. The know-it-all might possess clarity of mind that borders on omniscience, or the know-it-all might be a streetwise scoundrel with an unfailingly reliable information network. However the know-it-all comes by his or her knowledge, it is consistently "on the money." The know-it-all might be someone the PCs like and respect, or someone with whom the PCs deal with out of dire necessity. The important thing is that they have access to someone who knows more than they do about a great many things. The know-it-all helps keep the campaign moving forward when the PCs are floundering or otherwise lack direction. Here's someone the DM can use to communicate information he or she wants the players to know—information that isn't easily obtained by other means.

There might be limits to the know-it-all's knowledge, and the campaign can (over time) introduce different know-it-all NPCs

possessing different fields of experience. The one characteristic they share, however, is reliability. If your campaign is anything like mine, it's layered with deception, and the players need at least one NPC whose word they can trust and who will serve as a light in muddy waters. That's not to say that the know-it-all is there to solve every mystery the campaign has to offer. Some know-it-alls are better at providing advice than useful information. However, if the player characters are stuck, the know-it-all serves to guide them true. The know-it-all might not know who murdered the town burgomaster, but he or she might advise the heroes to attend the funeral and pay close attention to those in attendance in case an important clue presents itself, or the know-it-all might "have it on good authority" that the burgomaster was investigating rumors of a thieves' guild moving into town. The know-it-all might not have the answer written in blood, but the know-it-all can help keep the players on track.

Lessons Learned

It's easy to imagine a situation in which lazy or befuddled players might become so dependent on their know-it-all NPC that they refuse to think for themselves. This has never been a problem for me because my players are smart, and they know the risk of "going back to the well too often." They also know it doesn't take much DM effort to make their beloved know-it-all NPC "disappear." You don't need to kill off the know-it-all at the first hint of player abuse. Perhaps the meeting is thwarted when the know-it-all is drawn away by some other minor crisis; the players should take that as a warning. The know-it-all isn't just sitting around waiting for the PCs to show up with another problem to solve. The sooner my players realize that the know-it-all serves me as much as it serves them, the better.

My tiefling know-it-all, Excellence, is a spirited minx who uses her tail to flirt with men under the table. Her sexual escapades and playful indiscretion conceal a tough adolescence growing up in a society that treats tieflings as criminals. With acutely honed perception and insight, she casts her sharp gaze around a tavern full of drunken brutes and finds the one assassin hiding in their midst. She also never forgets a face or a name. And if you need to contact someone in the Horned Alliance or need to find someone who might have an orb of dragonkind to sell, she'll point you in the right direction.

Your know-it-all might be a different sort of character, such as a retired assassin with friends in low places, a reticent sage who's terrified of his own shadow, a mad wizard's talking cat familiar, a sarcastic efreet whom the heroes can summon in times of great need, or whatever else you dream up. Regardless of the form your know-it-all takes, this font of information and sage advice must be effective in his or her role. In the same way that villains must do villainous things to preserve their "evil cred," the know-it-all must not fail to be reliable or insightful, lest the character lose his or her purpose and the players no longer seek the NPC's knowledge or advice in times of need.

Here, then, are my guiding rules for know-it-all NPCs:

- **A know-it-all does a great service to your campaign by feeding the PCs truthful information or advice that keeps things moving forward.**
- **A know-it-all doesn't need to know everything about every single thing, just everything about many things.**
- **A know-it-all never steers the PCs wrong but has better things to do than follow the party around all day.**

Until the next encounter!

Kitchen Sinks and Frying Pan

4/19/2012

MONDAY NIGHT. *The epic-level heroes stand accused of heinous crimes against the Dragovar Empire. Rather than flee for their lives, they allow themselves to be taken prisoner so that they can gain an audience with General Kamal, the Imperial Regent, but not to plead their case. They intend to expose him as a mind flayer thrall and, in so doing, paint themselves as imperial*

loyalists. Talk about a risky gamble!
The heroes find themselves standing face-to-face with Kamal. Watching his back: an honor guard of Tiamat-worshiping dragonborn anti-paladins and scores of minions. The players think they have a fighting chance, and then out of nowhere a gigantic blue dragon and her brood arrive, and suddenly the likelihood of victory evaporates. A desperate stab at diplomacy proves fruitless, and as the battle erupts, scary reinforcements arrive to replace Kamal's slain minions while the anti-paladins turn their damage-dealing attacks into healing fuel for their dark general.
The battle lasts the entire session. When all's said and done, three of the six player characters have died spectacularly, and two more characters have turned invisible and withdrawn from the fight. The party wizard casts a mighty spell that sounds Kamal's death knell, but as the Imperial Regent is engulfed in a magical blast of elemental energy, I flash back to a familiar scene that played out four sessions earlier: The party's naked halfling rogue is a prisoner of the Vost Miraj, the imperial spy network. Zarkhrysa, the head of the agency, offers to use her influence and the information in her possession to turn the heroes from wanted criminals into saviors of the empire, on the condition that the rogue yield control of his private spy network (which he's been cultivating since mid-paragon tier). Four weeks ago, the rogue declined and escaped captivity, but he was forced to abandon all his gear. Among the rogue's belongings, Zarkhrysa found a single-use magic item called an hourglass talisman, a powerful device that allows its user to travel back in time briefly to affect changes in the campaign's history. Ironically, the players had been saving the talisman for the next time they faced a potential TPK, but they'd forgotten about it. It certainly never occurred to them that a villain might use the item and, in the process, put one character in the position of having to choose who lives and who dies.
When I planned the climactic encounter with General Kamal, I deliberately stacked the deck in the villain's favor knowing that if things went horribly awry, the Vost Miraj had the party's hourglass talisman. Accustomed to getting what she wants, Zarkhrysa uses the talisman to travel back in time to give the halfling rogue another chance to give her what she wants, and she's informed enough to know what will happen if he refuses a second time. The question is, will Oleander give up control of his spy network to save the lives of three companions killed in the future, or will he allow history to repeat itself and live with the outcome of the battle against General Kamal?

I cackle with glee when the player characters come into possession of powerful magic items, only to let them fall into the hands of villains who use them to make the PCs' lives a living hell. It's not something you can plan for, and it's not actually the topic of this week's article. It just makes me happy.

When I first learned how to play D&D, there was very little guidance on how to build a balanced encounter, by which I mean an encounter designed to challenge player characters without outright obliterating them. TSR published a veritable horde of adventures that I could study and emulate, but close examination of those adventures yielded some interesting facts. For one thing, it wasn't uncommon to see a mid-level adventure that included low-level monsters and high-level monsters, with chambers that contained monsters by the dozens. An adventure labeled "for levels 8–12" didn't preclude anything, and the prescribed level range was at best a shot in the dark.

It wasn't until 3rd Edition that great effort was taken to compare the power level of PCs with the power level of monsters and define what constituted an easy, challenging, or overwhelming encounter. Words were written to delineate what percentage of encounters should be "appropriate" for the party's level. No doubt these efforts contributed to the longevity of many D&D campaigns, and many DMs were taught to believe that failure to adhere to certain encounter-building principles would shatter the players' enjoyment of the game. A new breed of adventures put these principles into practice, and DMs who studied them applied the lessons of balanced encounter design to their homebrewed adventures. The side effect of a system that prescribes an encounter-building formula is a tendency on the part of some DMs to make every encounter an "appropriate challenge" for the PCs, and as a consequence the players subconsciously become aware of the underlying truth: as long as they don't do anything blatantly foolhardy, the mathematics behind the encounter-building system will ensure the same

outcome over and over. And that is, in a word, dull.

When I wrote "Life's Bazaar," the first adventure in The Shackled City adventure path (which first ran in Dungeon magazine and was later published as a hardcover book by Paizo Publishing), I made the main villain a beholder. So what if the adventure was designed for first-level characters? I wanted to show DMs the extent to which encounter-building advice can be ignored and demonstrate by way of example that rules and formulas should never constrict creativity. The fact is, there are beholders in the D&D world, and they don't just show up when high-level heroes come knocking. If you want to tell a memorable story, then consider the tale of the low-level heroes who survived an encounter with a beholder, or the story of how the epic-level characters came upon a treasure chamber guarded by four kobold pipsqueaks whose barks were worse than their bites. Surprises can come in all sizes and levels.

Lessons Learned

In my role at Wizards, I pay lip service to the principles of encounter design and even enforce them from time to time in published adventures, but in my own games I do not measure an encounter in terms of level or balance. I build encounters that I think will be fun and result in some memorable or exciting moments that the players will remember. The only burden I carry as the Dungeon Master is to be FAIR, but let's talk about what that word means in the context of running a D&D campaign. In my opinion, a "fair" encounter is one that allows for multiple outcomes. A fair encounter presents players with real choices and decisions, the consequences of which could lead to a completely unexpected and unplanned outcome. An unfair encounter is one where the conclusion is foregone. An unfair encounter turns your players into puppets unable to do anything you haven't allowed for.

I can get away with throwing everything including the kitchen sink at my players, as long as I honor the terms of our unspoken social contract. My players need to know that I'm on their side, that I'm rooting for their characters, and that I'll do whatever it takes to keep the campaign from becoming tiresome without depriving them of their ability to affect what happens. One cure for a predictable campaign is to put the PCs in a situation they're ill equipped to handle, encourage them to consider unorthodox tactics, and be open-minded enough to let the players imagine solutions you hadn't considered. As a philosophy, it's not without risks, but if my intentions are transparent, my players are more likely to pin any unfortunate outcome on their own decisions and bad luck. I'll let them flail about, find their way around obvious hurdles, create their own hurdles, and even leap from the proverbial frying pan into the fire if that's what they really want to do. And if they're genuinely screwed, I'll try not to laugh at their misfortune, and I might just throw water instead of gasoline on the fire so that the campaign doesn't go up in flames.

Which brings us to this past Monday night. I threw a kitchen sink at the party in the form of a gargantuan blue dragon, and consequently the players knew they had very few rounds to expose General Kamal's true nature. However, an invisible imp that the PCs had unwittingly summoned one week earlier thwarted their negotiations, drew attention away from Kamal, and incapacitated the party's dragonborn rogue at a critical moment. Add to that a string of botched saving throws and scores of minions dealing 20 damage per hit. And yet, even with overwhelming foes arrayed against them, the PCs ultimately accomplished what they set out to do. Kamal was slain after being exposed as a monster. The hourglass talisman was my back-up plan in case of TPK, but I ended up using it as a cliffhanger instead. There's a lot hinging on one character's dilemma, and I look forward to seeing how it pans out.
Until the next encounter!

Cuts and Splinters

4/5/2012

MONDAY NIGHT. *The epic-level heroes are wanted for crimes against the Dragovar Empire. They stand*

accused of crashing a flying citadel into the capital city, killing the imperial regent, impersonating imperial officials, assaulting a military stronghold, killing a witness under military protection and stealing her corpse, slaughtering dozens of Dragovar soldiers, and conspiracy to overthrow the government. Now, in all fairness, a pair of evil NPCs named Kharl and Nemencia crashed the citadel into Io'calioth; our "heroes" simply decided to do nothing about it.
Cornered in a run-down theater and confronted with the real possibility of a TPK, the heroes summon an efreet who owes them a favor, and he teleports them to a remote island where they can take a much needed extended rest. However, they're forced to leave their human psion ("Kyle Rolark," played by Chris Dupuis) behind. Kyle had already met his end at the hands of two pit fiends, which paved the way for his ghost to manifest. Since then, ghost-Kyle has been hijacking bodies and using them as hosts (talk about fun!), and while possessing one such host he managed to accidentally teleport himself out of sight and out of range of his criminal companions moments before the efreet teleported them away. Since then, ghost-Kyle has been trying to reunite with the other PCs, but they're more than half a world away. There's no telling when and if they'll see Kyle again.

My players know better than to split the party, and yet it happens with alarming frequency—and not just in the Monday night game. I could charge my Wednesday night group with the same crime, and that group has more repeat offenders! Let me tell you a brief, sad little story about Garrot the fighter, played expertly (some might say incompetently) by Mat Smith. Two sessions ago, the party was fighting three different encounters at once when Garrot decided to leap onto an undead beholder and ride it around. (You think he would've learned his lesson after the Catapult incident, but no.) The death tyrant reacted by floating away, taking Garrot with it, and drifting into the middle of a vast glacial chasm filled with white dragons. (Yep, you read that right.) Last week, Garrot's friends had the option of coming to his rescue or taking sides in another fight between two mobs of NPCs. Well, long story short, Garrot was left to his own devices, fell off the beholder, took a pile of damage as he slammed into the jagged floor of the chasm some 200 feet below, and then was flash-frozen and eaten by the dragons.

But I depress.

In my 3rd Edition campaign, whenever the party splits, I would deal with each party "splinter" separately, making one group wait while the other group's current misadventure played out. Then, at an appropriately dramatic or tense moment, I would shift my attention to the waiting group for a while until an opportunity came to put them on hold and return to the first group. It has the same effect as cut scenes in movies—a simple trick that allows the audience to follow two or more narratives that unfold simultaneously in different locations. By the end of the session, every player felt like they'd been given equal time, albeit the equivalent of a half session's worth of attention. Invariably what happens is players become disinterested when the spotlight's no longer on them; they start texting friends or decide now's the time to strike up a mildly distracting side conversation. You would think that these bouts of inactivity would urge them not to split the party in the future, but no. My players never really learned that lesson. Most of them are in my 4th Edition campaign, and splitting the party is what Chris Champagne, one of my newer players, would call "a clear and present danger" every time they sit down to play.

When the party splits, a DM needs to be prepared to jump back and forth between the various fragments until an opportunity to reunite the PCs rears its beautiful head. However, these days I tend to use the "back-and-forth" approach only as a last resort. I've found another approach I like better, and it's effective even when one or more of the splinter groups aren't in combat.

Here's how it works: Regardless of the number of splintered-off party members, everyone rolls initiative, and I use the initiative order to govern the flow of the session. Sounds simple, and it is. To take an example from this past Monday night, ghost-Kyle spent the majority of the session in spiritual possession of Thorbalt Mithralstar, dwarven son of Sea King Mithralstar, using the dwarf's good name and influence to finagle passage on a ship. The rest of the party spent the same session trying to stay one step ahead of their Dragovar pursuers while dealing with some

infernal beasts they accidentally pulled through a tapestry depicting the Nine Hells (it's a long story fraught with far-reaching consequences). Regardless of ghost-Kyle's separation from his friends, everyone was in initiative order for the entire night, and every time we came to ghost-Kyle's turn, the action would suddenly shift to Thorbalt Mithralstar in Io'calioth. Since he wasn't in combat, ghost-Kyle's turn would sometimes entail more than a single round of actions and allow for such things as a short conversation with a dwarf NPC (not in Dwarven, because—quelle surprise—Kyle doesn't speak the language), or a botched attempt to lose a pair of human handlers assigned to follow Mithralstar and keep him out of trouble. However, his turn was not markedly longer than anyone else's because, as a DM, I'm trained to think of initiative as a way to keep the action moving from one player to the next.

In a recent Wednesday night game, Xanthum the gnome bard (played by Curt Gould) blasted himself onto another plane when he accidentally activated his extradimensional cloak inside a portable hole, and he spent the better part of a session trapped in the Astral dominion of a Greyhawk deity (Istus) and isolated from the rest of the party. However, I kept Xanthum in the initiative order and circled back to him every time his turn came up. Curt was kept in the game, but he wasn't given any more attention than any other party member, which kept the other players from drifting off when Curt's turn came around.

Lessons Learned

Relying on the initiative count to pace the session has a couple advantages over the more traditional approach of dealing with one party splinter at a time:

- The initiative count gives you the feeling of "cut scenes" but lets players know when their turns are coming up. It makes it harder for players to ignore the part of the session that doesn't directly involve them.
- The initiative count removes the burden of having to guarantee every player equal play time and lets the DM focus on the fun stuff: listening, reacting to the players, and improvising.

Well, as they say in television, that's a wrap for this week. I'm off to peruse a dazzling array of dungeons submitted as part of the Dungeon Map contest. Thanks to everyone who submitted an entry. Oh, and if you have an idea or topic for a future DM Experience article, leave a quick comment.
Until the next encounter!

Never Surrender

3/29/2012

MONDAY NIGHT. *Cornered by pit fiends, Oleander the halfling rogue (played by Peter Schaefer) decides to go down fighting rather than surrender. Agents of the Vost Miraj (the Dragovar Empire's spy network) recover Oleander's corpse, raise him from the dead, and trap him inside a giant hollow cannonball aboard a docked Dragovar warship. Zarkhrysa, the Vost Miraj leader, wants to fold Oleander's spy network into hers, and so she offers him a deal. In exchange for his spy network, she'll release Oleander from captivity and help the PCs avoid future entanglements with the Dragovar Empire, which currently views them as terrorists and traitors. Oleander isn't ready to relinquish control of his guild, but he doesn't let on. Left alone to consider Zarkhrysa's "generous offer," he uses one of the abilities of his epic destiny (Thief of Legend) to "steal" his giant cannonball prison, effectively teleporting it away. Once freed from captivity, he sneaks off the warship and runs naked through the naval district of Io'calioth. Oh, did I fail to mention that the Vost Miraj took all of his stuff?*

When the going gets tough, most player characters would rather die than surrender, and that's a pity. The classic jailbreak scenario is a staple of fiction (it happens all the time in James Bond movies), but it's tough to pull off in a D&D campaign. You can't exactly blame the players for making it difficult, either: To surrender means to place your character's destiny and magic items firmly in the hands of the Dungeon Master, and speaking frankly, not every DM is accustomed to dealing with that situation when it arises.

A Dungeon Master who designs an encounter specifically to capture the PCs is, in my opinion, wasting time. Players know when the DM is angling to subdue their characters, and they will exhaust every resource and exploit every rule to ensure an altogether different outcome. I never build encounters designed to paint players into a corner where their only option is surrender. Let's face it — as long as characters have the option to go down fighting, surrender always seems like the less heroic choice. More players would rather shout "Never surrender!" than "Never say die!" In light of this reality, I try to create challenging encounters that, based on number and level of the enemies, might be more than the characters can handle. (I say might because it's hard to predict how clever tactics and good dice rolls will affect the outcome. I've seen a lucky run of critical hits turn a battle on its head in a matter of rounds.) My hope is that, over time, I can change the party's default motto from "Never surrender!" to "Live to fight another day!" But I still have a long way to go before surrender becomes anything but a last resort.

Neither my Monday night group nor my Wednesday night group has ever surrendered in its entirety. Both groups have experienced TPKs, and I've managed to capture as many as three PCs at once in the Monday game (recently, at epic tier) and four PCs at once in the Wednesday game (way back in the middle of the heroic tier). I occasionally capture a stray PC, but almost always because the PC was knocked unconscious or killed first. That doesn't count as "surrendering" in my book. Still, it does happen once in a blue moon. Two weeks ago, Nick DiPetrillo's epic-level warforged artificer surrendered to Dragovar authorities when he didn't have any obvious means of escape. But then, most of the warforged's magic items are built into his body and not easily removed. In other words, the character had very little to lose by surrendering. Nick's two previous characters had considerably more gear to lose, and they would sooner die than be taken prisoner (and perish they did).

It takes a great player to view surrender as an opportunity for fun instead of a punishment for failure, and it takes a great DM to realize that surrender can be the catalyst for some awesome heroics and memorable campaign moments. If you can get a player character to surrender, you've achieved something quite special: You've gotten a player to place his or her trust in your storytelling skill and temporarily relinquish control of his or her character's fate. The absolute worst response is to brutally punish the player for that decision and make him or her regret letting the character be taken alive. Before you can expect characters to surrender, you have to convince your players that surrendering isn't a fate worse than death — no easy feat, but I think I'm making some headway convincing my players that surrendering has certain advantages. The trick is to convince them that the following things are true:

Surrender doesn't mean the campaign's over.

If your players know in their hearts that you won't use a character's surrender as a way to punish "bad play" but as an opportunity for the character to reverse his or her misfortune in some fantastic way, they won't regard surrender as the end of their characters' adventuring careers. Even if they don't like to admit it, D&D players understand that fictional heroes are supposed to have ups and downs. Nothing is more heroic than watching a character overcome a great disadvantage, especially when he or she must rely on his wits and skills instead of a plethora of all-purpose magic items. Depending on the situation, you might need to take steps to expedite the character's escape by fabricating a serendipitous occurrence (such as a careless guard leaving a prison key within easy reach) or by allowing NPCs or even the gods to intervene on the heroes' behalf. Bad things happen to PCs all the time, so it's often a pleasant surprise to see something go the party's way by sheer DM fiat. I tend to adopt this helpful mentality whenever the characters are split up and I want to reunite them as quickly as possible.

Items lost should be regained eventually.

For many players, nothing sucks more than

losing hard-won loot, particularly magic items that add bonuses to defenses and attack rolls. If a PC surrenders, I make it a point to reunite the character with his loot (or treasure of comparable value) at the earliest, most plausible moment, even if it means helping them escape. When Jeremy Crawford's human wizard was captured and hauled off to the island prison of Zardkarath, he was stripped of his gear. Well into the voyage, a sympathetic NPC lurking aboard the prison ship (actually Bruce Cordell's retired character, Melech) helped Jeremy's wizard break free and showed him where his magical gear was stored. Once he was reunited with his gear, the wizard was able to take care of himself and teleport off the ship.

Magic items aren't all that important.

Would it ruin my campaign to deprive the heroes of every magic item in their possession? Surely not! Putting aside the fact that D&D characters are much more than the sum of their magic items, I like to think that I'm a fair and fun-loving DM, and naturally I would balance the campaign accordingly. There are a handful of magic items that are actually fun to use because they inspire creativity (hats of disguise, for example), but most items don't define a character in the ways that truly matter. Peter Schaefer's epic-level halfling rogue, who escaped captivity two sessions ago, has been running around without gear (and scant little clothing) ever since. Although there's a lot of cool stuff Peter would like to get back eventually, he's not exactly on death's door. Oleander's recent misadventures have forced the character to rely more on his skills and his colleagues and less on magic items. It's been an entertaining couple of weeks, not just for Peter but for everyone else at the game table, and Oleander has a new quest: get his stuff back!

Capture should come with a reward.

Have a captured character learn something important while in captivity. Let the character encounter a potential ally. Give the character a chance to interact with his captors in a manner not normally possible. These "rewards" pay off in terms of story and character development. When Baharoosh, Stan's dragonborn rogue, was captured following a botched assault on a Dragovar stronghold, he was delivered to the Vost Miraj, handed a quest, and released. In effect, the Vost Miraj gave him a choice: *Complete this quest for us, or we'll hunt you down and kill you.* In their arrogance, the Vost Miraj made the classic blunder of thinking they could control the hero through fear. Meanwhile, while in captivity, Baharoosh discovered that the Vost Miraj was working closely with an imperial vizier named Sezerivian to eliminate one of his political rivals. This kind of information wouldn't normally find its way into the party's hands, but Baharoosh's capture unearthed a campaign secret that resourceful PCs might exploit in the future. When all's said and done, I've rewarded *Baharoosh* for being captured, not punished him.

Lessons Learned

As mentioned earlier, I don't recommend building encounters specifically designed to capture the PCs. It's better to let players come to the conclusion that surrender is a viable option, if not the most desirable outcome. I can take steps to make the surrender option more palatable, including making my villains less interested in murdering the heroes and more interested in taking them alive, or throwing wave after wave of threats at them until battle fatigue sets in. However, such approaches are rarely successful. Here are two other approaches I've tried, with mixed results:

Divide and Conquer: If a player isolates his or her character from the rest of the party, that character suddenly loses access to a lot of party resources (buff spells, healing, beneficial auras, and whatnot) and becomes measurably weaker. Personally, I'm ruthless when it comes to punishing players who split the party. (Just ask Wil Wheaton!) My bad guys focus their attacks on the isolated character and attempt to cut off all means of escape by closing doors, blocking line of sight to other party members, and using powers that hinder movement or reduce the number of actions the character can take on his or her turn. Once the character is subdued, I can try to bully

the other heroes into surrendering by threatening violence against the captured character. More often than not, the remaining players write off the captured character and continue fighting for their lives, but the idea of surrendering is at least discussed.

Player Absence: If a player is absent and his or her character is "in play," I believe it's within my power as DM to use that character as a plot device and have the character surrender in the face of insurmountable odds (if for no other reason than to keep the character alive until the player returns). In a recent example from the Monday campaign, Matt Sernett was absent for one session, and his human fighter was captured and hauled off to a jailhouse for his alleged involvement in criminal activities (actually, there was nothing "alleged" about it). The other PCs were in no position to do anything, having already fled the scene, so it wasn't a stretch to say Matt's character had simply surrendered. One week later, Matt was back, and a sympathetic NPC helped Bartho escape captivity, which led to a brief yet harrowing wagon chase through the streets of Io'calioth (the Dragovar capital) and ended with Bartho flinging himself into the harbor, activating his seahorse figurine of wondrous power, and swimming away.

Under normal circumstances, the option to surrender should be a player choice, and some players will never surrender regardless of the assurances you make that their characters won't be screwed or forever deprived of their hard-earned loot. For some players, 'tis better to die with sword swinging than to give up one's blade to an enemy. So be it. That doesn't prevent you from turning a TPK into a future jailbreak scenario. Which reminds me: At some point, I'd like to talk about nigh invincible epic-level heroes and the challenges of taking down an epic-level party. Sounds like a worthy topic for a future installment. In the meantime, if you haven't submitted your entry for last week's contest, get cracking! The deadline is fast approaching. Until the next encounter!

Waxing Gygaxian

3/22/2012

MONDAY NIGHT. *Many moons ago, the dwarven clanlords of Gar Morra and the human barons of Bael Nerath crafted a hammer symbolizing their alliance, and the weapon was blessed by exarchs of Moradin and Erathis. It was then placed in a neutral stronghold called Harth Fantaro, where it remained until a cataclysm caused the citadel to sink into the ocean. Still, the hammer remained safe inside its extradimensional vault, watched over by the vault's astral giant architect . . . or so the story goes.*

At the end of paragon tier, the Monday night heroes made good on a promise and agreed to help the Deeplantern Guild (deep sea explorers) retrieve the Hammer of the Gods from Harth Fantaro, thinking it might fortify the squabbling dwarven clanholds and human baronies against the oppressive Dragovar Empire. The party found its way into the extradimensional vault and were confounded by a dungeon of shifting rooms, each one holding a small dwarven rune on a plate of burnished gold, and each one guarded by a puzzle, trap, or guardian. Only by retrieving all fifteen runes could they obtain the hammer, and even then, I threw in a couple of "curve balls" to turn the traditional "artifact hunt" adventure on its head. First and foremost, years of isolation had driven the astral giant mad, and a recent incursion by githyanki finally caused him to snap and regard all interlopers as enemies of Erathis and Moradin. Consequently, the dungeon's immortal architect believed the heroes to be githyanki, and attacked them at every turn. Second, the Hammer of the Gods did not actually exist—the heroes had to create it themselves using the runes scattered throughout the dungeon, which have the one-time power to turn any magical or masterwork hammer into the artifact.

The dungeon itself was a series of fifteen rooms with portals linking them, but the portal destinations would shift constantly, making it difficult for heroes to map the dungeon and find their way back to the entrance chamber. It seemed very appropriate for a dungeon hidden in the Astral Sea.

I would argue (and have on several occasions) that being the editor of Dungeon magazine is the best job in the roleplaying game business. However, if someone told me I could make a career out of inventing and drawing dungeon maps, I might change my tune. I have a "thing" for D&D maps, you see.

Whereas normal people like to spend their Sundays watching football, catching a movie, visiting family, or surfing the Internet for porn, I would rather draw maps and work on my D&D campaign. Sadly, that isn't always possible. Case in point, I'm spending a Sunday afternoon writing this article. No offense, but I'd rather be designing an illithid stronghold, an archwizard's tomb, or a dragon's lair!

My earliest dungeon maps were inspired by the sprawling, Gygaxian complexes featured in early TSR products. Each level filled an entire sheet of graph paper and had the logic of a Pokémon episode, but all those meandering corridors and awkwardly shaped rooms spoke volumes about the madness of their architects. They were built to torment and confound intruders.

In the 1980s and 90s, dungeons evolved. We saw fewer labyrinthine complexes infested with bizarre menageries of monsters in favor of smaller dungeons, with arrangements of rooms and corridors that made internal sense while still proving deadly to unwanted interlopers. Dungeon designers began to think more logically, asking questions such as: Where do the monsters get their food? Where do they dispose of their garbage and go to the bathroom? What keeps the monsters from killing one another? Today, dungeons have taken a back seat to story, to the extent that some adventures and campaigns do without them. It's true! The kid in me is saddened by the fact that D&D has, for many people (including myself), "evolved" beyond the simple joy of cracking open a long-lost dungeon and spending session after session plumbing its depths for treasure and defeating monsters and traps along the way. Byzantine dungeons have been forsaken in favor of event-driven scenarios and clever plots. There have been a few memorable exceptions, mind you. Return to the Temple of Elemental Evil was very much a campaign set in a dungeon, with a thick layer of dungeon politics just to make things more interesting. Before that, we had the Night Below and Ruins of Undermountain boxed sets, which also promised and delivered subterranean campaigns.

Now, before you think I'm a D&D puritan or an old-school dungeon-hugger, let it be known that I run a 4th Edition campaign that has shockingly few dungeons. Iomandra is a world shattered into thousands of tiny islands, each one a potential adventure location with its own perils, and yet I can count on one hand the number of sprawling dungeons my Monday and Wednesday night groups have explored. Almost all of the action takes place on ships or aboveground. In my campaign, underground exploration is usually limited to sea caves, castle dungeons, and city sewers. Furthermore, such excursions rarely demand more than a session or two. To date, there have been only three elaborate dungeons that required considerable exploration time—a yuan-ti prince's tomb located on the party's home island of Irindol (heroic tier), a sunken dwarven stronghold with an extradimensional vault (paragon tier), and a crashed flying citadel buried under a mile-thick glacier (epic tier).

Iomandra is a campaign about island nations at war. The prevailing nautical theme makes it hard to justify the inclusion of more than a few monstrous dungeons. For me, this focus been mostly a blessing, since it takes a lot of time and effort to create a sprawling dungeon complex, stock it, and find ways to keep the PCs engaged week after week. Tedious dungeons are like pools of thick mud; they can slow the campaign to a crawl and make the players forget they're supposed to be having fun.

Even though my campaign doesn't focus on dungeon exploration, I use dungeons as a way to defy player expectations. When the Monday group finally decided to retrieve the Hammer of the Gods from the sunken dwarven stronghold, they were not expecting to find themselves trapped in a sprawling extradimensional dungeon complex. They were surprised and delighted when, after eight or so rooms, they still hadn't found their prize. I think the exact words were, "OMG! We're in a dungeon!" The Wednesday group had a similar reaction recently, when their hunt for a pair of fugitives — the nefarious Kharl Mystrum and Nemencia Xandros

— led them into the heart of a fallen citadel buried under ice. There's nothing like a dungeon that creeps up on your players and swallows their characters before they know it!

Lessons Learned

It almost goes without saying that the best dungeons have strong ties to the themes and/or stories of your campaign, that whatever decisions the PCs make in the dungeon will not only determine the party's fate but also the inform the direction of the campaign going forward. That's better than the alternative: a dungeon that is merely a distraction, with no lasting impact on the campaign whatsoever.

The problem with good dungeons is that they aren't easy to make. Some people are masters at it; for others, it's a real chore. That's why we have downloadable dungeon-building software that lets us create sprawling (albeit unimaginative and repetitive) dungeon levels with a few mouse clicks. Even better, we have a Google search engine; all one needs to do is type in the words "dungeon maps" to see dozens of cleverly designed dungeon complexes ripe for plunder, including several that your players aren't likely to recognize.

Rather than belabor the obvious, let me do us all a service here. Thousands of people read this column every week, and I know some small percentage of you folks are dungeon builders extraordinaire. In the interest of giving us all more dungeons to choose from, I propose the following contest:

Dungeons Map Contest!

Design an original dungeon map and send it to submissions@wizards.com as a JPG or PDF, along with a short paragraph describing who built it and why. (I'm referring not to you, but to the dungeon's in-game architect and purpose.) It can be anything, from a Gygaxian sprawl to something more "contained." For complete contest rules, eligibility requirements (sorry Quebec), and deadlines, click here.

I'll include the winning entries in an upcoming column and explain why I think they're awesome, and other DMs will be free to plunder them for their home campaigns. How cool is that? And if no one submits an entry, I'll stop writing this column and go back to designing my own dungeon maps on rainy Sunday afternoons . . . and I won't share them, either. So there.
Until the next encounter!

A Lesson of Mediocrity

3/15/2012

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. *As a consequence of several player absences, the group is smaller than normal—five players instead of seven. But no matter—a major battle had been fought and won the week before, and this week's session begins with the aftermath. The heroes have slain the red dragon Hyragos, driven off Sea King Senestrago, and claimed another ship for their burgeoning fleet. They've also freed three goliaths trapped in the dragon's prison and discovered three gold dragon eggs amid the dragon's hoard. Over the course of the evening, the heroes learn that the goliaths are criminals and exiles from their tribe. They stole the eggs in the hopes of unleashing a gold dragon's rage upon their tribe-mates, but by sheer misfortune they were captured while heading back to their island.*

A bit of roleplaying bolstered by Insight checks is enough to convince the heroes that the goliaths are evil, and so the party's interest shifts to returning the gold dragon eggs to their rightful owner . . . which leads them to the gold dragon overlord of a nearby island called Damandaros. The dragon overlord and his mate are so grateful for the eggs' return that they bestow three honors upon the party: free ship repairs, exclusive trade rights for Sea King Silvereye (played by Rodney Thompson), and permission to erect a temple in Pelor's honor, which pleases the party's goliath battlemind, Ravok (played by Andrew Finch).

The session ends with Ravok taking his evil goliath kin to a desolate island aboard a submersible vessel captained by Nevin, one of Rodney Thompson's retired characters, while the rest of the characters head to the raft-city of Anchordown in pursuit of their next quest. Halfway to their new home of exile, the goliath criminals break their bonds and try to seize the submersible vessel, but

Ravok and Captain Nevin manage to kill them in what amounts to the only combat of the evening.

I might not be the best Dungeon Master in the world, but I'm good enough to know when I'm off my game, and this past Wednesday I was quite tired and out of sorts. My day had been filled with meetings, furious email exchanges, and the dousing of many fires. I had half a mind to cancel the game, but five of my seven players were eager to play, so, of course, the game must go on! My D&D players need their weekly fill of slaughter, Byzantine plots, and roleplaying.

My players are accustomed to NPCs infused with lifelike personalities. They like the funny accents, the first-person acting, and the witty repartee. But on this occasion, I was feeling lazy. I found myself describing what the NPCs say in the third person, rather than speaking with their voices. "The gold dragon thanks you for returning the eggs," and so on. There were also many times that evening where I said nothing at all, but rather listened to the players discuss their many options, including the ramifications of letting the three goliath exiles go free. Chris Champagne, one of the players, actually dozed off (I guess his day had been a lot like mine). To his credit, his character was physically absent for that part of the session, having used a teleportation circle to deliver Sea King Senestrago's captured concubines to another of the party's ships.

The long periods of DM silence went relatively unnoticed because the conscious players were fully engaged, plotting their next move. Normally I use moments such as these to chart the course of the campaign or scope out the next encounter, but on this occasion, I found it hard to stay a couple steps ahead of the players. I could barely keep up. "We set sail for Damandaros," they would say, and I'd be like, "Uh, okay. The voyage takes six days. When you arrive, a dragonborn officer in the service of the island's magistrate greets you. The officer wears a gold dragon mask and receives your tribute for the island's dragon overlord." Normally I'd ask the players what their characters do during the six-day voyage, and then describe the island of Damandaros as they approach, but not this time. That's when I knew I was really off my game.

Lessons Learned

My lackluster DMing notwithstanding, I was reminded of something important. The thought came to me just before the three goliath criminals tried to commandeer the party's submersible, which, in hindsight, was nothing but a desperate attempt on my part to end the evening with some violence and invalidate the players' rather uncharacteristic act of mercy. And here's what I learned: Despite my less than stellar performance, the players had a great time. When the session ended, my players thanked me for the terrific game, to which I responded with silent surprise. I've earned similar reactions before, usually after a gripping cliffhanger or bloody climactic battle against a major campaign villain. On this occasion, I felt like I'd underserved them, and yet they hardly seemed to notice. They had spent the last three-and-a-half hours arguing about the rights and wrongs of killing a trio of goliath criminals who posed no real threat to them, decided on various courses of action, received the good graces of a gold dragon overlord, and watched the goliaths throw away their lives in a failed attempt to win their freedom. To them, it was all very gratifying.

As long as my players have choices to make, engaging problems to solve, and moments where they feel like things are finally going their way, they can handle an evening without the funny accents, the first-person acting, the sudden reversals, and the clever parlor tricks. The goliath villains got their final comeuppance, the heroes found a powerful new ally, they've taken the campaign in a new direction, and I didn't pull the rug out from under them (as I occasionally do when things are going well). I couldn't have planned it better.

If your players care about what's happening in your campaign world, you don't always need to dazzle them. I've found the same thing to be true with many beloved TV shows: once I discover that I like the show's characters and the situations in which they find themselves, not every episode needs brilliant, Emmy-worthy

performances for me to continue liking the show. Because I'm hooked, I don't need to be impressed week after week. The same is true, I suppose, with my campaign. One mediocre DMing effort on my part goes unnoticed because my players are fans of the campaign, and they feel empowered to take what they've been given and run with it. Kudos to them.
Until the next encounter!

I Am Devastatorz Megabomb, Destroyer of Worlds!

3/8/2012

MONDAY NIGHT. *Things have gone poorly for the heroes of late, due in no small part to their recent actions and misadventures.*
Several months ago in "campaign time," the player characters allowed a group of human terrorists to crash a flying citadel into Io'calioth, the capital city of the Dragovar Empire, and were spotted fleeing the scene on phantom steeds. After nearly a year of "real time," an unfinished quest finally lured them back to Io'calioth, whereupon they were recognized and accused of consorting with the terrorists. To make matters worse, the heroes had given the Vost Miraj (the imperial spy network) ample proof of their secret alliance with the Knights of Ardyn, a group of non-evil renegades wanted by the Dragovar Empire for treason. Despite the accusations lobbed against them, the heroes managed to deceive local authorities long enough to avoid arrest and immediately took refuge in the home of Torel Winterleaf, a powerful merchant and sometime ally. The heroes used the Winterleaf mansion as a base from which to launch an assault against a tiefling crime lord hiding in the city's martial district (the aforementioned "unfinished quest"). The assault didn't go as planned, and once again the Dragovar authorities swooped down upon them. Faced with a host of new criminal charges, the heroes scattered to the four winds and reassembled at Lord Winterleaf's home, unaware that they were being tracked. A squad of dragonborn death knights sworn to defend the empire promptly seized the estate, but with assistance from Lord Winterleaf's daughter, Talia, the heroes escaped once more. Or, rather, most of them did.

There was a time not long ago when the heroes joined forces with the Knights of Ardyn and saved the Dragovar Empire, but news of their heroism has not yet reached individuals in power. So instead of being lauded as saviors of the empire, they're wanted criminals. Moreover, their human psion (played by Chris Dupuis) is dead, their human wizard (played by Jeremy Crawford) has been captured and placed aboard a Dragovar warship bound for the island prison of Zardkarath, their halfling rogue (played by Peter Schaefer) is in the clutches of the Vost Miraj, and their poor ally Lord Winterleaf has been arrested and charged with conspiracy and treason. Yes, I'm a foul DM, and I know it sounds unjust. But I prefer to think of it as fair turnabout for the mega-powerful magic item they acquired twenty levels ago.

I've said it before, but I think a strong campaign needs moments when the heroes feel like kings of the world and moments when they're on the ropes. Although the Monday group has enjoyed its fair share of trying times, they're in a real pickle now. There's nothing quite like watching epic-level heroes run for their lives, despite the fact that early in the campaign they gained some magic items and powers well beyond their level. It just goes to prove how much control a DM has over the balance of power.

At some point, every DM makes the "mistake" of handing out too much treasure or giving PCs access to magic items they probably don't deserve. I put the word "mistake" in quotation marks because, after years of DMing, I've come to the conclusion that it's not always a mistake to do so, and even if it is, it's easily corrected over time. When the Monday night game was still young, the 4th-level heroes traveled to the Feywild and fought an exiled fomorian witch with a glass eye that was actually a +3 dragon orb — a level 12 magic item that allowed its wielder to dominate and control dragons at will. The heroes hailed from an island ruled by an evil green dragon overlord, and they needed the orb to defeat it, but the battle against the witch didn't go well. Thanks in part to the four faerie dragons under the witch's control, the heroes were captured and forced to complete a quest on the witch's behalf. By the time that business was concluded, they were 5th level and had found a way to break the fomorian witch's evil magic. They slew the giant and pried the dragon orb from her eye socket.

The dragon orb was a well-earned reward, far

above what's considered appropriate treasure for a 5th-level party. Not only did the item make the battle against the green dragon overlord much easier, it played a prominent role in various other encounters throughout the heroic and paragon tier. If you've read my campaign wiki, you know that dragons are everywhere in the Iomandra campaign. Every time I threw a dragon at the heroes, the dragon orb played a pivotal role in the outcome of the encounter. It gave the heroes a HUGE advantage. And y'know what? That turned out to be perfectly acceptable. My players loved it! The orb made them feel mighty powerful. They'd make a dragon attack its allies, divulge the location of its secret hoard, and other things I dare not mention.

As a DM, I enjoy giving player characters that sense of invincibility. Sometimes it's a cleverly crafted illusion that's dashed as soon as the next threat rears its ugly head, and other times it's genuine — as happens when PCs get their hands on artifacts and other powerful items. It doesn't bother me if the players turn an otherwise challenging encounter into a cakewalk thanks to some "quick fix" item, killer spell, or clever trap. I say let 'em enjoy the moment, for surely the wheels of fate will grind them down next time. And if not then, surely the time after that!

Eventually the Monday night group surpassed their +3 dragon orb in terms of level. Realizing they could hardly get by without it, they paid tens of thousands of gold pieces to have the orb's enhancement bonus boosted. Wisest money they ever spent, too! Time and again, the orb proved invaluable, though once in a while a draconic adversary would resist the orb's spell and take umbrage. Because of these wonderful "uh-oh" moments, I've never felt a need to deprive the Monday nighters of their precious dragon orb. The same thing cannot be said for the Wednesday night group, which also came into possession of such an item. Early on in epic tier, the character wielding the orb fell unconscious and a fire titan, having witnessed the orb's effect on his red dragon companion, picked it up and crushed it in his hand. Oh my, the looks of horror on the players' faces! WOO-HOO, Bastard DM rides again! (The Monday night players can't be the only ones who suffer, am I right?)

Dragon Orb **Level 12+ Rare**

This 5-inch diameter crystal sphere is filled with scintillating mist that periodically assumes dragonlike forms.

Lvl 12	+3	13,000 gp	Lvl 22	+5	325,000 gp
Lvl 17	+4	65,000 gp	Lvl 27	+6	1,625,000 gp

Implement (Orb)

Enhancement: Attack rolls and damage rolls

Critical: +1d6 damage per plus, or +1d10 damage per plus against creatures with the dragon keyword

Property

Creatures with the dragon keyword that are within 20 squares of the orb take a penalty to attack rolls made against the orb wielder as well as a penalty to saving throws. These penalties are equal to the enhancement bonus of the orb.

Attack Power (charm) ✦ **At-Will** (Standard Action)

Attack: Close burst 10 (creatures with the dragon keyword in the burst); +17 vs. Will

Hit: The target is dominated until the end of your next turn.

Level 17: +22 vs. Will

Level 22: Close burst 20; +27 vs. Will

Level 27: Close burst 20; +32 vs. Will

Utility Power (psychic) ✦ **Daily** (Free Action)

Trigger: You hit at least one creature with the *dragon orb*'s attack power.

Effect: You slide one target hit with the *dragon orb*'s attack power up to 10 squares. That target also takes 1d6 psychic damage per plus of the orb, and the target is stunned until the start of your next turn.

To give this week's article a bit of meat, I'm attaching the dragon orb stat block I created for my 4th Edition game. You won't find this item in the D&D Character Builder or in any other published source because (1) it was designed specifically for my campaign and (2) a magic item with an at-will dominate power is insanely good, even if it affects only dragons. Feel free to hand out these orbs like cheap Halloween candy — just brace yourself for the sugar rush!

Lessons Learned

This week's "lesson" is a simple one, but it took me several campaigns to realize: It's okay to break the rules when it comes to doling out magic items, and a busted item doesn't need to spell a campaign's demise.

It's cool to give PCs items much too powerful for their level. Such items can help define characters in much the same way Stormbringer helps to define Elric or Guenhwyvar helps to define Drizzt. More than level-appropriate items, they become part of a character's (if not the entire adventuring party's) identity.

It's been my experience that a strong campaign is highly resistant to damage from world-destroying characters and their overpowered magic items. Just because Devastatorz Megabomb, a king among overpowered characters, seems invincible at 5th level doesn't mean he won't get smacked around at 15th level or 25th level. As long as the campaign keeps forging ahead, you'll find ways to humble even the mightiest character.

Granted, an ill-gotten and ill-used magic item can negatively impact your enjoyment of the game. However, I urge you, fellow DM, not to take drastic action unless the item is also causing grief to one or more of your players. In that case, it's best to act quickly lest the campaign lose its charm. Here, then, are three tried-and-true ways to divorce a busted item from the party without simply making it disappear:

- You can put the heroes in dire situations where the busted item avails them not.
- You can have the busted item gain sentience, become willful, and lose its appeal.
- You can have a powerful deity show up, declare that the item is being recalled because of some manufacturer's defect, and hand its wielder a coupon for 25% off his or her next magic item purchase.

Okay, maybe that last suggestion isn't so great, but I'm sure you'll think of something clever if you're patient. And if you can't think of a clever way to separate Sir Megabomb from his world-shattering weapon of choice, share your concern with the players and ask them for advice on what should be done. But know this: throwing the whole campaign out the window isn't your only option.
Until the next encounter!

The Storytelling King

3/1/2012

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. *The heroes have summoned the Sea Kings to Krakenholt to discuss an alliance. Conspicuous by his absence is their hated enemy, Sea King Senestrago. When he finally shows up, he brings his entire fleet with him and attacks his Sea King rivals, triggering a massive naval engagement.*
The heroes board Senestrago's flagship and begin kicking ass, but the tide turns. They're spending a LOT of healing surges, they're spreading their damage too thinly among too many enemies, and Senestrago's escort ships are sending reinforcements. Back and forth the battle rages until Senestrago appears from below decks. Before the PCs can focus fire on him, a red dragon plucks the Sea King from the battle and spirits him away to safety. After two sessions of combat, Senestrago's flagship is destroyed, and the remains of his fleet are scattered to the four winds.
Rather than let Senestrago regain his strength, the heroes chase him all the way back to his secret base on the island of Hyragos. There, the defeated Sea King negotiates with dwarven agents of the Ironstar Cartel to procure a massive iron torpedo capable of obliterating a small island. Senestrago plans to use it against Krakenholt, but when the PCs are spotted sneaking onto the island, one of the Ironstar Cartel dwarves rigs the torpedo's timer to explode in 10 rounds. While the party's goliath battlemind single-handedly confronts and kills the red dragon, the other PCs try to disarm the torpedo, prevent the Ironstar Cartel ship from escaping, and confront the evil Sea King. When all's said and done, the dragon is slain, the bomb is disarmed, the ship is stopped, but Senestrago once again escapes amid the chaos. I, for one, am very surprised. Delighted, but surprised.

I believe that I possess the four basic qualities of a good DM: I'm fair, I improvise well, I'm self-aware enough to recognize my strengths

and weaknesses, and I don't take myself or my campaign too seriously. About a third of everything else that defines my DMing style came to me the same way a skier learns to fly and a guitarist learns to rock the house: years of practice. Another third came from reading fiction (primarily horror, science fiction, and fantasy) and nonfiction (primarily ancient history). The rest I picked up from various actors, directors, and writers.

DMing is a complex activity that demands a lot of skills. The ability to describe things in a succinct yet evocative way is something I learned from Stephen King, and it was the subject of last week's article. This week, I'd like to share with you a few snippets from two of King's nonfiction works, On Writing and Danse Macabre. A lot of his discoveries about writing fiction (and not just horror fiction) also apply to DMing, which, as I've said before, is a similar kind of storytelling.

Lessons Learned

Let me share with you some of my favorite passages from On Writing and Danse Macabre and explain how they've helped shape my own DMing style. Do they ring as true for you as they do for me? If what King is saying strikes you as wrong or unsettling, like the off angles in Shirley Jackson's Hill House, I urge you not to turn away but study them more closely, for these aren't the ramblings of a madman but the revelations of a master storyteller.

1. Start with a "what if."
The most interesting situations can usually be expressed as a What-if question: What if vampires invaded a small New England village? ('Salem's Lot) What if a policeman in a remote Nevada town went berserk and started killing everyone in sight? (Desperation) What if a cleaning woman suspected of a murder she got away with (her husband) fell under suspicion for a murder she did not commit (her employer)? (Dolores Claiborne) What if a young mother and her son became trapped in their stalled car by a rabid dog? (Cujo). — SK
King asserts that he never writes outlines for his novels and never gets hung up on plot. In fact, he regards plot with great suspicion. Instead, he creates characters, puts them into "what if" situations, and lets the story evolve from there. When I prep an adventure for my D&D campaign, I don't waste time and effort trying to plan what the outcome will be. I'll let the players' actions and the random die rolls determine that. But when I'm trying to come up with adventure ideas, I do it in much the same way King does (or rather, the way I envision he does). It starts with a what-if question:

- What if a tiefling player character who died the previous session came back as a pit fiend?
- What if the Raven Queen commanded one of the characters to kill his companions because they know her true name?
- What if the party's ship was possessed by a succubus who died aboard the vessel?
- What if someone found a warforged pinned under an anchor at the bottom of the sea?
- What if the heroes discovered a network of secret demiplanes used by worshipers of Vecna to spy on the Maimed Lord's enemies?
- What if Sea King Senestrago decided to attack his rivals during a summit at Krakenholt?

Once I have a good what-if situation, I can let the story develop naturally over the course of however many sessions it takes. I might need to prepare a map and gather some stat blocks and miniatures ahead of time, but the plot isn't something I need to worry about, since that depends greatly on how the player characters react to the situation (and that, my friends, is beyond my control).

2. Never mind the plot.
I'm not able to guess with any accuracy how the damned thing is going to turn out, even with my inside knowledge of coming events, and . . . why worry about the ending anyway? Why be such a control freak? Sooner or later every story comes out somewhere. — SK
The best D&D adventures allow players to make real decisions that affect its outcome. Many plot-driven adventures make the mistake of driving

toward a specific endpoint, such that the PCs' actions and decisions are of little consequence. On the one hand, as a DM it's nice to know where the campaign is heading in general, but on the other hand, an adventure that requires the villain to escape or requires that the heroes be captured is just badly designed. The plot has basically rendered all other options inert, and that usually leaves players with the awful sense that they're trapped in a novel that you've already written.

DMs who are control freaks aren't self-aware enough to realize the fact, nor do they realize that their controlling behavior can trigger different forms of player rebellion. When a DM approaches me at a convention and asks for advice on dealing with unruly or disengaged players, one of the questions I ask is, "Do your players feel empowered?" This is sometimes met with a blank, confused stare. A DM can't cage players like animals and expect them to behave. As soon as players realize that they have no control over their characters' destinies, their attention quickly turns to finding ways to break out of their cages, and once they've broken free, they'll begin to run amok, resisting all attempts to lock them up again. Better to show them that they're the masters of their characters' destinies, and their choices are what shape the outcome of an adventure or a campaign.

In a recent Wednesday night game, my PCs had the villain cornered in his lair. Sea King Senestrago only escaped certain death because the party split up. Distracted by a ticking doomsday weapon, a huge red dragon, and a fleeing Ironstar Cartel ship, they tried to fight too many battles at once. Throughout the adventure, I kept thinking, this feels like a good time for the villain to die. Frankly I was surprised he got away, but his decision to flee was perfectly consistent with his cowardly nature. Will the party ever face him again? I have no clue. It's really up to the player characters. It's all about them, not the plot.

3. Looks aren't everything.

I can't remember many cases where I felt I had to describe what the people in a story of mine looked like—I'd rather let the reader supply the faces, the builds, and the clothing as well . . . Nor do I think physical description should be a shortcut to character. — SK

Of the thousands of NPCs in my campaign, most are faceless "extras" with no lines of dialogue. These minor NPCs add texture and verisimilitude to the campaign, little more, though on occasion one of them will get a name and a touch of personality. A few hundred NPCs have more significant roles to play in my campaign, and these major NPCs receive the bulk of my creative attention. However, I've taken King's point to heart. The only time I describe an NPC's physical appearance is when there's a story behind it. A dwarf that walks with a crutch is interesting because there's a story there: how was the dwarf injured? By comparison, a dwarf with blue eyes and a white beard is far less interesting, at least to me, because there's nothing to build on. That character would be better served having a unique voice, a quirk, or a specific manner that the players are likely to associate with that NPC (and that NPC alone) for the remainder of the campaign.

If you have relatively few NPCs in your campaign, each one can be a complex, multi-layered character. The Iomandra campaign has scores of them, so I've adopted the standard of giving each of my major NPCs one identifiable thing that truly defines them, and that certain something varies from NPC to NPC. It's not always a unique voice, for example:

- Nyrrska, a dragonborn assassin, has a scar across his throat and speaks with a raspy voice. How did he get that scar, one wonders.
- Zirko Axaran, a plane-hopping dwarf from the world of Greyhawk, likes to enumerate when he speaks: "There were three of them, I tell you! Not ONE, not TWO, but THREE!"
- Excellence the tiefling is wise beyond her years, to the point where the players trust that she's never wrong. They can always count on her advice.
- Anchor, a barnacle-encrusted warforged salvaged from the bottom of the Dragon Sea, is mute. He doesn't read or write, so he

communicates by nodding or shaking his head.

- Sea King Senestrago is a coward at heart. Nothing is more important than his own life, and he'll never stand toe-to-toe with an enemy if it means he might be physically hurt in any way.

Two above-mentioned NPCs have identifiable physical characteristics, and both of them come with a story. Nyrrska had his throat slashed by the dragonborn pirate warlord Vantajar and was raised from the dead, but the scar remained. Anchor's barnacles tell the story of how his ship sank and the months he spent alone, trapped at the bottom of the sea.

4. Let dialogue define.
It's dialogue that gives your cast their voices, and is crucial in defining their characters. — SK
Imagine you're running an encounter with a mad troll who carries around a stuffed doll with one missing eye. The doll's name is Candy. Also, the troll likes to taunt its prey. You might choose to have the troll say nothing during the encounter. You might choose to describe what the troll is saying in the third person ("The troll hurls insults at you."), or you can "inhabit" the troll and speak in its voice ("Candy doesn't like you! She says you nothin' but a meat sack!") You tell me, which version of the troll are the players likely to remember?

I like to inhabit my major NPCs, to "act them out," as it were. Conversely, with minor NPCs I'm more inclined to adopt a third-person voice ("The shopkeeper takes your money and thanks you profusely for your patronage.") I find that when I crawl into an NPC's skin and speak in its voice, the players are more inclined to engage that NPC in a meaningful dialogue. If I don't, my players take it as a sign (i.e., Chris is telling me this NPC isn't very important right now) and move on. One of the Wednesday group's favorite NPCs is Nyrrska, the dragonborn ex-assassin who serves aboard their ship. He doesn't do much onscreen, but when he speaks, it's always me speaking in his voice, and the undercurrent of menace in his raspy words makes the PCs glad he's on their side.

They say actions speak louder than words, but that's not always true. We judge people and characters just as well and as often by what they say and how they say it. In the film The Silence of the Lambs, how important is dialogue to the character of Hannibal Lector (played by Anthony Hopkins)? In the first half of the film, everything we know and fear about Lector is learned by observing his eerie stillness and paying attention to what he says, how he says it, and how Clarice Starling reacts. Dialogue defines that character.

5. Learn by osmosis.
When I read Ray Bradbury as a kid, I wrote like Ray Bradbury—everything green and wondrous and seen through a lens smeared with the grease of nostalgia. When I read James M. Cain, everything I wrote came out clipped and stripped and hardboiled. When I read Lovecraft, my prose became luxurious and Byzantine. I wrote stories in my teenage years where all these styles merged, creating a kind of hilarious stew. This sort of stylistic blending is a necessary part of developing one's own style. — SK
I learned to write adventures by reading adventures. In fact, when I was twelve years old, I used to build covers for my adventures out of construction paper and model my designs after the 1st Edition modules in my collection. I even glued the maps to the inside panels and used the covers as DM screens. As for the adventures themselves . . . well, my maps were Gygaxian labyrinths crafted my mad wizards, and my prose was akin to the early works of Len Lakofka and Tom Moldvay. But then I discovered Tracy and Laura Hickman, and suddenly all of my maps made more sense and the encounters were written with "Trick/Trap" and "Lore" sections like The Desert of Desolation module series. When I needed adventure and encounter ideas, I turned to the "U" and "UK" series for inspiration because I enjoyed their complex plots and clever use of weird Fiend Folio monsters.

While I didn't have any DM role models, I think it's safe to say one can learn a lot about DMing by playing in someone else's campaign. In On Writing, King says that a bad novel can teach one about the art of writing as much as, if not

more than, a good one. The same is true for DMs. Those of you who attend gaming conventions know that there are plenty of awesome DMs out there plus a handful of dreadful ones who lack the self-awareness to realize just how bad they are. If you survive a horrible DM experience, talk to your players about it. Tell them why you think the DM sucked, and pay close attention to their eyes and body language. If during the conversation they avoid making eye contact with you or give you that awkwardly measured silence, they may be telling you something about weaknesses in your own DMing style! Ultimately, you have to be your own brand of DM. You can learn things from others and steal the best of what other DMs have to offer, but no two DMs are exactly alike, and that's a good thing.

6. Let character, not event, steer the ship.
The best stories always end up being about the people rather than the event, which is to say character-driven. — SK
I think most DMs would agree with the above statement. It's the actions/inaction and decisions/indecision of the characters that propel the story forward or not. Some DMs become overly concerned when the story flounders and the PCs waste time harassing townsfolk, discussing options, planning their own little side ventures, and engaging in all manner of distractions that have nothing to do with the adventure. As long as the players are "in character" or focused on the campaign world (as opposed to, say, distracted by the real world), I'm willing to cut them some slack.

Monte Cook once confessed to me that some of his favorite campaign moments are the ones where he doesn't have to do anything but sit and listen to the players talk among themselves about what their characters should do next. He also spoke fondly of those unplanned, unscripted moments when our characters wandered around the streets of Ptolus, engaging inconsequential NPCs in conversation, tying up loose business, or enjoying some insidious sideline escapade (Erik Mona!). As long as all the players are having a good time, there's no reason why the adventure can't wait. If one or more of the players seem eager to get on with it, then as a DM I feel it's within my right to push the story forward by whatever means necessary. There are times when character development needs to take a back seat to ACTION, which is not to say you can't have character development while action is taking place. On the contrary, we learn lot about characters by watching them in action.

What King is saying touches on the fact that he doesn't know what's going to happen in his novels until it happens. In that respect, he's as much the reader as the novelist. Often his characters will do things and say things that surprise him. He doesn't say, "At this point in the novel, Annie Wilkes needs to get hit in the head with a typewriter because it'll be shocking and ironic." Similarly, it would be presumptuous for me to assume that Sea King Senestrago will escape and live to fight another day because I have another adventure planned in which he captures the PCs and makes them cry uncle. If he escapes, it'll be because the heroes gave him an opening and it's his nature to flee rather than fight.

7. Put the party on a teeter-totter.
All fantasy fiction is essentially about the concept of power; great fantasy fiction is about people who find it at great cost or lose it tragically; mediocre fantasy fiction is about people who have it and never lose it but simply wield it. — SK
I take this to mean that good drama is all about the constant shifting of power. Take J.R.R. Tolkien's character of Gollum, who finds the One Ring and gains unnaturally long life, but at great cost. At some point, Gollum simply has to lose the ring—there wouldn't be much of a story otherwise. Consider also the character of Tyrion Lannister, the dwarf in George R.R. Martin's Westeros novels, and how much less compelling he would be if everything went his way. Conversely, imagine if Tyrion was always being crushed underfoot and never gained the upper hand. Part of the reason why Tyrion is such a great character is that he has both ups and downs, moments in the story when things are going his way and moments when the whole world threatens to crush him.

In a recent session of the Wednesday night campaign, I threw an entire fleet of bad guys at the heroes and nearly overwhelmed them, to the point where they were powerless to stop Senestrago from abandoning ship. The very next session, they were back on the offensive and cornering Sea King Senestrago in his island base. It's like a wave, with high points and low points marking times when the heroes feel powerful and powerless.

Many campaigns suffer and die either because the player characters feel powerful all the time or powerless all the time. A campaign that makes the PCs feel like they're teetering toward world domination one session and tottering toward oblivion the next is much more exciting. Power needs to be gained and lost, lost and gained. Until the next encounter!

Stephens King's Third Eye

2/23/2012

MONDAY NIGHT. *An iron-wrought spiral staircase leads to an octagonal room. A few paces from the top of the staircase are a cluttered desk and a chair with a haversack slung over its back. Drapes conceal the windows, and a 10-foot-wide circular rug adorned with a silver pentagram covers the floor. Hanging on the far wall is a majestic tapestry depicting a war in Hell, and standing next to it is the tiefling crime lord, Dorethau Vadu. With an Infernal command, she summons two pit fiends. The devils step through the tapestry as though it was a doorway, and the stench of brimstone follows them. Roll initiative!*

While I find the various Dungeon Master's Guides fun reads, they taught me little about how to DM. It's much easier to learn by watching someone else do it. Sadly, I didn't have any role models—no older siblings or friends under whose wing I could learn the tricks and pitfalls of being a DM. Before I joined Wizards of the Coast, I was the only DM in my neighborhood. I dimly recall the odd time when I actually got to sit on the opposite side of the DM screen and play a character, but they were short and often forgettable experiences. Inevitably, the DM would lose interest after a session or two, and I'd be back behind the screen, doing what it seems I was born to do. It wasn't until I joined Wizards that I actually became a regular player, most notably in Monte Cook's Ptolus campaign and its lesser-known precursor, Praemal. Therefore, it's no surprise that I don't have any DM role models. There are, however, many people to whom I owe a debt of gratitude every time I write or run a D&D adventure, and Stephen King is one of them.

Before I tell you how an American horror writer made me a better DM, I need to explain a little bit about my own literary background. I'm an English major with a degree in Rhetoric and Professional Writing, and one of my most memorable courses at the University of Waterloo was a literature class called Imitatio. Our weekly assignment consisted of taking some distinguished piece of literature, such as Milton's Paradise Lost, and writing long-lost passages in the same style as the original work. By analyzing Milton's technique and stealing glimpses into his mind's eye, one could (in theory) appreciate the depth, intricacy, and nuance of the man's work enough to create something Milton himself might have written, albeit on an off day. It's like taking an art class and being asked to paint the Mona Lisa's long-lost sister, or better yet, the rest of the Mona Lisa, as though you were Leonardo da Vinci himself and not just some poseur. Imitating Stephen King wasn't part of the curriculum, probably because it was 1990 and his work wasn't considered "literature" at the time. That same year, I had a rather pedestrian and forgettable senior class in creative writing, for which I wrote a screenplay that was a rip-off of the film Heathers and a short story titled "A Day in the Life of My Dog," written from my dog's point of view. Never mind the fact that my dog, Taboo, was dead two years. Only in hindsight does it occur to me that I should've written about a day in the afterlife of my dog. That would've been a riot.

In that otherwise pointless creative writing class, I stumbled upon a short essay written by a contemporary American fiction writer who by that time had cranked out more than a dozen popular horror novels, including one about dead pets. Stephen King's essay is titled "Imagery and

the Third Eye," and it taught me a great deal about writing fiction and DMing. It turns out these two activities are kissing cousins! Creative writing and DMing are both firmly grounded in the ancient art of storytelling, the only difference being that one is primarily a written activity and the other primarily oral.

Let me ask you something, you're a DM: Have you ever wanted to write a novel? I'm betting the answer's yes. I'm betting you've actually written one or more, or maybe half of one. Maybe you wrote only the first chapter before the characters got stale or the process frightened you off. DMs are by nature storytellers, so I'd be mildly shocked to learn that you've never once imagined your name (or dorky pseudonym) on a novel jacket or in the credits of a movie based on your fictional creation. I certainly have, although I must admit that novel writing isn't my bag. I'd rather write an adventure or a screenplay. I crave structure. I'm a creature who needs a cage. If you're telling me that you've never wanted to write a novel or a screenplay, then, well, I guess I don't believe you, simple as that. You're a liar, liar, pants on fire. Dungeon Mastering is storytelling in the ancient oral tradition, and storytellers have a primal need to share stories. If I stole a glimpse into the nooks and crannies of your hard drive, would I find a partially written novel or screenplay locked away in that extradimensional madhouse? I bet I would!

We DMs can learn a lot from a storyteller as successful and experienced as King. "Imagery and the Third Eye" is readily available online in case you want to read it. It's still as fresh and true today as when King wrote it, lo those many years ago. I highly recommend it for all writers and all DMs. I can't promise it'll take you to the same place creatively that it transported me—a million miles from Nowhere, Canada to an amusement park where all the rides are free. However, I can promise you that you'll learn at least one trick that'll make you a better Dungeon Master.

It's easy to take Stephen King for granted, in much the same way we take American processed cheese for granted. He's a fixture of our time. The best scare Little Stevie ever laid on us happened waaaay back in 1999. A careless Maine driver sent him flying pell-mell over the pearly gates of Heaven. Fortunately for us, he flew clear over Heaven and fell back to Earth, and in the years since that fateful collision of bone and steel, he's written some damn fine stories and received the equivalent of a literary knighthood. The duly appointed guardians of Literature were willing to overlook King's past success and all those f-bombs, and now he's become part of the pantheon of American literary elite.

Just so you know where I stand on King's work, the man can do no wrong, even when he fails spectacularly. His characterizations are as deep and unsettling as the Mariana Trench, and nearly all of his work is eminently re-readable. I've read 'Salem's Lot, The Tommyknockers, and Dolores Claiborne each three times. Pet Sematary and It, five times. Misery, eight times. (That Annie Wilkes is hot!) I'm re-reading Duma Key now for the second time, and I'm long overdue for a reunion with Eyes of the Dragon (the closest King ever came to writing a D&D novel). But let's put his fiction aside and talk about King's nonfiction, starting with "Imagery and the Third Eye."

Lessons Learned

So let's get on with it, shall we?
As a Dungeon Master, my first job is to immerse my players in the world I've created, and to do that I need to describe what their characters see, hear, and smell. In other words, I need to be able to set the scene. Knowing what to describe and what not to describe is crucial. If I focus on the wrong details, it can be a tiresome or laughable experience for the players. As King says in *On Writing*, it's not just a question of how to describe something, but *how much to.*
In "Imagery and the Third Eye," King talks about creating an image in the mind's eye (what he calls the "third eye") of his reader. He doesn't aim to supply a "photograph in words" but rather gives his reader just enough detail to paint a picture for him or herself. It doesn't matter that the picture isn't exactly the same as the one King sees with his own third eye:
"Too many beginning writers feel that they have to assume the entire burden of imagery; to become

the reader's seeing-eye dog. That is simply not the case. Use vivid verbs. Avoid the passive voice. Avoid the cliché. Be specific. Be precise. Be elegant. Omit needless words."

— Stephen King, "Imagery and the Third Eye"

King pulls a specific example from his own work, a paragraph describing the haunted house from his second novel, 'Salem's Lot. Allow me to present a similar example — some read-aloud text plucked from the pages of a famous D&D adventure, The Temple of Elemental Evil by Gary Gygax and Frank Mentzer:

Lurid light from a flaming cresset and a glowing brazier full of charcoal reveals a 30-foot-by-20-foot chamber containing a rack, iron maiden, cage, and all the other unspeakable devices common to a torture chamber. Two adjacent, 10-foot-square alcoves, one to the south and one east, are barred, their doors held fast by chain and padlock. Two prisoners are in each, obviously here to await the tender mercies of the torturers. Two female humans are in the south alcove, and two orcs in the east.

Players might have trouble envisioning a "flaming cresset" if they don't know what a cresset is, but that's probably okay since the description offers sufficient context. The room dimensions aren't belabored, and they give players a good sense of the space into which their characters are moving. The text stumbles a bit as it describes the arrangement of the alcoves (almost demanding that the DM provide an accompanying map), but it rights itself quickly with the "doors held fast by chain and padlock." By the end, we have a pretty clear image of the room.

What the read-aloud text doesn't do is provide a laborious account of every torture device, nor does it describe what the cell doors are made of. It feeds us the major features (the rack, iron maiden, cage, and alcoves) and leaves the rest to our imaginations. Similarly, it doesn't paint a detailed picture of the prisoners. Are the two women similar in appearance or different? What color is their hair? Are they clothed or naked? None of these details is presented; that's what the listener brings to it.

Imagery does not occur on the page but in the listener's mind. As a DM, the trick is determining which details are important and which details are left for the players to imagine. As a general rule, I tend to under-describe things at first, then allow players to ask questions if they're having trouble seeing the picture in their mind's eye.

Here's another example pulled straight from King's work:

Look—here's a table covered with a red cloth. On it is a cage the size of a small fish aquarium. In the cage is a white rabbit with a pink nose and pink-rimmed eyes. In its front paws is a carrot-stub upon which it is contentedly munching. On its back, clearly marked in blue ink, is the numeral 8.

— Stephen King, On Writing

While not the best piece of writing in history, as King points out, it's adequate for making the point that nowhere in the description do we get the shape or exact dimensions of the cage. The cage I see with my third eye won't be the same cage you see with yours, but that's okay. If adventurers happen upon the cage, its shape and dimensions might become relevant if they decide to stuff it inside a bag of holding, but otherwise who cares? What's important is the numeral on the rabbit's back, a detail deliberately placed at the end of the descriptive passage for emphasis. (That's another lesson I've learned: If you want your players to remember a particular detail, save it for last.)

There are no shortcuts to figuring out what details to focus on. The storyteller learns by asking him or herself, What should I emphasize? If all else fails, be specific, be precise, be elegant, and omit needless words.

We can learn just as much, if not more, from bad examples. Here's an example of a room description that might be read-aloud text or something the DM conjures out of thin air. It isn't horrible but could use a little work:

"You enter a 40-foot-by-40-foot square chamber with a domed ceiling 20 feet above. Six feet from the entrance, you see a statue. Other statues are scattered about the room. Hanging from the ceiling by iron chains is a

heavy iron chandelier, beneath which is a dead basilisk. The room has no other exits, far as you can tell."

The text does a serviceable job of describing the room and its contents. It would be nice to know how the room is lit (are there candles or torches burning in the chandelier?), and more attention needs to be spent describing the statues; it's hard to get a good mental picture without knowing what they depict. Do they look like unfortunate souls who crossed paths with the basilisk before it died? We don't need a detailed description of every one, mind you.

One could make a case for not describing the basilisk as "dead" but rather "still." The players might assume incorrectly that it's asleep and try to sneak up on it, only to discover someone or something beat them to it! One could also make a case for using the word "basilisk" at all. By instead referring to it as a "giant, six-legged lizard," you let the players jump to their own conclusions.

The dead basilisk is by far the room's most interesting feature, but it's buried in terms of importance by the last sentence. Perhaps the lack of other exits is information that could be tacked onto the first sentence, where the room's general configuration is described. Also, the phrase "far as you can tell" is basically shorthand for saying Hey, stupid! Don't forget to search this room for secret doors! If that was the intent, mission accomplished. Otherwise, the passage would be fine without it.

On the topic of omitting needless words, you don't need "40-foot-by-40-foot" and "square" in the same expression, and "a 20-foot-high domed ceiling" is better than "a domed ceiling 20 feet above." Above? I mean, c'mon, where else would the ceiling be?

Here's how I might revise the description:

"You enter a 40-foot-square chamber with a 20-foot-high domed ceiling and no other exits. Six feet from the entrance, a statue of an armored dwarf clutches a stony battleaxe. Three more statues are scattered about the room, all of them depicting adventurers. Hanging from the ceiling by chains is an iron chandelier set with sputtering torches. Beneath it a giant, six-legged lizard lies perfectly still."

In Conclusion . . .

Most DMs describe things on the fly. In such cases, it's doubly important to **use vivid verbs, avoid the passive voice, avoid the cliché, be specific, be precise, be elegant**, and **omit needless words**. It's not like you can go back and revise your work, after all. My general rule of thumb is that if you can't describe a scene, a character, or an event in 30 seconds or less, your players are suffering needlessly. Any DM who's tried to run a published adventure with a full column of read-aloud text knows exactly what I mean; by the time you get to the end, the players are bored to tears and remember only one-tenth of what they've heard.

Next week, I'll share with you a few bits of DM wisdom I picked up from reading Stephen King's *On Writing* and his earlier nonfiction work, *Danse Macabre*. It'll be a Frankenstein's monster, the stitching together of various tips and tricks; I promise the experience will be eye opening and appropriately terrifying.
Until the next encounter!

Map Fu

2/9/2012

MONDAY NIGHT. *The heroes infiltrate the martial district of Io'calioth, capital city of the Dragovar Empire, and storm the fortified manor of Colonel Arzan, an evil dragonborn soldier who's secretly harboring a tiefling crime lord. They attack while the colonel is away, slaying the crime lord and snatching her corpse, but not before she summons a pair of pit fiends to defend her. Believing they have accomplished their mission, the party's main striker and defender decide not to face the devils and instead flee the scene by phasing through the walls, leaving the other party members to their own devices and allowing the pit fiends to gain the upper hand. The remaining characters find their means of egress cut off as the devils use their considerable might and intelligence to corner and crush them one by one.*

To prepare for the attack on Colonel Arzan's estate, the player characters procured blueprints of the fortified manor. Thus, it seemed like a good idea to render the three-level manor on a wet-erase battle map so that the players could get "the lay of the land" and plan their assault.

While dungeon tiles, printed poster maps, 3D terrain, and other kinds of prefabricated mapmaking tools are helpful on occasion, my preferred medium for displaying tactical maps is the wet-erase battle map. I find the blank, gridded canvas extremely versatile, allowing me to create encounter locations that aren't easily replicated by other means.

There are some drawbacks to wet-erase battle maps:

A. They take up considerable space on the game table. Since I run my games at work in a fairly spacious conference room with a large table, this isn't really a concern for me (although, it's worth noting, with eight or nine players around the table, that conference table isn't as big as I'd like it to be sometimes).

B. It takes time to draw a half-decent map on a wet-erase battle grid, particularly if you're like me and make mistakes and need to dab a damp towel on the map occasionally to correct a drawing error.

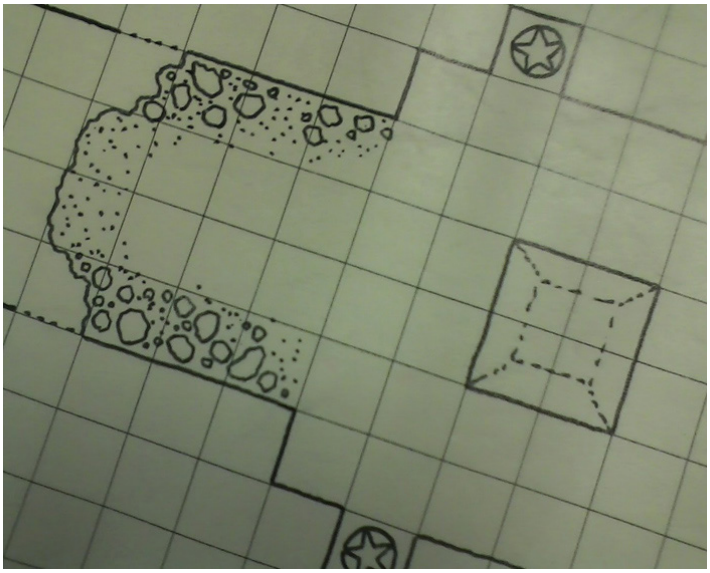
C. A quickly drawn or poorly rendered battle map can add very little to the play experience. You'd almost be better off drawing the map on your forehead without using a mirror!

There are dry-erase products similar to canvas battle maps, from laminated posters to oversized plastic jigsaw puzzle pieces that fit together to form a map board, and they provide not only excellent "creative canvases" but also have the added virtues of being easy to modify and erase. However, I like to draw my maps ahead of time rather than during the session, and I find maps drawn on these laminated or jigsaw surfaces smudge too easily for my tastes. When I lay out a map before my players, I want to conjure a specific reaction—not one of disappointment, but of awe. That's hard to pull off if the players are actually sitting around the table, watching you draw a straight line or, worse, a circle!

When it comes to wet-erase canvases, I've drawn enough tunnels, chambers, statues, staircases, alcoves, railings, fireplaces, and rubble over the years to become quite proficient in the medium, and I have a few tiny tricks that might be of interest to you. I find that it's the little flourishes that really help to make my maps stand out, and they don't take as much time as you might think.

Map Tricks

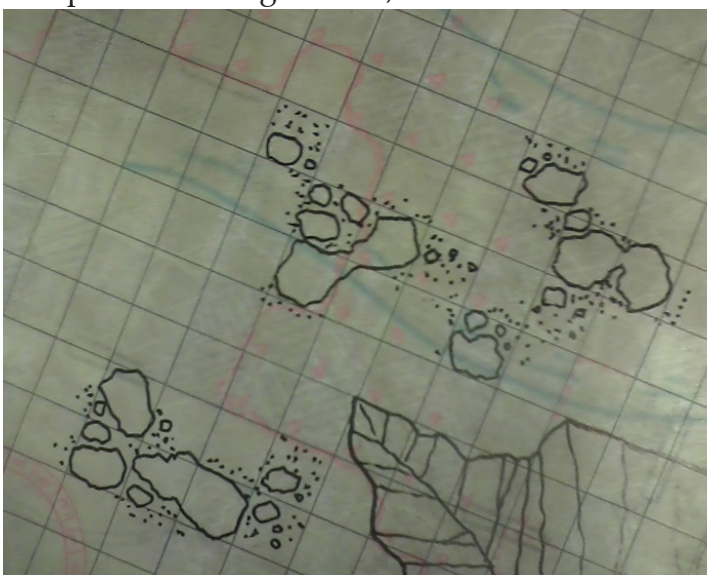
To help illustrate some of my teeny-weeny map tricks, I took snapshots of the battle maps currently rolled up on my DM cart. The locations shown here are snippets from several different maps created for several different adventures, and some of them are quite old. Some were drawn hastily in a matter of seconds, others in a matter of minutes. They are all "final" versions (i.e., not works in progress). When I draw a map prior to a game session, I quite often leave off details until the PCs actually explore the area, at which point I add furnishings and whatnot, and I sometimes make additions and alterations to a map when the features of a location change. What you're seeing here is how the maps ended



up looking when all was said and done. Alas, I don't have versions of the maps as they appeared at the beginning of each session, so you'll have to take my word that what I'm saying is true.

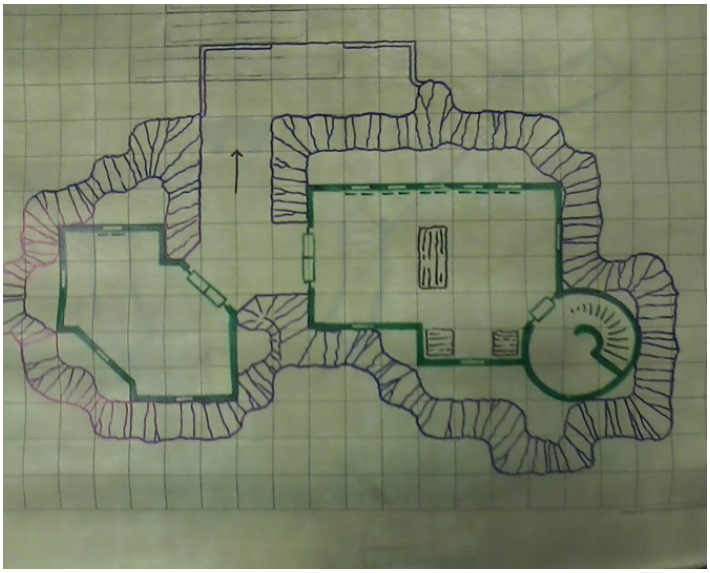
Trick #1: Rubble comes in two sizes.

When I draw rubble, I first create rough circles to represent the big chunks, and then I fill in the



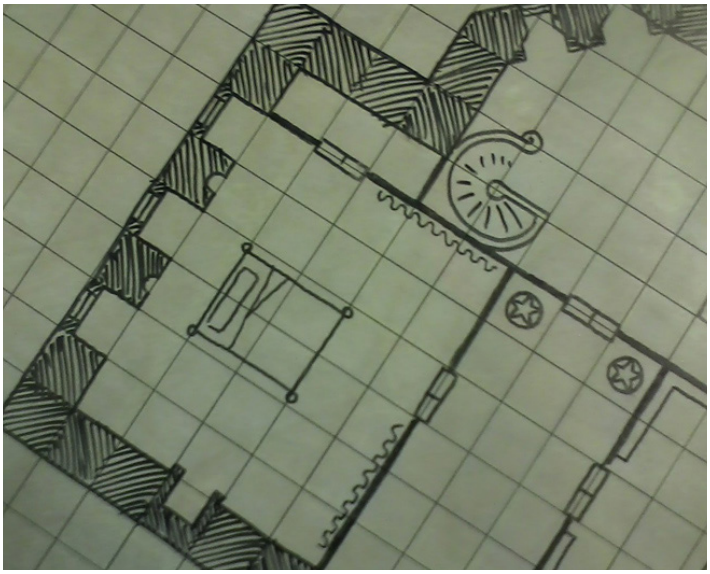
gaps with some hasty "stippling" (dots). It looks more time-consuming than it is, but it gives the rubble texture.

Trick #2: Rubble is the easiest kind of terrain. If you don't know how to fill a space, use rubble. It adds easy yet tactically interesting terrain to any encounter, and its presence is easily explained. When drawing the big chunks, try not to make any two exactly alike. It lends the map a great deal of verisimilitude, and it's easier done



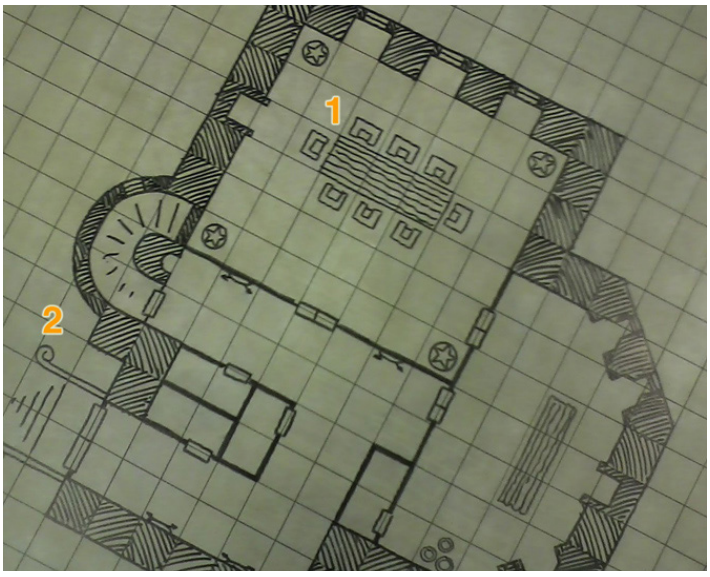
than said.

Trick #3: Cliffs fill squares, and they have forks. When I draw cliffs, I let them fill up entire squares (because they are, in effect, terrain). The fewer squares "thick" they are, the steeper they appear. The great thing about cliffs is that they look best when the lines aren't straight. Every few cliff lines, I add a "fork" (like a fork of lightning) to help distinguish them from steps. The forks also give the cliffs a naturally chiseled



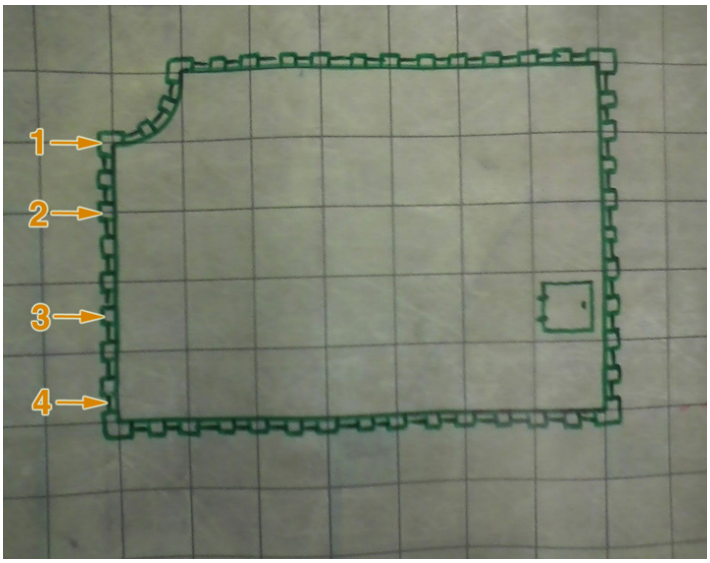
look.

Trick #4: Minimal furnishings are ideal. I don't waste time drawing all of the contents in a given area. Minimal furnishings provide clues about what's important. A bed in the middle of a room tells my players it's a bedchamber. A spiral staircase in a corner gives the players hints about where their characters can go. If they ask me what else these rooms contain, I tell them (and add detail as needed), but I like having lots of empty squares for monster minis!

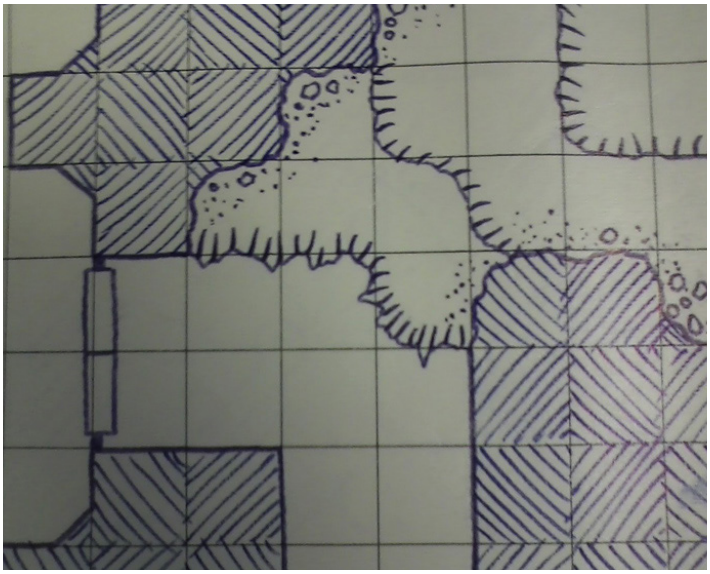


Trick #5: I don't believe in using empty rectangles, and railings are just hollow walls. This map illustrates a couple tricks: (1) I never

use empty rectangles to represent items within a room. They provide no information could be anything, which is why I don't use them. Want to turn a nondescript rectangle into a table? Just fill it with wobbly lines to represent the wood grain. (2) When I treat railings as "hollow walls," my players never have trouble figuring out what they are.



Trick #6: Build battlements starting with the corners.
Here's a map of a rooftop battlement. First I draw the inside line that defines the overall shape of the roof. After that, the battlement is built thus: (1) Always draw the "corner blocks" first. (2) Then draw a block over each gridline so that it straddles two squares. (3) Add a block between



each of the ones you've already drawn. (4) Connect the blocks with a thinner double line to complete the battlement.
Trick #7: Cross-hatching is great for filling in "dead space."
Nothing is better than cross-hatching for filling dead space and defining the edge of a wall, and hastily drawn cross-hatching is better than none. It adds a couple minutes of extra time to the mapmaking process, but the results speak for themselves.

Of course, these map tricks can apply to pretty much any hand-drawn map, regardless of the surface upon which it's drawn. Hopefully DMs of all experience levels will find one or more of these quick tricks helpful. If I learn any new ones, I'll be sure to pass them along.

Lessons Learned

If you do a Google search on "battle maps," you'll discover some pretty cool blogs that compare different kinds of dungeon-building tools, including wet-erase and dry-erase battle maps, dungeon tiles, 3D terrain, and whatnot. Ultimately, you must choose the map medium that works best for you (and the dungeon in question), but there's something to be said for the simplicity and artistry of a hand-drawn map. While it's true I have a steady hand and can draw a decent circle, I'm no artist. I rely on little tricks such as these to fool my players into thinking otherwise.
Until the next encounter!

Unfinished Business

1/26/2012

MONDAY NIGHT. *The epic-level adventurers have some unfinished business in the city of Io'calioth. A tiefling crime lord named Dorethau Vadu, whom the party hasn't encountered since paragon tier, remains at large, and the players have decided her time has finally come.*
Behind the grandmotherly façade is a woman who despises the Dragovar Empire so completely that she kidnaps dragonborn babies and eats them for breakfast. With her guild in shambles, Vadu has turned to an unlikely ally for protection and sequestered herself in

his fortified manor. This ally is someone the heroes have yet to meet: Colonel Arzan, a corrupt Dragovar official whom Dorethau Vadu is blackmailing. It seems Colonel Arzan plotted with several others to overthrow the Emperor, and though he was never caught, Vadu obtained evidence of his treachery and is blackmailing him for protection. That's not to say Arzan is deserving of the party's sympathy, for as the players will soon discover, he parades around with orphans on leashes and wears a cloak made from the stitched faces of his enemies.

Imagine you're a Dungeon Master who's just put the finishing touches on a new adventure that promises to entertain your players for several game sessions. Suddenly, out of the blue, something unexpected happens. The campaign turns left instead of right; the players decide to go this way instead of that way, and you decide to follow them to see what happens next. In short, your best-laid adventure is over before it begins. Has this ever happened to you? I ask because it happens to me all the time.

I like to dangle all sorts of adventure hooks in front of my players. That way, they never feel like the campaign has only one road to follow. I like my campaign to have lots of roads, lots of trails, lots of meandering footpaths, and even a few dead ends. When my crafty players see an adventure hook dangling in front of them, sometimes they bite, and sometimes they swim away. Even if they swim away, I leave that hook dangling, just in case they come back.

I expected Dorethau Vadu to be dead by now—another evil bag of XP on the party's road to glory. The heroes had all but wiped out her organization, and I had planned an elaborate final showdown with the horned crone. Then the adventurers got distracted by some other shiny adventure hooks, and off they went. Oh, sure, the players occasionally reminded themselves of the need to rid the world of so evil a creature as her, but as they gained levels and crossed over into epic tier, it seemed increasingly unlikely that the party would trouble themselves with eradicating the tiefling crime lord. And so, presumably, she kept on eating dragonborn babies.

In every group of players, there's at least one who keeps a list. You know what I'm talkin' about. In my Monday night group, that player is Peter Schaefer, and somewhere near the top of Peter's list is the name "Dorethau Vadu." So here we are, almost a year later. Through a series of adventurers and misadventures, the party is back in Io'calioth, and Peter's decided the time's come to strike that name off the party's list. Through his growing network of spies, Peter's character (Oleander the halfling rogue) has discovered where Dorethau Vadu is hiding, learned the layout of Colonel Arzan's fortified manor, and even bribed one of his unfaithful household servants. (Ah, the joys of being epic level!) The party is planning to invade the manor and rid the campaign of Dorethau Vadu, and probably Colonel Arzan, too.

I should be pleased, yes? The players have finally deigned to complete my little adventure. Unfortunately, the adventure was designed for paragon-tier characters, not epic-level ones! What's a DM to do?

Lessons Learned

Scaling up an adventure is easy. If you've been keeping up on this column, you already know my tricks for advancing monsters and NPCs; however, in this case, I decided not to use any of them. I decided to keep Dorethau Vadu at her current level and instead make her environment and her allies more threatening. My reason is simple: In terms of pure logic, there's no in-world way I can think of to explain how Vadu's power increased so dramatically, particularly after the heroes laid waste to her organization. But more importantly, the threat she poses doesn't derive from her statistics, but from her influence. If the PCs can get to her, they'll have no trouble killing her. The trick is getting to her.

I'm doing something similar but different with Colonel Arzan. Like Vadu, he's well below the party's experience level in terms of raw statistics. However, he's a member of the imperial martial caste, and if the party simply kills him, they'll be branded traitors of the empire, which carries with it consequences more than commensurate with their level. The trick here is to find proof that

Arzan himself is a traitor, and ironically enough, to do that the heroes need Dorethau Vadu.
By the time players get around to knocking off a threat that's been on their hit list for nearly ten levels, one needs to give serious thought to how challenging the encounter needs to be. A "cakewalk" can be a lot of fun for players because it reinforces just how powerful their characters have become in the world. Still, it's always fun to confront players with the consequences of leaving behind unfinished business. When the PCs decided not to finish her off, Vadu crawled under a rock and stayed out of their hair just long enough to become dangerous again. The tiefling crime lord hasn't been idle all these many months. Oh my goodness, no! Like any evil tiefling grandmother, she's been knitting a tapestry depicting a scene from the Nine Hells. She's also paid ritualists to enchant the tapestry, transforming it into a portal through which she can summon powerful devils to do her bidding. It's hanging on the wall of her bedroom in Colonel Arzan's estate. I don't know where I got the idea, but as far as I'm concerned it's brilliant because all that's left for me to do is surf the online D&D Compendium and figure out which devils I want to use!

So, to summarize:

- **Don't get frustrated if the players turn away from your adventure. If you can afford to, let 'em. Maybe they'll find it more alluring later on.**
- **When the players finally come around, only "scale up" the parts of the adventure you have to. Trust your left brain to determine what needs to change, trust your right brain to come up with simple yet creative ways to challenge the heroes, and let the rest be a cakewalk.**

Next week marks a major benchmark for The Dungeon Master Experience. It will be the 50th article in this series, wherein I will tell you about my next campaign and how it's already affecting the current one.
Until the next encounter!

Slave to the Rules

1/19/2012

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. *The players know that a secret society of Vecna worshipers has been spying on them from a hidden demiplane. They also know that the Vecnites have a garrison of warforged at their command. Fleet, the party's warforged warden, is unwilling to face his fellow constructs in battle, so the players hit upon the idea of using an illusion ritual to disguise their characters as warforged, slip past the garrison unchecked, and infiltrate the Vecnites' inner sanctum.*

Greetings, fellow Dungeon Masters! My last two articles were a bit long-winded, so I'll endeavor to keep this one short and sweet.

It's been my experience that D&D players, by and large, tend to deal with in-game problems by hacking them to death with swords. When they come to a locked door guarded by a monster, they kill the monster and break down the door. How much I relish those occasions when a player decides to talk to the monster, fool it, or lure it away instead! To incentivize such behavior, I tend to reward players who take risks and solve problems without resorting to brute force. This approach can, over time, inspire players to take greater risks, which often fuels the most memorable adventures.

Before my players hit upon the idea of using a Seeming ritual (Eberron Player's Guide, page 119) to disguise their characters as warforged, their only working plan besides charging forth with spells a-blazin' was to have Fleet (played by Nacime Khemis) confront his brethren and persuade them to embrace their individuality and throw off the yoke of oppression thrust upon them by their evil Vecnite masters. This plan was even more audacious than the "warforged disguise" plan. Had Nacime agreed to let Fleet deliver a speech before a wall of warforged adversaries, I would've done everything in my considerable power as DM to reward him in some fashion. Ultimately, the players abandoned this plan because Fleet's low Charisma made it unlikely that a Diplomacy check would succeed. Unbeknownst to them, I probably would've given Fleet a bonus on his skill check, and I probably would've given the party some advantage even if Nacime had rolled a 1.

Worst-case scenario, the warforged aren't swayed by Fleet's speech, but maybe there's some small victory to be gained. What if a single warforged sees through Fleet's unlikeable manner and chooses to help the party in some innocuous or profound way? What if Fleet's speech prompts an exchange wherein the players discovers a schism among the warforged, prompting their characters to drive a wedge between the loyal guards and the disenfranchised ones? My goal is to find some way—any way—to make the players glad they decided to put Fleet in the line of fire. As the DM, I can choose to be a rules monkey or a storytelling juggernaut.

I'm reminded of a previous session during which the Wednesday night heroes summoned the Sea Kings (oceanic merchant lords) to a "summit meeting" and urged them to unite against a common threat. By then, the party had already gone to great lengths to forge this alliance, so by the time the Sea Kings arrived, I wanted to reward the players for their accomplishments by having the alliance come together as planned. (My players are always stunned when that happens.) After an hour of roleplaying, I asked each player to choose a skill that his character might have used in the course of the encounter, and then had each player make an appropriate skill check against a moderate DC. The results of these checks had nothing to do with the outcome of the summit meeting. Instead, I gave the players one secret for each successful check. In the end, the party had its alliance, and they also discovered some things they didn't know previously about the various Sea Kings in attendance.

Lessons Learned

I know many DMs like to forgo dice rolls in favor of pure roleplaying, but my personal preference is to let the dice play their part. This is D&D, after all, not a Vampire LARP. Having said that, I'll be the first to admit that I've never been a slave to the rules. I try to be fair and impartial, but when it comes right down to it, I'm more interested in creating a fun and engaging campaign than crafting the perfect skill challenge or making sure a character is using a skill exactly as written. If my players want to infiltrate an enemy stronghold disguised as warforged, the rules say I need to make an Insight check every time a creature views or interacts with them, to which I say "Screw that!" It might seem odd that a member of Wizards R&D would discard D&D rules on a whim, but to quote Captain Hector Barbossa: Sometimes the rules are more what you'd call "guidelines."

The rules will boss you around if you let them, but they exist to serve you and your campaign. Don't let them shackle your creativity or the creativity of your players. By the same token, the rules aren't your enemies. They're your allies, ready to win battles for you on command. Use them as you will.
Until the next encounter!

Note from Jeff:
I couldn't find all the articles and most of the links in the articles that were still around were broken. There are probably errors on my part and there are deffinitely editorial faux pas in the layout design, but I didn't really want to spend too long on this. Obviously all the credit goes to Chris Perkins. Hope you enjoy.