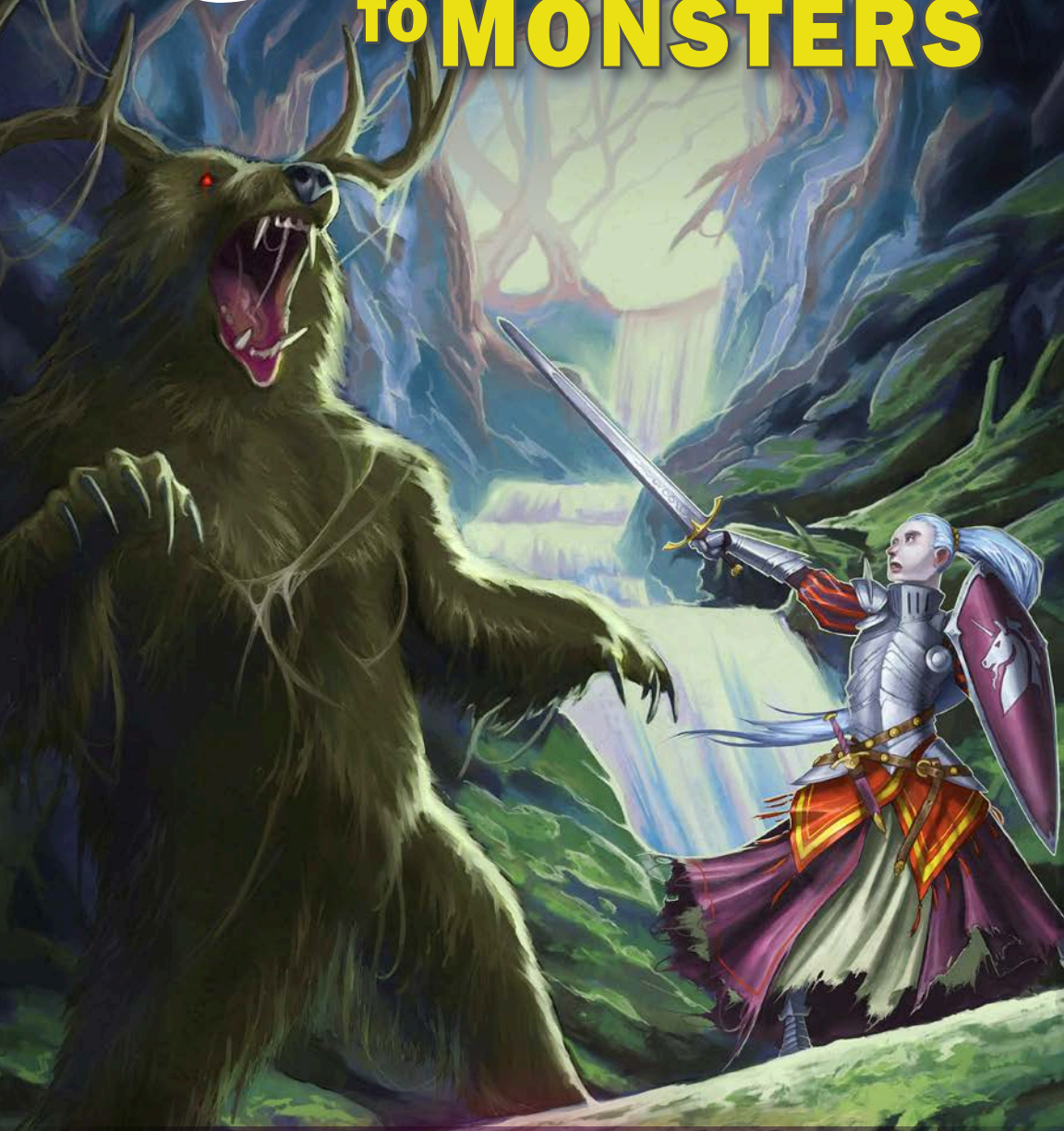# KOBOLD™ GUIDE TO MONSTERS

WITH ESSAYS BY

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Kobold Guide to Monsters

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INTRODUCTION

The screech in the dark. The rending of claws in the earth. The flash of red eyes and the gnashing of teeth as an impossible bulk barrels toward heroes who are perhaps outmatched.

A monster has arrived. Will the adventurers defeat the beast, or will they fall to its might?

Though this scene plays out countless times in nearly every roleplaying game, there's nothing quite like the thrill of a terrifying monster ready to wreak havoc on anyone who stands in its way. There's a reason roleplayers love a good hair-raising monster battle; it gets the blood pumping and challenges players to rise to the occasion.

On one hand, there's possible victory—and loot—to be had. On another, there's horrible death. Either way, gamers love facing monsters, Game Masters often love crafting and using them, and everyone walks away with endless stories to tell.

But concepting, creating, and using monsters as a Game Master is no easy feat. If the goal is to provide players with lifelong memories of thrilling victories and defeats, sometimes the reality falls far short of that mark.

That's where these essays come in.

In this book, some of the brightest stars in the gaming industry share their wisdom for concepting brilliant monsters, building beasts that stand the test of time, and using monsters to the most exciting effect in your games. These authors have amassed decades of collective experience creating beloved gaming moments for all. Many of them created your favorite monsters in tomes from the most prominent roleplaying game publishers around, including Chaosium, Green Ronin, Kobold Press, Paizo, Wizards of the Coast, and more.

Now, these experts' wisdom is yours. Whether you're looking for how to make the monster from your nightmares work in a tabletop environment, how to ensure your homebrew monster works well mechanically, or how to guarantee your horrible creations prompt memorable encounters, this book likely has just the advice you need.

So bask in the knowledge found in these pages. Level up your game, but do us a favor—don't keep this book too close to your player characters. We can't be held responsible if you do.

Monsters are unpredictable, after all.

—Amanda Hamon, *Kobold Guide to Monsters* Editor

ON CONCEPTING
MONSTERS

Monsters Are Scary

by Mike Mason

In tabletop RPGs, monsters should not only be challenging—they should also be terrifying and unpredictable. One way to ensure your game has little to no atmosphere is to treat monsters like obstacles simply to be overcome. Instead, monsters are a fantastic means to create excitement and action in your games, as well as to build tension and mood. With these, you can elevate the experience of your game, making it all the more memorable and fun.

This essay aims to provide you with some ideas for your GMing toolkit. The idea is to turn that gang of kobolds from being just another combat encounter into something to terrify and mess with your players' expectations. Here, our goal is to create encounters and plots to remember.

CREATING IMMERSIVE MONSTER DESCRIPTIONS

Let's start with presenting monsters and monster names. Using the "standard" name for a monster creates familiarity and, in-game, things can become mundane pretty quickly—it's boring to say simply that "there's a bunch of goblins" or "an ogre emerges from the cave". Neither scenario is particularly frightening or memorable.

How you set up and present a monster to players is important. Boring and predictable presentations simply turn these fearsome creatures into just another set of statistics for your players to battle, and such encounters are quickly forgotten.

Whatever you do, try to avoid using a monster's name. As soon as you say "goblin," "ogre," or "owlbear," you have broken the spell of mystery.

Creating mystery and doubt is key here, as you want the players to experience the thrill and fear of the unknown. Instead of giving players their common names, use descriptions instead—tell players what the adventurers see.

Thus, rather than saying, "An ogre steps out of the cave," tell them something like the following: "Your nostrils are assaulted by a foul and earthy smell, which seems to be emanating from that dark cave mouth over there. As you turn to look, you get a sense of something large moving just inside the cave, but it's too dark to make out anything." In this example, you're using the senses (in this case smell and sight) to build some atmosphere and tension.

Let's say the party creeps toward the cave; how might you build this encounter further? Don't show the monster fully, but rather hint at it and leave room for the imagination. Your player's minds are wonderful things that can conjure all manner of horrors when given tidbits of information.

For example, you might say: "As you approach the cave, the smell is almost unbearable. Death hangs heavy in the air. Whatever has happened in this cave can't be good. When you shed some light into the cave, you make out a large form, perhaps a humanoid, which seems to sink back into the darkness away from your light. There's a sound of leather cracking and the chink of metal. You get a sense of something old and cunning; something waiting and lurking."

In this description, you've added sound to the senses as another element to help the mood of the scene. Now, instead of just another ogre in just another cave, you've established some tension. The players know whatever is lurking in that cave is dangerous and deadly, but they don't know what it is.

At this point, it could be anything. The players are likely racking their brains, trying to figure out what's inside and what the level of risk is. Great! The unknown is the key to fear. You want to play with that. The more that is unknown, the greater potential is for fear.

You might continue: "OK, so you cautiously enter. You taste blood and sweat on your tongues. The air is heavy. You see movement at the edge of your light. There's something gnarled and pockmarked, and you see a sudden glint of steel. There's a great bellowing roar! A huge, giant-like thing bursts forth. An immense and misshapen head full of yellowed teeth lurches toward you rapidly! What do you do?"

In describing the scene and situation without using the word "ogre" and taking a bit of time to dress things up, you allow the players' minds to help fuel the nightmare. You turn an ordinary encounter into something scary and unpredictable. Such things are likely to push the players into making rash or hasty decisions, putting the party at risk while also

establishing a memorable scene. It's gone from a mundane encounter into something more exciting. Try to make sure your players remain unsure of the monster's identity for as long as possible. Keep building through your description, playing on the senses as much as possible.

FOCUS ON THE SENSES

When describing your monsters, it's a good idea to make use of all five senses. Don't just rely on sight. People will smell and hear before they see a thing, so adventurers should do the same, and you can use those senses to lead into an encounter. Most monsters probably smell pretty bad, and some will smell of blood and death—things that not only warn of danger but help encapsulate the threat to come.

When you describe such smells, tell the adventurers the smell makes them gag, makes them wary, makes them fearful—or all three. Think especially about the sounds the monster makes. Does it breathe in great gulps of air, take wheezing gasps, or perhaps its breathing makes a strange whistling sound? What noise does it make when moving? Could adventurers hear the crunching of heavy boots or feet on stones, or a wet slithering sound, or maybe a curiously padded commotion? Is it loud or barely perceptible? Perhaps it sounds like something else, leading the adventurers to draw the wrong conclusion.

Sight is another important component of describing a monster. When you eventually describe what a monster looks like, show only glimpses of the monster at first, building on these until the full thing is presented. Catching glimpses as a monster sneaks about through corridors and tunnels builds suspense. Tease the adventurers so they grow curious, laying a trail of breadcrumbs to lead them to the unexpected.

It's important to keep in mind that all monsters look different. No two humans look the same (apart from identical twins!), so why should every ogre, goblin, or dragon? Vary your descriptions of the same monster types and make each one unique, which gives them a personality of sorts.

Perhaps one ogre has three eyes. A different ogre might have one eye hanging from its socket, while another uses a human face for an eyepatch. And that's just the eyes! Think about scars, hair, body shape, dress/armor, and so on. Try to instill some mystery—just what is this monster? You might never even tell the players the name of the monster and leave it to them to come up with their own name.

And what about the sixth sense—that feeling creeping up your spine when danger is close? You can make use of this, too: a subtle change in air pressure, an atmosphere of wrongness, or just the feeling that something bad is about to happen.

A tingling sensation might become a warning sign. The feeling of being watched and tracked could swiftly turn the hunters into the hunted. You can weave such elements into your description and scene building. By doing so, you can guarantee your players will take notice when you tell them their characters suddenly feel like there are hundreds of insects crawling over their skin.

In fact, revulsion is a useful tool when describing a scene, moment, or monster. We are repelled by unpleasant things and some of us can have violent physical reactions, like vomiting and cold sweats. While these things won't affect the adventurers in a mechanical sense, they will help the players to get into the right mood.

Visceral description of horrible creatures and the injuries they can cause can play a role in cementing images in the players' minds. Of course, be aware of your group—ensure you understand what level of gore (if any) is appropriate to the people in your game. If in doubt, ask before play and/or use some form of consent mechanic. It's a shared game and experience in which everyone should be having fun.

MONSTERS HAVE MINDSETS

Apart from presenting the monster, let's think about how it could act. Each monster type probably has certain modes of behavior linked to its primary purpose. For undead things, its goal may be simply to kill the living. But even unnatural horrors can be presented in such a way to increase the fear and make them less predictable.

Most monsters are living things and have more than just killing adventuring parties on their minds. Living things need food and shelter, too. Yes, some monsters may gain their food and shelter by killing and eating the adventurers, but most probably want an easier meal with far less hassle. This is all by way of saying that many monsters will not fight to the death if they can help it. Just like us, when facing superior opposition, they will try to escape to live another day. The same is true for animals and bestial creatures. Fighting to the death every time they are encountered makes for predictable encounters, so consider changing things up and make things less humdrum.

When determining its behavior, consider the intelligence of the monster. Those near or above human intelligence will not blindly throw themselves into a fight they cannot win. Just like us, they will be cunning and make use of the terrain, opportunity, and tactics to ensure success. And, if things go badly for them, they will try to escape or surrender, rather than be ground to mincemeat.

A monster knows its lair and home far better than the adventurers, so use that knowledge to good effect. Consider it not only when setting ambushes, but also when a monster is hunting the party, when it's escaping, and when it's setting a trap. The adventurers should feel at a disadvantage when on the monster's home ground.

For a group of adventurers used to monsters throwing themselves upon their pointy swords and dying without regard for life and limb, encounters with actually intelligent foes will be disconcerting. What's an adventuring party's most deadly adversary? The answer is another adventuring party. Thinking adversaries pose a real threat, do not act rashly, and bide their time to improve their chances of success.

Whichever monsters or villains you're using, above all, make them unpredictable. Doing the unexpected raises doubt and makes the situation tenser. You can play against expectations to make each encounter different—don't make them all a straight-up fight. Vary the setup and change the dynamics. Can the enemy of my enemy become my ally? Double crosses, lies, and cheating are all good angles to explore.

For animals and bestial things, make them unpredictable too. They operate on a different level to our minds. Rather than charge out to attack, they lurk and wait to use the right moment to pounce or spring their trap—sudden and violent, often relying on hunting or aggression instincts.

A single wolf may be trapped and injured by the adventurers, yet you'll see dismay on your players' faces when the wolf's howls bring not only the full pack to surround the party but some bears or goblins, too. In this way, you might let the party's ambush unexpectedly become ambushed by an outsider—which could be some bestial creature or a more cunning threat that uses the situation to its advantage.

What about the undead? They just turn up and suck the life out of people, don't they? Well, yes, sort of. But think about making these horrors even scarier. Rather than appearing before the party, have them materialize through walls while the adventurers are walking down a corridor, catching them off guard.

Better yet, use strange sounds to split the party up and then run a series of one-on-one encounters. Present undead monsters through smell, noise, and partial glimpses—build suspense and tension. These monsters are unnatural and should make everyone's hair stand on end, cause goosebumps to rise, and fill people with unexplained dread and foreboding. Their very smell should be anathema to living things: repellant and wrong.

How about invisible monsters (or wizards)? It's hard to describe what you can't see, so you might use the environment to not only build tension but also to leave clues.

For instance, when there's an invisible creature, the foliage might move unnaturally, footprints might make squelching sounds in the mud or blood, and so on. Can the adventurers hear the monster's breathing? Do its scales grate against the stonework? Is it leaving a stinking trail of slime or noxious matter behind it, which becomes visible five minutes after its passing? Use strange smells and sounds to heighten the mood of such scenes, keeping the players guessing while also hinting at what is about to befall them.

Engaging and memorable encounters start with what you, the GM, describes. Use your description not only to set the scene but also to set the tone and mood. How you describe monsters plays a major factor in how your players react and engage with the game. The more you invest, the more the players will too.

When using monsters, keep things fresh and interesting, don't rely on the mundane, and be creative whenever possible. In doing so, you open a new window full of possibilities.

Mike Mason is an award-winning game writer and creative director for the Call of Cthulhu roleplaying game. He likes to sprinkle a good dose of horror into most games he runs. Mike is the co-writer of Call of Cthulhu 7th edition, Pulp Cthulhu, *and he also took the lead on the* Call of Cthulhu Starter Set *and the revised* Masks of Nyarlathotep; *in fact, traces of Mike's tentacles can be found on every book in the line. Around the millennium, Mike published* The Whisperer, *a zine devoted to Call of Cthulhu, and ran the Kult of Keepers, a group of Call of Cthulhu scenario writers organizing convention games. Mike previously worked for Games Workshop as the Line Manager and co-writer of the ENnie Award-winning Warhammer 40,000 RPG* Dark Heresy. *Mike lives in the Midlands of England, betwixt the rolling Derbyshire Peaks and the Satanic Mills of Nottinghamshire.*

Designing Monsters from Myths and Folklore

by Wolfgang Baur

M yths, folklore, and legends provide an incredibly vast, deep, and often incredibly weird trove of monsters for tabletop game designers. From the hydra of Hercules; to the werewolves of Roman, French, and English legends; to the Arabian tales of jinn; to the North American lore of Bigfoot or Mothman; these are creatures players know. That familiarity makes them especially intriguing fodder for designers.

Why is it so appealing to draw on this well of existing tropes and history? Well, if players already know that vampires suck blood and Bigfoot lives in the deep forests and foothills, they feel some connection to a game's story, and they have a keener sense of what kind of adventures that monster will appear in. They already know enough to be interested and invested in the creature, rather than confused by something wholly new and strange.

HOW LEGENDARY MONSTERS GO HORRIBLY WRONG

Unfortunately, it's possible to use existing elements and design a tabletop-game creature that doesn't really scratch the itch. The first error most designers make when turning a monster from folklore into a tabletop RPG monster is choosing the wrong sort of monster.

Many myths and legends follow predictable patterns that work in folklore and stories incredibly well but are less effective in tabletop RPGs. These monsters are scary, interesting, or simply compelling because they tap into a specific human emotion in a clear way: disgust, fear, or lust, for example.

Ghosts, for instance, embody the fear of loss when they possess hapless villagers or curse their own descendants. Wild, black-furred beasts prey upon the fear of the unknown when they lurk in the woods, seeking to eat small children or steal livestock.

These monsters are fine for folklore, but they don't bring much new to the table for an RPG. Possession monsters remove player agency and are often a bookkeeping mess. Simple beasts in the woods could just as easily be wolves, goblins, or nasty gnomes.

So, ask yourself: what elements of your folkloric monster are going to surprise players at the table? What elements are going to feel incredibly familiar and rote? If you mostly only have a differently colored werewolf, or an even-more-complicated possession, you might want to choose something else on which to base your RPG creature.

The second place folkloric monsters fail is in what they *do* bring to a game from story. For example, rübezahl is a counting demon from my own Germanic heritage, also found in many Balkan stories. It's a form of counting monster similar to some vampires and Japanese ghosts: it feels compelled to count things like grains of wheat or rice, or pebbles, or anything put in front of it. In a story, the rübezahl's counting obsession gives a hero a chance to get away, or to outwit the demon long enough to accomplish some goal.

In Kobold Press's *Tome of Beasts* for the fifth edition of the world's oldest roleplaying game, designer Dan Dillon carefully avoided making this monster too easily defeated. The demon's compulsion to count might work only once to slow this monster, thus limiting the degree and potency of rübezahl's compulsion while still making that lore valuable to players who know it. In this as well as other instances, it's best to discard a monster's weaknesses partially or entirely to make them more useful and playable.

Designing a monster from folklore does not get you off the hook in terms of creating new and compelling mechanics. The best of such monsters have tricks that are not necessarily apparent in the source material—that is, your job as designer is to expand the range of tricks that suit the monster's theme, far beyond the original story.

You'll note, for instance, that a medusa in tabletop RPGs often does have the petrifying gaze of Greek legends. It also has a longbow and a sword and snake hair, which owe more to modern interpretations such as Ray Harryhausen and 1981's *Clash of the Titans*.

Another point where folklore might provide a stumbling block lies in cultural exchange, which can spark a variety of reactions. Where one reader might see positive cultural transfer between two groups, another might see cultural appropriation or misrepresentation. Often the difference

lies in the material's treatment and its source. If you are not a member of the source culture and that source culture is relatively distant from your own, it's worth considering whether you know enough about the subject to treat it with respect and avoid misrepresenting the material or causing offense. Positive cultural transfer and exchange can be powerful, but avoiding accidentally insulting living people is important.

If the myth comes from a long-ago culture that doesn't exist in the present day, the risk of insulting living readers is much lower. If the creature is from a living culture and it's one outside the experience of the designer or Game Master, it's always a good idea to ask folks from that culture if any questions about potential appropriation arise. For professional game designers, this often means employing cultural consultants. For Game Masters around a table with friends it might spark friendly conversations or in-depth research as needed. Some cultures may welcome the discussion and representation; others might have more complex reactions to seeing their heritage presented outside its usual haunts.

HIGHLIGHTING WHAT WE KNOW

When it comes to folkloric monsters, I always recommend retaining the core elements players know. Hydras have many heads; werewolves change shape; Bigfoot tromps around the woods and is remarkably stealthy for a creature of its size.

In addition, you should retain some variant element of the folklore; hydras require fire to kill, werewolves shed their skins to become human (like selkies), and Bigfoot sometimes adopts or kidnaps humans.

Most of all, though, avoid the temptation to make the monster such a wildly original variant that no one recognizes it. After all, doing this loses the point of creating a folkloric creature. At that point, you may have a wonderful monster, but no one would call it by its original name anymore.

A hydra that is not reptilian or many-headed, a werewolf that doesn't change with the moon, a Bigfoot that is roughly human sized—these deviations might have a story premise ("The Bigfoot That Wasn't Big"), but they won't scratch the itch for players who want folklore's.

If you use a creature from myth, in other words, you are promising to retain the heart and soul of the creature. You can bend and stretch it, but if you only use the name and an extremely loose inspiration, you can certainly rename it. It may be a more appealing monster if you don't pretend it will satisfy hydra-fans, werewolf-fans, or Bigfoot-fans.

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW: THE TWIST

The risks I discuss above are partly mechanical, and partly lore-based. Both issues can be avoided by choosing creatures whose lore is not *too* deeply embedded in our culture, or creatures whose lore is narrow enough that they can be introduced to players as something they might not know.

For instance, the letiche is a monster from Cajun folklore—a human child raised by alligators. This is a rich premise for design, but it includes no heavy inspiration for mechanics. Instead, we're borrowing a hook and making it the starting point of design.

How would such a monster arise and survive? Which feral traits does it share with alligators? What strange customs might be part of this? Could it be part of an alligator-friendly tradition of magic or even a form of sacrifice to swamp divinities? Or do certain lizardfolk find this an entertaining way to keep their alligators sharp—using a letiche as a scout, climbing bald cypress trees in the bayou and directing alligators to prey?

That is up to you; the name and the concept, though, will bring a Cajun idea to a wider audience. Plus, the letiche's backstory suggests a terrain, some anatomical and art elements, and connections to a wider world. Sometimes, that is all you need to start up something fresh.

Another option for a twist involves taking a familiar folkloric monster and broadening it in its range and gaming application. This should be a very familiar twist to any designer who knows the origins of medusas, pegasi, or lorelei, all of which exist as much more generic versions in tabletop RPGs (the last of them from Kobold Press's *Tome of Beasts*). Taking a monster that is unique in folklore and making it a whole type or a collection of related monsters shows that a good idea can be adopted and then transformed into something that powers many more stories in a game context than the original context.

For example, the story of Medusa is about a specific person and the gods Athena and Poseidon, and the Lorelei is from a very specific place along the Rhine River. Part of the work of designing from folklore is taking these creations out of that context and making them accessible to tabletop players in a much broader, more generic, and highly entertaining form as exemplars rather than unique individuals.

Unless you are using the folklore to make an NPC (a different subject entirely), make your folkloric monster useful in more places, with fewer restrictions, and as part of a broader category that depends less on specifics of language or specifics of culture. For games, you want creatures that are generally useful in hundreds of different worlds and possible stories, and that means stripping away some aspects of a monster's origins to make it easier to place in new adventures and participate in new stories and genres.

HOW MECHANICS SUPPORT THE MYTH

In the best monsters from folklore, one wildly weird and wonderful element often becomes an exemplar power or mechanic that defines the creature in combat or in play. The head of the penanggalan floats free of its body; the rübezahl counts the grains of wheat and keeps coming; the phoenix dies and is reborn. These are images and abilities that make those monsters immediately identifiable.

If you are designing from folklore, well, you can pick and choose which of a folkloric creature's story elements provide the best gameplay. The vampire is a classic example. Dozens or perhaps hundreds of versions of the vampire legend exist, but many of the elements that are compelling on movie or television screens are less so in a tabletop game.

Cutting off a vampire's head and stuffing the mouth with holy wafers is certainly part of the vampire legend in European Christian folklore. For mechanical reasons, it's not part of the creature in many games where vampires appear—many games don't have rules for decapitations. It's also omitted for lore reasons—what does a holy wafer mean if a particular fantasy setting has no doctrine of transubstantiation and communion?

It might seem obvious, but the point of a monster in a tabletop game is to provide entertainment and a challenge to the players. If a monster requires volumes of specific background lore, a very narrow cultural context, or deeply simulationist mechanics to make it work, then it is a poor choice for tabletop games. However, if you can capture the spirit of the monster with one clean mechanic that shows off everything people love about it on screen, you're nailing it as a monster designer.

For example, meeting and capturing a water monster such as Nessie is a fun sea serpent fight, but there's not a lot of replay value there. And part of the joy of that legend is that you *might* see it, and if you do spot it, well, that's about it.

A single encounter will work for a game like *Call of Cthulhu*, which might bring Nessie in as a unique Mythos beastie. However, if you are designing for a traditional heroic fantasy rules set, a better use of your time as a game designer might be something like the legend of kongamato, the boat breaker, as a monster that can be encountered over and over in a variety of jungle or coastal adventures.

Or, you might do as suggested earlier, and make "nessies" a type of familiar sea serpent known along the Scottish coasts, Norwegian fjords and Dutch dikes, as a somewhat common creature in a fantasy version of the North Sea. Its particular mechanical appeal, then, would need to be something unique to the nessies as a group: perhaps great stealth, perhaps ramming boats below the waterline, or perhaps inducing memory loss in

many of those who see it. No matter which direction you go with this sort of broadening, the mechanics should still be connected thematically to the version of Nessie that players already know.

This is the great joy of designing from folklore. If you've done it right, your audience will love seeing something they have seen in books, TV, or movies brought into the gaming sphere in a way that both respects the source material and expands on it. The right selection of old, familiar powers joining with new twists and original mechanics that highlight the monster's core theme and flavor—that is a designer flex that shows you understand and appreciate the source, and you also bring something fresh and new to delight a tabletop player and to make the monster fun and playable.

Go forth, and give some new life to old tales by designing a folkloric monster of your own!

Wolfgang Baur *has worked for Wizards of the Coast, Paizo, and Kobold Press since the days of grunge. He currently oversees Kobold Press in Kirkland, Washington, where he also writes occasional adventures, settings, and adaptations for Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition, both for Wizards of the Coast's Forgotten Realms and for Kobold Press's Midgard setting. He's a bibliomaniac and a fan of obtuse, ornate, and recondite verbiage.*

Monster Mash
Creating Your Favorite Monsters from Pop Culture

by Celeste Conowitch

For many, playing tabletop roleplaying games is all about the thrill of experiencing action. At the same time, many drawn to tabletop games also hold lifelong loves for fantastical novels, bold science fiction films, thrilling video games, surreal comics, and much more. These popular media are, among many things, full of the action that roleplayers crave.

It makes sense, then, that players and Game Masters alike crave to replicate their favorite scenes in popular media. Since roleplaying games have existed, players have sought to port the same challenging monsters and villains into games as they've seen on the screen or read on the page.

In this essay, I'll provide some tips and tricks for those who are serious about taking monsters from their favorite pop culture media and bringing them into tabletop games.

USE WHAT IS ALREADY THERE

The first challenge Game Masters face when crafting a beloved media monster (or any kind of monster) is how to use the game's rules to statistically represent it. There's good news here: designing such a specific monster shares a lot of commonality with designing any monster.

First, search for a similar monster that might exist in the game. If one does, use that as your starting point, and then go from there. Taking a preexisting monster and disguising it—whether simply with cosmetic changes or with added subtle mechanical changes—is known as reskinning. (For more about reskinning monsters generally, see Michael E. Shea's essay

"The Divine Art of Reskinning Monsters," starting on page 49.)

I assure you; reskinning works more often than you might think. Let me give you an example.

Recently, I sought to design an encounter based on John Carpenter's horror classic *The Thing*. Here, I was confronted with a significant obstacle: how the heck was I going to build stats for a seemingly unbeatable alien thing? If Kurt Russell could barely defeat it, how would my players?

I started by deciding what I wanted to show "on screen" and "off screen" in regard to this monster—that is, what I wanted the players to experience and play through using the game's rules, which is "on screen," and what I wanted to simply narrate but not express mechanically, which is "off screen." I then built mechanics only for these "on-screen" confrontations.

I didn't need to provide mechanics for how the monster sneak around the base or infect NPCs while they were alone—events that all happened "off screen." I knew my players' imaginations would fill in the gaps.

I did, however, need to represent the classic end-game fight, in which my players faced off against a writhing, organic mass of tentacles. For this fight, I needed a totally alien tentacled aberration—and I found that the otyugh stat block hit all those qualifications!

An otyugh is a pretty standard monstrous fixture in the world's oldest roleplaying game. And by throwing some descriptive paint on its mechanics, I had a perfect way to bring *The Thing* to life. I didn't even need to build anything from scratch!

I'm a firm believer in bringing pop culture monsters to life in the easiest way possible. However, sometimes finding an existing monster to reskin is difficult. When you need to design a monster like this from scratch, I still recommend scanning the catalogs of existing monsters—if you're playing the 5th Edition version of the rules, try including Kobold Press's *Tome of Beasts*, *Creature Codex*, and *Tome of Beasts 2*—to find special features you can grab for your monsters.

For example, let's say you're trying to build a xenomorph from the famous *Alien* movie franchise. One of the worst traits of the xenomorphs (or the best, depending on your perspective!) is their acidic blood, which causes massive destruction upon contact with skin or any other bodily material.

While there isn't such a specific acidic blood trait readily available in any monster catalog (I hope), in the 5th Edition rules, you might consider lifting the fire form trait from a fire elemental. The heart of this fire form trait is the same as a xenomorph's molecularly acidic blood; if you try and hit the creature at melee range, you are going to get burned. If fire form deals acid damage instead of fire damage, the trait now works for a xenomorph.

While it does, of course, take a little creative re-imagining, learning to scan monster features in this way saves you a world of trouble while

crafting terrors from pop culture to delight your players. Monster design mechanics can be fiddly to balance from scratch, so don't be afraid to benefit by using what already exists!

THE PROBLEM WITH CHALLENGE RATING

Infamous villains are another aspect of pop culture media that Game Masters often hope to incorporate into their tabletop games. One of the biggest difficulties in doing so, however, involves creating a challenge that player characters can actually surmount. Often, in the media world, villains are larger than life, and only through careful planning (and often extraordinary luck) do the heroes triumph.

As an example, let's take Sauron from J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* series. Now, Sauron as written is essentially a god. He cannot be defeated in a direct fight. Rather, a specific ring must be dropped into a specific place to destroy Sauron.

Obviously, this is difficult to replicate with tabletop game mechanics. So, how does one create the biggest baddest lord of them all in a tabletop homebrew game?

The short answer is, we don't. At least, not really.

A big, bad villain such as Sauron is often best left without a stat block. Rather, it's a better idea to invest in creating his chief minions, his main lackeys, or even slightly more mortal versions of himself. Think Luke fighting Darth Vader's illusory double in *The Empire Strikes Back*.

While porting famous monsters into our home games often works brilliantly, there are notable exceptions to every rule. Having a big bad that's just out of reach, but who's nonetheless pulling a campaign's strings, can be the most effective way to bring the thrills of classic media into a tabletop game. Villains are much scarier if conventional means can't beat them, so don't feel the need to quantify every monster mechanically.

Now, I'm going to hit you with the other side of the blade here: you also don't always need to represent a monster's challenge rating accurately.

Sometimes, for example, you'll have a fourth-level party, and you'll want your players to fight Godzilla. Now, logically, Godzilla would probably have a challenge rating way beyond what a fourth-level party could handle.

But there's good news: it's not your job to represent Godzilla as accurately as possible with mechanics. It's your job to accurately depict a challenging (but doable) fight with Godzilla for a fourth-level party.

Too often, people get caught up with the idea that they must represent monsters accurately with mechanics. However, this misses the point of what makes this exercise fun.

Your players want to have a thrilling kaiju battle. They don't want to compare whether their fight was exactly like the scene in a film.

With this in mind, why not make Loki from the *Thor* films a villain with challenge rating 6? He can always return to menace the party and be more prepared next time. Why not create the mogwai of *Gremlins* as challenge rating 20? As long as you can deliver a satisfying interaction that provides the same impact as the media you're emulating, you can shape the numbers to your needs.

LOOK AND FEEL LIKE THE REAL DEAL

Once you've chosen and tweaked your pop culture monster's mechanics, you need to figure out how to make it look good.

As Game Master, it's your job to make your monster look and feel like the real thing. You are in charge of selling the terrifying little-girl ghost from *The Ring*, or in driving home the horror of forced assimilation into *Star Trek's* borg.

In other words, when using a well-known monster in your tabletop game, you're signing up to deliver that monster's experience. This means your players need to experience the look, feel, sounds, and smells of your monster.

Some of this can be done with keywords in describing the monster itself. If you're using Freddy Krueger from *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, you *must* include the sound of metal claws scraping against a wall. If you're bringing the *Swamp Thing* to life, you *must* include a rank, boggy smell that assaults your player characters' nostrils. And so on.

While designing your monster's mechanics, it's equally important to make a list of these descriptive keywords. If you've already considered how to describe your iconic monster, selling these encounters is a great deal easier.

As a final note on this point, whatever you do, do *not* tell your players what they're going to be running into in your game. The slow-burn realization that they'll have to deal with the weeping angels from *Doctor Who* will be worlds more gratifying when the players don't have a heads up.

Besides using key words in your descriptions, there are a few more key tips to creating a convincing encounter. Unless you're playing through the exact storyline of your favorite fantasy series, you're likely going to need to do a little justification work to bring a famous pop-culture character into your world. Often, this can be accomplished by providing your monster with an excellently themed location in which to live.

It's easy to justify having Dracula make an appearance if your players find a remote mountain castle, for instance. It's also easy to justify the appearance of Doctor Octopus from the *Spider-Man* franchise if your world is populated with alchemical laboratories.

Once you pick a monster you can realistically port into your tabletop game, it's important to ground it in a location that makes sense. Winding through a landscape that's suffering under winter's wrath sells the White Witch of Narnia's cruelty before the players ever see her.

Let your characters feel the influence of your monsters before they encounter them. When player characters discover familiar villainous handiwork, narrowly escape from recognizable attacks, and discover clues about familiar origins, they'll likely connect your monster to these familiar pop culture story beats. This is the path to convincingly running the well-known characters we love to hate.

MAKE THEM YOURS

With all these tools in hand, you're now ready to bring those well-known creations into your own games!

Before you go forth to thrill and terrify, I have one final piece of advice. Remember, it's your creativity that's bringing these famous villains into your game. Authors have done a great job making these pop culture icons work in movies, TV series, comics, and books, but only you can make them work masterfully in a tabletop-roleplaying setting.

Take the liberties you need to make your creations soar in a brand-new environment. Maybe your version is smarter, bigger, and badder. If your players are invested, they'll have an even better time taking down Imhotep than they did actually watching *The Mummy*!

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FROM CONCEPT TO CREATURE

Building Monsters From Nothing

by James Haeck

As a Game Master—whether your players are seasoned veterans who have seen all the monsters in your myriad books multiple times, or you want to create a custom creature to suit your campaign—sometimes you just need to make a monster.

Sometimes inspiration strikes, and a monster idea emerges fully formed from your head, like Athena from Zeus's skull. For those times when your inner muse is silent, however, you need a strategy to ignite your creative fire.

Fortunately, you don't need to start from a grand concept; many monsters made by professional game designers start from a single kernel of creativity—a single power, a single story need, or even a piece of concept art—and build outward from there.

As this essay will show, you can use any one of these three starting points to create monsters for your home game, or even for your self-published adventures!

A MONSTER BUILT FROM A SINGLE POWER

Some monsters are built around a gameplay function, and everything else about them blossoms out of that mechanical seed.

Many classic video game monsters were made this way, with everything from their aesthetic to their behavior reflecting the one power (or weakness!) that sits at their core. The iconic goomba from *Super Mario Bros.* is an angry little mushroom with a big ol' head that's practically screaming to be jumped on.

Monsters built from a power are often conceptually simple but rapidly understood by players. This makes them a great starting point for new monster designers!

Do you have a single power you'd like to design a monster around right now? If you don't, start by thinking of other monsters you've seen in fantasy or science fiction. Make a list of 5 to 10 powers off the top of your head and choose one (or more!) that you really like.

Here's a list of ten iconic powers to inspire you, but don't feel limited by this list; the possibilities are endless:

- Flight
- Laser beams (or magic beams, etc.)
- A body made of fire
- Shapeshifting
- Size-shifting
- Teleportation
- Incredible speed
- Supernaturally tough
- Ally summoning
- Dimension shifting

Once you have a power in mind, you may be wondering how to represent it in terms of game mechanics.

This process is different in every game, but it's simplest to look for an existing monster in your game's monster book with a similar power and then borrow the way that power works. You might decide you want to tweak some of the numbers to suit your monster's specific use, but save filling in all the numbers until you have a solid understanding of the creature's traits and powers.

Now that you have a power in mind, and a loose set of mechanics to represent that power, you can start building outward.

Let's use laser beams as an example in the 5th Edition of the world's oldest roleplaying game. You want your creature to fire magic beams, so you decide to represent that as a ranged spell attack that has a +5 bonus to hit and deals 14 (4d6) radiant damage.

Next, consider: what purpose does this creature serve in your combat encounter? (If you've created a creature that shoots magic laser beams, it's probably a monster that wants to fight; on the other hand, choosing an ability like shapeshifting should get you to consider the social applications of this creature instead.)

It's always a good idea to follow the path of least resistance in your mind. You may be drawn to design game mechanics next—or you may think of

your monster's story applications—or you may think of the appearance of your monster! If you follow one path and hit a brick wall, don't beat your head against it. Take a step back and try going down another path and following your imagination.

For example, maybe you want your laser-beam creature to be flighty and hard to catch. What about a bat-like body? That's small and nimble, so it must be capable of flying 30 feet per round. But how does it shoot laser beams? It could have laser *vision*, like a comic book superhero—which inspires the look of a basketball-sized eyeball with bat wings, and it can shoot lasers out of that eye!

This is shaping up to be somewhat of a cartoonish monster, so maybe you can ground it in reality by figuring out its place in its fantastical ecosystem. How does such a creature survive? Maybe it's not a predator, but it actually peacefully siphons magical energy from ley lines to feed, and it can expend that magic to blast away predators. Its one big eye suggests it has great vision, so perhaps it can see invisible creatures—which means maybe its predators can turn invisible at will!

Keep spiraling outward from your starting point. Each category—mechanics, story, and appearance—informs the other. If you keep an open mind, each breakthrough in one category will ripple outward into the others.

A BEAST CARVED FROM A SINGLE STORY

Some Game Masters are more easily inspired by their campaign's story than their game's mechanics. This is most common among Game Masters who aren't deeply invested in the minutiae of the system they're using—they could tell their story in any RPG system, for instance, and their whole group is just already familiar with the one they're using now—so story triumphs over mechanics for them.

A Game Master like this needs a monster whose mechanics fit the story they have in mind. What story do you want to tell in your next session?

Perhaps your plot is as follows: a prince of the realm has been killed, and his lover is secretly a shapeshifting assassin who spirited away the prince's real paramour and has been posing as her for the past few years.

If that were your story, it has already given you a key monster power: shapeshifting! If you wanted, you could return to the previous example of power-first design and work outward from there.

However, if you're more interested in story than mechanical design, it's perfectly reasonable to avoid building a creature from the ground up. In that case, it's easiest to reflavor monsters from your game's published bestiaries to suit your needs.

As long as you can roleplay your "new" creature as a compelling character, and describe them as having few interesting physical traits as well, there are good odds your players will never notice their game statistics are identical to an existing monster.

However, some of the best stories in gaming arise when the characters encounter creatures whose powers in combat synergize with their role in the story. Just like your players would be jolted out of your fiction to see a character that's hailed as a master wizard fight only with a sword, your players would be immersed deeper in your game when a monster's story role and combat role are in harmony.

If the characters are fighting a dragon and the dragon's loyal advisor in their lair, it makes sense for the dragon to be a majestic terror in combat, while the advisor uses buff spells to keep their master alive.

As another example, if you've created a story whose villain is an erinyes devil that deserted her platoon, you can take an existing monster stat block and add a single new trait to it to represent its craven personality. In the 5th Edition rules, an erinyes is typically a courageous and disciplined warrior of hell, but giving her the ability to cast *expeditious retreat* at will totally transforms how she behaves in combat. Standing and fighting doesn't befit this monster's cowardly nature. Just by making one small change, this flighty deserter is able to speedily evade her foes while still raining arrows upon her pursuers!

A CREATURE SPRUNG FROM ILLUSTRATION

The internet is overflowing with fantasy art that can set even the most jaded Game Master's mind alight with inspiration. Just digging through a fantasy art gallery or a concept art book for a movie or video game you love can give you more monster ideas than you could possibly turn into creatures for your game.

The question then becomes—where do you start? The creatures in concept art are bursting with visual appeal. But if you want to use one of these creatures in your tabletop game, how do you isolate the most important part of the monster?

In fantasy roleplaying games, most monsters only have three scant rounds of combat to show off their greatest talents before they are killed, forced to surrender, or talked out of battle by the players' characters. There's little sense in overloading a monster with abilities that won't get used in their three rounds in the spotlight.

All you need to do to create a monster from a piece of art is find three things the creature can actively do. Passive things such as movement abilities (wings for flight, fins for swimming) or senses (no eyes for

blindsight, glowing eyes for truesight), and others are important to consider, but are not a part of your three active abilities.

When creating a monster from a piece of art, it's important to know what to look for. What part of the art could inspire an active trait? What could inspire a passive trait? Is there a part of the art that's clearly the central focus of the piece—something that screams in big, neon letters, "make the monster *use* this!"

To illustrate this, let's look at a monster from the *Tome of Beasts*, Kobold Press's first giant book of monsters for the 5th Edition rules. If you want to follow along, crack open your own copy of *Tome of Beasts* and look at the art for the void dragon, on page 139. Don't look at its stats. We're going to strip all the existing game design—splendid as it is—away from this creature, and reimagine it, just based on its art.

There are a few things that stand out from this illustration: the way the dragon emerges from swirling clouds, the little black hole perched between its halo-like horns, the starbursts in its chest, claws, and eyes, and the way its wings are filled with starfields rather than membrane. Think about what you would do to turn each one of these aesthetic details into an ability that the monster can use.

These starbursts seem to sparkle with destructive power; let's turn them into attacks! Instead of a breath weapon, this dragon can shoot a beam of coruscating starlight from its chest.

This attack will deal radiant damage, and the size, saving throw DC, and damage of the beam can be copied from a dragon of similar power from your game's bestiary. And because of the starbursts on its claws and head, we can also make its claw and bite attacks deal extra radiant damage— fairly standard dragon stuff.

More excitingly, let's look at those wings. Filled with the stars and the void between them, these wings can surely do more than just give the dragon a flying speed. Try this: as an action, the dragon can become one with the void, turning incorporeal while flying until the end of its turn, allowing it to pass through creatures and solid objects and become resistant to physical attacks.

Let's do the same for the black hole between its horns; we already have several attacks, so let's make this a defensive trait: as a reaction when it's targeted by a spell, it can open up a tiny wormhole that causes the spell to instead target another creature of its choice.

These four abilities together don't make a complete monster; if you're playing a mechanically crunchy fantasy RPG such as the 5th Edition rules, you need other vital numeric stats including hit points, armor class, saving throws, and so on. However, we're fortunate that, as a dragon, this creature is particularly easy to create by adding new abilities to an existing creature.

There are ten different dragons, with stat blocks for four different age categories, across the 5th Edition rules. To make this into a new creature, it's a simple matter to take your new abilities, plug them into the stats of an existing dragon, and remove any redundant features (for instance, you don't need this dragon to have both a starlight beam *and* a breath weapon).

Of course, if you're designing this monster for publication, you should build the creature's stats from the ground up instead of just copying them, but this method works perfectly for creatures you'll use in your home game!

IN CONCLUSION

So, after all this, you've created a monster! Set it aside for a day to give it time to breathe, then return to it and appraise it with fresh eyes. Do you like it? If it's good, then congratulations! You have a monster that you can use in your game with pride! Your players may forget it the moment the game ends, or remember it for years to come, but no matter what they think, you have created something you can iterate upon for the future.

And if wasn't so great after all, throw it out. Maybe you realized it stunk when you returned to it, or maybe you only realized once you tried to use it in-game. Either way, it's the easiest thing in the world to throw it out and start again from a new seed.

There are countless story ideas, innumerable monster powers, and more pieces of concept art than any one human can possibly see in their lifetime. Hunt down a new spark of inspiration and begin again. And this time, build a monster that's more fun, more fascinating, and more innovative than the last!

James Haeck is an RPG designer with a focus on storytelling and narrative design, particularly for Dungeons & Dragons. His work has been published by Wizards of the Coast, Kobold Press, D&D Beyond, Critical Role, and many more. He is the Senior Game Designer for Ghostfire Gaming, where he is transferring from his brain to the page the most imaginative 5th Edition stories and settings he can think of. He lives in Seattle, Washington, with his fiancé, Hannah Rose, and their animal companions, Mei and Marzipan. You can find him wasting time on Twitter @jamesjhaeck.

ON DETAILING
MONSTERS

Designing Memorable Monsters

Crafting Fun Encounters Through Special Abilities

by Monte Cook

I f an RPG is a play, then monsters are the Game Master's main actors. I mean that not just in the "actors on a stage" sense, but also in the "someone who takes action" sense. Once the setting is in play and the PCs are wandering around—in the wilderness, in a dungeon, in a post-apocalyptic ruin, or wherever—it's the monsters that act on the GM's behalf. In other words, if the PCs leave a door in the dungeon open, the most straightforward way for the GM to close it again is to have a monster do it.

The problem with this setup is that the PCs are very likely equipped with fancy gear, cool abilities, and interesting names and backstories, and the monsters are, well, in comparison, they're throwaways with some teeth, some claws, and some hit points. At least, they're throwaways if the GM doesn't take some steps to make them interesting.

So let's talk about making monsters—one of the primary tools in the GM's toolbox—memorable. While I'm going to focus mainly on creating new monsters of your own, these guidelines also apply to choosing from monsters that already exist from what is very likely the multiple bestiaries you probably have on your shelf (I know it's not just me!).

There are many ways to make a monster memorable and more interesting, and none of them involve giving it a thousand hit points so that the encounter with it becomes a session-long slog. Monsters aren't more

interesting simply because their stats are high (though there are exceptions to this, which we'll get to shortly).

Monsters are interesting because they present the players with a game experience they've never had before. It's a far better strategy to try to challenge the players rather than their characters. When it comes to fun, having to think of a solution is always more memorable than needing to roll really high multiple times.

Think of each monster in terms of an encounter. What's a fun encounter you want to have? Break it down as basically as you can. Do you want to have the characters experience a wild chase through the air? Deal with a million creepy-crawlies in a narrow, pitch-dark tunnel? Lose their ability to speak when they badly need to communicate?

Next, whatever the answer, design your monster for that goal. Or, to put it another way, think of the scene in the movie of your game that you want to see on the screen, and then make your monster work in a way that will make that happen.

That leads us to ask the question: what makes a good encounter? Well, first and foremost, it's fun. But ideally there are multiple ways to deal with the challenge presented (including perhaps avoiding it altogether) and there are things for different types of players and characters to do.

Monsters shape an encounter through their abilities. That could be as simple as "this monster attacks from an ambush" to complicated supernatural abilities that reverse gravity or turn characters into chickens. Let's break that down into some very general categories.

Monsters have the ability to:
- Inflict damage
- Utilize or control the environment
- Incapacitate characters
- Affect PC abilities or possessions
- Wield incredible defenses

I'll be honest; when I initially made the above list, it was much longer. I had mind control, shape-changing, immunities, and more. But as I worked on it, I realized most of the entries I had could all be consolidated. You'll see what I mean as we explore each category in more depth.

BREAKING IT DOWN

Here's what I mean by each entry in my monster ability list.

Monsters Can Inflict Damage. I'm not going to spend a lot of time on this. You know how this works. Practically every monster inflicts damage, and thus, this is important but unlikely to make your monster memorable.

Monsters Can Utilize or Control the Environment. This can be anything from setting traps for the PCs to changing the terrain, like turning the floor to mud or making nearby plants entangle the characters. It can include the ability to hide really well or appear to be an inanimate object. I'll be honest, most of this stuff is the kind of thing I'd consider the bare minimum for an interesting monster encounter.

I mean, when in doubt, put the goblins behind cover or drop a net on the PCs. It keeps a fight from being merely some attack rolls and damage rolls, but that's about it. The exception would be something really out of the ordinary, like a very clever trap, or a very specific situation that makes a low-power creature a challenge for a powerful group of PCs, like goblins starting an avalanche on top of PCs.

But even these sorts of tactics should be used sparingly. And the "mimic" schtick where the monster poses as a chest, a table, a sword, or the floor? Used once, it's fun. Used multiple times and it forces the characters to carefully check every object they come upon for the rest of the campaign, which grows tedious.

I'd also lump in flying attacks from airborne monsters in this category. The creature stays out of reach by clinging to the ceiling or attacking from the air. Now melee-focused characters have to come up with some useful ranged attack. Extending the encounter into three dimensions is good, but is probably only the beginnings of a memorable encounter, not the entirety of it. Don't forget to give that flying, floating, or levitating monster something really interesting to do.

Monsters Can Incapacitate Characters. Lots of monster abilities are utterly incapacitating. And that's okay—once in a while. But be really aware of how frustrating it is as a player to be taken out of an encounter entirely. Being frozen in place, put in a coma, or otherwise losing all your actions for the encounter—or worse, the adventure—simply says to a player, "You don't get to play."

Here's a suggestion that's far more fun and interesting (and in fact, more horrifying). Instead of being instantly turned to stone and thus taken out of the encounter or even the adventure, perhaps a character is slowly turning to stone over the course of many rounds, with actions becoming harder and harder while the group scrambles to save the character before it's too late.

The fun of this kind of encounter probably depends on the length of the incapacitation. A beast that smacks a character so hard they lose their next action is just frustrating enough to encourage them to keep from getting smacked again, but it's no real hardship. (A little bit of frustration is good— it makes the victory more sweet and increases the tension as the players take action to avoid further frustration.)

For instance, mind control is a form of incapacitation. Take control of a character for one round? Fun. Take control of a character for the rest of the adventure? Well, you might as well say they're dead, because that player doesn't really get to play their character.

(For what it's worth, a long-term compulsion, such "attack every dwarf you see," is far more interesting than total mind domination. Then, the player can do what they want—except there's that one thing. When that character and their friends encounters the band of friendly dwarves, suddenly that's a memorable moment for the whole group as they know what's coming and have to try to prevent it somehow.)

There's little drama or tension in being utterly incapacitated. But being forced into a situation where you can't do what you want but you can still do something? That's good. If you don't do that thing, then you're in deep trouble—that's even better. Consider the monster that grabs a character and starts to squeeze. That character can't do what they wanted to do, but if they don't get out of that grip, they're probably dead. That's tension.

In other words, consider using incapacitating monsters that don't take characters completely out of the encounter, but *change* them for the encounter. A character temporarily transformed into a tinier, clumsier, more limited, or just stupider version of themselves isn't out of the game, they just have to deal with situations they wouldn't otherwise cope with.

I'm not just talking about penalties to die rolls, but whole new situations. The blind fighter might need to find their foe somehow before they can attack. The wizard shrunk to tiny size must avoid being stepped on by their friends even as they cast their spells. The possibilities are endless.

There are other ways to "partially" incapacitate characters. For example, what if a character is ensorcelled or mind-manipulated so that they cannot attack the monster? They can do other things, but they can't make direct attacks. Now the player needs to get creative to still participate in a battle in a meaningful way, helping other characters or affecting the monster indirectly.

There's practically no limit to the things you can do to "partially" incapacitate a character. Think of it as a way to "damage" the characters in nontraditional ways: turn a character slowly into mush, or instantly into a toad, or freeze one of the PC's arms, or have two characters switch bodies, or have a giant magnet attract all the PCs' metal equipment and armor. And these are all just examples.

Monsters Can Affect PC Abilities or Possessions. A monster might destroy the gunslinger's pistol, or drain the brawler's strength. These tactics are pretty straightforward. They're also frustrating for players. Foiling the magic-wielding character with some monster that's immune to magic for one encounter is fine—perhaps even fun as it encourages the player to get creative, but constantly countering the PC's favorite spells is quite another.

Remember, in most RPGs, abilities and possessions are basically (some of) the rewards for playing, and regularly taking them away feels like a punishment. It's better to require a particular ability for success against a monster than to nullify it. This still plays off the character's abilities, but in a positive way. For example, rather than saying a monster takes only partial damage from fire, you say it takes more damage than usual from cold.

A thieving monster that steals a character's money or their favorite magical item is also extremely frustrating for players, yet it can make for an intriguing encounter. This is not because the character no longer has their gold or item, but because, frankly, it will really tick them off.

Odds are the character will immediately do whatever they can to find the thief to get their item back and get some revenge. (Don't believe me? Try it. I guarantee most players will do anything to get their hard-won treasure back.) This is great because it's one encounter that leads into another encounter, and now the PC has a whole new motivation for being proactive.

Monsters Can Wield Incredible Defenses. Very rarely, you can achieve the creation of a memorable monster if it's just really hard to defeat. If the PCs can only succeed by rolling a natural 20 on a d20, you're priming that emotional moment when it happens. On the flip side, you're likely to be sitting there a while as people keep trying and failing to roll well.

It's much better to provide a challenge beyond requiring high attack and defense or skill rolls. In other words, ingenuity might be the key rather than rolling a 20. If the PCs foil the invisible monster's incredible defense by luring it into a flour mill filled with swirling dust, that's not ruining the encounter—it's making it memorable.

Or, let's take another look at those shape-changing monsters we mentioned before. The creature that can perfectly mimic people or animals that the PCs would otherwise trust is very interesting. It's particularly interesting if it's not just a brief encounter, but a sort of "long-con" deception where the shapeshifter spends a great deal time with the PCs before they reveal themselves (or are revealed). You need only watch John Carpenter's *The Thing* to realize how such a creature can make for a very memorable set of encounters.

Similar to the suggestion above regarding requiring something rather than prohibiting it, consider creating a unique defense, such as one in which you can only strike the monster with a weapon bathed in a specific magical pool. Or, a weapon must be coated in the venom of a specific type of snake, or the monster can only be defeated by discovering and speaking its true name. These are memorable monsters because they are usually those that begin with a defeat—the PCs trying conventional means—and only later give way to victory.

Consider, then, creating monsters with something that will make the encounter feel different, but still fun, such as the suggestions in this essay. Using these, you might give the players and their characters a new challenge they've never faced before—in the form of a memorable monster.

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The Hierarchy of Draconic Needs

Making Your Monsters Stand Out

by Crystal Frasier

D ragons are boring. It's sad but true.

Once the definitive monster of fairy tales and fantasy fiction, gaming tropes have reduced these impressive beasts to lizards with flamethrowers who just sit in caves all day, waiting for plucky adventurers to stumble along and stab them.

Every dragon fight is the same slugfest in a big cavern, where everyone spreads out to avoid the breath weapon and everyone busts out their anti-dragon spells or dragon-slaying weapons. When you fought him, did you even learn that dragon's name? You're pretty sure he shouted it as part of his monologue when the fight started, and you're pretty sure it had two *x*'s in it.

So yeah, dragons are boring.

They're tough, but they're ultimately cookie-cutter adversaries that we've all faced before. We want something new—like a hairless, squid-faced bull with the faces of a dozen crying infants emerging from its haunches!

Except by the time you've fought five or six such glabrous beasts, they start to feel the same, too.

People are hardwired to see patterns everywhere, and that's useful. It means we have a shorthand for expectations. The word "kobold" brings to mind tiny, panicky lizard- (or dog-) people with spears and minimal clothing. You don't need to explain what a kobold is every time they show up in your game because your players already know the stereotypes of a kobold. But familiarity breeds contempt; people get bored with the same thing every time.

The problem isn't the dragons. The problem is that none of your dragons feel unique.

HAVING NEEDS

So you want a unique version of an existing monster, but what does that mean? Perhaps foremost, you'll want them to be interesting and memorable—and for them to throw surprises at your players so they'll talk about those fights and the plot threads involved for weeks afterward. The first stage of making your monsters unique is making them individuals, with identifiable personalities and needs.

The fastest and easiest option to add some uniqueness to your monsters is to give them a few personality quirks—some behavioral tics and manners of speech that stand out—and run with it. If your green dragon talks like a bayou witch and her lair is lined with terrariums full of lizards, sometimes that's enough to make a monster stand out, especially if the heroes parley with her. Don't underestimate the value a strange accent, an outlandish bit of costume, or compulsive action can have on an encounter, because it is specifically those differences that will stick in players' minds.

If you want to flesh out your monsters even more, you might learn a bit about Maslow's hierarchy of needs, a basic framework from psychology that describes human motivation, starting from those actions most essential for life and moving up to those actions important to our personal and spiritual fulfillment. Consider what need motivates your monster's actions, because that informs very different adventures and encounters.

Below are some ways to apply the categories of needs found in Maslow's hierarchy to your monsters' motivations.

Physical Needs. These are the most basic things needed for survival, such as breathing, eating, sleeping, and keeping warm. Monsters focused on fulfilling these needs are either simple-minded animals or intelligent beings put in impossible situations where they must fight for their basic survival.

"I am kidnapping this princess to eat her," a monster concerned with these needs would think.

Safety Needs. These are basic needs revolving around security and long-term survival, such as securing long-term health, stockpiling for future hardship, and securing protection from physical dangers. Monsters focused on fulfilling these needs may be well-established animals or intelligent beings bouncing back from some disaster, or they might be trying to establish themselves in a new place.

"I am kidnapping this princess to stop the king's attacks on my lair," a monster concerned with these needs would think.

Community Needs/Belonging. By the time a monster is thinking about community needs, they are beginning to focus on psychological needs and wants as much as base survival, and chief among community needs is the need to not be alone. These monsters want friendship, romance, or a family.

"I am kidnapping this princess because we're in love and her father forbids our marriage," a monster concerned with these needs would think.

Prestige Needs. While it can mean respect or fear, prestige needs also mean seeking a sense of independence and individuality—the ability for a single person to make their own choices. Monsters fulfilling prestige needs might not want to be disrespected or may simply insist they shouldn't have consequences for their actions (at least not from puny humans).

"I am kidnapping this princess so all will fear me and know they aren't untouchable," a monster concerned with these needs would think.

Creative/Personal Needs. Finally, at the pinnacle of the hierarchy of needs are elements related to personal growth and becoming the best version of one's self. That might mean art or creativity, but it might also mean a monster imposing their philosophy or religion on everyone because they feel like they're right, or trying to ascend into godhood.

"I am kidnapping this princess to make a statement about feudal society," a monster concerned with these needs would think.

FULFILLING THEIR NEEDS

Giving your monster a name, a favorite album, and a relationship status is fun, but at the end of the day, 90% of your players' interaction will involve clashing swords and rolling dice. So, once you know whether your monster is hungry or her mother didn't hug her enough, it's time to start thinking about how to reflect that mechanically. But being a Game Master is a lot of work, and the last thing you need are even more stat blocks to prepare. Here are some of the easiest ways to help your unique monsters stand out once you trade blows.

INK AND PAINT

There's nothing wrong with making a monster stand out purely via flavor text while leaving its mechanics untouched. You can say your goblin chefs all wield meat cleavers and still use the statistics for short swords, for instance.

However, re-painting your monster stat blocks can go much further than this. You can use entirely different stat blocks to represent unique individuals or leaders. If you want a cackling goblin witch to lead those chefs, you can just pull the stat block for an imp, describing her flight as sitting on a bare-bristle broomstick and her poison and invisibility as spells.

Re-painting your stat blocks can also mean changing how you describe some elements of a creature, trading out damage resistances or the kind of damage dealt by attacks. You might not have a lot of ice monsters for your arctic adventure, but grabbing fire-based creatures and re-casting their attacks and energy resistance as cold gives you a host of possibilities with no extra work.

Playing with descriptions can also be used to give monsters seemingly unique powers. So long as the end result of their attack is fundamentally the same, you can describe it however you like. A medusa might carry a bow, but you can just as easily describe her ranged attacks as deadly blasts of venom from her cobra hair. You can make some truly bizarre monsters just by adjusting how your describe their abilities: a basilisk whose deadly gaze turns humans into jellyfish might seem very different on the surface, but the end result is still a character transformed into a useless, nonfunctional state.

NEW FEATURES

If you don't want to build a monster's stat block from scratch, consider adding one or two special abilities from pre-existing sources to create your unique monster. You can pull rules from any source—most games provide verdant fields of rules text you can borrow, from monster powers to magic items to class abilities to spells to feats.

Feel free to change a monster's favorite skills without worrying about the bonuses—if it's important for your black dragon to be great at ice skating instead of intimidating, just use their Intimidate modifier as-is without worrying that ice skating isn't a Charisma-based skill. Pull from your monster's general challenge rating to ensure the damage inflicted or difficulty to resist are level-appropriate, or borrow from any level and use the rules for setting level-appropriate damage and difficulties to adjust them.

When adding new abilities, keep in mind most combats only last a few turns, so your unique monster isn't going to be able to show off too many of their unique talents. More than one or two adjustments and you won't have time to showcase them all, so it's usually better to pick one fun, showcase power than to drop in a dozen minor abilities.

NEW FACES, NEW PLACES

To help your unique monster stand out, consider changing the things around them rather than adjusting the monster themselves. A new environment can take advantage of overlooked abilities—undead monsters don't need to breathe, so they can function underwater, in a poisonous

swamp, or in the depths of space—or create situations where the heroes don't want to start a fight and must find other solutions.

A band of heroes might be able to dodge a dragon's flaming breath weapon, but if the dragon poses as a human and lives in a crowded city, a fight could kill dozens of people—hundreds if the fires spread! A new environment might also dramatically increase the risk to heroes. Consider challenging your players with a flying monster while they cling to a cliffside, for example.

You can also consider the other monsters that surround your unique monster. A goblin queen who rides a tamed giant chameleon has a story to tell—she might even seem to fly at first—and a lich with an army of pixies has clearly hatched a unique strategy that can draw the players' interest. New minions might take advantage of a villain's innate abilities or be immune to some trait that normally forces them to work alone, such as a medusa leading a band of blind grimlocks

TINKER

For all their reputation as finely tuned machines, roleplaying games are pretty robust and hard to break. It's hard to derail everything just by tinkering with the numbers, so don't stress about tweaking bonuses and saving throws or adding a few extra hit points. Adding hit points is actually one of the easiest ways to help a monster stand out without increasing the challenge for your PCs—unique monsters stand out as priority targets, so giving them the ability to soak up extra damage helps keep them around a little longer to show off whatever unique talents you've come up with.

Most games have guidelines or charts for Game Masters that tell you how far you can push your numbers before the challenge becomes overwhelming for players. If you plan to tinker, get to know this information to help guide you work.

MAKE IT UP

The deepest, darkest secret of game mastering—the truth that must never be revealed to the players—is that you can just make stuff up. None of the things that make your monster unique need to be accounted for in the stat block. The rules exist to keep things balanced—locks exist to keep honest men honest, as my father likes to say—and you can throw that balance out whenever you like if everyone keeps having fun. If you want your kobold matriarch to teleport, shoot lightning from her tail, and crush stone (but not human skulls) with her bare hands, you don't need rules for any of that; *they can just happen*. Be fair in how you apply this broad and undefined

ability—it's generally best to point rules-free options at NPCs and terrain rather than using them against the PCs themselves—and always keep in mind the goal is to have a fun and memorable game.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

Making your monsters stand out is all about playing with your players' expectations. By understanding both how to defy the stereotypes your players expect and giving those differences some fun mechanical tweaks, you can keep your encounters from feeling stagnant and help those set pieces stick in players' memories—no matter how many dragons your players fight.

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THE DIVINE ART OF RESKINNING MONSTERS

Making Your Monsters Stand Out

by Michael E. Shea

W hen it comes to your GM's toolbox, monster reskinning is one of your most valuable tools. When you reskin a monster, with hardly any work at all, you can save the time, money, and effort spent on a monster's mechanical design and reuse it for your own purposes. Monster reskinning helps you improvise during your game—letting you react to the changing story by bringing just about any monster to the table whenever you need it. When you embrace this divine art, you can build a rich world of unique foes with nothing but an existing book of monsters and a spark of imagination.

It's so good it feels like cheating.

Nearly every Game Master's guide for the most popular RPGs includes instructions for reskinning monsters, and yet many GMs still spend hours designing monsters from scratch that end up dead 90 seconds after they hit the table. GMs want to build worlds, including the monsters within them, and building monsters from scratch feels comfortable.

Instead, spending time and effort building brand-new monsters often takes GMs away from the areas of their game that matter the most to their players: the story, the world that surrounds the characters, and how the world reacts to the actions those characters take.

It can be tough to do, but consider letting go of your resistance to using GM tricks that feel too easy. Leverage the work others have already done and let's start reskinning.

WHAT IT MEANS TO RESKIN

What does it mean to reskin a monster? In case you're not familiar with the term, the concept is an easy one.

Reskinning is simply the practice of taking an existing monster in your favorite monster book and wrapping it in the narrative flavor of something else. An ogre might be reskinned as a champion barbarian. A red dragon might be reskinned into a powerful, fire-breathing demon. Drow might be reskinned into a band of magic-enhanced assassins.

When you reskin a monster, you're taking an existing block of mechanics and wrapping it in a new story. You can reflavor existing monsters into ones that fit into your game world. It's that simple. It's also extremely powerful.

CAPITALIZING OFF OF THE WORK OF OTHERS

Imagine what it takes to build a published monster. A monster designer sits down with their RPG's monster building guidelines. They consider their concept, apply attributes, choose abilities, check the monster's balance among similar monsters, and refactor to suit.

In professional publications, the monster heads off to a developer (sort of like a technical editor for books about dragons), who looks at the monster's stat block and makes sure it fits the mechanics of the game. Somewhere around this point, the monster often goes out for playtesting and numerous groups try it out and provide feedback.

All that feedback then trickles back upward for any design tweaks and development changes. Then, finally, it goes to an editor who checks it all against everything else in the book before it goes to layout and publication. That's a lot of work for a monster to go from a designer's idea to your table when you run it at your game.

Why would you want to do all of that work yourself?

When you reskin a published monster, you can encapsulate all of that work and turn it into any monster you can think of with just a new description. You often don't even have to write it down.

Instead, you can use all of that effort to your advantage. Instead of building your own monsters, you can put your energy into the story and the world that surrounds your characters.

LEVELS OF RESKINNING

Reskinning has numerous levels of complexity, each designed for a different result. Mostly this comes down to how much customization a monster needs to fit the story. Here are a few of these levels of complexity in the order of easiest to hardest to accomplish.

Call it Something Different. The easiest method of reskinning is to take an existing stat block as-is and just call it something different. If you make no changes to the monster's mechanics, it means no work for you as the GM. This can be done completely on the fly during a game without needing to even write anything down.

Changing Up Equipment. Sometimes you don't need to modify a monster's full traits, but you just want to change up what it's wearing or carrying. Maybe that ogre got herself a suit of awesome, ogre-sized plate armor. Maybe that troll learned how to swing a pair of battle axes. Usually changing up the equipment of a monster means little more than tweaking the monster's armor class or changing up the type and amount of damage it dishes out. Changing up equipment is a great way for a generic band of monsters to feel like a group of individuals.

Changing Up Traits. Just a little bit more challenging is changing up a monster's baseline traits. If you use the ogre stat block to represent a barbarian champion, it's no longer a giant and it's no longer large. The languages the creature knows may change. Most of the time you only need to change these traits if they come into play and, most of the time, you can do this during the game.

Making Quick "Elites." Another easy trick is to make "elite" versions of existing monsters. These powerful versions of baseline monsters may have double the hit points, an extra attack or two, more damage on its attacks, or any combination of these. Making these elite versions of existing monsters is easy but will definitely change the difficulty of the monster when compared to its baseline.

Adding Mechanical Traits. Though harder, adding new mechanics to an existing stat block can customize a monster not just in its fiction but also in how it plays at the table. You might, for example, give your barbarian champion an icy warhammer that inflicts extra cold damage and give her resistance to cold because of her long time spent on the icy frontier. Often, you can jot down these changes on a notecard, a sticky note in your monster book, or in your game notes. Adding one or two mechanical traits to an existing monster makes the monster feel different at the table with little added complexity.

Mashing Monsters Together. Sometimes, you want more than just a couple of traits to change up a monster. Say you want a skeletal mammoth, a vampire gladiator, an owlbear wraith, or a werewolf mage. In this case you're taking two whole stat blocks and mashing them together. Some RPGs offer templates to support such changes, but even if no templates exist for your favorite RPG, you can use one stat block as a template and mash it up with another to make something new.

Doing so is much like adding traits, only we're likely adding a bunch of them. When mashing up two monsters, start with the most mechanically complex monster as the base monster and choose traits from the less complex monster to augment it. This reduces the overall amount of work you need to do to mash them together. Mashing monsters like this is more art than science; you should be careful to choose the elements that will make the monster feel unique without going too far.

SHIFTING DIFFICULTIES

When you change the mechanics of a monster, you're also likely changing how difficult it will be to fight. While most GM's guides offer advice on understanding the challenge rating of monsters you create, such guidelines are already loose at best.

Because you're developing monsters for your own group, you likely already know what your characters are capable of. Any abstract measurement of difficulty tends to break down when applied to a specific group of characters played by specific players. Worry less about applying a mechanical challenge rating to a monster and worry more about how you think this monster will actually play out when the characters in your game face it.

Do your characters tend to eat through a monster's hit points quickly? Do they tend to absorb crazy amounts of damage inflicted by monsters? These questions will have a much bigger effect on how you tweak a monster than the arbitrary scale of difficulty used for monsters overall.

WHICH MONSTERS RESKIN THE BEST?

Some monsters make for better reskinning than others. For the most part, monsters with the fewest mechanics are the easiest to reskin and run at the table. Orcs, ogres, and the various flavors of giants all work well as generic piles of hit points and damage. Applying traits onto these monsters such as extra armor, extra damage, or spell-like effects is easy to do and makes them feel very different in combat. Because their stat blocks are often simple, they're easy to run at the table, which makes them prime candidates for reskinning.

ADD SPELL-LIKE ABILITIES

Applying spell-like abilities is a way to capitalize not only on the design effort that went into building monsters but also on the effort that went into designing spells. Adding a spell-like ability to a monster, particularly one that synergizes well with the monster's baseline abilities, will make any monster feel unique.

Some spells, such as *fire shield*, dramatically change how a monster plays in combat. A dragon with *fire shield* is far more dangerous than one without it. An assassin with *greater invisibility* is considerably more deadly. Mixing spells with monsters is a quick way to take the few hundred monsters in our monster book and turn them into tens of thousands.

Imagine there's a simple skeleton, except that when it dies, it explodes in a fireball. Now imagine dozens of the things swarming in on our characters. Scary, right? That's the effect adding spell-like abilities to monsters can achieve.

PITFALLS OF RESKINNING

Reskinning monsters isn't without peril. A common problem with reskinning is using the wrong mechanics to fit the flavor of a particular monster. You may love that black dragon stat block, but it probably won't work well for the undead spellcaster you were hoping for.

Packing too many actions onto a single monster also won't work too well. If a baseline monster already has suitable actions, giving it a bunch of extra things to do likely won't help it at the table.

Let's say we're creating a troll acolyte; a troll who picked up a spellbook and managed to decipher some of its arcane teachings. Giving a troll *magic missile* won't make much of a difference if its bite and claw attacks are so much more effective. A troll who can cast *shield*, however, will get the players' attention.

When you're adding features onto a monster, ensure any new actions you give it are effective and evocative enough to be worth the monster's actions.

One big potential pitfall with reskinning is accidently giving players a peek behind the curtain. Players will lose their connection to the fiction if they figure out you've reskinned one monster into another. Keep your monster book hidden and avoid the temptation to let the players know how crafty you were turning a fire giant into that animated war machine they just fought.

Making your game feel real means hiding the secret machine behind the curtain so the players can hang onto their illusions. As always, when you tweak, reskin, or otherwise turn the dials in your secret room, do so to make the game as fun and exciting as you can.

IT DOESN'T END WITH MONSTERS

Here's a final secret: reskinning doesn't end with monsters. It turns out you can reskin just about anything in your RPG when you need to. NPCs, dungeons, maps, factions, nations, histories, pantheons, and even entire worlds can be reskinned into whatever best suits your game. Always feel free to ride off of the inertia provided by others and use it to propel your game into fantastic new stories.

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On Being an Unnaturalist

Monster Wrangling for Fun and Profit

by Kelly Pawlik

I'm an unnaturalist.

I document monsters—detailing how they relate to their natural surroundings, trying to understand their psyches, noting the details about their appearances, habits, and abilities. I've been an unnaturalist since the first time I read about Greek mythology as a child, daydreaming of giant three-headed dogs and women with heads coifed in serpents.

When I cracked the cover of my first *Monster Manual*, I was stunned; there were people who knew exactly how hard it was to resist the medusa's petrifying, and they had noted it with illustrations and notes on her ecology and psychology. And she was in a book with *hundreds* of other creatures, similarly presented.

My purpose was clear: I *had* to join the fearless assemblage who must have risked the very heart of darkness to provide this information for other intrepid explorers to use. If you enjoy thinking about monsters, and all the considerations their existence entails, I suspect you're an unnaturalist too.

If you're interested in dipping your toes into publishing the results of your unnaturalist tendencies, read on.

IT STARTS AT HOME

One aspect of roleplaying games that makes them superior to other types of games is, in my opinion, the ability to add consequential content with relative ease. Homebrewing allows any Game Master to introduce or customize a monster—or anything else in their game—to whichever degree they see fit. Like most GMs, I started down the path of the unnaturalist by doing just this.

In my experience, GMs homebrew monsters for three reasons, as follows.

Necessity. Sometimes you want your game setting to have a creature that isn't readily available or isn't available at all. Does your world have forest-dwelling dwarves who live in the treetops and brachiate through the tree canopy? I haven't seen any published, but in most roleplaying games it's a simple matter of swapping one or two standard traits for the ones your arboreal dwarves need to thrive in their leafy demesne. Homebrewing out of necessity can be done on an ad hoc basis; you can make trade-offs on the fly inside an existing set of statistics to give a creature the features it needs to suit your purpose.

Inspiration. Sometimes you're exposed to a monster through a piece of media and are inspired to recreate it for your game, or even just to represent it statistically in your RPG of choice. If you want to use the demogorgon from *Stranger Things*, or the luck dragon from *The Neverending Story*, or volcra from Leigh Bardugo's Grishaverse novel series to thrill your players, you need to stat them yourself.

Worldbuilding. For me, this is the most satisfying reason to homebrew monsters. Creating monsters as a part of worldbuilding allows you to put your stamp on the game world, even if the world you're using is a long-published setting. The shadow fey and clockwork creatures of Midgard do as much to distinguish that setting from the Forgotten Realms as its ley lines or the fact it's a flat world do. Creating custom monsters for your campaign helps prevent your players from metagaming their way through encounters with the stock monsters from your game's bestiary.

THE SMALLEST OF LEAPS

In years past, it was unlikely anyone outside yourself and a small circle of gamers would see the results of your homebrew. Fortunately for unnaturalists, it's now easier to get eyes on our work than it ever has been!

Sharing a monster is as easy as pasting it to your social media or an online message board. Furthermore, the barrier to publishing your material has decreased just as dramatically, making the distance between being a homebrewer and an author—or if you prefer, between being an amateur and semi-professional unnaturalist—significantly shorter. If you

love writing about monsters and have access to appropriate software as well as an Internet connection, you too could be a published unnaturalist!

The reasons to publish your monsters are largely the same as why you started homebrewing them.

You likely aren't the only Game Master who needs arboreal dwarves or cloud-bodied, airborne aboleth. Certainly your peers have been exposed to some of the same inspiration you have, and really, who doesn't want luck dragons in their setting? Game Masters are as busy as they ever have been; not everyone has the time or inclination to worldbuild, especially if something they're looking for, or a close approximation, is easily available.

SELF-PUBLISHING VERSUS WORKING FOR HIRE

Once you decide to take the leap into the ineffable world of the semi-professional unnaturalist, there's another consideration you need to make: do you publish your monsters yourself, or do you seek out an established publisher and offer yourself as a contractor to create monsters for them?

Self-Publishing

To say self-publishing is *easy* would be disingenuous; it's a ton of work. People who say that really mean that almost anyone can put together a product of some level of quality and easily upload it to a venue where you might sell some copies.

The biggest benefit of self-publishing is you can release into the wilds whatever dark children you wish. The limit is your imagination and your skill at presentation through words and images.

On the other hand, pouring all your love and creativity into your self-published pamphlet of beasts doesn't necessarily give you an audience or sales. Barring an instant audience, you'll need to build one, probably slowly.

Work for Hire

There are upsides to making monsters as part of a work-for-hire contract rather than self-publishing them. In addition to the obvious payment you'll receive, reputable publishers will have an editor and/or developer, even if that's the publisher themselves. The editor/developer will make sure everything looks good, makes sense, and is mechanically sound for the system the monster is produced for.

As good an unnaturalist as you think you are, a good editor/developer will challenge you, show you where your craft is weakest, and work with you to improve it. I can't shower enough love on the editors and developers I've worked with; they're worth twice their weight in platinum ingots.

Finally, established publishers have an audience for their material, which means your work will get seen.

The dark side, as it were, of working for hire is that you don't own the work you produce under contract. Once you've turned it in and been paid, the publisher can do with it what they wish, including not release it at all. Furthermore, working for hire is predicated on the ability to get contracted for it in the first place.

Roleplaying games are a tiny niche inside the publishing world. Getting a contract to write for a roleplaying game publisher requires as much or more luck and perseverance as it does skill.

Few people start at the top; you should be prepared to work your way from indie micro-publishers up, building your reputation and repertoire one monster at a time.

ITEMS OF CONSIDERATION

Once you decide to transition from homebrewing, whether opting for self-publishing or through an established publisher, there are a few things to think about.

Who is my Audience?

It's impossible to appeal to everyone. Before you start writing your monsters, you should have a good idea who you think will use them. Part of this is dictated by the game you're writing them for. When you're putting together a 'zine of beasts for Free League Publishing's MÖRK BORG RPG, you want each of them to be as hardcore and metal as possible, and you want to make sure your material is presented in that game's unique style. The world's oldest roleplaying game, on the other hand, has a much more generic, and arguably family-friendly image, so a pleasure golem made of tongues and protuberances might offend some people.

If you're doing an unnaturalist's work for hire, you also need to consider your publisher's audience. Most publishers, even third-party ones producing material for popular games, focus on specific themes or types of beasts. Focus your work on whatever monsters you've been contracted to do and save that one concept you love but doesn't fit for a different project.

Why Does the Game Need This Monster?

This is the first question I ask myself when I sit down for creature creation, and if it's a really hard one to answer, often that answer is really simple: it doesn't. Sometimes the rule of cool is enough to see you through. I herald the creator of the giant shark bowl ooze for Kobold Press's *Creature Codex* as a genius, because despite how silly the monster is, it's visually amazing

and the mechanics back it up as something I want to find a reason to use in a game.

The reason a game needs a given monster doesn't need to be profound. For example, if dragons didn't exist, we'd have to make them because they represent the iconic apex predator, at least in that most popular of games. The game needs liches because there needs to be visible consequences for pursuing personal and arcane power at the expense of any other consideration. Imps need to exist so higher-ranking devils have someone to bully while they're tooling around the Hells. You get the idea.

Where Will This Monster Live?

When I'm homebrewing a monster with no intention of having it published, I rarely come up with much more than the information I need to make it usable in my game. A good monster is more than its stat block, however, and when you are putting out your next pamphlet of creatures, they'll need to come with some information to help anyone who's not you run them at their table.

You can craft the sweetest set of features for something, but if I paid for monsters, I'm going to be cranky if they don't come with some ecological information, and preferably a bit of insight into the way they think so they can potentially be more than some fodder I chuck at my players while I figure out where the left-hand path they've chosen takes them. At a minimum, I like to know the following.

Where does the creature live? What protective features does its home have? Does it keep treasure in there? If so, why aren't creatures that covet whatever it's hoarding constantly kicking the door in? How far does it range from its lair?

What does it eat? Where does it get its food? Does it compete with anything else in the area for food or other resources? If it devours intelligent sentient beings, why haven't they exterminated it yet? What source does its water come from?

How do the senses perceive it? What kind of skin does it have? Is it covered with slime or some other fluid? If so, what does that feel like to the touch? Does it have hair? If so, how much of its body is covered with it? Is it soft or coarse? What color is it? What does it smell like? What does it look like?

You can't be too evocative when it comes to describing your creature; a Game Master should be able to give their players a clear idea of what the creature they're facing looks like, even if they aren't shown an image of it.

How does it think? What is its personality like? Does it run off sheer instinct, or does it calculate its actions? Does it hunt and stalk or charge right in? Can it be reasoned with?

There are other considerations of course, but if you at least have answers to the above questions, you're going to be crafting some great beasts.

Know the Rules

It shouldn't come as a surprise, but you need to know the rules for the game you're producing monsters for. As important, you should know how to *present* those rules in your material.

Most games and publishers have a style guide indicating how things should be formatted. If you can't find it online, ask your publisher for it. If they don't have one, you need to examine how monsters are written and presented in first-party material and mimic that look, feel, and sound.

If a game has specific rules language, and of course most do, you must use that language in your writing. Doing otherwise is frustrating to any editor who may be looking at your monsters, as well as to people who expect material for a given game to look and sound like official material they get for that game.

Know What's Available

You don't need to worry about this as much if you're self-publishing, though it's good to be aware of what monsters are available to avoid duplication. If you're creating content for a publisher, at a minimum you need to know which monsters your game's publisher has released as official content. There's no point in pitching or writing a monster for a publisher if that beast already exists. Focus your energy elsewhere.

DELVE INTO THE DARKNESS

I hope I haven't scared you off of publishing your monsters for roleplaying gamers everywhere to enjoy. Being a semi-professional unnaturalist is something I'm passionate about, and I love sharing that passion with others.

If you're thinking of dipping your toes into the self-publishing pool, leap in. There's no rush when you're working for yourself, so take the time you need to craft the best monsters you can. Use the feedback you get from that work to improve for your next release.

If you so choose, pitch ideas to publishers you like; most of them have websites with contact information. The worst thing you'll get from one is a polite rejection.

Most importantly of all, don't be afraid to delve into the darkness, you never know what you'll find next.

***Kelly Pawlik** gave in to her husband's requests to play TTRPGs after their second child was born in 2012, and she's never looked back. Since then, she has played nearly a dozen different systems and prefers games that focus on romance, drama, and adventure; she's an avid proponent of duet gaming. She is co-owner of Dire Rugrat Publishing, a micro-publisher focusing on 5th Edition supplements. In addition to self-publishing and writing for Kobold Press, over the years Kelly has worked for several indie RPG publishing companies. Her childhood dream was to be a writer, and more recently, Kelly has begun to branch out into fiction. She loves RPGs because they can make any dream a reality. Kelly can find a Taylor Swift song that fits any game session.*

ON USING MONSTERS

Telling a Story
with Encounters

by Shawn Merwin

Games are a set of rules that come together to create a process. That process, in turn, is meant to create an experience for the participants, as well as an outcome. A single game of "Rock, Paper, Scissors," for example, has a relatively simple set of rules and a concise process that produces a single-winner outcome in a matter of seconds.

A roleplaying game, on the other hand, is comprised of many more rules that produce an incredibly complicated process, and the outcome of that process doesn't necessarily produce "winners" or "losers." The most striking outcome of a roleplaying game produces not a winner or loser but a narrative as its artifact.

One of the most frequent questions an RPG player endures from non-players about an RPG session is "Did you win?"

A variety of answers generally follows: "If you have fun, then you won the game." "The game is about storytelling, not about winning or losing." Or my personal favorite: "All the characters died, but we had a great time!"

This question, and the various answers it spawns, speaks to the narrative-creation process inherent in most RPGs. When we design an "adventure"—the segment of game play that we often delineate as a complete story that the characters undertake—we're really creating a machine.

Into our machine we pack the characters the players bring to the table. Out the other end comes the story of what happened to those characters and the world they inhabit as they moved through the adventure.

ADVENTURE AS A GAME-MACHINE

It's surely not that simple, of course. This RPG machine incorporates the rules of the game, the desires of the players, the whims of the Game Masters running the adventure, and countless other factors.

Yet, at the end of the adventure, we have all the elements of a story: the characters involved, the motivations of those characters, the actions they took, the things they said, the conflicts that were resolved (or not), the locations they traversed and inhabited, and the end results of all of those elements. We have, for better or for worse, a story.

That adventure-machine that we adventure designers create is a very complex machine, as mentioned earlier. It has many inputs provided by the players, the Game Master, the rules system itself, and the situation in which the game plays out.

But that adventure-machine is also comprised of smaller parts. In a play, these parts might be called scenes or acts. In a novel, these might be called chapters. There is a specific term for them in RPGs: encounters.

The encounter is where the players, and their characters, interact with games rules and the story-outcome most significantly. Although character creation lets the players interact with the rules to decide who their characters are and what they are capable of doing within the game, the encounter is where the gears turn to process the inputs into a story.

As we build adventures, sessions, plots, campaigns, worlds, or whatever aspects you want to name, the encounter is the smallest complete building block we have at our disposal.

HOW DO ENCOUNTERS WORK?

Thinking of encounters as discrete and self-contained processes is important during adventure design, as encounters contain their own elements, their own challenges, their own smaller stories, and their own range of outcomes. Encounters are discrete entities, but also pieces of a larger puzzle. Each encounter tells a story but is also a piece of a larger story.

So how do encounters work, how do they tell their own stories, and how do they fit into the longer story of an adventure?

Stories, great or small, all contain certain elements. Most importantly, they contain conflict. The conflict might be physical, emotional, or psychological; they might be internal or external; they might be deadly or barely consequential. But at its root, the conflict—and how the conflict resolves or fails to resolve—is the crux of a story. Other details are important to a story as well: characters and their motivations, setting, theme, tone, etc.

As an encounter tells a story, so it must contain those narrative elements. The conflict within RPG encounters is often the most visceral and violent

type of conflict: combat. More than just combat, however, can act as the conflict in an RPG encounter. Sometimes the conflict might be simply traveling through hostile environs. Sometimes the conflict involves gaining information from a reluctant source. Or, a battle of wits between two characters might be the encounter's focus. All of these are conflicts, and they just so happen to match the three pillars of the world's oldest roleplaying game: combat, exploration, and roleplaying/social interaction.

Whatever the conflict involves, it's important to ask these key questions as one is assembling an encounter: how has the world changed to prompt this encounter, and how might the characters change once they've finished it? These are the same questions we ask of storytellers as we hear their stories. What happened? Why did it happen? What does it mean to the characters? And what will happen next?

As encounter designers and storytellers, we can focus on these questions as we design our encounters to make sure they output the most interesting narrative as the players and the rules provide their own inputs. So what goes into designing an encounter to make sure we get the most story out of it?

AN ENCOUNTER'S NARRATIVE ELEMENTS

The most important narrative elements to consider when creating an encounter are listed below. They don't change much if the encounters involve strictly roleplaying, strictly exploration, strictly combat, or a combination of any of those three.

- Information
- Goals
- NPCs
- Threats/Challenges
- Setting
- Choices

Now, let's look at each of these individually.

Information

What the characters know and what the characters are trying to learn are integral to the story that comes out of your encounters. Often, the gaining of that information is the entirety of the conflict in an encounter.

Where is the headquarters of the cult? What magic can defeat the otherwise invulnerable foe? What's the queen's favorite flower? Who captured the lover of one of the characters? These are all questions that might drive your encounter forward.

It's not just the information the characters learn, however, that is important to the story of the encounter. The design of the encounter also

must hinge on what the characters know (or think they know) before the encounter begins. The difference between what they know at the start and at the end of an encounter is how the story grows and changes. Without knowing the current situation clearly, the impact of changes is lost, thus weakening the story.

There is drama and tension in the dissonance between the information known at the start of the encounter and the information learned once the encounter starts. As the characters move through the encounter, they probably learn more information that helps them make decisions within the encounter. This information might be new, might confirm previously gathered information, or could show the characters the information they received previously was incomplete or incorrect.

Goals

The reason to have an encounter is because the characters are trying to do something (or possibly several things), or something is being done to them. This is the hoped-for resolution of the conflict of the encounter-story.

For combat, the goal is often to overcome the enemy. There is power in making different goals than killing in combat encounters: escape a room, rescue a prisoner, retrieve an object, or the like. The overall adventure-story becomes more interesting when the individual encounter-stories are diverse and not repetitive.

To elaborate, varying goals for encounters from one to the next, on the other hand, is a great tool for making great encounters and great adventures. Not every combat should be about simply killing all the monsters. Not every roleplaying encounter should be just persuading and getting information. Not every exploration encounter need be simply finding the trap and disarming it.

And more importantly, not every encounter goal needs to tie directly into the goal of the adventure—although you do want every goal to take the story of the adventure forward in new and exciting ways. Even if an adventure seems like a straight-forward, hack-'n'-slash dungeon crawl, the goal of one encounter might be to help the friendly deep gnome find the tastiest mushrooms for his soup, because only he has the key that gets them through the door they need to pass. Such changes of pace are welcomed in an adventure-story.

NPCs

NPCs are the enemies, allies, and neutral parties with whom the characters interact during an encounter; however, I prefer to think of NPCs as anyone or anything the characters might talk with. An animated statue the characters have to convince to open the door to a haunted temple is an NPC, for instance.

When putting NPCs into your encounters, it's important to think about not just their place in the world, but their place in the unfolding potential narrative. What details can you give these NPCs that will deepen or broaden the story?

Flat characters are fine if they're only present to serve a particular purpose and role. But creating and presenting more complex characters gives more room for the player characters to produce a more interesting narrative artifact by the end of the encounter.

One tip for NPCs and encounter-stories: reuse NPCs as much as possible while still having the encounter make sense. Always keep an eye on NPCs you've used previously in encounters, and see if they can make a curtain call—in a new light, if possible. The brigand who escaped in the first encounter might be the information provider in the fifth encounter, and the previous interactions can inform what happens in the new encounter. The decisions characters made previously, and the information they gathered, help (or hinder) in the new encounter.

Threats/Challenges

The threats and challenges of an encounter are, simply put, the things that stand between the characters and their goals. The most obvious threats during most encounters are the slavering monsters that oppose the characters.

This is a foundation of RPGs, and it behooves us to remember this brings many players to the game. That doesn't mean every encounter needs to be about overcoming that particular type of threat; it's just important to remember that getting too far away from the threat of monsters killing the player characters can leave a significant number of players dissatisfied.

That said, most players are going to appreciate a wide variety of threats and challenges, whether or not deadly monsters are involved. Similarly, not every challenge needs to have life or death as the final stakes. Ask a player whose character has a very powerful magic item if they would rather lose their character or the magic item, and you might be surprised at the answer (or you might not). The challenge of completing a ritual dance at a royal social gathering without stepping on anyone's toes might be as tense and as memorable as fighting the demon lord.

Regardless of the challenge presented, always keep in mind how the characters or the world are going to change based on different outcomes. If there is never a chance of failure, there is no real conflict, and therefore no real story. By the same token, if the only consequence of failure is death or the end of the game, there is no story either, because failure should lead to as much growth in character and plot as success.

Setting

In stories, the setting provides a context and an atmosphere for the characters and plots that take place. In short, they immerse the listener in an environment that should complement and inform the story.

Where an encounter takes place, and the details you use to describe the setting, are equally important for immersion in an RPG, but their ramifications are often far more important.

Will the setting make the challenge harder or easier for the characters? Can the characters affect the setting in a way that changes aspects of the encounter? Or maybe the NPCs or monsters can change the setting as well unless the characters stop them?

During the encounter, the most important thing to remember with setting is how the setting and its components might affect the characters as they attempt to deal with challenges and achieve their goals. Focus on what is relevant, downplay what is not, and keep the characters focused on the details they need.

After the action of the encounter ends, however, taking a larger look at the setting can enhance the story that unfolds. How did the characters' actions change the encounter setting (or the larger world setting)? Did the wizard start a large fire in the town by haphazardly throwing spells? What does that mean for the story going forward? Almost every action a character takes in an encounter could have repercussions to the setting or the NPCs therein.

Choices

It is certainly possible an encounter may not have any specific threat or challenge, or the goal may be as simple as making a choice. After recovering a magical crown from the orc's lair, the characters must decide to whom they should give it.

This is a decision worthy of an encounter, but it may not have all the elements of a combat or exploration encounter. That's OK! But like other encounters, make sure the players have all the information they need, provide those elements that make the encounter more interesting and evocative, and think through the various ramifications of the choices made.

THE NARRATIVE ARTIFACT

Despite RPGs being so wonderful because they're incredible tools for doing something unique—creating stories through game play—too often that aspect is lost when players and Game Masters neglect to let the encounter-machines run through their full process. We rush to get either the "yes" or "no", the "0" or "1," the "fail" or "succeed" from the machine, and we forget that so much more can go into a story.

The nuanced consequences of actions, the subtle changes to the world based on the smallest wing-beat of a butterfly, the tremendous power in a misspoken word or unguarded glance: stories hinge on these small details as much as on the large acts. Encounters, when designed and presented with care, have the potential to create stories as surprising and delightful as they are epic.

Shawn Merwin has been a freelance game designer since 2001 and has worked for Wizards of the Coast, Kobold Press, Pelgrane Press, Modiphius Entertainment, and countless others. He's been an administrator for many organized play programs, and he recently worked on Baldur's Gate: Descent into Avernus *and the Acquisitions Incorporated hardcovers for Dungeons & Dragons. He's currently Executive Lead Designer at Ghostfire Gaming, and he talks about gaming topics on a weekly podcast called* Mastering Dungeons.

WHY THE CHARACTERS FIGHT

Building Anticipation for an Adversary

by Meagan Maricle

Roleplaying games are, at their heart, stories, and every story needs great adversaries. Monsters and villains are great adversaries in your stories, your worldbuilding, your campaign, or even a character's backstory. An adversary can create tension in the narrative and provide engaging storytelling and roleplaying moments while it works against your characters.

But now that you have a great monster or villain idea, how do you make sure your characters stay interested in overcoming your adversary?

For that, you need to build anticipation, which can be done in a variety of ways.

These can include adjustments to the atmosphere around your table, interactions between the characters and their adversary, threats to the people and locations the characters love, rumors and legends about the adversary, time limits for the characters to resolve an issue the adversary presents, and clues about the adversary's presence and machinations.

This list is detailed below, but it's far from exhaustive. In the end, you should feel free to take whichever approaches best fit your characters and their adversaries.

ATMOSPHERE

One of the most visceral ways to build anticipation in a game is by adding atmosphere. The adversaries in games may appear as statistics and fun artwork on paper, but they also exist in the minds of your players. A player's imagination can make an adversary more terrifying and powerful than any numbers on a page, and building atmosphere around an adversary allows us to better engage that imagination.

As a storyteller, you have many tools at your disposal for building atmosphere.

Never underestimate the power of music, a dimly lit room, sound effects, props, or scented candles or oils to stimulate the imagination. These tools can help pull the players into your world or help them feel like they are actually in an adversary's lair.

If your players are facing an adversary that has returned from the grave, try placing a small bowl of damp dirt or potting soil in the room to give the room a churned-earth scent. If an adversary devoured all of a victim other than its locket or similar piece of jewelry, pick up some costume jewelry at a local party store to hand the players as tactile evidence of the adversary's power. Who knows? Maybe the players hold on to that locket for the majority of the campaign, vowing vengeance for a victim they never knew.

If your players are facing an adversary known for a unique sound it makes—does the monster always smack its lips right before it attacks; does the villainous mayor clink coins in his pocket when he's plotting something nefarious?—adjust your manner of speech or use an appropriate sound effect from any number of free and paid online sources. Then, every time the characters encounter the adversary—or its minions or machinations— they hear that sound, reminding them of the adversary.

Of course, not every session needs be in a candle-lit basement covered in potting soil and Halloween decorations. However, subtle adjustments at the table can be appropriate for enhancing anticipation around long-awaited encounters with an adversary the characters have been hunting for some time.

CONTACT WITH THE CHARACTERS

Sometimes the best way to build anticipation for an adversary is to have it interact in a more up-front way with the characters. Such contact allows the adversary's schemes to come to light and informs the characters the adversary exists. The key aspect of contact is that the adversary is aware of the characters and is actively working against them.

Direct Contact. Often difficult to accomplish—especially when dealing with more combative characters—direct contact allows you to reveal major

aspects of the adversary or foreshadow its powers, giving the characters a glimpse at what they eventually have to overcome. Direct contact can take the form of actual combat with the characters, where the very powerful adversary decides to leave the characters as a snack for later (almost, but not quite, killing them) or doesn't deem them powerful enough to be a threat and ignores them.

Direct contact can also take the form of an adversary manipulating the world around the characters, such as through publicly condemning them for crimes they didn't commit or reducing a location's confidence in them or their abilities. Additionally, direct contact can take the form of an adversary facing off against the characters' powerful ally, showing the characters the might of the unknown adversary by juxtaposing it with the might of the known ally.

Indirect Contact. For longer schemes or more subtle adversaries, an indirect approach may be more appropriate. Indirect contact allows you to introduce an adversary's schemes ahead of time and allows the adversary to interfere with the characters without putting itself in immediate danger.

Indirect contact can be the adversary sending its minions to attack, bully, or in some other way directly hinder the characters. It can also take the more subtle form of the adversary manipulating the characters' allies, environment, equipment, or even their power (social, political, actual game mechanics, etc.) to work against them.

COST OF LOVE

A tried-and-true tactic for building anticipation is to threaten something the players hold dear: a nation, a non-player character, a village, or similar.

This tactic should be used with caution, as its careless or excessive use can lead to players refusing to connect with parts of your world out of fear of having that connection later used against them. This tactic also requires a bit of build-up to establish the connection you want to threaten; the characters are unlikely to feel anticipation or urgency if they only recently encountered the location or person being threatened.

If used with care and consideration for how it all fits into the story, threatening something the characters hold dear can be a very rewarding way of building anticipation for an adversary and of creating a feeling of accomplishment when that adversary is defeated.

Keep in mind, "threaten" is not the same as "kill" or "destroy." Death and destruction have major ramifications—sometimes ones you might not even realize until after the fact, and it is always a good idea to communicate with your players before potentially removing or causing permanent harm to a character's loved one.

The adversary killing the characters' favorite town guard is sure to get the characters' attention, but minor threats can also be just as effective at building anticipation around an adversary causing trouble.

For example, perhaps your adversary lives in the forest nearby and enjoys a local delicacy or ale. It sneaks into the characters' favorite tavern each night and eats up the delicacy, leaving the locals scratching their heads. The adversary's forays into the tavern eventually become more frequent, threatening the livelihood of the establishment and, therefore, the stability of the characters' favorite retreat. The anticipation builds as the tavernkeeper expresses increasing desperation about the situation and the local authority's inability to discover or stop the culprit.

RUMORS AND LEGENDS

When an adversary is embedded in an area for a long period of time or when it interacts regularly with people in an area, those who live in the area develop stories around the adversary. Some of these stories are rumors, while others become legends about the adversary's habits or about ways to deter it.

Rumors. Anyone who has encountered something new or scary is likely to tell a story about it, and that story is likely to get exaggerated in the retelling. Exaggerated or inaccurate rumors about an adversary can leave the characters trying to sort fact from fiction. These rumors allow you to give hints at what the adversary looks like, or is capable of, viewed through the foggy lens of those who survived encounters with the adversary.

As with building atmosphere for players, be sure to use all the non-player character's senses when describing the adversary. An adversary's appearance may not be the most memorable aspect of it—perhaps it has an overpowering or unique scent or made an odd noise when it moved. These more memorable aspects can help the characters find the facts in the fiction—victims of a werewolf might not remember the werewolf's appearance, but they all might remember that it smelled like a wet dog.

Rumors can be a fun way to play with character and player expectations and can even turn assumptions or clichés on their heads. An adversary that "eats fire!" could be one that stepped on a torch that was thrown at it. For a twist, maybe that adversary snuffed out the torch not because it eats fire but because it is actually afraid of or harmed by fire.

Legends. When an adversary inhabits a region for a long period of time or when it has alternating periods of dormancy and activity, locals develop long-term stories about it. These stories often describe its power, how to ward against it, or how to prepare for when it next awakens. These stories might even become embedded in the locals' culture, shaping their daily routines or how they interact with the world around them.

In our own world, superstitions and belief in monsters and evil spirits are responsible for many of our second-nature customs or habits, such as making hand gestures or speaking phrases when certain actions or events occur or decorating a home in a particular way or with specific iconography.

Cultural habits and quirks developed from an adversary's presence shouldn't be detrimental to a society, but they can be fun ways for the characters to get a hint at the long-lasting effects of the adversary inhabiting the area.

TIME LIMIT

To build anticipation very quickly, try introducing a time limit. Time limits add extra pressure and urgency by telling the characters they have to face the adversary within a certain time frame to prevent it from destroying, taking, or harming something.

This "something" doesn't always have to be something in which the characters have a deep investment. For example, the time limit can be related to the characters' altruism or the needs of their employers. Time limits can be as simple as saving a victim before it is sacrificed in a cult's profane ritual, or as complex as a race to mobilize an army to stop an ancient monster before it fully awakens and destroys a region or world.

A time limit doesn't have to be a single moment or event. For example, if the characters are heading into a cult's hideout to save local villagers, the time limit might be the frequency at which the villagers are sacrificed— the longer the characters take to stop the cult, the fewer villagers they successfully rescue.

If the characters are trying to stop an ancient monster from awakening, the time limits could be the amount of time the characters have to reactivate the wards that previously kept the monster slumbering, in addition to the ultimate time limit of the monster's awakening.

TRAIL OF BODIES: SUBTLE AND NOT-SO-SUBTLE CLUES

The world around the characters can provide hints about the adversary, giving the characters a trail of clues that builds anticipation as the characters discover more and more. These clues can take obvious forms, such as a literal trail of bodies, or more subtle forms, such as the absence of predators or large game animals in an area.

Obvious clues give the characters the information they need to defeat their adversary. However, when you make an adversary completely known, it can lessen the anticipation. This is especially true in situations where players can correlate an adversary to specific game mechanics, such as "oh, the monster is obviously a werewolf, and we just need to get some silver."

Conversely, subtle clues can tell the story of the adversary rather than its game mechanics, but such clues might not be obvious enough, leading the characters to lose interest in finding or defeating the adversary.

A mixture of subtle and not-so-subtle clues allows you to showcase the adversary's role in the world while ensuring the characters don't lose focus. A mixed approach might include the characters defeating some minor threat and finding a mysterious symbol on or near their opponents. The characters could encounter this symbol on multiple occasions, with each new occurrence giving more clues about the type of adversary it is, the kind of influence it has, and similar information. Each new occurrence reminds the characters of the adversary's existence and power, and each new piece of information helps build anticipation for, and knowledge about, the adversary, thus preparing the characters for the eventual encounter.

Meagan Maricle is an editor at Kobold Press and was the lead editor on the Margreve Player's Guide, Underworld Player's Guide, City of Cats, Empire of the Ghouls, Tome of Beasts 2, *and the ENnie Award-winning* Creature Codex. *When not saving kobolds from their own word-traps, she schemes the demise of her players' characters while petting her diabolical, furry companion ("I'll get you next time, PCs!"). She has been playing (Advanced) Dungeons and Dragons since the early 90s, when her parents turned her into an emerald wyrmling.*

Tactics Make All the Difference

by Kate Baker

I t's happened to every GM: it might be because of the encounter's terrain, it might be because of a character's abilities, or it might just be because of the luck of a die roll. It could be the combat is so easy the players are wondering why they bothered rolling initiative. Whatever it is, the encounter just isn't working.

Naturally, GMs can always make mechanical adjustments on the fly. When the solo enemy drops too quickly, a second enemy can be waiting in the wings, ready to take over. An overly difficult enemy could suddenly have half the hit points of what the stat block says.

However, when that encounter just isn't working, it's usually possible to adjust its difficulty without ever needing to change the numbers on the page, simply by adjusting the tactics. Read on to discover how.

MAKING A COMBAT EASIER

I have published adventures in several game systems, but I've also been GMing both at home and at conventions for years, often running demos for new players. Take it from me, it can ruin the experience for someone new to tabletop RPGs when their character dies in the player's first game. Even for experienced players, the loss of a PC can be hard, and a TPK from a battle that felt straight-up unwinnable can make everyone feel frustrated.

At the same time, many GMs find fudging dice rolls distasteful—or even impossible if you're GMing without a screen or you're rolling in the open on virtual tabletops. This is where tactics come in.

Using the tips here, you can give your players exactly the right encounter and, in the process, a fun experience. While not every piece of advice will work for every encounter, I hope you'll find something here to give you inspiration for fine-tuning the difficulty of your encounter.

A lot of these tips boil down to "do something other than attack," but there are many different ways to do this without making the adjustments feel unnatural.

Spread Out Attacks

Experienced players know to focus fire on an enemy, as four enemies with a few hit points left each are far more dangerous than two enemies who are at full health and two enemies who are down. You can use the same principle in reverse to make a tough combat easier. Don't keep targeting the same character; spread out attacks and effects among the whole party.

Set up for the Characters' Abilities

If you're running a game for a regular group, you know what the characters can do. Maneuver the enemies to make it possible for the characters to do their cool things. Make sure the rogue has space to flank, for example. Keep groups of enemies clustered so the wizard can use area-of-effect spells. Whatever the characters are great at doing, if you need to make sure an encounter doesn't turn into an accidental TPK, help them do it.

Give the Enemy Some Attitude

Who makes mistakes? Overconfident enemies, that's who. Your enemy who is currently demolishing the player characters in combat might spend a turn or two gloating or mocking the characters, giving them a chance to heal or move out of range. Alternatively, certain enemies could be focused on doing things honorably, refusing to take certain actions that are unsporting.

Vary Your Turns

Don't have the enemies perform the same action every round. Powerful attacks repeated against the same character might be the most efficient use of your monster, but that may not lead to the most fun game for your players. Besides, most monsters have several cool abilities: it's fun to show them all off! Using different abilities, even weaker ones, shows off the creature to the fullest and can give the player characters a respite from a tough battle. Along the same lines, have the enemies do things other than directly attack the player characters. Spending a turn intimidating the PCs or taking cover behind furniture still keeps the battle moving, but most likely without taking out any characters.

Spend Time on the Move

When your enemies move around, it usually means less opportunity to attack and more opportunities for the characters to take care of themselves. When the enemy is moving between different targets because you're spreading out your attacks, there's no need to take the most efficient route or to choose the next-closest PC to attack.

Constantly changing your location on the battlefield makes sure all the characters have the chance to be out of reach, and in many systems, this also means your enemy can't make as many attacks. This can also help you enable the PCs to make a tactical retreat, which is important if they are over their heads in combat.

Change the Battlefield

An enemy can spend some time changing the battlefield instead of directly harming the player characters. Destroying a doorway to keep the PCs from escaping is both terrifying and can give the player characters the opportunity to regroup. A more cautious enemy who relies on ranged attacks might start tipping over tables to make some cover to hide behind. A chaotic enemy might even start lighting the place on fire!

In addition, this tactic gives the player characters a break from being directly attacked and can actually make the encounter feel more dynamic and interesting. Look at your battle map and give some thought to what that tough enemy might want to do to change their surroundings.

Friendly Fire

We've all seen what happens when enemies are focused on taking out the player characters above anything else. The evil wizard cares so little for their minions they neglect to exclude them from a fireball, for instance. Raging beasts fight each other for who gets the most delectable-looking player character. If the PCs are overwhelmed, it can help a lot to lessen the difficulty if some of the enemies take out others. Plus, it will serve to show just how ruthless or bloodthirsty the enemy is!

No, After You!

If you have more than one enemy in a encounter, you don't have to bring them all out at the same time. One enemy might get prepared by casting buff spells or drawing weapons while another enemy charges in. Or, perhaps, the main boss sits back and watches its minions fight for a while, shouting commands or berating its subordinates. When the minions fail, then the boss jumps into action, joining the fight. It can also be interesting to keep one enemy hidden at the beginning of a combat, only to pop out later.

Allow Alternative Resolutions and Retreats

Finally, not every battle needs to be a fight to the death. Does the enemy have any motivations beyond killing? If the player characters stole something from the enemy, then they might be content to simply take the item back after gaining the upper hand. An enemy who is protecting something or someone could be just as happy to scare the player characters away as to kill them.

A devious enemy could spare the player characters' lives in exchange for a service. An unintelligent but bloodthirsty creature might start dragging one unconscious player character off for a tasty meal rather than continuing to attack the rest of the party. Your enemy's tactics at the end of the battle can easily change based on the enemy's motivations without feeling forced or unnatural.

MAKING A COMBAT HARDER

On the other end of the spectrum, there are times you might need to make an encounter harder. While the consequences are less dire for an overly easy combat, it can also make for a less-than-fun experience, particularly if the party is consistently crushing encounters without breaking a sweat. It's good to have techniques in mind for how to increase the difficulty of an encounter without making mechanical changes. Just as with the tactics to make an encounter less challenging, not every tip here will work for every combat, but you should be able to find some advice for making any combat tougher.

Review Abilities and Look for Synergy

One of the best techniques for how to make a combat more difficult is making sure you really understand all an opponent's special abilities. Look for synergy both within a single creature's capabilities and between different creatures in the same encounter.

If an enemy can cast spells, make sure you know what all the spells can do. Can one enemy cause the player characters to be afraid while another deals extra damage to targets who are afraid? Try to set up sequences like that by making sure you know what the enemies can do.

Movement is Key

Just as with making an encounter easier, movement is key to making an encounter more difficult. Having enemies approach a powerful party and stay there often results in getting clobbered quickly. Hit-and-run tactics or making ranged attacks and continuing to move further away can help extend the battle for a longer time.

Use Terrain to Your Advantage

Many monsters have special abilities tied to their specific terrains. If the monster is good at hiding in a particular terrain, then make sure to have that monster hide. Creatures with unusual movement types, such as flying, swimming, or burrowing, should use them to get around and keep the player characters off-guard. Humanoid enemies can use terrain strategically, such as by taking cover or even closing doors to separate parts of the encounter.

Add Environmental Effects

You can make an encounter more difficult not only by adjusting the monster's tactics, but by using the environment to its fullest. Tangled undergrowth, slippery mud, or crumbling walkways can all make things more difficult for the PCs. This works particularly well if it's an effect that the monster gets to ignore due to its own special abilities.

Target the Characters' Weaknesses

If you are GMing for a regular group or even for a new group in a system you know well, you probably know their abilities well. By deliberately targeting their weaknesses, you can make an encounter more difficult. Don't continue to trade blows with a front-liner in full plate whom you can't touch; move to the back line to strike at less well-defended characters.

Focus Fire

A group of weaker enemies may not be very scary when each one is fighting a different PC, but they can be much more effective when they all target the same character. This technique is even particularly thematic for many types of enemies, such as wolves and other pack hunters, or squads of militaristic opponents with a leader calling out orders.

Work Together

Sometimes an enemy is just too weak to do much directly against the player characters. However, that enemy might be better used assisting more powerful enemies. A weaker enemy can aid a more powerful enemy's attacks through actions or positioning. Other ways for minions to help include healing the more powerful enemy or getting between the PCs and a powerful spellcaster who is most dangerous when not directly threatened.

Spread Out Your Opponents

Some of the techniques described involve clustering up your enemies, but be cautious. If you're not getting any kind of tactical advantage from keeping the enemies close together, it is much better to spread them out

far enough to keep the PCs from using their abilities against large groups. Don't make it easy for a fighter to cleave multiple opponents or for a wizard to use an area-of-effect spell on all the enemies at once.

Rolling Battles

Lastly, there may be only so much you can do to turn a single weak encounter into a difficult one. However, you can sometimes chain together several weaker encounters to feel like a much stronger one. In a dungeon setting, it is certainly plausible for the loud sounds of combat to attract the attention of the creatures in the next room over.

IN CONCLUSION

These tips don't cover every situation, but the suggestions here will hopefully trigger some insights for your games. By thinking tactically, you can fine-tune the difficulty of your encounters to give your players exactly the experience they are looking for. Whether you need to make the players sweat from a lackluster monster or keep an over-tuned creature from causing a TPK, you'll know what to do.

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When Fighting Doesn't Solve Everything

Noncombat Encounters with Monsters

by Steve Winter

Asignificant development in tabletop RPG design in the last few decades involves baked-in systems allowing the GM to judge quantitatively whether a specific combat encounter will be easy, hard, or deadly for the characters. Before any dice hit the table, these systems allow the GM to have a reasonable idea how bloodied and depleted the heroes will be after fighting through any given challenge.

Tailoring encounters to a targeted level of balance is a good thing. It can become a problem, however, if players fall into the habit of expecting every situation they encounter to turn into a battle they can handle. This can lead to bad habits around the table.

The worst of these bad habits is a pattern of "fight first and ask questions later." Most RPG world settings are more violent than the real world, but that doesn't mean everything the characters meet deserves to be fought and killed. Aside from fostering a murderous mindset among players and making the game needlessly violent, this brand of laziness eventually becomes dull and repetitive. When your only tool is a warhammer, every problem looks like a gnoll.

Once this habit takes hold, it can lead to the belief that plot advances are gained through combat alone. When characters can always get what they need by force, roleplaying is relegated to an amusing way to spend idle time between battles. Characters become snarky and insulting toward everyone.

In the worst cases, even "heroes" start acting like unbearable jerks and become the sort of people most of us would avoid in real life. That's just how these characters behave to their friends and neutral acquaintances. Enemies and monsters are killed as fast—and with as little preamble—as possible. Afterward, such characters just read the vital clues left carelessly in packs and dens.

BAD HABITS

But let's be fair to players: most of their behavior is learned from their GM. If they have bad habits, they probably developed them as adaptive learning fostered by the GM's bad habits.

Here are six bad habits to look for in yourself as the GM if players are reluctant to roleplay through encounters.

- You only confront characters with fights they're likely to win.

- You steer every encounter into a fight anyway, even when characters do try talking to the opposition. You might be just as guilty of wanting to skip past the roleplaying and get to the bloodshed as the bloodthirstiest of characters. In these cases, the players learn that talking isn't just unproductive, it's counterproductive because it gives the enemy a chance to get the drop on characters before attacking.

- You advance the plot to the same extent whether the opposition is slaughtered, befriended, bribed, or routed. You probably think you're being clever about this and hiding your tracks well, but players pick up on such things very quickly. They might not comment on it, but they realize intuitively that there's no good reason for the villain to write out his entire plan in a letter to an underling; if he does, there's no good reason for that underling to carry the incriminating letter around after reading it. The only reason for those things to happen is so the PCs can get the information no matter how they go after it.

- The only time you encourage "roleplaying" is when you need to deliver a large exposition dump. Characters tend to be passive observers in these situations rather than active participants.

- You aren't comfortable with roleplaying. Be honest here. Whether you're not very good at it or you *think* you're not good at it, the solution is practice. You won't get better if you keep avoiding the problem.

- Your roleplaying situations turn awkward. Letting the conversation become graphically violent, sexually suggestive, racially charged, full of inappropriate jokes, or too much in any other way instills players with the desire to never repeat that experience. You need to know and respect your players' comfort levels with uncomfortable topics and

with off-topic references. The same goes for players; anyone around the table can take a conversation off the rails. When it happens, directing the situation back into everyone's comfort zone is everyone's responsibility, but it's especially yours as the GM.

GOOD HABITS

The same way players learn bad habits from their GM, they also learn good habits. If you want to encourage more roleplaying when danger looms, try any of the following as the GM.

- Remind players regularly through sights, sounds, and immersion that society takes a dim view of murder. This is easy to do in towns and larger settlements where characters often get out of control and wind up assassinating guards and assaulting shopkeepers when perfectly good alternatives were available (alternatives such as bribing or distracting the guard and simply paying for their purchases the way normal people do).

  A player defaults to murder when they see it as the easiest, most direct route to what their character wants. Sometimes, players need to be reminded that society's rules apply to their characters, too. Depending on your players, this can be as simple as a sign stating "shoplifters will be prosecuted" or as extreme as bodies hanging from gallows and heads on pikes at the city gates, with nearby placards identifying them as threats to public safety.

- Make the opposition obviously too strong for the characters to defeat: a squad of giants, a lich with golem bodyguards, a dragon whose lair contains many offspring and caretaker creatures. Don't withhold information about the opposition's strength. Use it to fill the characters with awe. Like the doomsday device in "Dr. Strangelove," the whole point is lost if you keep it secret.

  Once fighting is removed as an option, characters must look for an alternative. Don't fall into the trap of thinking of this as a crude, brute-force corrective. Characters should be reminded now and then that the world extends beyond the horizon and they're not the biggest, baddest force of destruction in it.

- You can also reverse those roles and make the opposition too weak for the characters to bother with. The weaker side must do everything in its power to avoid a battle it's bound to lose. The NPCs' best option is to persuade the characters they're more valuable alive than dead. The first few times you try this ploy as GM, it behooves you to make sure it's true; if the characters spare those NPCs' lives, those NPCs must actually prove helpful.

If this deal turns out to be a trap the first or second time it's offered, players will never fall for it again, even if the campaign carries on another 20 years. You can also use this to appeal to the players' sense of fairness or morality. Are the PCs really willing to slaughter a hundred of the duke's guards just to see him today instead of waiting until tomorrow?

- Perhaps the most potent tool in your toolbox for discouraging murder involves the characters needing their adversaries to stay alive. Whether it's because the characters can't get information from corpses, or because the adversaries' lives are key to their goals, it's a good idea for you to place complex encounters in front of your players that combat would actually complicate as oppose to solve.

ACTIONS HAVE CONSEQUENCES

The number one question facing the GM is not how to make roleplaying fun; if it weren't already fun, we wouldn't be playing these games. Rather, the question addressed here is how to make roleplaying matter, especially if combat is deemphasized in your games.

The answer is, like combat, something must be at stake. Roleplaying scenes must entail the chance for both success and failure. In other words, players must have the potential to "lose" at roleplaying.

How do you gauge that? Some games include character stats to reflect how persuasive, charming, or adept at lying a character is. You can roll a die to determine whether an argument succeeds exactly the same way you roll a die to determine whether a sword or an arrow strikes its target. But that's not roleplaying; it is, in fact, the antithesis of roleplaying.

In this scenario, we want players to assume the personalities of their characters and, to the best of their ability, navigate through a situation by thinking and speaking the way their characters would. The question is, how do you, the GM, judge the extent of their success?

The easiest way is to fall back on the die roll mentioned above. Let the characters lay out their arguments, then roll the die to see whether their argument was persuasive.

This method's advantage is simplicity. It's unsatisfying on every other level. Roleplaying has no effect on the outcome. Brilliant roleplaying is entirely undone by a bad die roll, and lackluster roleplaying succeeds beautifully if the die roll is good. Why bother roleplaying at all if it doesn't matter?

A simple refinement is for the GM to add bonuses or penalties to the die roll based on their judgment of how well the characters handled the situation. This is a clear improvement—at least the players' roleplaying performance matters—but it still leaves the question of success or failure to a die roll.

One argument often put forward in defense of these two approaches is that they allow players who aren't personally very eloquent or skillful at witty repartee to play characters who are. Most of our RPG characters are capable of feats we can't pull off in real life. Few of us are as muscular as our sword-wielding heroes, and even fewer actually wield magic. Instead of swinging axes and casting spells, which gamers do poorly or not at all, we substitute talking and rolling dice.

When our characters talk, however, it's fundamentally different from swinging an ax or casting a spell because we're all capable of talking or communicating in some way. Communication is the primary means by which we play RPGs.

Some people are better communicators than others; they're more eloquent, wittier, better at extemporizing, or just quicker with a comeback. Some people's communication is hampered by disability, a speech impediment, or shyness. Relying on a die roll levels the field and ensures no one is penalized because the player isn't as glib as the character.

But relying on a die roll eliminates one of the most fundamental elements that makes roleplaying games such a unique and powerful experience.

Here's an alternative. One of the GM's jobs is to know the strengths and weaknesses not only of the characters in the adventuring party but of the individual players seated around the table. In a roleplaying situation, a player's performance can be less important than the player's effort. In combat, wanting it is meaningless; only high rolls matter. In a roleplaying situation, that rule can be reversed.

Consider an example where you have two players at the table. One is a professional salesman who's glib, eloquent, and quick-witted but is playing an uncharismatic, dull-witted warrior. The other person is shy and frequently stumbles over words when under pressure but is playing a charming, silver-tongued bard.

You wouldn't allow the dull-witted warrior to talk his way out of every difficulty just because the player has that gift. As GM, you mentally correct for the fact that in this case, the player is more capable than the character.

You can and should use the same type of correction in the opposite direction. When a shy player tries to speak for an outgoing character, you mustn't judge their success on the same scale you'd apply to the professional salesman.

Instead, consider what the specific player is capable of and judge their effort against that. If they came up with a terrific argument or delivered what is for them an eloquent speech, reward the effort. If they phoned it in or didn't take it seriously, apply a penalty. Your job is to judge the player's effort, but not on a curve! Evaluate and reward the effort, not the performance.

If you're not comfortable doing that, consider two things. First, you're not judging someone's worth as a person, you're just saying "nicely done" or "I think you could have handled that better" in response to a moment in a game. Second, the only way to improve is through practice.

In many cases, no die roll is needed. The GM simply decides whether the characters presented a case or acted in a way that would sway the local baron, monster, villain, or other NPC. A completely freeform approach is perfect for handling roleplaying situations where the consequences of success and failure aren't huge.

Where the stakes are higher, more objective criteria are called for, along with more planning by the GM. That's where keywords come in.

USING KEYWORDS

In this context, "keyword" is a catch-all label for words, phrases, and concepts that need to be brought up during a conversation with an NPC or other creature. The GM builds a short list of the points player characters need to address if their negotiation with this NPC is to succeed. What goes on that list depends on the situation and on the NPC's personality and desires. For characters to "win" the encounter, they need to address some or all of the keywords to the best of the players' abilities.

You read that right. For the characters to succeed, the players need to exert themselves.

Here's a simple example: characters exploring a system of caves encounter a xorn munching on a few uncut, semiprecious gems and otherwise minding its own business. It's too late to back off; the xorn felt their approaching footsteps through the stone even before the glow of the characters' lanterns came into view. The xorn is curious, not hostile, having never met explorers from the surface before. Once it sniffs steel, gold, and other delicious, refined metals on these odd creatures, it isn't going to let them go by without finding out what they are and partaking of a few of their "rations."

For this encounter, the GM selects the keywords "steel," "jewelry," "humanity," and "sunlight." If players discuss at least three of those topics with the xorn and offer it some refined metal to eat, it lets them pass. Other subjects are likely to come up, but the xorn doesn't care about them and they don't affect the outcome of the encounter.

For a more rigorous approach, the xorn could let characters pass if they successfully use your game system's persuasion skill. If three or four of the keywords are discussed with the xorn, characters get a substantial bonus or advantage on the check. If two keywords are discussed, they make the check naturally. If only one of the keywords comes up, they make the check with a substantial penalty or with disadvantage. Discussing none of the keywords results in automatic failure.

What's important here is the characters discuss the subject in a meaningful way and the players do their best to win over the xorn. We're not interested when a player simply says "I tell it about my jewelry" as an attempt at roleplaying. Rather, the player should make an effort to actually say something about the character's jewelry that a xorn might find enlightening.

Someone who delivers TED talks in real life but plays a monosyllabic character can get away with a few mumbled comments punctuated with thumps on the table. A shy player or one who has difficulty speaking for any reason but whose character is eloquent isn't expected to match their character's golden tongue. They should, however, still roleplay the situation to the best of their ability and comfort level, whatever that may be.

The GM decides how well players perform based on their personal communication skill and what's known about their characters' personalities.

DISCUSS IT

Because roleplaying "success" is subjective, the GM has one other option: letting the players themselves size up their performances. After the party's speakers finish their roleplaying exchange with the NPCs ask the table, "How do you think that went?" Initially, most people will just exclaim, "Great!" As players get accustomed to you asking this question after roleplaying encounters, they'll likely become more critical of their own performances. When you demonstrate you take these scenes seriously, they'll start taking them more seriously, too.

The best solution to any problem at your game table is to talk about it. If you're concerned the game is becoming too much about tactics and characters are too predictably antagonistic toward everything they meet, discuss it. If you're annoyed at how often players break character and disrupt the mood with jokes and pop-culture asides, discuss it. If you want to use the advice in this article and put more emphasis on roleplaying but you're afraid players won't join in, discuss it.

For the GM, roleplaying monsters may be the most challenging and enjoyable part of the job. Emphasize their alien nature and nonhuman thought patterns. Use incomprehensible logic and twisted motivations. When the villain has the stage, let your evil light shine.

The magic of an RPG is not the tactical maps, the miniatures, or the number crunching. It's roleplaying. Encouraging players to immerse themselves in their characters in every situation is how you lead them to the best experiences a roleplaying game has to offer.

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Make a Friend With It

Turning Monsters Into Allies

by Shanna Germain

This ettin followed me home. Can I keep it?"

The whole point of putting monsters in your adventures is to make your players fight with them, right? You probably even want your players to kill them and take their loot—unless, of course, your monsters are too busy killing your players and taking *their* loot.

Monsters are easy antagonists because, well, they're monsters. It's in their very nature, their very name, and probably even in their alignment and abilities. But what if your players could have their characters make friends with monsters instead?

I don't mean every monster, of course. Most players know it's probably not a good idea to have their character walk up to a chimera and challenge it to a friendly game of cards unless they want to get hit with a giant blast of fire.

But adding a few friendly monsters—or even just ones who don't want to eat your face—to your game opens up tons of possibilities for your players and their characters. Having an ettin ally or a bugbear best friend adds tons of nuance and complications, and this can pave the way for interesting decisions and story moments.

If the party's made friends with a hill giant named Arges, how will their new buddy feel about the party's plan to attack a family of giants and steal their beloved possessions? Will Arges join them in their fight, help defend the other giants, or walk away from the whole thing altogether?

Or, maybe the party has already killed that family of giants, and when someone pulls out a stolen trinket, Arges recognizes it as the one he gave his sister, who was recently killed by . . . his new friends? Adding this element to your game can open an incredible level of nuance to almost any straightforward concept.

So, how do you go about making it possible to befriend monsters while keeping them, well, monstrous?

You don't want to take away monsters' true nature, or change them so much they're no longer recognizable. Instead, try making tweaks that are compatible with and appropriate to the monster's abilities, personality, alignment, and so on, while providing interesting openings and opportunities for positive interactions, shared goals, and possibly even long-term friendships.

In the real world, we've come a long way in our understanding of creatures since those early days of making monster manuals. We now know dogs can "talk" using recorded buttons, crows seem to hold funerals for their dead, and bees can count at least as high as six and maybe even higher.

In tabletop games, creatures that once were portrayed as monstrous beasts ready to kill and eat all humans are now seen in a more nuanced light. They probably just want to raise their young, claim their territory, and eat their kill in relative safety.

With all that in mind, it's a great time to update our understanding of monsters, as well.

MONSTERS AS INDIVIDUALS

A great starting point is to think of each monster as an individual. Yes, a monster might belong to the category of "devil" or "dragon" or "basilisk," which brings with it a specific set of statistics, expectations, and abilities. However, this doesn't necessarily mean all basilisks are the exact same. One might be smarter than the others. Or more friendly. Or maybe it was blinded at an early age and it can't damage the PCs with its gaze, and that means it's approachable.

When it comes to viewing individual monsters as unique within their broad categories, dogs in the real world are a great analogy. Think of the category of "dog." While we can all agree to the basics of what a dog is—we might even be able to come up with a set of general statistics, personalities, and abilities that most dogs share—we also know that within that category we'll find creatures across a wide spectrum of sizes, shapes, personalities, skillsets, and intelligences.

The difference between your aunt's sweet but dumb shih tzu and a border collie like the famous Chaser—who knew more than 1,000 words and could distinguish between proper nouns, adverbs, and propositions—is vast. And yet, they're both dogs. They're both the same species.

Consider that monsters have the same vast capacity for variations within categories, and you're starting to get the point. This kind of variation allows for a lot of play in a monster's personality, intelligence level, and even alignment, if they have one.

You don't have to change everything about a creature to make it approachable. Just give it one unique element that can create the opportunity for friendship. Possibly the monster had a friend when it was young who looked something like one of the PCs (or one of the PCs' companions). Perhaps it is fascinated by shiny things and can't stop trying to "borrow" the fighter's well-honed weapons and metal armor. Or, maybe it's smarter than its fellows and is so bored of being "just a monster" it tries to convince the PCs to teach it something new.

MONSTERS IN LOVE

There's an old saying among writers: "All villains love a kitten." The idea is that even the evilest masterminds have a soft spot for something. You can use this idea to your advantage—give your monster something to love and they will instantly be more open to the possibility of friendship. The thing you give your monster to love might be a home, a child, a pet, an object, or even a player character.

Often, in games, when a monster loves something, we see it only in relation to what kind of violence they will do to protect it. They love their home and will attack anything that comes near it. They love food and will happily eat the characters alive as a snack. They love their family or community and will bust more than a couple of heads to keep it intact.

But what if the thing they love is threatened by something other than the PCs? We've all seen those videos of wild animals who seek humans out for help when their young one is wrapped in barbed wire or has fallen down a storm drain.

Perhaps the manticore's mate has gotten caught in a trap. If the PCs work with the manticore to help free their mate, at the very least, the manticores won't make a meal out of the PCs. At the very best, they may be grateful, which could be the start of a beautiful (if slightly unnerving) friendship.

WORKING WITHIN ALIGNMENTS

Alignments exist, and we can't talk about monsters without talking about the fact that many of them are inherently designated as evil. If your game traditionally uses alignments, you could, of course, throw out the alignment system altogether or change it so that all of your fiends are chaotic good (which creates a very specific tone). For a more nuanced take, you could choose to work within the alignment system in interesting ways.

For example, if you have a character whose alignment is also evil, perhaps they bond with the monster over their unique view of the world. Or perhaps the evil-alignment monster and the PCs have the same goal with different motives, or the same motivation toward different goals.

Having the PCs and the monster work together, and bond together to achieve something, even for a short period of time, can be the start of a lasting friendship (or, let's be honest, the start of a long-term rivalry, if things go awry).

MEDDLING WITH MONSTERS

Another way to turn monsters into individuals and potential allies is to give them something via scientific or magical means that moves them above and beyond the expectations of their particular species, category, or type. Depending on your setting, the change could come about using gene tampering, selective breeding, a magic spell or device, and so on.

Increasing intelligence or empathy is one obvious change. Another is to give them the ability to communicate via speech or some other means. You could give them a unique drive—maybe they've been implanted with a device that makes them want to help others, or they've been magically endowed with the ability to break spells. A "Jekyll-and-Hyde"-style monster is also an interesting way to go; it keeps characters on their toes and may invite interesting discussions about whether it's worth it to keep the party's friend around.

By making it clear this monster is purposefully very different from others of its type, you're basically saying to your players, "Hey, here's an opportunity to interact differently with this particular monster." Whether your players choose to befriend the monster is obviously up to them, but at the very least you've done your part to keep them all from turning into murder hobos.

CREATE OPPORTUNITIES

If you want to encourage the PCs to make friends with monsters, be sure to give them powers and items that invite them to do so.

It's likely the characters are going to be nervous about making friends with monsters based on bad previous experiences. This might be true of the players themselves as well—they may not even know making friends with monsters is an option. There's no harm in reminding them of that possibility so they can keep their eyes open in the future. Then, when they try, say yes as long as it works within the rules of the game and makes logistical sense.

Many monsters can be charmed or befriended with spells, magic items, and even smooth talking. Trying to sweet-talk a vicious monster who's trying to protect its young probably isn't going to get the players very far.

However, sweet talking that same creature while they're calm and unthreatened and the character has a tasty offering in their hand? There's a friendship in the making.

GAME MASTERING FRIENDSHIP

Okay, let's say you've done all that. You created a cool, unique monster that provided an opportunity for friendship, and the PCs jumped on it. Now they're walking around the world with a hill giant for a BFF. How do you utilize that experience well?

Game mastering when your party is cultivating a monster friendship is much like GMing when they've befriended any NPC, with a few notable exceptions. Keep in mind the following is likely true.

- Others will probably react very poorly to a monster walking into a town, city, camp, or building. Make sure you're ready to have NPCs react to the monster, and to whatever follows, whether it's a fight or additional friendships.
- Monsters tend to be pretty powerful on their own, and they may turn the tide of every fight the PCs engage in. Decide whether you want a "friend" monster to be a little less dangerous and powerful than their counterparts or if you want to increase the difficulty of challenges so the PCs still have to struggle to win.
- Monsters who don't speak the same language as the characters (or who don't speak any language at all) will likely struggle to communicate with their new friends, which can be funny and mildly frustrating for characters but unfun and deeply frustrating to players. Be sure to come up with alternate ways of communicating: drawing images, using gestures, or maybe even finding a translation device or spell of some kind.

Another option is to have one of your players "run" the monster alongside their own character. (Or perhaps, if you have a new player joining, they can take on the monster as their main character—it's easy enough to tweak the stats in most games to turn a monster into a PC.)

There may be a different hundred ways to have your players kill monsters—but there are just as many ways to have them befriend them. And, who knows? That monster they befriend today may just be the monster that saves their lives tomorrow.

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Pacing an Encounter Just Right
How to Keep Things Moving

by Vee Mus'e

W e all know the amount of effort and time it takes to prepare a game, whether you're brainstorming a world from scratch or delving into more nuanced encounters. Just as important, though, is how time flows while you're playing your game. It's far more fun for players and Game Masters alike when a game's pace is brisk and exciting rather than slow and bogged down.

So, what makes an encounter successful in its pacing, and how do you get there?

WHAT IS YOUR INTENT?

To pace an encounter, sometimes you need to establish what *type* of encounter you're running. A combat encounter runs at a vastly different pace than a roleplaying encounter, for instance. Focusing too much on one type of encounter may suddenly leave the story feeling stilted and lagging, while pushing ahead too quickly could leave players feeling rushed and perhaps a bit dazed.

As the Game Master, one of the many hats you're wearing—along with storyteller, villain, and sidekick—is that of an orchestra conductor. Just like a certain song needs a specific tempo, the encounters you create need a satisfying sense of collective pacing to ensure everyone at the table can make the most of their gaming experience. In the end, if your game's pacing is enjoyable, you'll all enjoy what you've orchestrated together.

GIVE THEM THE OLD ONE, TWO!

Combat-driven encounters, by nature, get your players' hearts beating and minds racing. There's a palpable excitement that hangs in the air as your player express good-natured groans: "Here we go!"

The minute you call for initiative, you need to be aware of counts beyond hit points and armor class. As you create an epic battle with your words, you'll want to be sure the pace matches and carries the intensity through from when those first rolls are made.

As both a GM and player, I've found the most effectively paced and exciting combat encounters combine the use of turn efficacy with clear and vivid descriptions of action. This way, everyone feels like they're participating, and everyone knows what's happening.

Let's explore these together to discuss why each of these matters—and what you can do as GM to use these aspects to keep the game moving.

KEEP THE GAME MOVING

I have a few tricks to help maintain a solid pace while still adding to an encounter's thrill—without bogging the game down while players consider and take their turns.

First, remind your players who is up next as soon as a player starts to take their action. You can do this verbally as you go, using a sort of visual initiative tracker, or even select a "GM's helper" who can remind the players who's next.

These strategies can help you maintain the pace of combat without interruption. Everyone can start to anticipate and prepare in advance, making it easier to rotate through turns and rounds. This keeps everything in motion as you progress.

Second, limit the amount of time a player has to announce their action. I'm not saying to get a physical egg timer, but it does help to set an expectation for how quickly players must make decisions.

If things start coming to a halt because a player is either unprepared or unsure of what to do, simply offering to come back to them either triggers the decision, or they gratefully take your offer and are better prepared when their turn comes back around.

If there there's a rules aspect that's unclear, or is beginning to turn into a debate, it's your job as the GM to make a call. Roll a die, if you must. As GM, it is your call, and sometimes using a die to help determine results can make for a fast and clear ruling.

After the game, you can always debrief and better explore and discuss what was going on at the time, or clarify how a certain spell should play out

next time, or the like. But during the game, it's wise to focus on keeping up the pace of combat so that your game continues to run smoothly.

READ THE ROOM, NOT JUST THE STAT BLOCKS

Sometimes, you'll need to adjust your approach as GM based on your group of players. In other words, reading the room can be key.

As GM, get a feel for how your players work in combat—individually and with each other. Don't be afraid to use some bite-sized baddies in your earlier sessions to help establish this baseline.

More often than not, experienced players are able and ready to jump in and take action with little to no extra time needed. These players often have already brought out the dice they need for attacking and damaging, and they're ready to roll as soon as they are up in the initiative order. Newer players, however, may still need to look back and reread what they can do, or are unsure of how to best use their PC's abilities.

If you have a player who is honestly struggling with making calls or understanding the game, and you also have a seasoned player present, sometimes a buddy system is just the trick to help.

While you as GM are making sure the game is moving, asking your players to help each other can make for a far more cohesive experience for everyone. Of course, you should speak to your veteran players before using this approach to be sure they feel up to it.

If not, you can always offer to work with the player having issues one-on-one. Even taking the time to run a couple of combat encounters for just that player as practice can make a world of difference when everyone gathers back at the table to continue the campaign. In the long run, taking extra time behind the scenes will help save time during game play.

GET INTO THE NITTY-GRITTY DETAILS

Along with keeping combat flowing at the table, you also need to be very conscientious of how you are revealing what is happening in your game. Words are powerful and critical when it comes to action-packed combat.

When describing events happening in the game, be clear, be descriptive, and also keep in mind that not everyone works well with a massive description dump of the area or what they are fighting. Lay out the basics so your players know what they are facing when you start, and continue to add to the details of combat while you progress through turns and rounds.

Here's where you can incorporate basic maps, or even minis and terrain, for those who are more visual. And when questions are asked, that's a clue for you as the GM to provide more of the details they'll need.

Here's an example of how I tend to set a scene:

Two-by-two, you walk into a clearing in the forest along a sunlight-dappled path. To either side, you see lush green overgrowth edging the path. Ten feet further along the path, the tree line becomes more dense. It's almost like walking through a tunnel as the branches reach 20 feet above, intertwining with each other like folded hands. To the front of you, 40 feet ahead, the path turns to the left. All around you hear the call of birds and the skittering sounds of forest animals—when suddenly there is a low growl coming from the left side of the woods just before the path turns. A hulking shadowy form emerges, and you see two red eyes flashing at you with malice!

With this, the players not only have parameters in terms of the space with which they can work, but they also have sounds and sights to augment what they know. Toward the end of the description, they'll realize there's more than meets the eye here, and there's a clear clue that something untoward is about to go down.

As the players enter into combat and ask questions, this is where you can add things like a fallen tree with a stump that could be used for cover. Or, if the PCs move forward to approach the creature, you could describe what they are fighting with more details.

During the combat, if you're not using a tactical battle map, don't forget to mention things such as measurements and directions, how close objects and creatures are to players, and which players are near each other.

You are essentially continuously telling the story of combat for your players. Simply saying, "The troll moves forward" isn't going to work. Rather, say: "The troll spots you and advances 20 feet directly down the path. It stops 15 feet in front of you, its club clutched in its right hand tightly." Again, by providing more details as you go along, the players will have a better sense of what is happening. In fact, as the GM, encourage them to do the same when they describe their character's action.

If they hit a monster, ask them to describe what it is they are doing and what it looks like. Now you've brought a touch of roleplaying into your combat, but you also have further reinforcement for everyone at the table as to what is happening.

These sorts of dynamic descriptions also keep a level of excitement in the air as the players become more invested in what's going on. This keeps the pace moving forward and avoids it becoming stagnant.

Should a player be less inclined to go into a lot of detail, that is also all right. Ask them what they are using, where they are aiming, and if they are moving anywhere, and you will still get information that is helpful to the combat scene.

Whether the combat lasts three rounds or seven, by making use of vivid details and being aware of time, you will be able to keep your game exciting, dynamic, and entertaining. This, in turn, will help keep the pace of the combat going for you and your players.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE ROLEPLAY?

Here's the thing about combat encounters: sometimes they don't go as planned. What you planned as a full-on combat might suddenly become the cleric winning over the keg mimic and keeping it from attacking the party.

Yes, this actually happened. The dice were being very kind to the player, and mine were absolutely miserable, but *it worked!* Quite frankly, not having that moment turn into combat enriched the overall story the players created with me.

When you end up with a roleplaying encounter, how do you know your pacing is effective?

Again, factor in the situation. Key into your players and pay attention to what they're saying and their body language in general.

Are all the players involved, or is this focused on just one or two? If it's a matter of everyone getting into it and wanting to participate, and you find yourself more active listener than storyteller, let it happen.

Let the players set the pace and find themselves in the moment. Sometimes, as the GM, it's easy to become frustrated when something doesn't go according to your original plan. While that is understandable, it's also limiting for your players and yourself. As long as your players are actively participating and eager to interact with the encounter, you may only need to throw in some checks here or there to keep things interesting, and that's OK!

THE GREAT DIVIDE

Of course, if your party suddenly splits, it's a different story in terms of maintaining your game's pace. Now, you've got a challenge as GM; you'll need to be aware of what each of your players is doing, and you'll need to be careful that each character receives similar screen time.

For instance, I have had parties go in five different directions, such that each player was essentially dealing with a one-on-one interaction with an NPC. In this case, I use a 10-minute "fade to" mechanic, and it works reliably for me every time.

In other words, each character or characters in a single scene get a specific amount of time to speak and act before I switch to the next scene with the next characters. (This time increment works for me, but feel free to test out different increments to find what you are most comfortable using.)

This method functions as a revolving door, allowing you to work your way around each scenario as the GM but preventing you and your players from focusing too much on just one or two players. To transition between each scene, I typically say something like: "And as you discuss this, I'm going to pause here while we fade over to X. X, while this is going on, what is it you are doing?" This is a clear way to transition scenes and shift focus over to a new player.

By using this method, it keeps the pace going for everyone. As some are waiting to complete their moments, they get to see what is happening with their fellow players.

For the GM, these scene splits can provide a fantastic opportunity to throw in some surprise revelations, especially if a detail is revealed right before a needed shift. Story revelations can amp up your game's intrigue and excitement, so I highly recommend using these unexpected splits to reveal any lore or plot element you may want to filter into the campaign so everything keeps moving forward.

IT'S A BALANCING ACT

Regardless how you end up running your encounters, it's always something of a balancing act to keep your pacing tight. Overall, as GM it's a good idea to be ready for anything the players throw at you and to have contingencies in place for the unexpected.

Thinking ahead and incorporating some of these tricks mentioned above can help make it easier to maintain your game's pace when it comes to combat and roleplaying. The more experience you gain, and the more you work with your players, the easier it'll all get—and the more enjoyable it will become for all. Happy gaming!

Known for her appearances as both a Game Master and a player of tabletop roleplaying games, **Vee Mus'e** *ran Kobold Press's* Tales of the Old Margreve *live stream,* The Last Heir, *for two seasons. She can also be found presenting on other channels and giving interviews, and she is a professional miniature painter and tabletop terrain designer.*

Maps and Monsters

by Luis Loza

Every fight with a monster takes place somewhere. Unless your game happens to take place in featureless simulation rooms made only for combat, you'll need to set up some kind of encounter site for your monster. (Even then, you should use the power of your simulation room to create a cool place to fight!)

When the inevitable fight does happen at your table, you'll most likely need a map of some kind to represent the fight location. While it's easy enough to pull out a battle map, toss some miniatures onto it, and call it good, putting a little thought into the features of your encounter site can make sure every fight is one that's memorable and fun—or, at the very least, not boring.

Maps can have different functionality; they might be anything from interesting adventuring sites to fun props to useful references for regions and cities. In this essay, however, we're going to look at maps in relation to monsters, as the majority of maps you'll use at the table are paired with some kind of encounter.

COMPLEMENT A MONSTER

The most obvious way to pair a map with a monster is to complement the monster's abilities. You might have decided you want to throw a big, fearsome dragon at your players and want to have an exciting location for the fight. The right map will allow the dragon to make the most of its abilities, which might include flight, the ability to breathe blasts of flame, and using its mighty size to overwhelm the brave heroes.

The obvious place to fight a dragon is within its lair, which is probably in some cave at the top of a perilous mountain. Dragons tend to live in caves, so why not fight it in a cave?

The first issue is that most fantasy caves tend to be rather restrictive. It's easy to imagine a cave like that in which a bear lives, but dragons need more space. You should also make sure this lair has plenty of vertical space so the dragon can fly and possibly even escape if the cave has an opening through the ceiling. Finally, you can make sure the lair has plenty of narrow tunnels that funnel heroes nicely into the path of an oncoming fire breath.

Each monster has abilities to consider when creating a map for their encounters. Can your monster leap great distances with ease? Maybe the fight takes place in a wide river with large rocks the monster can use as stepping stones to hop around and harass the heroes.

Can your monster push people around? If so, use a map with lots of ledges where the heroes can stand and subsequently fall off mid-fight! Overall, it's a good rule of thumb to make sure each of your monster's unique abilities has at least one feature on your map that really helps it shine.

INSPIRE AN ENCOUNTER

Sometimes maps work the other way around. Rather than trying to shape a map to suit a monster, you might begin with an interesting map and want to find an interesting monster to place there.

As someone who likes to draw maps, I know all about creating a fun map first and then trying to create an encounter that makes the most of it. This is especially true now with so many great map-makers sharing their maps with the world online and through virtual tabletops.

In this case, you can follow the above process, but in reverse. Identify key features of the maps that you find interesting and use those to start narrowing down possible monsters that might fight there.

A large canyon with high ledges is the perfect place for an ambush, so throw some goblin archers on the top of the walls. They can harry the heroes as they make their way through the canyon. Alternatively, you can include a large monster with tentacles to pull heroes down into the canyon, where it's much more dangerous to fight.

It's fun to consider how a monster might make use of a map that doesn't match its typical environment. What happens when you throw a troll into a sewer? Maybe it hides among the sewer muck to ambush travelers. It could use its tremendous size to reach from one side of a sewer tunnel to the other and pull a hero over, forcing her companions to find a way across before the troll escapes. The troll could even use its great strength to bring down the ceiling of a small sewer tunnel, trapping or separating the heroes mid-fight.

A given map might have more features than you know what to do with for a given encounter—and that's okay. A map with high cliffs, deep chasms, lots of pillars, and a rope bridge might inspire a dozen different encounters.

You don't have to try to use every feature of the map in a given encounter and, in fact, it will usually be cause for distraction to try. Having to keep every feature in mind is draining, and it's best to focus on just one or two features to highlight. You can always reuse your map later with different encounters that each make use of the remaining features of the map.

Reusing maps in this way might even inspire your players to make use of the features themselves in future encounters. The players might have a fun time ambushing the enemy group using the knowledge they learned from the archer ambush the first time they were at the location.

TELL A STORY

While most maps are encounter locations first, you can't ignore the narrative capability of a good map. Most RPGs tend to rely on words and players' imaginations to handle the majority of the storytelling.

While maps feature lots of illustrations for characters, locations, monsters, and so on, they also represent one of the few visual aspects of an RPG with which the players actively engage. Their characters move around the map, sometimes uncovering parts of the map piece by piece. This is the perfect means to tell the players more about the monster that's up ahead.

Let's consider the dragon again. Maybe instead of a full-grown dragon, it's a younger and smaller dragon, so we can sneak it into the furthest reaches of the villain's keep. As the heroes are exploring the keep, you can include various clues about the dragon's nature.

There might be various gashes and tears throughout the keep to hint at the dragon's deadly claws and fangs. You could include large cow carcasses that look like they were used to feed some large creature. Finally, you could include burning debris and scorch marks along a large hallway that leads to the room holding the dragon.

If your players understand the clues, they'll probably know they're in for a fight with a dragon or some other terrifying creature, and they might prepare accordingly. If not, oh well. They can always make new characters.

Consider which features you could include on your map to explain a bit more about your monster. Slain prey can hint at the monster's means of attacking. Large bite marks are different from claw slashes, which are both significantly different from eye lasers. A lair with lots of creatures turned to stone can warn heroes that becoming a statue might be their ultimate fate. Hinting at a monster's key abilities might be the difference between prepared heroes who come out on top and a pile of dead, picked-clean bones.

Not all map features need to hint at a monster's abilities, however. Instead, consider what other stories you can tell with your map. Heroes who find dead mercenaries and an empty nest in the dragon's lair might suddenly understand why the dragon has taken to razing the countryside. A dungeon with blood trails along the floor that end at an empty, blood-stained altar suddenly make the rumors of a local cult a lot more plausible.

Many of these narrative features are ones you could point out as part of your description of a location, but don't be afraid to let your map do the work for you. Include scorch marks or an overturned chair on the map, but let your players catch these details when looking over it. Players who want more information or need more help can just ask questions about what they see. This lets the players take the lead on exploration and noticing details. If they happen to discern the narrative hints you've placed, they'll feel pretty clever for figuring it out and you'll have excited players.

USEFUL MAP FEATURES

So, let's say you want to make a good map for your next encounter. What should you include? Simply, you want interesting features that your monster can use during the encounter. These features don't even necessarily need to be related to your monster's abilities or included specifically for your monster. As long as your monster can make use of it in some way, it's probably a useful feature for your map. To keep things simple, map features come in three categories: elevation features, interactive features, and obstacles.

It's easy to think of most maps as flat areas with a few objects sprinkled in to keep things interesting, but make sure to consider how elevation can come into play during an encounter. Changes in elevation could consist of simple features, such as the second-floor balcony in a grand ballroom, a dais in the center of a temple, or a pit in the middle of the room.

These features allow a monster to gain the high ground against heroes or hide out of sight of a wizard's spell. You can even get particularly complicated with your elevation features and include several variations in elevation on the same map. Castle battlements could include multiple staircases, high towers, and more to vary the elevation and allow for particularly dynamic encounters.

Interactive features are typically the most complicated ones to include, but can be the most exciting. These can vary from simple things like doors and windows to giant water wheels and active traps. What makes these features interesting is they do nothing on their own but are an open invitation to alter the battlefield. The gang of kobolds can suddenly shift the tide of battle when they close one of the doors into the room, forcing the heroes through the bottleneck of the remaining doorway. An orc

warrior can throw a ladder down to traverse a chasm and reach the heroes. With a little ingenuity, almost anything becomes an interactive feature. Be prepared for monster and player alike to come up with a clever use for most anything you've thrown onto the map.

The most common feature you'll probably include on your map is an obstacle. These features are there to provide some kind of cover or to limit maneuverability. Crates, pillars, overturned tables, patches of thorny vines, pools of water, and more all serve as obstacles. A monster can get the most out of an obstacle when it can maneuver around the obstacle in ways the heroes can't.

A monster that can walk on water suddenly doesn't have to worry about that pool of water when trying to reach the heroes. Additionally, it can use the water as a barrier that aids its escape. Obstacles can be most anything, but the important thing to make clear is their size and the space they occupy.

When using a combat grid, it should be easy to know at a glance what spaces a given obstacle blocks. Make sure you're clear with your obstacle placement to save yourself time mid-combat.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Well, that's a lot of information about maps! But don't feel like you need to include every possible element in each map you use. Ultimately, you simply want a place for your monster to roam that's a bit more interesting than a flat, open field.

Not every monster needs a premium map that allows the monster to make use of each of its abilities while also delving into a secret aspect of the monster's story. However, sometimes that's exactly what you need.

When the situation calls for it, just make sure to take an extra minute when putting your map together to add some interesting features and you'll have a much better encounter. Soon enough, these features will become second nature and every random encounter will feel like one that you planned weeks in advance.

Luis Loza is a developer at Paizo Inc. working on the Lost Omens line. He's been playing RPGs for almost 20 years and has written as a freelancer for multiple companies and game systems, including the Pathfinder RPG and Dungeons & Dragons. His notable work includes creating Borne by the Sun's Grace, *a Mexican- and Mesoamerican-inspired adventure for the Pathfinder RPG, and creating playable otters for the Starfinder RPG. Luis is based out of Seattle, where he lives with his wife and a cat that is unfortunately not as cuddly as she lets on. You can follow him on twitter @donatoclassic and check out his work at* luisloza.com.

LET THE MONSTER MASTERS GUIDE YOU!

Classic monsters can get stale, and Game Masters often need to birth their own monstrosities to properly challenge players. But concepting, creating, and using monsters is no easy feat for any Game Master—and that's where this book comes in.

In these pages, fifteen of the brightest stars in the gaming industry share their wisdom for conceptualizing, developing, and maximizing the "Wow!" factor of monsters. Step by step, the writers show how to think up a new idea—or modify an existing one—then refine and test the design and get the absolute most out of the creature.

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