Dispatches from the Raven Crowking
V.3 - Building the Sandbox

Daniel J. Bishop

Compatible With DCC RPG

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Introduction

Welcome back to the Nest. This volume is going to focus on creating, running, and maintaining a sandbox-style campaign.

If you spend much time on Internet gaming forums, especially those devoted to old-school gaming, you are going to hear various opinions about sandbox-style games. Some people believe that sandboxing is too difficult to prepare for. Others feel that the sandbox offers players little in terms of direction. Those people may have different definitions of a sandbox than I do. I am going to offer you a way to create a sandbox that works.

I have some very strong opinions about what makes a game work, honed from over 35 years of experience. The first volume of Dispatches describes the interrelationship between ***Context, Choice, and Consequence*** which I believe is the very heart of role-playing games. If you have not yet examined that volume, I recommend that you do so, as it lays out the philosophical groundwork for the method described herein. Alternatively, you could find the original posts on my blog, at ravencrowking.blogspot.ca.

These articles represent my opinions. I am not going to write "in my humble opinion" after everything I write, or even the web-slang "IMHO". If you read something that you find offensive, apparently being promoted as fact, just assume the imaginary IMHO. It will make both of our lives that much easier.

Please be aware that I am using "Game Master" or "GM" as a generic for people running games. "Judge" is being used as a specific for those GMs running ***Dungeon Crawl Classics***.

Note also that this is how I do things. I know that it works, because it works for me. If you have a better way, no matter how forceful I might make an argument, I am not suggesting that you should change. Just be aware that, sometimes, what we imagine to be a better way is the source of problems we experience in play. It pays to read an argument, digest it, and then decide if (and if, how) it applies to your own gaming.

Ready? Then we will begin.

What is a Sandbox?

"Sandbox" is used in many ways, by many gamers, and the basic idea has been muddied by a generation of "Adventure Path/Railroad" players and GMs seeking to promote their particular modus operandi by obscuring the meaning and benefits of the sandbox. Sometimes this has been done innocently; sometimes not.

In the context used here, a sandbox is a gaming environment in which the direction of play is driven by the choices of the players, rather than by a series of encounters/game actions that must occur to meet with the Game Master's chosen "plot". A sandbox is an attempt at a "breathing world" that the players experience, and that allows them to follow their own interests within its context.

A sandbox is not featureless – it is not an endless ocean without a star to steer by. As described in Volume 1, choice requires both context and consequence to be meaningful. A setting without context is not a sandbox.

A sandbox is always in motion. This is a necessary part of both context, and of creating a "breathing world". A sandbox contains within it the plots and schemes not only of the player characters, but also of NPCs – both humans and otherwise. Some of these schemes the PCs will seek to thwart; others they will seek to aid.

Still others they will never become aware of. In some cases, some PCs may be on either side of a scheme, as fits their own interests. It contains also natural events – diseases, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, tides, etc. – that simply occur when and where they do, regardless of where the PCs are or what they are doing. The GM does not decide what the PCs are "supposed to do" within the context they are presented with. That is not his job.

A sandbox reacts to the PCs, to the NPCs, and to the events occurring within its "breathing world". Actions have consequences. The way the world changes is part of the context for future choices, and is a clue as to the behind-the-scenes actions of NPCs and others.

A sandbox is not without thematic elements. It is not without motion. It is

not without plot, except in one special sense: It is without the judge deciding what the PCs should do (i.e., determining the "plot" of the PC's "story"). It need not be infinite in scope; it need not allow any possible action (just as the real world doesn't allow people to fly like Superman or time travel like in ***Doctor Who***). Within its bounds, and within its contextual space, though, it must allow the players to decide the course of their own character's destinies. It must give them the tools to do so.

Because it bears repeating, the only thing that a sandbox lacks is the GM making decisions for the Player Characters, either overtly or covertly. And, that is a damn good thing to lack.

In short, it is the opposite of an Adventure Path. And it is in opposition to a railroad. A sandbox seeks not to limit choice to a narrow parameter, but to enable choice making that is rich in both context and consequence. It does not tell a single story, known in rough outline even before the events take place, but provides instead an environment in which many stories take place. And those stories are "what happened" rather than "what was destined to happen". The stories take place after play.

There are people out there who possess amazing abilities as storytellers, who can hold a group so rapt that they are completely unaware of how narrow the range of their choices really is. There are storytellers good enough that, although their audience is aware, they are engaged enough in the story that they do not care.

Likewise, there are players who just want to engage in a table top skirmish game. There are players who don't want to make decisions, who just want to go along with the flow. There are definitely people who want others to make choices for them, and who would prefer to engage in something far less than a "breathing world". Essentially, they want the limited palette of a computer game at the table, and often because they have never experienced anything more.

Yet, for those of us who actually enjoy role-playing games – even if we also enjoy interactive storytelling games, skirmish games, and/or computer games – the sandbox is the only format that even comes close to providing satisfaction.

There is nothing wrong with wanting to tell a story or play a skirmish game.

They are just not the same thing as a role-playing game is. Pretending otherwise started as a means to sell so-called "computer role-playing games" and continued so that publishers could more easily sell other entertainments akin to role-playing games. "Of course it's a role-playing game! It says so on the cover!"

It should be a no-brainer that, to the degree the Game Master restricts players from making choices for their characters from the standpoint (context) of their roles, he also restricts role-playing. To fully experience a role-playing game, a sandbox is a requirement. Anything less is…..less. In many cases, very much less.

The sandbox remains relevant, because it is the singular important thing that table top gaming does better than its competitors. Want to hear a compelling story? The control an author or director has over characters/cast means that many novels and films will be better than your amateur storyteller. If you want to experience the same, you will expect a "computer role-playing game" to limit your choices, and the railroading elements are therefore less likely to get in the way. Want to be involved in a skirmish? The computer does it better, crunching all the numbers for you. Just hanging out with your friends can be more fun with a barbeque or at a pub. And, if learning the game rules is work, running a game is exponentially more so.

If gaming has become less relevant than it was in its Gygaxian heyday, this is the reason why. RPGs can offer many things in addition to the sandbox. When they fail to offer the sandbox as the most basic mode of play, not only do they limit the "role-playing" allowed within the context of the "game", but they also tend to limit the "game" allowed in context with the "role-playing". And they come into direct competitions with entertainments that do the same, but do it better.

Why System Matters

Let's be clear: Whatever kind of game you like is okay. If you want a game that focuses on tactical skirmishes, that's cool. If you want a game that focuses on telling a mostly pre-written narrative, that's also cool. But neither one of those things are what I mean when I talk about role-playing games.

There is a movement today to claim that system doesn't matter; all that matters are the people around the table. Well, if you want to claim that the people around the table matter, the answer ought to be that you are making a self-evident claim. If you are claiming that this means that the system doesn't matter, that is fallacious reasoning. If you are making that claim while spending hundreds of dollars on a particular system, and claiming that said system is an "evolution" in design, well, then you are a hypocrite. You are either lying to yourself, or to your audience, or both.

Let us assume that you, Gentle Reader, are both interested in sandbox play, and are wise and/or experienced enough to know that system matters. What sort of systems make for satisfying sandbox play, and what sort of systems should be avoided? Perhaps more importantly, why?

1. Fast Play: To be suitable for sandbox play, a game must be able to resolve encounters relatively quickly. Imagine, if you will, an average play session of four hours. If it takes eight hours to resolve an encounter, play is uninteresting. If it takes a mere four hours to resolve the same encounter, then the value of that play session is determined solely by how important/good that encounter is.

So far, so good. It is easy to see the problem with such an extreme example.

But let us say that the average encounter instead takes about an hour to resolve. What are the ramifications of this?

The value of the play session rests heavily on each encounter. Any substandard, or unimportant, encounter will drag down the entire play session. This encourages the Game Master to only include "important" encounters – effectively choosing which encounters will be played out. Likewise, players will be discouraged from decision-making, lest they choose a blind alley and "waste" the play session. As they look more and more to the GM for direction, the game moves farther and farther from a sandbox.

Moreover, the desire to retain only "important" encounters encourages the Game Master to leave "flavor" encounters by the wayside. Slowly, but surely, the world breathes a little less as the GM rushes past the scenery. The world stops reacting to the players' choices as wandering and random encounters – once the spice of play – are relegated to the trash bin. Why not adventure for only 15 minutes each day, if the world responds the same way as if you pressed onward? The world becomes flat, boring, and stale. And, frankly, the computer does this better.

Conversely, if you begin with the concept that 3-4 good encounters make for a good play session, and you are playing with a system that allows 10 or more encounters in that 4-hour span, suddenly the world has room to breathe again. It is no longer obvious what the "important" encounters are. If the players decide to explore a tangent, the session is not ruined….instead, the GM is encouraged to provide tangents to pique player interest.

2. Relatively Shallow Power Curve: We are all familiar with games where the desire to add skills and feats, and to avoid so-called "dead levels", beefs PCs up so much between one level and the next that what was once a challenge quickly becomes stale, and where an encounter can easily overwhelm a

group whose average level is only a little below that which the encounter was designed for. This has some serious deleterious effects on sandbox play.

Games where you are expected to level up with relative frequency compound this problem considerably.

If you have a hard time understanding the problems this poses, take a close look at any of the modules WotC produced for 3rd Edition Dungeons & Dragons. What you will see is an extremely linear encounter order – even compared to many TSR 1st Edition tournament modules. This is because it is extremely important for the PCs to have levelled up appropriately between various sets of encounters. The encounters must take place in a relatively linear order to make the adventure work. That this heavily erodes the choices available to the players is, apparently, not an important design consideration.

Along with this is the idea that a "return to" is not in the works. You can go back to an area if it has been completely repopulated with level-appropriate opponents; otherwise, the place is no longer of interest, and the design work is lost.

It is impossible to overstate the degree to which this damages the sense of a real, breathing world. It also curtails player choices – there is no point in going back to the Caves of Doom, even if you failed to explore them fully. In a very real way, that decision is taken from you by the ruleset. In the few published 3.x edition adventures where you are expected to return to an area you've already been to, the GM must give very specific clues that there is even a point.

Consider also the poor, harried Game Master, who is trying to create a sandbox world that will be of interest to her players. In order to create this as a sandbox, she must design a few areas in which low-level play may occur. But, in a steep- power-curve game, whatever is not immediately chosen by the players is wasted design work. In a shallow-power-curve game, though, it remains viable for play.

If there were no other reasons to avoid 3rd and 4th Edition D&D (and its direct derivatives) for sandbox play, these first two failures would be more than enough!

3. Simulationist: It is difficult to make a world live and breathe if the ruleset

you are using forces the players to separate their game-rules decisions from the decisions that their characters are making within the game's fictional setting. It is ultimately desirable that a player, with no knowledge of the game's rules, can make decisions from his or her character's viewpoint, and have those decisions be viable.

Why?

Well, the most obvious answer is that this difference is why Holmes Basic is a role-playing game, and why HeroClix and Monopoly are not. The less the player is making decisions from the basis of the character role, the less the game is actually a role-playing game.

A more complicated answer would examine the relationship between simulationism and player decision making. The more a player can use his actual experience to make decisions within the campaign milieu, the more "real" the world seems, and consequently the more involved the player becomes in that decision making. As creating a "breathing world" to whatever degree is possible is one goal of sandbox play, and as encouraging player decision making is another, it should be clear that simulationism feeds into both goals.

It should be clear that the terms "realism" and "simulation", within the context of a role-playing game, refer to simulating the "reality" of the genre of that game. No one expects that people are actually going to fly like Superman, or that anyone will ever be as hyper-competent as Batman, but within the context of a supers-style game, this is part of the "realism" being simulated.

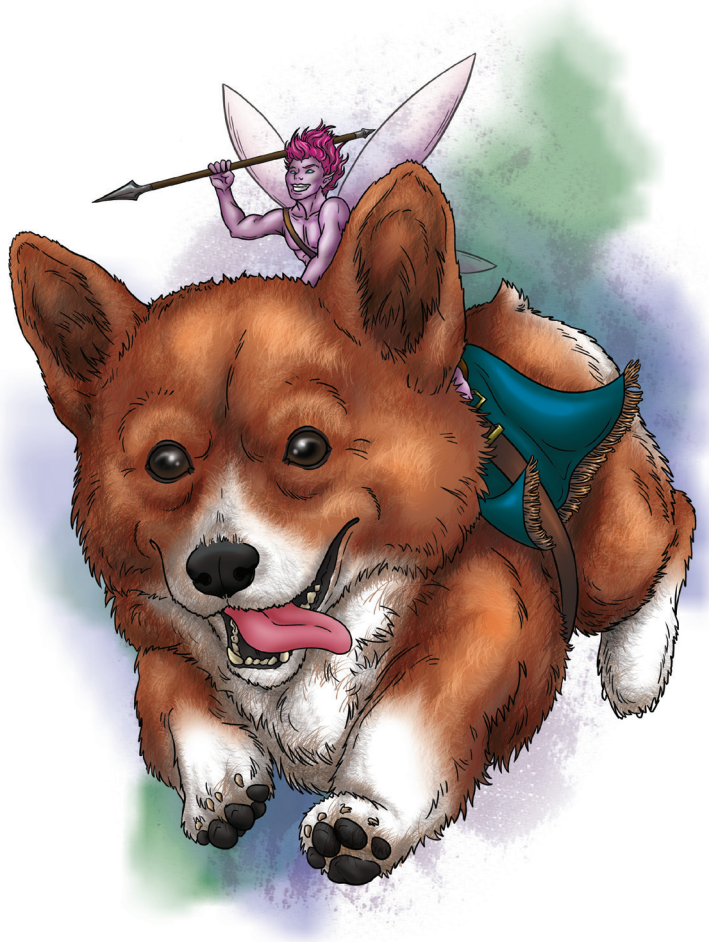
4. Broad (Rather than Narrow) Balance: Game balance can be roughly described as following either a broad-based or a narrow-based approach. Broad-based balance looks at balancing play over the entire play experience, whereas narrow balance attempts to balance play at each point along the play experience. All role-playing games fall somewhere along this spectrum. AD&D 1e is very broad-based in its balance, for example, while D&D 4e is extremely narrow.

This issue of balance type is related to both the power curve and the pace at which play occurs.

It is related to power curve in that, the wider the group of characters that can

be balanced, the broader the balance base must be. In order for a 1st level character to adventure in a meaningful way with a 3rd level character, the power growth between the characters must be limited. A shallow power curve helps to maintain broad balance.

To understand how the pace of play affects broad vs. narrow balance, it helps to examine 3rd Edition D&D. In 3rd Edition, the combination of class, skills, and feats allows an extremely wide variety of character types to be created. One can easily create a scholar, a mighty warrior, a character with a smattering of skills but no true expertise, or anything else one can think of. This is even more true when one considers the inclusion of various splatbooks and third party offerings. It is even reasonable to posit that one could create in 3e a group of characters who are relatively similar in power and abilities to



the iconic 1e party of fighter, magic-user, thief, and cleric.

Now, that 1e party works well because (1) the focus of play is often on exploration of a fictional space, rather than simply on combat, and (2) when encounters take place, although one or another character may particularly shine, they are resolved quickly, and other players have the chance to take the spotlight.

In 3e, combat drags. One direct result of this is that combat takes up a disproportionate amount of actual game time. A character that shines in combat, in short, shines more brightly than the guy who makes a roll to find a trap, and then another roll to remove it. And this moves balance from a broad base – where different approaches are equally valid and important – to a narrow base, where combat is supremely important. The direction that WotC took to "fix" D&D in 4e demonstrates this amply – combat takes longer, balance is centered around combat balance, things like traps or skill use are treated essentially like combat, and creature abilities are designed to prevent anyone from being out-shone during the long grind-fest that typifies 4e combats.

If that is what one wants in a game, that's fine. It is not good for sandbox campaigns, though…and, frankly, video games do it far better.

5. Speedy Character Creation: If the Game Master is going to allow players to make choices, and then actually follow through on the consequences of those choices, characters will die. Or they will be doing something else when a group wants to plunder some ancient ruin. If broad-balanced games are balanced around total play time (as I contend they are), then speedy character creation is as important as quickly resolved encounters.

Another aspect to speedy character creation is that the game is not played in the building of characters, but at the table. Characters become largely differentiated – and defined – by what they do, what they learn, what the gain, rather than being assembled like a deck for Magic the Gathering.

This relates to choices, context, and consequence, because characters are built during play as a consequence of the choices they make. Games with "Wealth by Level" guidelines, that mandate or assume that characters will grow more powerful in lockstep, or that have treasure parcels teleport around after the PCs until they are found, simply don't make for good sandboxing.

Finally, imagine and pity the poor Game Master. If the player must make but a single character, the Game Master must make dozens, hundreds, or thousands. Games with long character generation pull Game Masters in the direction of the railroad/Adventure Path simply to avoid having to make as many NPCs. Which brings us to….

6. Speedy World Creation: If it is important for the poor, overworked Game Master to be able to create NPCs quickly, the same holds true for vast swathes of world creation. The more exacting the rules are, the more the Game Master must look up and record in order to create the setting, and the more time it will take. D&D 3e was the epitome of this, with its statistics for walls, floors, etc. A game suitable for sandboxing should not require the Game Master to look up information just to put a flight of stairs on a map.

To put it more directly, if two hours of prep time is all you have, and you can only create a few encounters in that two hours, then you (as a Game Master) are going to be heavily invested in ensuring that the players use those encounters and none other. On the other hand, if you can create several dozen encounters in the same time – far more than the players are likely to need in any given session – you are far more likely to allow them to make choices that determine which encounters get used.

7. Encourages GM Fiat: This is related to the speedy creation of characters and setting, as well as speeding play. It is often better for the game to make a decision and move on. You can look up the "official ruling" later, if it is important to anyone at the table, but that shouldn't be the priority during play.

Encouraging GM fiat also allows for customization of NPCs, monsters, and game effects without requiring the GM to do homework. How much easier to write, "Is blind, but can fight as though sighted" as part of an NPC write-up, than to try to discover the sequence of feats and skills that allows the character to be created "legally"! How much easier to just an ogre's stats the way you think they should be to fit a particular concept than to have to look for a particular template (and do the work of applying some of them)!

But encouraging GM fiat isn't all about speed of play, or even cutting down on the GM's homework. The very idea of a sandbox includes within it that the world is worth exploring – it is not simply a generic expression of the rules, but rather a combination of the ruleset and the vision of the Game Master. Playing in that sandbox allows for real exploration in part because the

GM's vision is as important as the game rules themselves.

This is not to say that the players are unimportant – by exercising choice within the whole, they create the actual focus of play as an amalgam of all participants plus ruleset. And encouraging GM fiat means that the GM can hold the rules as secondary to the imaginations of all participants. A cool, and appropriate, character concept need never be set aside because the rules do not account for it. Likewise, an inappropriate, but "legal", character concept need never be allowed to drag the game down for all other participants.

Finally, if the Game Master must adhere slavishly to the rules, either there will always be a chance to fall down stairs, break bones, etc. – or such things simply will not, and cannot, happen.

Finally, a good game for a sandbox

8. Encourages Long-Term Thinking as well as Short-Term Thinking:
If your game is going to last beyond a single session, or a single "adventure path", the players must be encouraged to consider their characters' long-term goals.

To be clear, I do not mean "long-term build" here. I don't mean how the character will look at various character class levels. I mean, how the character wants to shape the world around him.

The ability to shape the world around you is a major feature of sandbox gaming. The game milieu begins life as the domain of the Game Master, but it does not stay so. It changes in response to PC actions, and wise players can and will learn to make those actions count. Characters clear wilderness, found towns, create castles, and become lords of the land. They determine policy, sway kingdoms, and lead men. In short, they wrest some level of control over the milieu from the Game Master, and make parts of the milieu their own.

And, if the Game Master is actually running a sandbox, this is encouraged. This is the big reward of the game. Beyond levels, beyond character power, beyond gold and jewels, is the opportunity to make your choices matter in persistent and important ways. You may be frustrated trying to do the same in the real world. You will be frustrated trying to do the same in a railroad. Your efforts may be resisted and thwarted from time to time in a sandbox, but they should also be rewarded.

After all, that's one of the biggest draws of the game….and one thing that computer games cannot come close to matching.

Recommendations

The minute you accept that system matters, it then follows that you should have a system that helps meet your goals…or at least avoid systems that work against you!

It should be obvious that I believe ***Dungeon Crawl Classics*** serves the needs of a sandbox GM admirably. My ***Campaign Elements*** series, published by ***Purple Duck Games***, is intended to make it easier for a DCC judge to create a sandbox game.

For science fiction gaming, I believe that the absolute best system for sandbox games available today is ***Stars Without Numbers***, which contains such a plethora of well-made tools targeted at making and running a sandbox that it is simply without peer at the moment. The classic ***Traveller*** game would be well worth considering as well.

If post-Apocalyptic gaming is your thing, there is ***Mutant Crawl Classics*** and ***Crawling Under a Broken Moon*** for ***Dungeon Crawl Classics***, the original ***Gamma World*** game, and ***Mutant Future***, all of which will work very well in a sandbox format.

Any early Dungeons & Dragons is good, up to (but not including) the introduction of the Player's Option books. Pre-5th Edition WotC-D&D is right out, but the "retro-clones" are right in. OSRIC, Basic Fantasy, and Labyrinth Lord (among others) are extremely sandbox-friendly.

Initial Set Up For Sandbox Games

Let us imagine that you've decided you want to run a sandbox-style game, and you have chosen an appropriate system. Now, you have pads of graph paper and hex paper printed off, and you are beginning to imagine what you want your sandbox to be like. What now?

For me, the first step toward setting up anything is to brainstorm ideas. I'll get some scrap paper, and just write down whatever ideas I come up with.

What kind of cultures do I want in the campaign milieu? What kind of creatures? People? Situations? Even single encounters, if they occur to me, get written down. From these notes, I am attempting to create four things:

1. An initial base of operations,
2. An interesting outdoors area to explore,
3. An overview of the region that the initial sandbox area is part of,
4. At least three major and six minor adventure sites.

We'll be looking at each of these in order, but it is important to remember that they are interlinked.

One of the reasons that I brainstorm first is so that, for example, I have a strong idea of what my adventure area and wilderness will consist of, and can include clues to, say, the Tower of Amoreth the Arcane in the background of the initial starting area and the wilderness. In addition, adventure sites can interlink, offering (a) pointers for the players, to help them determine where else they can explore, and (b) "Aha!" moments when things learned in two or more locations suddenly point to a larger whole.

Point (a) is important because it helps the players to make choices. If you go back to the ***Choices, Context, and Consequences*** essays in the first volume of ***Dispatches***, you will recall that the Game Master needs to supply information (context) for player choices.

In the initial area, ferreting out these connections shouldn't be too difficult. In expansion areas, where the players are presumably growing accustomed to seeking out and putting together scraps of information, the clues can become harder to discover/piece together. The goal is to make information available, and to have enough information available that the players will gain access to a reasonable amount of it. On the other hand, the information should be difficult enough to gain/use that doing so gives the players a feeling of accomplishment. Lots of information, hidden with varying degrees of difficulty, is the best way to accomplish this.

(In early TSR modules, treasure was used the same way. Lots of treasure, hidden with varying degrees of difficulty, ensured that the players would both

find treasure, and feel a sense of accomplishment based on the most difficult-to-locate treasures they uncovered. If the GM didn't tell the players what they missed, that sense of accomplishment – as well as the sense of the module taking place in a mysterious area – could endure. It is only when the GM felt the need to tell the players what they missed, or the players to read the module later, that this set-up became damaged. You can easily prevent this problem in work you write yourself!)

The foregoing also explains point (b) rather well. "Aha!" moments are (among other things) a reward for good play. In an initial area, "good play" should have a fairly low bar, so as to encourage play, exploration, and decision-making.

This is not to say that a cakewalk is desired, because a cakewalk offers no sense of accomplishment. Rather, again, a sliding bar is desired, where any effort includes rewards at its fringes according to the effort put in. Everyone gets rewarded; better play is rewarded more.

Likewise, if your overview includes the idea "Ancient Aztec civilization was once in area now being raided by Vikings" as a "hook", it is critically important that your initial area includes elements both of the current Viking raiders and of the ancient Aztecs who were once there. The overview exists to guide your initial work, allowing you to foreshadow a larger world.

Note that, if your campaign milieu is going to include a megadungeon, I recommend that this lies outside the initial set-up area. Characters and players should have a chance to get their feet wet in the milieu before entering such an area.

If you think of ***The Hobbit***, Hobbiton, the trolls, and Rivendell all may be considered as part of the initial set-up area, before entering the much more complex goblin mines and Mirkwood. Likewise, much occurs in ***The Lord of the Rings*** before the Fellowship encounters Moria.

If you intend on including a megadungeon, though, you can certainly include links, hints, and rumors in the initial area. This is actually a good idea. In fact, hints of any expansion areas you are already envisioning should be included in the initial area. You want the players to consider a larger world almost from the beginning.

Initial Base of Operations

The initial base of operations is most often a small settlement, near the borders of a dangerous area in which adventures can be had. The base is mostly safe, and offers the PCs a haven to rest, as well as resources to adventure – sales of weapons, armor, and other gear; perhaps magical healing; perhaps an NPC or two who can help round out a party, or who can offer useful advice. This is the model of the classic TSR modules, ***Keep on the Borderland*** and ***Village of Hommlet***.

In his mostly excellent column, Dungeoncraft, Ray Winninger listed the "First Rule of Dungeoncraft: Never force yourself to create more than you must" and suggests that failure to follow that rule has been the downfall of many campaigns.

Now, Mr. Winninger offers a lot of excellent advice in his columns, but I'm going to caution you to not take this one at face value. Or, at least, not to do so without first considering exactly what this rule is saying. For example, it suggests that the prospective GM actually knows what is needed, and imagining that this is so takes one into the linear adventure path all too easily.

Also, it is all too easy to read "Never force yourself to create more than you must" as "Never create more than you must" – I've had that argument several times on RPG boards, and it rises hydra-like every time you think it is truly slain – and it is that "force yourself" that is actually important in the rule. Don't burn yourself out creating material that you don't think you're going to need, if it is not fun for you. Don't force yourself.

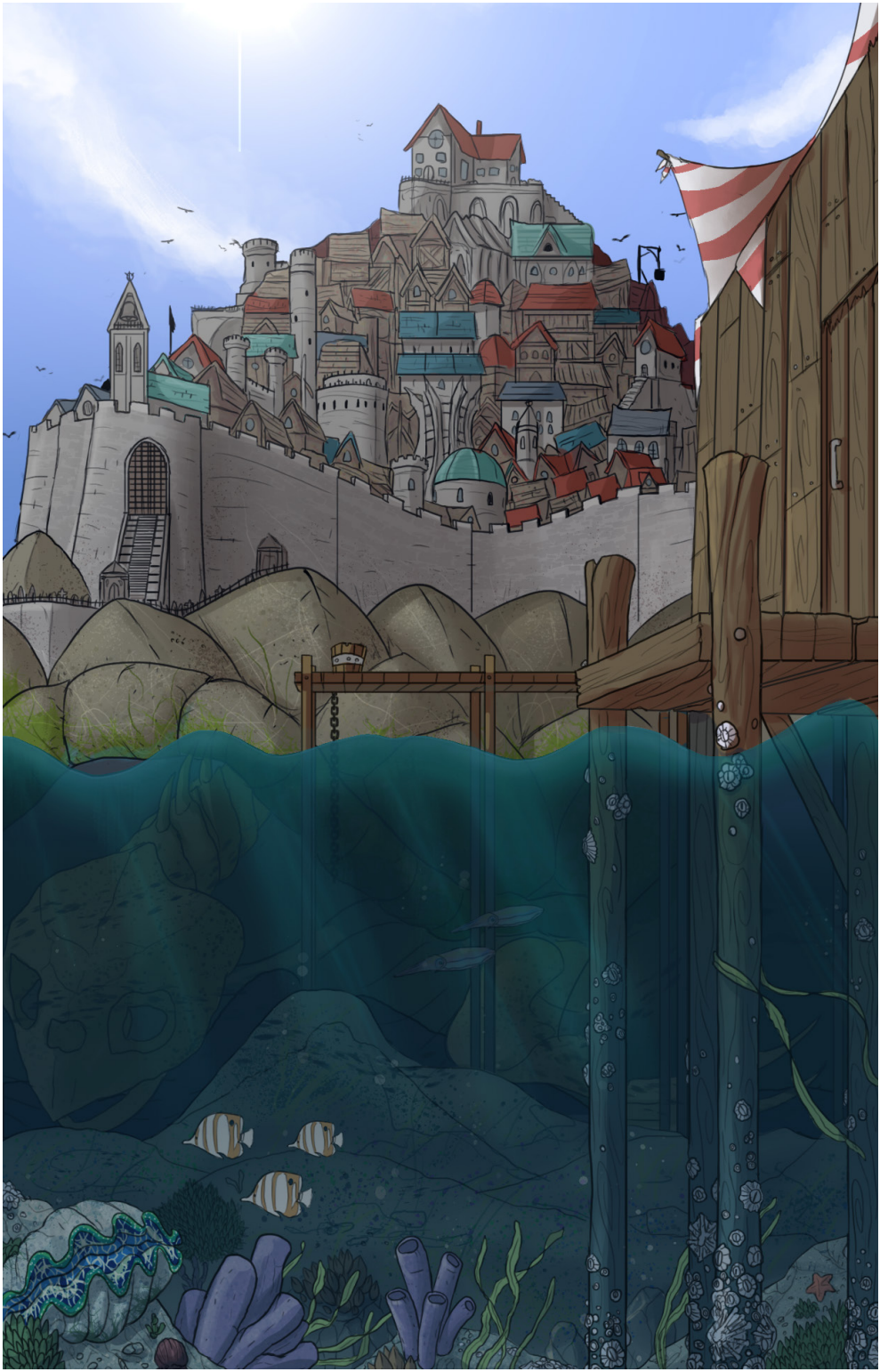
I would rephrase Mr. Winniger's rule to two rules:

1. Concentrate on immediate needs first, and

2. After immediate needs are met, do whatever work interests you the most. Or, take a break if nothing is particularly interesting to you.

Obviously, if you fail to do (1), then you don't have the necessary material to play the game, and if you don't do (2), GMing will become more of a chore than a joy. That way GM burnout and ruined campaigns doth lie.

In my own "Rules", I would include this as a salient one: Every hour of prep



work should result in at least two hours of game time. Actually, my goal when prepping is closer to "at least five hours of game time". These three rules together inform how I prep an initial base of operations.

(As an aside, there is a lot of "back-and-forthing" involved in setting up a sandbox milieu. When you begin to design wilderness areas and adventure sites, you are going to reference and modify your initial base of operations. If you are writing notes longhand, leave space for this. I find that the computer is ideal for this, but I still prefer to make handwritten notes first, as writing something down tends to imprint on the memory better than typing it up. Seriously. There have been studies.

You may also find that you are coming up with cool wilderness or adventure site ideas while working on the base of operations. Write them down! Let the work you are doing now inspire the work you will do in the future, and vice versa.)

(As a second aside, I would say that the "Every hour of prep work should result in at least two hours of game time" rule applies even when a GM decides to write a treatise on the wildflowers of some particular reason. The key is to find reasons to make that work relevant, rather than just boring your players with pseudo- scholarship.

Likewise, if you spend a minute deciding that "Bree-Yark" is goblin for "Hey Rube!" make sure that you also get at least two minutes' worth of fun out of it at the gaming table. Re-using lore is a good way to do that. The first time, the PCs might think that "Bree-Yark" means "We surrender!" The second time, they might know what it really means, and it might seem to be simply color. Still later, they might use the phrase to trick some goblins into thinking an intruder is coming from another direction.)

Concentrate on immediate needs first.

The immediate needs of a base of operation are determining the resources available to the PCs, including any possible spellcasting or magical resources (such as healing, or identify and other divination spells); determining what NPCs there are who might aid or hinder the PCs, and determining what threats, if any, exist within the settlement itself. What is the overt power structure of the settlement? Who is in charge, and who is known to be influential?

These are the things that players are likely to be interested in during the first game session or so. As a result, they are the things that you need to know first. You can get away with not naming every guardsman; you cannot get away without knowing whether or not a suit of chainmail or a lantern can be purchased.

"Background" NPCs can, likewise, be developed as needed, but you need to know the characters in the area, now, which can be especially helpful or useful. This includes NPC adventurers that might offer the PCs advice, aid, or their direct services. Some of these last NPCs should be normal folk who seek a better life (and therefore have no real class levels), and a very few should be "ringers" that are really baneful. As a rule of thumb, for every ringer you include, ten NPCs must be on the up-and-up, or the players will (rightly!) stop trusting NPCs altogether.

Difficult NPCs might be ones who overcharge for services, are rival adventurers, are secret thieves or spies, etc. Again, these folks are most effective when sparsely encountered, so the "No more than 1 for every 10 non-problem NPCs" rule should be followed. Failing to include these types, though, makes the game lose some of its charm. For many players, ferreting out the weasels is one of the joys in the game, as is rivaling with, and finally besting, a long-term foe.

Remember that a "problem NPC" need not be evil – a rival adventurer can be honorable, graceful and courteous, never try to kill the PC, and even help the PC from time to time. So long as there is a serious chance that he will get the treasure first, he can be effective. Especially if the PCs occasionally get the chance to return the favor – both by scooping the loot, and by saving him from some danger!

If you have players with a keen interest in anything else in particular, make sure you include addressing their interests in the "immediate needs" phase. This is why so many commercial modules (ex. B2, T1, and N1) develop inns and taverns more than, say, the local tanner's establishment.

In some cases, the PCs are intended to be would-be adventurers who come to the area to seek their fortunes. In others, they are intended to be natives of the location. If the PCs are natives of the location, you need to ensure that the support structures are in place to make this possible – for example, a temple of the PC cleric's god, a more powerful wizard to have trained a fledg-

ling magic-user, etc. It is completely okay to say that some PCs start as locals, and others as migrants, if it doesn't make sense that some PCs come from the starting area.

Adventure sites within the base – sewers, a haunted house, an abandoned mill – are good ways to allow a group to sort itself out with a minimum of risk. Assuming the risks are minimal, which need not always be the case. If you have such an area, you need only place it at the moment. When we discuss filling in initial adventure sites, we will come back to this topic.

After immediate needs are met, do whatever work interests you the most.

Once you've completed the most important work, do what interests you. No level of detail is too great, if you are creating that detail because you want to. But, if more detail doesn't interest you at the moment, take a break.

Information about travelers at the inn, details of the local temple's religion, quirky background NPCs, the hopes and dreams of the local blacksmith's apprentice….all of this can make for interesting gaming, but only if you are actually interested enough to do the work with some flair. Otherwise, you are better off "winging it" if the players inquire into these things…or, better yet, putting it off until you become interested in it.

Keep in mind, though, that the initial base of operations is the one "safe" place that the characters are likely to spend the most time in during the entire campaign. Once the characters have outgrown it, they will also have outgrown the need to stop anywhere for as long a time. Many things that can be glossed over in a town the PCs are likely to merely pass through – or even permanently live in – cannot as successfully be glossed in the initial base of operations.

This area is "home" to the PCs. The more you work to make it feel like a real place, the more enjoyment your players will have. Also, the more attached they will become to the game milieu, considering it "theirs" by proxy. This is a good thing. It is probably one of the most rewarding things a Game Master can experience.

Every hour of prep work should result in at least two hours of game time.

Ray Winninger had another Rule that I think is a good one: "Whenever you

design a major piece of the campaign world, always devise at least one secret related to that piece." To this I would add, "Whenever you devise a major piece of the campaign world, always consider how that piece can be used for replay value." Having secrets that the players can uncover can bring them back to a piece of the game milieu that you devised long ago, and that they thought they were done with. It increases replay value.

Likewise, for each of the major NPCs and major resources in the base of operations, you want to create both at least one secret, and at least one connection to something else. That something else can be inside the base of operations, but it can also be a connection to locations in the wilderness or in an adventure site. For example, the local lord might desire some particular creature type for his menagerie, while another's daughter went off with a band of adventurers to explore the Caverns of Deadly Doom, where her skeleton yet molders.

Remember, every time you get to reuse an element that you created previously – every time your hour's work adds more at-table play time – you win. If what happens in the wilderness sends the PCs back into a dungeon they've already visited, or back to see someone in town – you win. If it makes the players even consider it, you win. You are getting extra mileage out of your design work.

This is not to say that your goal is to frustrate players – it is not! Rather, you wish to intrigue them, to offer them connections, and to reward them for paying attention to what is happening in the game milieu.

If it seems that these remarks apply only to a village in a wilderness, think again. The base of operations could be a neighborhood in a city, where the city becomes the "wilderness". Likewise, in a Stars Without Numbers campaign, the base of operations could be a spaceport, with the "wilderness" being the planetary body the characters begin play on. The details change, but the basic ideas are still the same.

An interesting outdoors area to explore

In some cases, and in particular in modules like ***T1 Village of Hommlet*** and ***N1 Cult of the Reptile God***, the outdoors area is sketchy at best, and nonexistent at worst. As only one adventure site is presented, it is imagined that

travel from the base of operations to the adventure site is relatively inconsequential. You can start a game this way – even a sandbox-style game (so long as the options then open out from those initial choices) but doing so is not preferable.

If you contrast the above modules with ***B2 Keep on the Borderlands***, ***The Lost City of Barakus***, and ***Rappan Athuk Reloaded***, or similar modules, the appeal of having a well-developed and interesting outdoors area to explore ought to be immediately apparent. If nothing else, such areas offer players a choice beyond simply travelling to the nearby ruins. And, as described in previous posts, the point of table top role-playing games is the ability to make choices that matter. And that means that, the more player choices determine what the play experience actually is, the less the milieu will seem to be "videogamey".

The key to making the outdoors area work is to make it interesting. An interesting wilderness area offers challenges, yes….but it also offers landmarks to navigate by, clues that help supply context for choices, and descriptive elements akin to the "dungeon dressing" in the ***1st Edition AD&D Dungeon Master's Guide***.

A large part of wilderness adventuring is also dealing with random encounters. In a way, these things are all part of the "challenge", but they are also part of making the campaign milieu seem to "breathe".

Concentrate first on immediate needs first.

Draw a wilderness map. Either place your initial base of operations near the centre, or ensure that there are strong obstacles (such as deserts, high mountains, etc.) that prevent easy travel into unmapped regions. Ensure that your map includes all the features you want in your initial area. I.e., if you want an element of oceans and coastlines, make sure that you include these elements.

If you can obtain numbered hex paper, it will be easier to key the areas, and you can make changes related to the location of lairs, monsters, etc., without having to change your map. For an initial play area, a small scale is desirable – an area comprising no more than a week's travel in all directions, with whatever means the Player Characters are likely to have available. Mapping the area the characters can reach in three game days is often sufficient.

I prefer to make these maps on a 1 hex = 5 miles scale. This is a small enough scale to note interesting features, and large enough that the initial map need be no larger than a single sheet of hex paper. You may wish to experiment with larger or smaller scales.

For important regions, I will make "nested hex" paper, where the larger hexes match the initial map, and the smaller hexes within are scaled at 1 hex = 1 mile. This can give a fairly comprehensive picture of an important location.

Decide the basic parameters of the objects on the map you drew. It isn't enough to show a stream; you want to individuate this stream from the others on your map. If the party gets lost, and comes across the stream, they should be able to get some idea where they are from how the stream itself is described. Likewise, decide if woods are heavy or light, if grasslands are rolling or not. Are these hills craggy and full of small caves? Are those hills forested, with gentle slopes? The level of detail that JRR Tolkien gives in The Hobbit is about perfect for this.

Decide where your adventure locations will be, and roughly what sorts of adventure locations they are going to be. If you will recall, we are considering at least three major and six minor adventure locations. A major location may be a dungeon, a ruin, a lost city, an enchanted island, or whatever else you can imagine. A minor location may be a ruined farmhouse, a minor cave system, etc. In general, a major location may take several sessions to explore, while a minor location will only take about 1 game session (or less!).

Consider how these sites will affect the areas around them. Brainstorm a list of clues pointing to the location's existence, placement, and nature, as well as to any creatures that might have a local impact on the environment. You will want to liberally sprinkle these clues around the adventure site, as far abroad as you think believable, to aid the players in making choices. Basically, you are providing context here.

If you imagine the story of Little Red Riding Hood, it is the foreknowledge of the wolf in Granny's bed that gives the story its tension. Likewise, in any movie or novel, it is our ability to anticipate what may happen that makes us pay attention. Many first time Game Masters think it important to hide clues from their players. The reality is actually quite the reverse – the more clues the players have, the better! Making decisions while anticipating what may occur is far more engaging than making decisions in the dark and hoping for

the best.

Place a few lairs of creatures that are not full adventure sites. They are just places where a creature may be found, analogous to a single room in a dungeon. Likewise, you can place a few tricks, traps, and treasures without any creatures at all, just as if you were stocking a dungeon.

Don't assume that all of these will be hostile encounters. Some may begin neutral; some may be potential friends and allies. Here woodsmen have a small encampment from which they range during daylight hours. There a single fortified farmhouse is found in relative isolation.

Don't be afraid to have these areas "bleed into" one another.

Consider: Crossing the Misty Mountains, the party encounters stone giants, which are largely disconnected from everything else. However, when the party takes shelter in a cave, they unknowingly enter the Goblin Lair adventure site. Escaping this, they encounter a "potential landslide" natural trap, and stumble into a gathering place of wolves….which is also the destination of the goblins they escaped because the wolves and goblins are linked. The disturbance caused by this encounter triggers a nearby lair – that of the Lord of Eagles. And so on.

Place other settlements, if desired. If you place nearby villages and settlements, give them the same sort of development that you did the initial base of operations….but, in each case, do about 1/4 of the detail you did previously. You can always add detail if the players are interested; if not, you need do no more.

Create basic encounter tables for random encounters. These should reflect your design work to this point, indicating the creatures and peoples living in your wilderness area. Your encounter tables can and should include more than simply one fight after another. Normal animals, for instance, should be included both in description of the wilderness, and in "encounters".

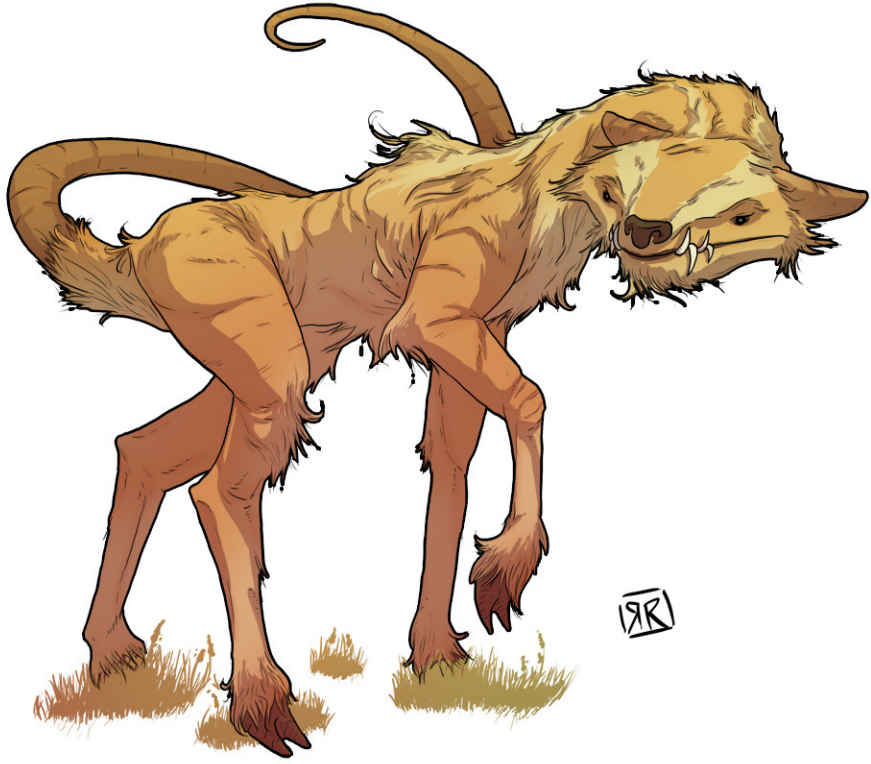
You can also create a list of "specials" that can occur – random encounters that are either essentially dressing (a cart fallen over and half-buried in mud/vegetation, with a broken axle) or an analogue to a dungeon room (i.e., fully described creatures with or without treasure, possibly a mixed group, possibly not, maybe a trick or a trap, etc.).

There are many products with random tables that can help you with this work. The random ruins tables in ***Wilderlands of High Fantasy*** are of much use, for example, and that product also includes a lot of examples of potential wilderness encounters and lairs.

After immediate needs are met, do whatever work interests you the most. Or, take a break if nothing is particularly interesting to you.

As before, once you've completed the most important work, do what interests you. No level of detail is too great, if you are creating that detail because you want to. But, if more detail doesn't interest you at the moment, take a break.

The wilderness area should be in constant motion. Refine your encounter tables. Create more specials. Move new creatures into the area, and change the status of those you've already placed. Consider how things interact, and how you can supply more context or more conflict.



Every hour of prep work should result in at least two hours of game time.

Individual lairs are not necessarily significant, unless the creatures therein are friendly enough, numerous enough, or powerful enough to last beyond a single encounter. Instead, consider the secrets of particular forested regions, hills, lakes, ponds, and beaches. Whatever is likely to stay in the campaign milieu and have replay value.

Remember, if you accept my rule that "Whenever you devise a major piece of the campaign world, always consider how that piece can be used for replay value" you should also accept the converse: "Whatever has little or no replay value shouldn't be developed more than necessary".

Sometimes it may seem that the outdoors areas are analogous to the corridors in a dungeon – just something that separates the more interesting rooms/encounters. This is, of course, somewhat true, just as it is often true of a dungeon corridor, and for much the same reason – the wilderness and the corridors are seldom well developed.

But, of course, the condition of the dungeon corridors can give a major indication about the nature of what is to be found within the rooms. Also, dungeon corridors can be encounter areas in their own right, with creatures living in them, or with tricks and/or traps of their own. Likewise the wilderness. No one suggests that every corridor in a 20-level megadungeon complex should be individually keyed. Likewise, no one is suggesting that every tree and flower, every rill and sand dune, of the wilderness need be detailed. Indeed, doing so would violate the "Whatever has little or no replay value shouldn't be developed more than necessary" rule to no one's benefit.

In the wilderness, as with corridors, a strong overview and an occasional reminder, together with a little development, can go a very long way.

An Overview of the Region

Every area designed for a sandbox occurs as part of a larger whole, and this is no less true for the initial area than for any other. Nothing exists in isolation. Unless your starting area is hermetically sealed from the rest of your world – in which case, your starting area is the totality of your world! – this is as true for the game as it is for real life. Merchant caravans come from somewhere,

pirates sell their goods in some distant port. Even the distant past is part of the larger picture….Who made that castle whose ruins the player characters are busy plundering?

It is important, therefore, to have a general overview of the region that the initial sandbox area is part of.

Two quick notes:

(1) I have been involved in discussions where it has been suggested that the "box" was an operative part of the term "sandbox" as it applies to role-playing games. I reject this utterly. There is, of necessity, an edge to the region currently created by the Game Master and/or explored by the players in a sandbox game – but this edge exists neither to keep the world out, or to keep the players in. It is just the edge of the work thus far, a frontier that is always ready for expansion!

(2) Although these steps are being given sequentially, there is no reason to do the work in this way. So long as the necessary things get done, it doesn't matter what order you do them in. In fact, the work will be better for as much intersection between steps as possible. Until the starting area is presented as "ready" by you, the Game Master, everything is fluid. You should let yourself be inspired by all parts of the work, and you should be willing to go back and adjust stuff, add material, and even throw out things to make a more satisfying whole!

Concentrate first on immediate needs first.

The purpose of an overview is to have answers ready for the most obvious questions that the players are going to ask, while also having in place a vision that both inspires and grounds your imagination. You can draw a sort of vague relationship map of the surrounding area, noting only major towns, cities, and landscape features. Feel free to name the country that the starting area is part of, determine the basic gist of the government, and name the other countries it is immediately adjacent to (or otherwise in contact with). Decide if their relations are currently friendly or not.

You should have some idea of the major religion(s) in the region your starting area falls within, as well as what type of calendar is in use. Noting the major holidays is also a good idea. Make certain you know what year it is! It is a

good idea, as well, to know what event the year is counted from.

Celestially, you will want to know if there is more than one sun, or moon, and, if your world uses a system of astrology, what the major signs of its zodiac are. You may also want to name other known planets or important astronomical/astrological features. For example, in the northern hemisphere on Earth, you would want to mention the Big and Little Dippers, Polaris, and Orion. I like to include the phases of the moon(s) on my calendars, as this prevents me from slipping up. It also helps me keep track of when creatures such as lycanthropes are more active.

What trade goods are available, and where are they coming from? You don't need to know everything here, but 3-5 samples (good cloth, for example, or wine; ivory, silk, and gemstones; tobacco; etc.). This will help you when you are creating treasures, stocking trading posts, and detailing merchant caravans.

Who lived here in the past? Name 2-3 ancient peoples who are now gone, and give each one 2-3 defining characteristics. These should be characteristics that remain persistent in the campaign milieu. For example, in one of my own games, the ancient Esk made great use of amber beads in their decorative work, and raised barrows and monoliths now associated with the fey. The Partheloneons, on the other hand, were pseudo-Roman militants who delved too deeply into Things Man Was Not Meant to Know (i.e., Lovecraftian mythos stuff).

Not only does this sort of work add realism to the game, but it allows you to create un-dead monsters which really feel like they come from earlier times. Just as, in a contemporary setting, it is cooler to run into an ancient Aztec vampire or Egyptian mummy than it is to run into the ghost of Joe Modern, it is cooler in a fantasy milieu to interact with the past when you encounter such ancient creatures. Likewise, folkloric fey often partake of the dress and mannerisms of a bygone age…these details help faeries seem different than contemporary men.

Consider, too, that some player characters might be members of long-lived races, such as elves, whose starting ages make it possible that they were alive when the ancient peoples went away!

Your own particular gaming group will have its own special interests; try to

anticipate the questions that the players are likely to raise, and make sure that you have some form of answer available (even if you don't intend to supply it to them right away!).

After immediate needs are met, do whatever work interests you the most. Or, take a break if nothing is particularly interesting to you.

This advice never changes….

Every hour of prep work should result in at least two hours of game time.

……..as long as you keep this advice in mind.

You should assume that your world is mostly Earth-like, except in those places where you intentionally create differences. Thus, in addition to whatever fantastic trees you create, there will be oaks, elms, willows, and pines. That there will be trees, even, is something that the players ought to be able to assume, unless you tell them otherwise.

If you are going to invent other details, make sure that you use them. On the Plain of Prax, the grasses are normal, terrestrial grasses, except those unusual ones that you specify. Those unusual ones you specify should be noteworthy in some way. They should have an effect on game play (even if that effect is not, strictly speaking, mechanical). You should get at least twice the time in play value as you spend in coming up with these details.

If you decide that there is a known symbol associated with an evil cult, make sure to use that symbol in concrete ways. Knowing that symbol should allow the players to (potentially) predict the layout of an area, or even of a secret door. For example, a cult that is known to use the number three repeatedly can have a room with two obvious doors…a clue that there is another, non-obvious door in the area. If you spend the time to write it up, also spend the time to use it in every possible way you can think of! Get the highest yield you can from your design work.

Finally, you have to decide how much of this information to pass on to your players. My advice is, at the start of the game, very little indeed. Rather, as you write the background of your world, assume that the players know all the background you do, and refer to it as you would oak trees, bears, and France. Then let them ask questions as they become interested. Put the ball in

their court in this way, and they may actually listen to the answers! Make the answers useful to know within the context of the game milieu, and they may actually be eager to learn more.

Initial Adventure Sites

I recommended earlier that the initial area for a sandbox milieu contains at least three major and six minor adventure sites. The reason for this should, by this point, be obvious – if the goal is not to railroad the players, then they must have choices about what adventure sites they will explore.

At the same time, I recommend that any campaign megadungeon is not located in (although it may be adjacent to) the initial area. This is because it is desirable that the players think of the game milieu as more than just a village and a nearby ruin.

Why is this desirable? Because, no matter how interesting the megadungeon may be, without the context of a larger world, such campaigns tend to grow stale rather quickly. If your experience, or your particular strengths as a Game Master, suggest otherwise, you should disregard my advice, and go with what feels right to you.

Within the context of this discussion, a minor adventuring site is any area that can be fully explored in 1-2 game sessions or less. Examples of minor sites might be a "five room dungeon", a ruined villa or inn, a modest tomb, a small cave complex, or an abandoned lighthouse.

A major adventuring site is any site that requires more time and care. Note that it may not be immediately apparent to the players which sites are major, and which sites are minor. What appears to be a small cave complex may lead deep beneath the earth. What appears to be merely a ruined villa may have several dungeon levels beneath. Only by actual exploration may the players learn the truth.

Concentrate first on immediate needs first.

Although the following is given in a step-by-step format, individual Game Masters are advised to strike while the iron is hot. If you find yourself moved to work more on a single location, do that work first. The steps are given

in order to supply structure, and in order to supply direction when you are foundering. They are not included to suggest slave-like devotion to a process in total disregard to your own creativity!

1. Start by deciding on the nature of each adventure location. Describe it in a single-sentence or a short paragraph. For example:

- "Ancient ruins in jungle of the mysterious Olmatec people. Step-pyramids have fallen into ruin. Jaguars and pseudo-Aztec monsters."
- "Sea caves where pirates hide their booty."
- "A hidden temple to an evil deity has attracted monsters to the caverns lining these ravine walls. The monsters live in an uneasy alliance with each other, for the most part. The priests work at excavating a collapsed tunnel into another, more ancient, complex."

2. Select or draw maps for each of your adventure sites.

No matter how fantastic you are at drawing maps, I urge you to consider outsourcing some of this design work. Look at real cave maps. Use a search engine to find images on the Internet. Not only can this provide cool inspirations, but it can prevent your world from seeming as though it had but one architect in its long history.

Obviously, if you intend to publish your work, you need to consider that when outsourcing maps.

3. Decide what major creatures are located at each site, developing a random encounter chart if applicable.

At this point, if you are forced to "wing it", you have enough information to offer a consistent presentation, so long as you take notes on what you decide in play.

After immediate needs are met, do whatever work interests you the most. Or, take a break if nothing is particularly interesting to you.

Further develop your adventure location. Do encounter area write-ups, place monsters, place treasures, etc., etc. This is, in fact, similar to what you would normally do when creating an adventure site.

Every hour of prep work should result in at least two hours of game time.

Some modification of this advice is in order, for this particular step, because you do not, under any circumstances, want to force your players to interact with any particular area in a sandbox milieu. The trick, then, becomes to (1) maximize value while (2) maximizing player choices.

Doing so requires that you accept, a priori, that some treasures will never be found, some monsters will never be encountered, and some areas will never be explored. If you've gotten into the habit, pushed by later versions of D&D, that the unit of play is the encounter, that encounters are set pieces that the players must play through, that treasures are "rewards" which must be found to ensure proper wealth by level….you need to get yourself out of those ruts right now.

That is not how things work in a sandbox milieu.

If you can, grab some old and new edition modules, and look closely at the maps. You will notice that, even in the most railroad-y of the older modules, there tend to be multiple ways to reach various areas, with a few choke points. There may be much treasure hidden, but there is an assumption that finding it will rely at least in part on chance. Module B1 actually states that in any good dungeon the PCs will not find all the treasure.

Adventure sites have replay value if the players decide that there is more to explore – simply using a complex map means that an area will gain more bang for the effort put into it.

Rather than trying to create a complex narrative of events that will happen, when you create an adventuring site, you should create minor threads of events….things that link the various creatures in the area. Bits of politics. Secrets small and large that can explode out into a narrative. Basically, you are supplying hooks upon which you can build your improvisation when determining how various creatures react to the player characters and to each other.

In this way, you will allow the choices of the players, and the actual interactions within game play, to push various elements to the foreground. Because you have done very little work on these snippets, it doesn't matter if most of these are pushed into the background. Also, in a persistent campaign milieu, the hook that is pushed into the background today may be thrust into the

limelight tomorrow! In this way, previous interactions will be given greater context, and take on a depth of their own.

I cannot stress enough how reading the older fantasy and adventure fiction authors – Edgar Rice Burroughs, Jack Vance, Robert E. Howard, etc., etc., etc. – helps with this. These authors make use of characters who could well be PCs and NPCs in a role-playing game. The protagonists run into characters that have agendas of their own, and those agendas make the main thrust of the story richer simply by interacting with the protagonists. This means that these stories are less tightly plotted….but less tightly plotted is exactly what is desired in a sandbox. These authors can really help you learn how to deliver on that desire!

You can increase the value of your design work by referencing other adventure sites in the site you are working on. For example, a log in that abandoned lighthouse might mention the ruined jungle city. A group of slavers operating out of part of the jungle ruins might be in league with the pirates that buried their gold in those sea caves. A letter found in the collapsed inn refers to a treasure hidden in a small cave complex long ago.

In this last case, the party might have already wiped out the goblins which were once living there, but never located the hidden treasure (which neither they, nor the goblins, knew about at the time). Suddenly those caves are worth another look!

Imagine that you wish to present the players with a "rescue the prince" scenario. A merchant's son is taken by cultists, and is going to be sacrificed in a cavern temple to a spider god. The merchant will pay good money to save his son.

Imagine also that you want to use other parts of the cavern complex as a further adventure site, to increase the value of your work in this area. How can you do this?

First, provide both an obvious entrance to the complex, and a concealed entrance that the cultists use. Vermin of various sorts are good encounters for the opening areas of the obvious entrance; the cultists bypass these by using the hidden entrance. Note that the players may use tracking, divination, or other means to also bypass these areas. This is not cheating; this is playing the game.

Second, ensure that there are other ways to go that merely straight to the cult's spider temple. And some of those ways should have intelligent inhabitants. Kobolds may attack intruders on sight, but they know about the temple, hating and fearing the priests there. If the party can find a way to communicate, they might glean some valuable information!

Finally, include one or two bizarre things not associated with the temple itself. For example, when I used this scenario, I included a tentacled horror that was actually quite cultured, and was more than willing to talk to the party as soon as it realized that they could actually fight back. This provided the players with a strong clue that there was more going on in the complex than merely spider cultists and kobolds.

I also included a fountain carved in the rock – clearly feyish in nature – next to a long drop-off, just where the PCs needed to turn to locate the spider temple. There was more than one way to go, but one way was obviously easier than the other. Yet, the presence of the fountain clearly piqued the player's interest…and if they went down the shaft, there were more indications that deep fey dwelt in that region.

Simply leaving "other ways to go" is insufficient to make your design hours really work for you – actively give the players reasons to examine those other locations.

Likewise, if you are considering including one or more Killing Fields, Megadungeons, or potential Epic Endgames in your campaign milieu (see Volume 1 & 2 of Dispatches), you can begin foreshadowing other adventure possibilities by including them now. If you are interested in expanding the initial starting area beginning with the region to the immediate south, put in hints about that region right now – goods from trade routes arising in that region can appear in a bandit's lair, for instance.

Again, supply of information is key to creating these sites, and making them work for you. If you create 9 sites over the course of 20 hours, and three sites are used for a total of 40 hours or more of game play, you win. If six out of nine are used for 60 hours of game play, even better.

And the key to "even better" is to provide linking information, put the ball the players' court, and then enjoy the ride!

Notes for Dungeon Crawl Classics Judges

Most ***Dungeon Crawl Classics*** campaigns will begin with a 0-level funnel, and sandbox-style DCC campaigns are no different. This funnel creates a strong "hook" that gets the action going, but the judge must be careful not to predetermine how the action then takes place.

Because of how PCs are generated in Dungeon Crawl Classics, the judge should be careful not to set the initial outpost in stone. Doubtless, some of the PCs will turn out to be important characters there. If one or more PCs are blacksmiths, and they are killed in the funnel, it is completely appropriate for the judge to determine that there are no blacksmiths remaining in the village. As the initial funnel progresses, the judge should note any results or conversations that impact the PCs' starting area, and adjust his work accordingly.

The judge will want to make elements of the initial funnel re-usable in some way. This may be because it introduces creatures that threaten the area, or special treasures that require returning to the initial location, or even because a potential patron is introduced.

By understanding the basics of the area in which the DCC sandbox is to take place, the judge may also plant clues or hooks for other areas within the initial funnel. ***The Portal Under the Stars***, for instance, sends the PCs searching for a dryad's tree. Using this adventure, the judge may either plan for such an encounter location, or may change the published text so as better to reflect what will appear in his sandbox. The important thing about these hooks is that, while they offer potential direction to the players, they do not usually force the players to choose the path being offered.

There are many published ***Dungeon Crawl Classics*** adventures, which the judge may wish to incorporate. These published adventures fall into three rough categories:

- **Site-based adventures:** The adventure offers a location, and the PCs interact with it when they enter that location. This is the easiest type of adventure to incorporate, because it is truly modular. The judge still has the responsibility of going through the adventure and making changes to better fit her own campaign milieu.
- **Adventures of opportunity:** A trigger event has occurred, and the PCs

have a limited time in which to take advantage of it. For instance, if a ship crashes onto a reef, the goods aboard the ship may be salvaged before the vessel sinks. Many of the traditional "Quest Giver" type adventures fall into this category.

- **Situational adventures:** A situation has occurred that the PCs must deal with. They are transported to the Purple Planet. They are kidnapped by the Cinder Claws. They are brought before the Courts of Chaos. These types of adventures can occur in a sandbox setting, but they should be used sparingly. They exist as a ***contrast*** to the control the players typically have over their circumstances, and ***regaining that control*** is a primary reward.

Some people claim that adventures of opportunity and situational adventures do not belong in a sandbox. If the real world is the ultimate expression of what the sandbox seeks to emulate, reality demonstrates that fleeting opportunities do arise, and situations do occur which we must either deal with, or pay the price for avoiding. If you are in the path of a tsunami, it is unwise to ignore it.

Regardless of what published adventure(s) you choose to include, you must still make any necessary changes to fit them into your milieu. You should also go through them, looking for elements that can provide foreshadowing for the adventure and elements that you can get long term use from.

Modules in the Sandbox

There are people who will claim that the inclusion of published adventure modules damages sandbox games. In effect, they argue that, should White Plume Mountain appear somewhere in the campaign milieu, players lose all agency. Or all creativity. Or are only able to react to the GM's presented story. That I disagree with these ideas is putting it rather mildly.

In my conception of the game, play is a volleying of ideas between players and GM, with each both reacting and acting upon each other. The GM's responsibility is to give sufficient context for the players to make meaningful choices, and then to present the consequences of those choices as new context for the next volley of player choices.

The fictional campaign milieu, however it is devised, and including its inhab-

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itants, is the primary context that players have. The ruleset is the secondary context, with the players presumably understanding that the rules are a model of the world, and can be altered as circumstances demand to model the world better.

Now, it has been said that "necessity is the mother of invention", which is another way of saying that creativity often occurs as a reaction to some problem. Far from restricting creativity, having something to react to often increases it. Consider all of the novels, poems, songs, paintings, films, etc., that are specifically inspired by, or reacting to, something else. Now, consider all of the same that develop in a vacuum, reacting to nothing. I cannot think of a single example of the second set.

Reaction need not be creative. You can react – or act, for that matter – by rote. But reaction is not intrinsically less creative because it is in response to something else. In fact, the reason why simply watching a movie is not generally viewed as a creative process is because it is passive. You do not react.

If, on the other hand, you watch a movie, and your reaction is to feel that you could do better, that is creative – so long as you actually go out and do it! Edgar Rice Burroughs claimed that he started writing as a reaction to the novels that were then available. No one was writing what he wanted to read, and he thought he could do better.

So, imagine that you wanted to slap White Plume Mountain into a sandbox campaign milieu. What to do? Well, first you need to remove the intro parts that refer to how the PCs get involved...unless you wish to make it either a situational adventure or an adventure of opportunity, and even then the site must exist prior to the triggering opportunity or situation. You need to go through the module and change anything you think should be changed, so as to fit the campaign milieu. Then you need to place it somewhere. Then you need to decide what "footprint" it has on the local area. You may also have to update it from time to time to keep up with campaign events.

Me, I would place the theft of the three great weapons into the far past, and make mention of White Plume Mountain early on. The players can either decide that they want those weapons, and decide how to go about it (at any level), or ignore it, or do whatever else they like. The presence of White Plume Mountain removes no agency from the players whatsoever.

Some players may choose to tackle White Plume Mountain "because it is there". Well, that's a meaningful choice, too. It is as meaningful as choosing to raise an army, create a great collection, or waylay travelers in a forest.

Nothing is in any way invalidated by the inclusion of White Plume Mountain in the GM's prep work. Conversely, though, the GM's prep work may be made considerably easier by the module's inclusion, and the module itself might carry resonance with both GM and players who have heard of it. Some GMs create campaign milieus modeled off of real world history to create exactly this type of resonance. The world is made neither larger nor smaller by one mountain being called the Omu Peak or by another being called White Plume Mountain.

When I run a game, my attempt is to bring the context of a full world to the players, to the best of my ability. That includes NPCs who want to use the PCs to their own ends. That includes having wizards who might have created unique un-dead. It includes ordering the interests of gods and city-states, and, occasionally, things happen like earthquakes and floods. The world moves whether or not the PCs move with it.

Opportunities can be squandered. The PCs can be sitting in a tavern somewhere, drinking fine ale, when events catch up to them....and those events can be natural or unnatural. The world doesn't sit still, no matter how much you might wish it to.

The GM is not a slave to the players, and the players are not slaves to the GM. I am not playing these games to escape life, or to escape a sense of powerlessness. I play these games to explore. I am interested in making the world tick, and I am interested in what the players do. I am interested in both their actions and their reactions. I am interested in their creativity.

This works because, not surprisingly, this is also what I am interested in as a player - I have no desire to play in a world that does not similarly breathe. And this, to me, is part of managing a sandbox. An important part.

The first module I ever used was Gary Gygax's The Keep on the Borderlands. I have used it many times since, and it is still the best module TSR ever produced in my opinion. There are, of course, things I didn't like about it at the time....particularly the idea that the DM should steer the PCs back if they go too close to the edge of the map. Modules were frameworks only. They were

meant to be bent, folded, spindled, and mutilated.

While the GM has absolute authority to determine what the game milieu is, one of the common player goals in a sandbox is to influence what the game milieu will be. In other words, while the GM determines the past and present of the game world, the future is created through the collaborative effort of the players (via their characters' actions) and the GM (by determining what the effects of those actions are on the game milieu, as well as what effect various non-player characters, monsters, and natural – or supernatural – occurrences will have).

This distinction cannot be overstressed – It is the GM's job to provide context and consequences for player character decisions; it is not the GM's job to force the player characters down a narrow "plot"! The GM who grasps (and follows) the philosophy behind this game avoids falling in love with the milieu as it is. Instead, he or she is eager to see just how the players will attempt to change it! It is the success, or failure, of these attempts that sandbox games are about. Leaving a lasting mark on the campaign world is often the closest to "winning" that one can get!

To my mind, it doesn't always matter where you start, but it does always matter what agency you have to affect things once you have started. You have to start somewhere.

The game is not just the player's actions, or just the GM's adjudications, it is the back-and-forth between the two. If the GM is unwilling to do his part, for whatever reason, the game is less than it could be. If the GM is unwilling to do prep work until you tell him what to do, and then you either have to play while he flies by the seat of his pants or until he does the work, the game is less than it could be. If there are not enough things going on in the world to tempt you away from your goals (successfully or not...you need not give in to temptation) then the game is less than it could be.

Present me with a world. If I want to change it, I will.

A Sample Minor Adventure Site

Now we turn to look at the creation of a sample minor adventure site. As previously discussed, setting up such a site has several goals, including both speedy play (the average minor site should be explorable in a session or so), reusability, and usefulness in pointing toward other adventuring sites.

During my initial brainstorming session, I decided that the site would be the ruin of a temple, mostly lost to time, beneath which remain a smallish dungeon area. In order to meet my goals, I considered the following:

(1) The temple was once that of a good deity, but the high priestess turned to evil. She is still imprisoned in the dungeon as a powerful un-dead spirit. This spirit can communicate with the living through her preserved skull, and her knowledge of the area is extensive (if out of date). Part of her reasons for communicating with the living is to trick them into freeing her, which requires three objects. She knows where they were kept in her lifetime, but one of these objects has been moved beyond the initial starting area in the intervening years.

The purpose of this character is threefold: First, she supplies a link to three other sites in the starting area, encouraging characters to seek out three specific treasures for her own fell purposes. Second, she supplies a reason (information) for returning to the ruined temple. By occasionally restocking the area with new inhabitants, both malevolent and benign, I can make additional use of my original design work. Finally, she supplies a potential Epic Endgame (or Midgame) if released.

(2) A major treasure will be hidden in the temple dungeon, in an area unknown to the high priestess. This area will be hard to discover without additional information, and a map in another adventure site will indicate where to look. This gives the players another motive to return here if they have already "cleared" the site, and will give the players a motive to come here if they have not already been here, thus potentially bringing the skull into play.

(3) The upper ruin is inhabited by a hermit who has dealings with the inhabitants of two other adventure sites…let's say, a group of goblins inhabiting a nearby cave system, and a group of pirates in a major adventuring site consisting of a fort, the dungeons beneath, and a series of sea caves. The hermit helps both groups fence stolen loot, and members of either group may be

present at any given time. Obviously, for the most fun, both of these groups dislike each other.

The hermit needs a contact in the closest thieves' guild, and can certainly help PCs deal with their own stolen goods, if he believes them trustworthy. If not, he can pass information about the PCs on to the pirates and the goblins. Likewise, if the PCs take on either the goblins or (especially) the pirates, clues/documentation may lead them to the hermit. (Goblins do not keep good records, but they may treat the hermit as a religious figure, and wear the same holy symbol, for example.)

It should also be noteworthy that the hermit may have a fair amount of treasure available to him at various times. Whenever either the goblins or the pirates are particularly active, the hermit will have booty to fence. PCs looting the hermit at this time will acquire this booty – stolen goods that may serve to connect them with either group if sold/displayed indiscriminately!

The hermit has no interest in exploring the dungeon area, and calls himself the "caretaker" of the ruin. He will ask for donations for its upkeep (although there is no sign of actual upkeep), and may be able to give the PCs some support in terms of minor healing, simple food, rough accommodations, etc., after any foray.

Of course, he has better food and accommodations for himself, but he is loathe to let anyone learn of them.

Requirements

From the above outline, born of simple brainstorming over the holidays, a clear idea of what is needed to make the site useful is clear:

(1) Maps of the upper ruins, the dungeon area, and the surrounding terrain. The upper ruin must include an area for rough accommodations, a semi-hidden better area for the hermit, and a place for stolen goods to be hidden. The dungeon area must include a space for the skull, and a place for the hidden treasure.

(2) Statistics for the hermit, the skull, goblin visitors, and pirate visitors. The fence probably sends a cart to the hermit to pick up goods, and so there should be statistics for these folk as well. I can get away without statistics for

the undead high priestess immediately, but I need to know roughly what she knows about the area, what the three items are she needs to be released, and where she believes them to be.

(3) Potential hoards for treasures ready for fencing, both from goblins and pirates. The hermit's personal hoard of luxury goods, and his hidden cache of better food.

(4) A signaling system whereby the hermit can let the fence know to send the cart. This signal system might eventually be penetrated by the PCs, allowing them (potentially) to uncover the fence, recover stolen goods, etc. It is therefore sensible that the signal is only sent after "guests" (including adventurers, goblins, and pirates) have gone away.

(5) Odds of pirates, goblins, cart, and maybe other adventurers or travelers being present at any given time. Who those other travelers will be. Possibly a very simple random encounter chart for the dungeon area.

Once these basic needs have been dealt with, I can key the actual maps. Preferably, each adventuring site in the starting area is outlined in this fashion, the basics are done for each site, and then actual keying begins for each site. What this ensures is that, if the Game Master is forced to "wing it", it is at least possible to do so with consistency.

Notes

The format for this series of essays, detailing a minor adventure site, came about because simply presenting such a site doesn't actually demonstrate the steps (or thinking) leading to the end result. At first I was thinking that I could just present a finished product, but that doesn't actually accomplish the same thing.

Nor does a "now you finish stocking it" ala ***B1: In Search of Adventure***. Ideally, what I want to supply is not a completed adventure site, but the process creates it.

Note also the focus on not determining what will happen at the site, but rather with making a site rich in possible happenings. That way, the interests of the players at the table, rather than the interests of a single designer (even if the GM) more strongly shape the course of play.

The Great Outdoors

I drew a quick map, using a scale of 1 hex = 1 mile. You will notice that I used hex paper with numbered hexes. This is because I want to be able to create additional encounters by using the hex numbers, and I know that over the course of a sandbox campaign, the encounters in an area may well change.

I have located the hermitage on a rocky hill along the road leading from a large village (campaign starting area, to the north) and somewhere more coastal (to the southeast), with the thought that carts sent by the Thieves' Guild to receive stolen goods could come along this road. The pirates could use this road to bring treasure up from the coast, and closeness to the road would make visitors seem less suspicious. It would also allow the players to easily locate this site.

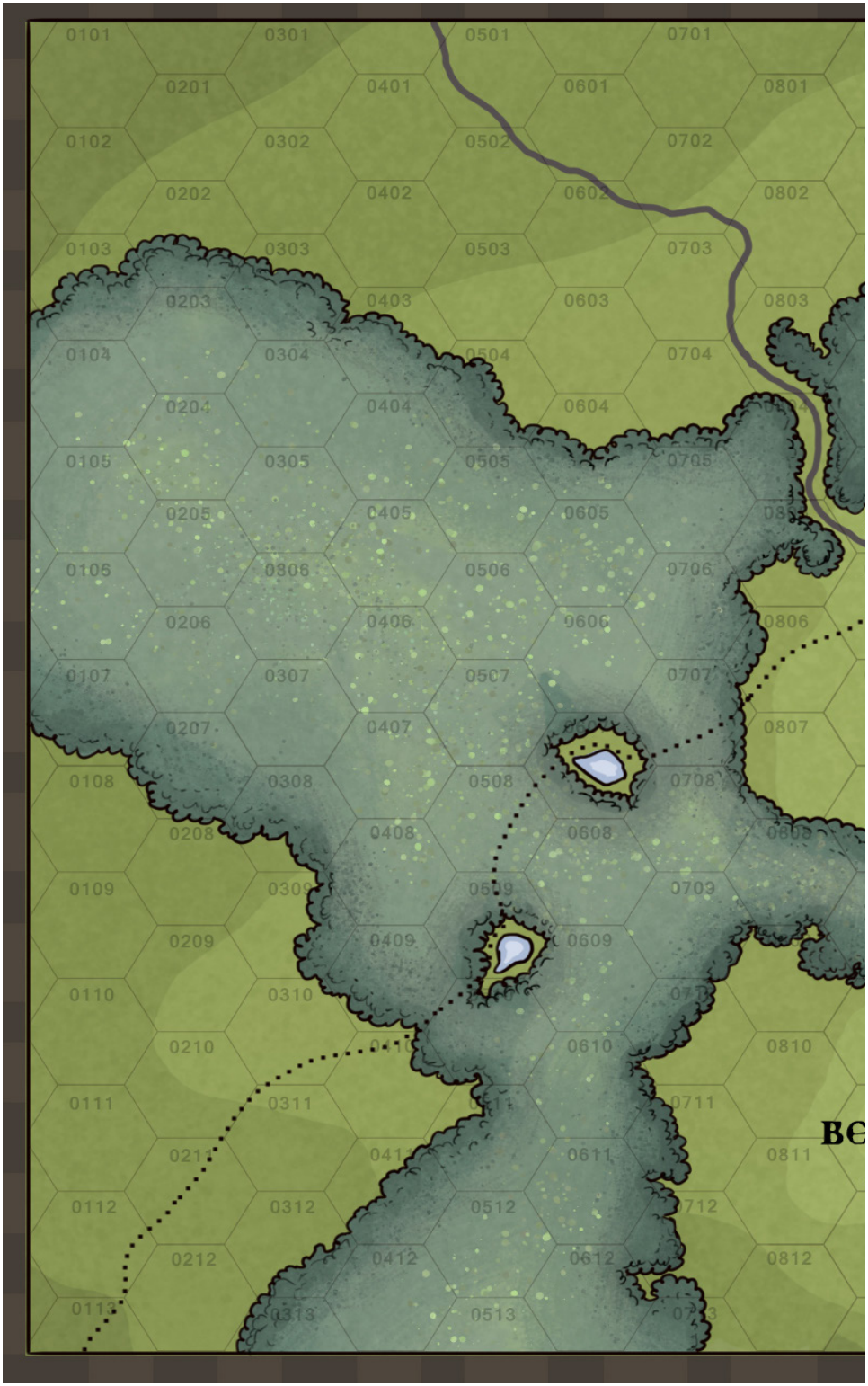
The temple is on a bit of a hill so that the hermit can use smoke signals to alert the Guild when there are sufficient materials to warrant sending a cart. The outbuildings are where the hermitage is located, the temple is ruined, and the goblin cave is where goblins that bring materials to fence stay. Belmar's Seat is the name of another rocky upcrop, named for a hero of old (and which can tie into the area history, and other adventure sites).

In addition to the noted road and trails, there will be numerous, non-permanent game trails. In addition to the two small lakes shown on the map, there will be numerous small rills and streams which appear after a rain or seasonally.

Because the area is close to the village, I know that there are unlikely to be any truly dangerous monsters in the area, but also that I will want to include some other minor lairs. Why? Because it makes things interesting for the players, and rewards exploration of the area. And I want to reward exploration, because exploration may eventually lead them to the goblin cave, wherein clues to unravel what is actually happening at the hermitage are most likely to come to light.

(I am not in a rush for this to happen, mind you. It will happen in its own time, or not, as game play dictates.)

I also know that the PCs are most likely to follow roads and trails, at least initially, in their exploration of any area, so I will want to set most encounters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GOBLIN CAVE
TEMPLE
OUTBUILDINGS
BELMAR'S SEAT

along these roadways and paths. I therefore come up with a provisional list of hexes to flesh out:

0203: Verminous Caverns: This area is the least likely for the players to locate, so I am going to put something interesting, deadly, and rewarding here. I am then going to sprinkle links to it in other areas of the sandbox (or I would be doing so if actually developing this area for play).

This area contains a hidden cave system, more vertical than horizontal, which was once the lair of a dragon. Much of the dragon's treasure is still hidden below, although moved now by flowing water from a single location to a plethora of areas throughout the caves. In addition, the caves are now home to many giant spiders, flies, ants, and scorpions. There is a rich haul here, for those capable of retrieving it…and sudden death for everyone else.

For fun, I'm going to say that the dragon's bones are still in the caverns, where they may be found by adventurers. They might be sold to a sage or collector, or they might be used for some form of magical ritual. Possibly, an egg remains from the dragon's last clutch, allowing me to create an ongoing situation which may change the lair (and the area) over time.

Finally, within this hex, there is a 50% chance that any encounter will be with giant vermin of some sort. Within a 1-hex radius around this hex, there is a 1 in 6 chance that any encounter will be with giant vermin. I will have to develop a separate encounter table to determine what is encountered.

0207: Spider!: A giant black widow spider has stretched its web across the trail in this hex. Some of the husks from its victims, if found, have treasure.

0211: Foundations: Alongside the trail here, the group may discover the foundations of a ruined farmhouse, which can help to offers some shelter from the elements. There is nothing of value here.

0509: Belmar's Cup: This lake is known as Belmar's Cup, after the folk heroking who once ruled in this region. It is relatively shallow and weedy, but offers some fishing. Recently, a forester drowned in the lake, and now haunts this region each night as a ghoul.

0602: Broken Cart: An overturned cart with a broken wheel lies alongside the roadway here, quietly going back to the earth. If investigated during the

summer months, there is a 1 in 6 chance that a snake takes advantage of the shade it offers…but the snake is non-venomous, and quickly slithers away.

0607: Lake Lugres: This lake is extremely deep, being formed in a narrow fissure not unlike those in Hex 0203. It is fed by rainwater, snow melt, and an underground spring. There is good fishing here the year round, although would- be fishermen must cut a hole in the ice during the winter. Legend and rumor claim that a hungry spirit dwells within the lake's depths, but this is not so.

0911 Belmar's Seat: An outcrop of rock named for the hero-king Belmar. A flat- topped boulder at the apex of the hill is known as Belmar's Chair. It is said that those who sit at Midsummer's Even on Belmar's Chair are driven mad, or become poets – if there is any difference between the two.

1005: Outbuildings: This is the site of the Hermitage. The outbuildings include the hermit's quarters, a common area for guests (including a stable as part of the common area). The cellar beneath the hermit's quarters includes a secret area wherein treasure from bandits, goblins, and pirates may be hidden.

We will treat the hermit as a friar, from the DCC core rulebook, with the special abilities of a 3rd level thief. This level was chosen so as to allow interaction with starting PCs, where the hermit will not be instantly overwhelmed, while at the same time making it possible for the PCs to defeat him later. Besides which, living alone in the (near) wilds as he does, the hermit will need some "oomph"! Appendixes S and T help us to give him a name: Llulch the Psalmist. You will note that I chose a clerical title, rather than one indicated for a thief, because our thief is disguised as a hermit.

1204: Temple: This is the ruined temple, beneath which the dungeon lies. We might as well start calling this the Dungeon of the Skull, because that will be its most important feature. Within the temple, there is an area that allows our hermit to mimic a cleric, effectively giving him access to a limited amount of curative magic each day. In fact, let us make this a temple of Hermes (as the patron of thieves, healers, and magic, it seems appropriate).

"Quest for It": As a God of Healing, we should seed the temple or the dungeon with the means to gain exception healing, as an adventure or a quest. This can be tied in with the Skull, in that the Skull can be the means by which PCs can learn how said quests can be performed. The Skull, of course,

is also working on her own agenda of being freed and restored.

"God of Magic": There should be at least one, and as many as three to five, spells that can potentially be learned through the temple and the dungeon beneath. Moreover, Hermes would make an excellent patron, and we should fully develop him as such.

1309: Farmstead: There is a small farmstead located in this hex.

1404: Goblin Cave: When goblins visit the hermitage, they stay here. As a result, there is goblin graffiti on the walls, carvings on the table, etc., that hints at what the hermit really is. Unknown to the hermit, the goblins have begun mining here, trying to break into the Dungeon of the Skull.

In many fantasy role-playing games, a goblin is a goblin is a goblin. This isn't a bad thing, and works well for that system, but Dungeon Crawl Classics is a different animal. Using the DCC RPG, we should strive to make these unique humanoids that are derived from the basic goblin. Luckily, the DCC core book gives us charts to help with this.

Our "goblins" will be yellow, and will fight with two weapons. The book suggests longsword and dagger, but we'll leave what the weapons are open for the moment. They are also bald and speak a racial language other than "goblin"….a random roll as per Thief in Appendix L suggested "Gnoll", but for fun, let's have them speak the dwarven language, as though they are degenerate dwarves. Our details will progress from this assumption. For example, they can fight with hand axe and dagger. Their mining also makes sense in terms of dwarvishness as well as goblinness. Although they are bald, we can allow them full beards.

1406: Tailings Pile: The tailings pile from the goblin mining – as well as some broken mining equipment of obvious goblin manufacture – is hidden just off the trail here.

Some Centaurs for Sandbox Games

Centaurs: These creatures are described on page 398 of the core rulebook. Some centaurs have special abilities, as indicated below.

D30	Centaur Special Ability
1-14	No Special Abilities
15-16	**Spell-Casting:** The centaur is able to cast spells as a (roll 1d7): 1-5 cleric or 6-7 wizard, with 1d3 levels. The centaur is 10% likely to gain the other abilities of the class at the same level.
17-19	**Warlike:** The centaur gains a +2 bonus to attack rolls and damage.
20	**Swift:** The centaur's movement speed is increased by +10'
21-22	**Mildly Poisonous Blood:** A character striking the centaur with an edged weapon must make a DC 10 Reflex save or suffer 1d3 damage from the centaur's splashing blood.
23	**Poisonous Blood:** A character striking the centaur with an edged weapon must make a DC 10 Reflex save or be splashed with the centaur's blood. These characters suffer 1d4 Stamina damage, and must make a DC 10 Fort save or 1 point is permanent. The centaur can use its move to stab itself (causing 1 hp damage) with a sharp weapon. The weapon is then poisoned with the centaur's blood for 1d5 rounds, or until it hits a target.
24-26	**Healing:** The centaur can heal any character 1d3 hit points per day. In addition, it can cure a disease or neutralize a poison once per week; in this case, there is a 1 in 7 chance that even permanent damage can be healed.
27-28	**Sage Knowledge:** The centaur has sage-like knowledge about 1d5 topics of the Judge's choice.
29	**Gift of Prophesy:** The centaur is able to foresee the future in a limited manner, making prophesies as determined by the Judge. In addition, there is a 10% chance that it can answer 1d5 simple questions (ones which can be answered with yes/no or with a few words) for any character once a month.
30	Roll twice.

Female centaurs are called *centauride*.

Asbolus: Init +3; Atk hooves +2 melee (1d4+1) and sword +4 melee (1d8+1) or bow +5 missile fire (1d6+1) or other weapon; AC 14; HD 4d8; hp 20; MV 50'; Act 2d20; SP poisonous blood, foresee future, curse, death throes; SV Fort +3, Ref +2, Will +5; AL N.

Asbolus is a centaur gifted with the powers of prophesy. Most often, he divines portents through the flight of birds, but he will also cast stones or use the entrails of animals. When consulted, he may demand the body of a specific animal to answer a specific question, or to read a difficult future. He does not otherwise demand payment, although he only grants interviews to those he deems worthy – those who have achieved something of note, or who are at least 3rd level.

Absolus's blood is poisonous. He can dip his own arrows into his flesh (causing himself 1 point of damage per arrow) to create poisoned arrows (Fort DC 15, 1d5 Stamina damage, 1 point is permanent on a failed save). Contact with his blood is likewise hazardous, though the Fort save in this case is only DC 5 to avoid 1d3 Stamina damage. A Reflex save is needed to avoid splashed blood when making a successful melee attack (DC 10 + damage done). All in melee with Absolus must make this save, although anyone other than the attacker gains a +2 bonus on this save.

Asbolus can cast *curse* once per day, with a +6 spell check bonus.

If reduced to 0 hp, Asbolus does not immediately die, but can take any remaining actions in the current round, and then gains 1d5 d24 Action Dice on the next round, to use for attacks or to *curse* his slayer.

Aspect of Chiron: Init +5; Atk hooves +4 melee (1d4+2) and sword +6 melee (1d8+2) or bow +7 missile fire (1d6+1) or other weapon; AC 16; HD 8d8; hp 40; MV 60'; Act 3d20; SP poisonous blood, spell use, curse, death throes, immortal; SV Fort +4, Ref +2, Will +8; AL L.

Known the oldest of the primordial centaurs, Chiron remembers many things from past ages of the Ancient Earth, but has little special knowledge of the current era. He is a clone-thing, grown in vats in the ruins of Daedalus, which somehow always comes to lair in the same spot. Each Aspect of Chiron only knows what he was born knowing, plus his own experiences, so that when one Aspect is slain, the next knows nothing of his predecessor's life beyond the ruins or eventual death. Yet, if one Aspect is slain, another will arise in 1d5 months, making Chiron effectively immortal so long as the Vats of Daedalus endure.

Chiron is renowned as a healer, as a teacher of heroes, and as a magician. He can heal up to 3 HD each day, cure poison at will, allow any creature a Fort save to throw off a disease each day (DC 5 to 15, depending upon the disease), set bones so that the heal without ability score loss, and brew 1d7

potions of healing (1 HD) each month. A Lawful warrior or dwarf who studies with Chiron for three months can gain a one step increase in his Deed Die with a successful Luck check (one time only).

He can cast the following spells once per day, with no chance of disapproval, misfire, or corruption (+6 spell check): *animal summoning*, *comprehend languages*, *detect magic*, *read magic*, *locate object*, *consult spirit*, *blessing*, *second sight*, *banish*, *remove curse*, and *speak with the dead*. in addition, Chiron can cast *curse* once per day, with a +10 bonus to the spell check.

Chiron's blood is poisonous. He can dip his own arrows into his flesh (causing himself 1 point of damage per arrow) to create poisoned arrows (Fort DC 18, 1d7 Stamina damage, 1 point is permanent on a failed save). Contact with his blood is likewise hazardous, though the Fort save in this case is only DC 8 to avoid 1d5 Stamina damage. A Reflex save is needed to avoid splashed blood when making a successful melee attack (DC 10 + damage done). All in melee with Chiron must make this save, although anyone other than the attacker gains a +2 bonus on this save.

If reduced to 0 hp, Chiron does not immediately die, but can take any remaining actions in the current round, and then gains 1d5 d24 Action Dice on the next round, to use for attacks or to *curse* his slayer.

Coming Soon?

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