Tome of Adventure Design

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The answer to life, the universe and everything.

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Introduction

A fantasy adventure game, at its very heart, is about developing an open-ended "story" of the characters. The referee is in charge of the fantasy world, and the players direct the actions of their characters in that fantasy world. Neither the referee nor the group of players has complete control over what's going to happen, and the result is an evolving set of surprises for both the referee and the players. Unlike the players, as the referee and creator of the game world, most of your "work" is done ahead of time. To some degree or other, you have to create the groundwork for the adventure before the game starts. Even though no battle plan survives contact with the enemy – and if you're an experienced referee you know exactly what I mean – the game has to start … with a starting point. This might just be a vague set of ideas, or it might be as complex as a set of maps with a detailed key and well thought-out encounters for the players to run into.

The *Tome of Adventure Design* is organized as a series of "books," each one providing resources at every step of the way. The vast majority of the content of each book is made up of random generation tables that I've created over a quarter of a century (sigh) for my own use. I should say up front that these are tables for deep design – in other words, most of them are too long, and contain too many unusual or contradictory entries, for use on the spot at the gaming table. There are already many excellent books of tables for use on the fly; the tables in these books are different. They work best as a tool for preparation beforehand, providing relatively vast creative resources for browsing and gathering, rather than quick-use tables designed to provide broad, fast brushstrokes. My shorter tables tend to deliver cryptic results designed to shock the reader's creativity into filling in the gaps, whereas my longer tables are unusably vast for easy random generation, being designed to shock the reader's creativity into operation by presenting a sea of possibilities.

Creativity

Creativity is the ultimate heart of adventure design; producing a masterpiece adventure involves many interlocking skills and talents, but the foremost talent of all is the ability to tap into the depths of the fantastic imagination and draw forth something startling and unexpected. Creativity is not an easy skill to teach, but if you're reading this book it's a fair assumption that you're not in the ranks of those who truly have difficulties with creative thought. You don't need to learn the basics, and you might not even need much help with the highest reaches of the art. Either way, you know what I mean when I say that there's a mindset, a condition of openness, in which you're on fire – and when it's not there, you're basically screwed. How do you get into that mindset, where you can grab ideas from thin air and whisk them together with seeming effortlessness?

Virtually *every* prominent adventure author I've talked with about this question has answered it in the same way. A creative adventure begins with a visual image of some kind. It might be dreamlike or hazy; it might seem, at first, to be nothing of consequence; or it might leap forth, demanding to be drawn into writing. But it's quite clear that a visual image is the most common form of "first inspiration" for an adventure. In my conversations with Rob Kuntz (one of the foundational authors of Dungeons & Dragons) about creativity, Rob was quite definite that visual imagery is key to his own first inspirations. Harley Stroh, author of a number of modules for the Dungeon Crawl Classics line by Goodman Games, agrees. In an interview with Bruce Cordell (Return to the Tomb of Horrors, Sunless Citadel) on montecook.com, Bruce was asked about his inspiration for the key monster in one of his modules. The answer? "There was this old horror movie I saw years ago…."

So, how do we achieve these visual images – "the force that through the green fuse drives the flower," as Dylan Thomas might say? And it's a question cutting to the whole value of this book itself. After all, if visual imagery is the key to creativity, isn't the ideal creative tool going to be a book of images and pictures rather than a book of random generation tables?

No.

"Problems cannot be solved at the same level of consciousness that created them." – Albert Einstein

In other words, if I may put my own spin on Einstein's famous quote, one visual image doesn't lead directly to another visual image except through some other process. The key to creating unique visual images is to tap that other process – and that other process is the manipulation and recombination of concepts. Let's look at another quote from Einstein:

"The physical entities which seem to serve as elements in thought are certain signs and more-or-less clear images which can be 'voluntarily' reproduced and combined. The above-mentioned elements are, in my case, of visual and some of muscular type."
– Albert Einstein

Again, we've got visual images mentioned in the creative mix Einstein describes; but notice that the key factor is the *combination* of "signs" and "images." Deep creativity is a cloud-realm of diverse symbols and images; combining and diverging, seeking the unforeseen. And so, in fact, we reach the driving force of this book. To the fullest extent possible, the tables in the *Tome of Adventure Design* are designed to *simulate* the cloud-realm of deep creativity; to provide an entry into the disembodied mix of symbols, portents and images that populate the subconscious mind; to jar the reader – quite artificially – into the creative cloud. And thereby to create a pathway so that the mind may follow more easily into this strange realm. It's no accident that the first cover illustration for this volume focuses upon opening a doorway.

With all that said, how does one best use this book to enter the realm of deep creativity? Here's my advice. First off, whatever results you roll with your dice, treat the results not as words, but as pictures, abstracts, concepts, symbols, or meanings. Treat each result as a half-formed idea, ready for combination with others – leave it to drift in your mind while you're accumulating more random results. And then, once something starts to coalesce – stop rolling dice! Daydream for a minute, waiting to see if you've got something, and if it isn't there yet, then start browsing through the tables looking for whatever "second part" of that idea is going to click it into shape.

Drift, and find.

BOOK ONE:

Principles and Starting Points

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Introduction to Book One

This first book is about the topmost level of adventure design: a cardinal rule, the elements of a good adventure, the location, the villain's plan, and the adventurers' mission. These all provide context – the framework upon which the details hang. Oddly – and I've had this confirmed to me by several brilliant adventure authors – the context is often not the starting point for creating an adventure. In many cases, such as Rob Kuntz's *Maure Castle*, the "spark" came from a detail rather than from the context. Rob has written that Maure Castle originated with imagery from a Conan story: the visual pictures of iron gates and an iron golem. The castle's history and villains (other than the golem) developed from those flashes of imagery, not the other way around. There's no way of knowing whether your creativity will happen to be working from top-down or from bottom-up, so keep that in mind. If the tables in this book aren't working for you, try approaching it in the other direction using tables from later books. In particular, I often use the Monster Tables (planned as the next book in the series) as an independent starting point for generating adventure ideas.

Adventure Design: General Principles

The Cardinal Rule of Adventure Design

A good adventure should maximize meaningful player decisions.

An adventure is the setting in which players make decisions for their characters. It doesn't matter whether you're running a science fiction roleplaying game, an old west roleplaying game, or a fantasy roleplaying game. Players making decisions is what it's all about. From your perspective as the adventure designer, there are lots of tricks you can use to make a good adventure into a great adventure, but if you ignore the importance of player decisions you risk making an otherwise good adventure into a failed gaming experience both for you and for your players. Thus, the cardinal rule of adventure design: seek to maximize the number of meaningful, potentially-informed decisions the players can make during the course of the adventure. By "meaningful," I mean that the decisions aren't just trivial options with no real influence on what's going to happen. And by "potentially-informed," I mean that the players should have enough information – or the potential to have gotten that information – to make a good decision rather than an arbitrary selection between options. If bad information-gathering or failure to interpret clues is the reason why the players don't have all the information they need, then that's their problem – it's a matter of player skill, and they goofed. But on the other hand, if they play a smart game, brilliantly gathering information and interpreting clues, they should encounter your adventure as a series of choices in which (for the most part) they can use the information to improve their chances of success as they proceed.

Virtually every "trick" of good adventure design hangs on this single rule. Maximize meaningful player decisions.

Creating an Adventure: The Elements of a Masterpiece

There are a few distinct components of a good adventure; even the simplest, most bare-bones adventure should contain all of these parts. If you're an experienced game master, at some point you've created tiny little scenarios that somehow managed to be the most memorable adventures of all time for your group. And on the other hand, you've seen some of your great creations fall flat. What was the difference? Why did a scrap of an idea work out so much better than the well-planned masterpiece? One very good possibility is this: the scrap of idea happened to contain all of the right components (listed below), and the masterpiece somehow left out one or more of them. In fact, this is one of the great perils of the well-constructed adventure. When you're creating on the fly, at the gaming table, you dream up new stuff when you see that something isn't working right. If you're working from an adventure you created ahead of time, you can still fix the problem during the game, but let's face it: the whole reason you wrote your material ahead of time was so you didn't need to fix things on the fly.

Necessary Elements of a Masterpiece Adventure

1) Backstory
2) Location
3) Opposition
4) Variation of Challenge
5) Exploration
6) Race Against Time
7) Resource Management
8) Milestones and Conclusions
9) Continuation Options

Backstory

The backstory is the answer to a question: what happened to change this location from a normal place into a dangerous place of adventure, with treasures and monsters? Players love to discover the answer to this question, and an adventure feels incomplete, from the players' perspective, if it ends without this loose end being tied up. If the backstory is too complicated to be fully discovered or understood, then it's too complicated for an adventure. Backstory creates the MYSTERY of the location. It can be as simple as: "A wizard once lived here, and he died, and monsters moved in." But an adventure with absolutely no backstory for the players to discover is like a play where something isn't explained by the final curtain. It leaves a sense of dissatisfaction and incompleteness. Having some backstory – purely for the purpose of giving the players something to discover – is actually one of the few tricks of adventure design that doesn't come from the cardinal rule of maximizing player decisions.

Location

The place in which the adventure occurs has to be an interesting locale, with unusual tactical opportunities and possibly a theme of some kind. The map should be evaluated as follows: is it a good game board for tactical movement? If the map doesn't measure up as a game board, it won't measure up for use in a roleplaying game, either. Maps work the same way in both types of games.

Opposition

The current occupants of the adventure location might or might not be related to the backstory. In many cases, the backstory just explains why the place has become a good place for monsters to inhabit. In general, monsters need not all be unusual, but every adventure should contain some sort of unique monster, and also use those normal monsters in an interesting way from time to time. Not all monster encounters must be wildly unusual, either: having the "normal" ones will highlight the interest of the unusual ones. It's a matter of variety.

Variation of Challenge

Players enjoy adventures in which the nature of the challenges they face are varied. A good adventure will include combats, traps to detect and avoid, strange tricks to figure out, varied combat terrain, and negotiations. Challenges also include getting lost (EXPLORATION) and managing limited resources (RACE AGAINST TIME). A related point is that obstacles should have variation of solution, as well. Don't place challenges that can only be solved in one way – for the players, making the decision to fight with or to negotiate with a dragon adds an important dimension to the game.

Exploration

Part of the magic of adventuring is the sense of exploring a strange place. Getting lost is a serious risk, and the players will need to create a map of this place in order to return alive. This aspect of an adventure (especially creating the map directly at the table) is very powerful for putting the players directly into the atmosphere, but some gaming groups might find it tedious. It depends on what you want to emphasize, and what the players enjoy. Of all the adventure components listed here, exploration is the only one that isn't necessarily universal. With some gaming groups, leaving exploration out will destroy the feel of the adventure. With others, putting it in will be seen as a disastrous waste of time. Know your group.

Race Against Time

Whether it's a major or a minor component of the adventure, some aspect of the adventure must create a race against time – even if it's just that the party is running low on money to pay their bill at the local inn. A race against time is what causes the players to have to MANAGE RESOURCES.

Resource Management

Related to the RACE AGAINST TIME, resource management is an important factor in virtually all adventures. In fact, you don't have to make any sort of deliberate attempt to write it into your adventure, because the management of hit points and spells is built into the game system itself. Indeed, if you overdo the resource management side of an adventure, you risk bogging things down into nothing more than a bookkeeping session. For very low-level adventurers, the risk of running out of torches adds excitement and urgency. But if you try to focus on torches when the characters are high level, you're driving in the wrong gear. Okay, so that's the risk of overdoing resource management. On the other hand, when it's done right, having a resource to manage can create a whole new dimension for player decisions, and a memorable adventure. You've done it many times before, possibly without even thinking about it very much. Here's an example: a couple of healing potions given to a low-level party as a partial "up front" payment for a mission. In one sense those potions are just treasure, and in another sense they're a way to give the party an added bit of strength for confronting monsters that are a bit more interesting than the run of the mill low level monsters. But you've also added a new dimension to the game: the decision of when to use them. Deliberately writing a significant element of resource management into an adventure is probably the riskiest trick in the adventure designer's toolbox. When it's done well, it adds a lot to the adventure. But you can easily throw off the pace by creating annoying bookkeeping, or you might accidentally hand out a resource that can blast away all the adventure's challenges. Frankly, this is an art rather than a science. I don't have any good guidelines for it other than to say: don't get too creative with this unless you're already an experienced adventure-writer. If you're relatively inexperienced, just rely upon whatever resource management challenges are already built into the game's rules, and you won't go far wrong.

Milestones and Conclusions

The adventure should contain one or more locations where they can clearly see that they have achieved a victory against the adventure. These might be places where they learn a chunk of information about the BACKSTORY, they might be places where an obviously significant monster dwells, or they might be mission objectives identified in advance, such as rescuing prisoners or finding a particular object. Defeating a "boss" monster is one example of a conclusion, but don't make all your adventures follow the pattern of "fight + fight + fight + defeat boss monster = conclusion." The same pattern of milestones and conclusions shouldn't be repeated too often, or it gets stale.

Continuation Options

Something about the MYSTERY, LOCATION, or OPPOSITION gives the adventurers a new direction they might follow. Avoid creating situations where the players have no choice about their next course of action. Instead, provide them with possibilities, hints, clues, and options. A treasure chest containing a map is the classic example of a continuation option. Nobody's forced to do anything, but the link to another adventure is made clearly available.

Locations

Approach No. 1: Overview Approach

Tables 1-1A and 1-1B are simply alternates for each other: they provide an overall description of the location, and something/someone that either currently occupies the location -- or that once gave the location its name, but is not necessarily still there.

Table 1-1A: Locations (Overview)

Die Roll	Structure's Description (1d100)	Structure (1d100)	Feature - first word (1d100)	Feature - second word (1d100)
01	Adamantine	Abbey of the	Ant-	Abbot
02	Aerial	Aerie of the	Ape-	Actor
03	Amphibious	Asylum of the	Baboon-	Alchemist
04	Ancient	Aviary of the	Bat-	Altar
05	Arachnid	Barracks of the	Beetle-	Apparition
06	Astrological	Bastion of the	Bitter	Apprentice
07	Asymmetrical	Bazaar of the	Blood	Assassin
08	Bizarre	Bluffs of the	Bone-	Beast
09	Black	Brewery of the	Brain	Behemoth
10	Bleak	Bridge of the	Broken	Binder
11	Blue	Cairn of the	Bronze	Bishop
12	Bronze	Canyon of the	Burned	Breeder
13	Buried	Carnival of the	Cabalistic	Brood
14	Celestial	Castle of the	Carnal	Brotherhood
15	Circuitous	Cathedral of the	Caterpillar-	Burrower
16	Circular	Cellars of the	Centipede-	Caller
17	Clay	Chapel of the	Changing	Captive
18	Coiled	Chapterhouse of the	Chaos-	Ceremony
19	Collapsing	Church of the	Cloud-	Chalice
20	Concealed	City of the	Cockroach-	Changeling
21	Contaminated	Cliffs of the	Crimson	Chanter
22	Convoluted	Cloister of the	Crippled	Circlet
23	Corroded	Cocoon of the	Crocodile-	Clan
24	Criminal	Coliseum of the	Dark	Collector
25	Crimson	Contrivance of the	Death-	Combiner
26	Crooked	Cottage of the	Decayed	Congregation
27	Crude	Court of the	Deceitful	Coronet
28	Crumbling	Crags of the	Deluded	Crafter
29	Crystalline	Craters of the	Dinosaur-	Crawler
30	Curious	Crypt of the	Diseased	Creator
31	Cursed	Demi-plane of the	Dragonfly-	Creature
32	Cyclopean	Dens of the	Dread	Crown
33	Decaying	Dimension of the	Elemental	Cult
34	Deceptive	Domain of the	Elephant-	Cultists
35	Decomposing	Dome of the	Feathered	Daughter
36	Defiled	Dungeons of the	Fiery	Demon

Table 1-1A: Locations (Overview) Continued

Die Roll	Structure's Description (1d100)	Structure (1d100)	Feature - first word (1d100)	Feature - second word (1d100)
37	Demolished	Dwelling of the	Flame	Device
38	Demonic	Edifice of the	Flying	Dreamer
39	Desolate	Fane of the	Ghostly	Druid
40	Destroyed	Farm of the	Gluttonous	Egg
41	Devious	Forest of the	Gnarled	Emissary
42	Diamond	Forge of the	Half-breed	Emperor
43	Dilapidated	Fortress of the	Heart-	Executioner
44	Disorienting	Foundry of the	Hive	Exile
45	Divided	Galleon of the	Hollow	Experimenter
46	Dormant	Galleries of the	Horned	Eye
47	Double	Garden of the	Howling	Father
48	Dream-	Garrison of the	Hunchback	Gatherer
49	Earthen	Generator of the	Hyena-	God
50	Ebony	Glade of the	Ice	Goddess
51	Eldritch	Globe of the	Immoral	Golem
52	Elliptical	Grotto of the	Immortal	Grail
53	Enchanted	Hall of the	Imprisoned	Guardian
54	Enclosed	Halls of the	Insane	Head
55	Entombed	Harbor of the	Insatiable	Horde
56	Eroding	Hatcheries of the	Iron	Hunter
57	Ethereal	Haven of the	Jackal-	Hunters
58	Fertile	Hill of the	Jade	Hybrid
59	Fortified	Hive of the	Jewel	Idol
60	Fortress-	Holt of the	Leech-	Jailer
61	Glittering	House of the	Legendary	Keeper
62	Grey	Hut of the	Leopard-	Killer
63	Hidden	Island of the	Lesser	King
64	High	Isles of the	Lion-	Knight
65	Invulnerable	Jungle of the	Loathsome	Lich
66	Isolated	Keep of the	Lunar	Lord
67	Labyrinthine	Kennels of the	Mad	Mage
68	Living	Labyrinth of the	Mammoth-	Magician
69	Moaning	Lair of the	Man-eating	Maker
70	Mud-	Lighthouse of the	Mantis-	Master
71	Octagonal	Lodgings of the	Many-legged	Monks
72	Painted	Manse of the	Mist-	Mother
73	Pearly	Mansion of the	Monkey-	People
74	Pod-	Marsh of the	Moth-	Priest
75	Poisoned	Maze of the	Mutant	Priesthood
76	Quaking	Megalith of the	Ooze	Prince
77	Remade	Mill of the	Outlawed	Princess
78	Ruined	Mines of the	Polluted	Puppet
79	Rune-	Monastery of the	Rat-	Reaver
80	Sea-swept	Monolith of the	Reawakened	Resurrectionist
81	Silent	Mounds of the	Resurrected	Scholar
82	Spiraling	Necropolis of the	Sabertooth	Seed
83	Star-	Nest of the	Scarlet	Shaper

Table 1-1A: Locations (Overview) Continued

Die Roll	Structure's Description (1d100)	Structure (1d100)	Feature - first word (1d100)	Feature - second word (1d100)
84	Storm-tossed	Obelisk of the	Scorched	Sisterhood
85	Sub-	Outpost of the	Secret	Slitherer
86	Sunken	Pagoda of the	Shadow	Society
87	Tall	Palace of the	Shattered	Son
88	Temporal	Pavilion of the	Skeletal	Sorcerer
89	Three-Part	Pits of the	Slave	Sorceress
90	Titanic	Prison of the	Slime-	Spawn
91	Towering	Pyramid of the	Slug-	Star
92	Toxic	Rift of the	Snail-	Statue
93	Treasure-	Sanctuary of the	Snake-	Surgeon
94	Triangular	Sanctum of the	Twisted	Tree
95	Unearthed	Shrine of the	Undead	Tribe
96	Unfinished	Spire of the	Unholy	Walker
97	Unnatural	Stockades of the	Unseen	Warlord
98	Urban	Stronghold of the	Wasp-	Weaver
99	Watery	Tower of the	Worm-	Whisperer
100	Wooden	Zeppelin of the	Zombie	Wizard

Table 1-1B: Locations (Overview)

Die Roll	Structure's Description (1d100)	Structure (1d100)	Feature - First Word (1d100)	Feature -Second Word (1d100) (Put Preference on the Singular)
01	Airborne	Abbey of the	Ant-	Artifact
02	Aromatic	Aerie of the	Armored	Assassin
03	Azure	Asylum of the	Army of the	Automaton
04	Belowground	Aviary of the	Artificial	Basilisk
05	Black	Barracks of the	Bandit	Bat(s)
06	Blue	Bastion of the	Bear	Beast
07	Bone-	Bazaar of the	Bone-	Behemoth
08	Breathing	Bluffs of the	Brain-	Berserker(s)
09	Brooding	Bridge of the	Breeding	Cannibal
10	Bubbling	Cairn of the	Bronze	Centaur
11	Calcified	Canyon of the	Centipede-	Chieftain of Goblins
12	Cliff-	Carnival of the	Clan of the	Chimera
13	Coastal	Castle of the	Cloned	Cleric
14	Concealed	Cathedral of the	Cloud-	Cockatrice
15	Conquered	Cellars of the	Conjoined	Colossus
16	Contemplation-	Chapel of the	Crocodile-	Creature
17	Crimson	Church of the	Cursed	Cyclops
18	Cruel	City of the	Dark	Demigod
19	Cryptic	Cliffs of the	Decayed	Demon
20	Cunning	Cloister of the	Deceitful	Displacer
21	Dank	Cocoon of the	Demonic	Djinni
22	Dark	Coliseum of the	Deranged	Doppelganger
23	Deadly	Contrivance of the	Diseased	Dragon
24	Deadly	Cottage of the	Elemental	Druid
25	Death-	Court of the	Enchanted	Efreet