

Beware of Dragons

Introduction

Everyone of us has written an adventure. Unfortunately most are not beware of that and the reason for this cannot be found in alcoholic beverages. Most GMs have spend much of their spare in the creation of an adventure, carefully creating scene after scene, balancing the whole plot, inventing new creatures, places and spells. Others prefer to buy ready made adventure, where almost every aspect is covered and dealt with. Another way is to use small adventure hooks or scenarios that are filled with life. All of them have something in common: They are not perfect! No matter how much time you spend on an adventure, how much money you invested in a supplement or how good you know your players, there are situations where you have to come up with your own ideas, you have to improvise. Your players are human beings and their actions can hardly be predicted (otherwise everyone would make a million on the stock exchange). This improvisation is the first step to create an adventure, although only small parts of an adventure are improvised, a huge world of new adventures are behind the veil and all that is necessary is to lift it.

Even players create adventures. Roleplaying is not a one-way-street. Instead players manipulate the world they play in - sometimes metaphorically, sometimes literally. I remember an adventure where my PC - unintentionally - killed the princes he wanted to rescue; just image all the possible adventures afterwards. These are also the first steps to create new adventures.

There are hundreds of good adventures on the market - and probably thousands of bad ones. This article is meant to show you some of the possible ways to create good adventures. It does not guarantee a good adventure and the one's that are made need constant modification during game-play. Even if you fail spectacularly, you should not hesitate to try again.

To create an adventure all you need is a pen and a pencil. A rulebook may be nice, but it is not necessary.

First steps

The first step is always the hardest. The first step involves to sit down and try. Sometimes you will have hundreds of possible ideas and none the following day. You cannot do anything against that. Even great authors had times where they could not come up with even an average idea. The best way to deal with a blockage is to do something else: Visit friends, go into a pub, watch TV, read a book, but do not try to force it. It would not work anyway. Discipline is of course another thing. When you really want to start writing an adventure, it is necessary to work on it. Work does not always involve pleasure. It also means sweat and tears. A good rule of thumb is to sit down once a week for a few hours to read what you have written, change it where necessary and develop the story a little bit further. Most adventures are not finished, because the authors just wanted to interrupt it for a while and never came back. To come up with a coherent storyline means that you need to have a more or less constant stream of thought in your head.

Some people want to have everything finished in their heads. Every encounter, every place, every character. If you are able to do this fine. Most of us, including myself, however start with little more than a rough idea.

Starting a story can be done in various ways. I guess most people start with a plot. They do have an idea what should happen. The danger of this method is that the whole thing is too much centred around the main plot. The author loves the plot so dearly that he does not want to spoil it with side plots. Adventures done in this way haven often the tendency to be too rigid, they lack flexibility. The biggest advantage of this method is that the story often has a nice climax. Since the plot the most important aspect, the authors pay much time on the progression and too keep a constant tension.

Another way to do it, is to start with a single character, generally a NPC. This often involves great clockwork like conspiracy in the background. This method has some big disadvantages. The one is, that the author becomes so fond of this main character that he/she/it appears to be omnipotent. No matter how hard the players try, it is impossible to kill or abuse him/her/it. The author often identifies himself with this character and some even feel insulted when a wit player points out some stupid action of the character. Another drawback is that the players may feel as if they are no longer able to manipulate the world. Although this feeling is fine in some scenarios, it is very difficult to maintain and most players will just get bored. A third handicap is that the mentioned clockwork conspiracies are never revealed. They may be grant and impressive, but they are worth nothing if no one is interested or if it is impossible to reveal even the tiniest bit of them. When you have built these great constructions of intrigue in the background of an adventure, the players should at least have an idea that something is going on or should be

able to reveal a small bit and makes it impossible to fully comprehend it, but possible to have an idea that something is going on. The advantage of this method is that the main character is generally fully crafted, often paralleling the PCs. Unfortunately most other characters lack this complexity and are reduced to comic style stereotypes. The X-files TV-series are a good example of this method, James Bond movies are not.

A third, and in my opinion best, method is to start in an evolutionary way. A simple character or event is the starting point and they develop the story. Let the characters develop and make small events that may eventually lead to big ones. The biggest danger of this kind of method is that it gets boring. The plot progresses and everything is nice and fine, but nothing spectacular happens. The biggest advantage is that the characters, events and places appear convincing.

A fourth method is a singular event. Although this gives a big chance for the end of the adventure, it has the tendency to be rather blatant and exaggerated in the end.

Another possible method, although I have never seen anyone using it, are maps. Probably it is just me, but I have hundreds of roleplaying maps. When I read the names I always try to imagine the place and the people living there. Therefore it may be possible to start with a map. However I only find this advisable in cases where you plan a large scale campaign and not just a single adventure.

These are nothing than possible methods. There is no golden way or perfect solution. It not only depends on your personal preference, but also on the adventure. When the adventure should take place in a city it is better to centre around a character or plot, when it takes place in the wilderness an evolutionary process may be better suited.

The first thing you have to determine before starting is the place. Not so much the exact place, but the general places. Adventures can be set in dungeons, cities or the wilderness or any combination of the three. This is personal taste and of less importance to the general approach, although the possibilities are different. When I say place here, I mean the general character of the adventure, although such character is general combined with a specific place. Some people like dungeon-bashing, but it does not have to take place in a dungeon. City here represents a low-combat setting with much investigation. Wilderness is between the two. You can very well have wilderness adventures in a dungeon and hack-and-slay in a city. A nice thing here is to surprise the players. When you send them in a dungeon everyone will be packed with extra arrows, spare swords and thick armour. Now confront them with an investigation and they will be surprised.

Which brings me to another issue: Surprise. In my opinion the most important aspect of any adventure. Clichés and stereotypes are good, but surprises are better. They are often what makes a good adventure a great adventure. Nothing is worse than an adventure that can be foreseen after the first ten minutes of play.

The mood

The general mood of an adventure is of great importance. Although some people think that it is predetermined by the game, which is why Warhammer Fantasy RP is always associated with dark fantasy and AD&D with dungeon bashing. This is false. The mood is determined by the GM and the adventure. Just because the rulebook reads of grim world, does not mean of how the adventures will look like.

Take the computer game Discworld as an example. The first part was very close to the novels, very funny and full of absurdities. Then take a look at Discworld:Noir. Totally different. If you like AD&D and want to play in a dark fantasy environment, just do it. It is not necessary to buy a new rulebook.

The general mood has a big impact on the game itself. When it takes place in a so called dark fantasy environment, the players are often much less likely to trust anyone. When you set it in a world full of powerful magic and chivalry, they are much more self-confident.

What you prefer is up to you, but it is necessary to think about the mood before the game starts. It is plainly stupid to create an adventure full of dragons, balrogs and sorcerers and then make them so powerful, that no PC can stand up against them.

Also remember that the PCs have to be aware of the general mood. Make it clear that they cannot have a "wish" every now and then or you end up with dead PC and angry players.

The Plot

The plot is difficult to make. A good rule is to keep it simple. Not that the players should be able to foresee everything. There is a huge difference between simplicity and blatancy. Shakespeare's plays are very simple: right versus wrong, good versus evil. Everyone can understand them. That is what makes them popular. You can hardly find a movie today that is not following a very simple plotline. The general theme needs to be simple. No one, not even you, is able to present an adventure with three dozens people intriguing against each other and having different aims.

Although the general theme should be simple, it is difficult to make it appear complex. You can simply add a few red herrings, but this will just distract from the plot. Take for example a very simple plot, a knight that wants to save the princess from the dragon. Quite simple. Now add a third party, that is not caught in this good versus evil battle, but whose aims partly contradict the aims of the dragon and the knight. This makes it more complex, without adding much complexity. Also remember that the simpler the plot, the easier it is to follow. Otherwise every now and then the players need to be briefed about the identity of different persons. Most amateur adventures are much too complex. They add everything they have in mind, hundreds of subplots and all their favourite characters. This is okay with a novel, but a no-no for an adventure, unless you are very good in which case you should think about selling it. If you have written an adventure count every main character and every main aim. Now compare these numbers with that of a good professional adventure (e.g. Harlequin for Shadowrun or Horror on the Orient Express for Call of Cthulhu). If you exceed the number of the professional adventure by more than five, reconsider the adventure.

A simple way to come up with a plot is to steal it. Movies or books give enough material to exploit. The difficulty however is that it should not be too obvious. Use allusions and general themes, never ever simply copy a plot or a character. There are too many "Gandalphs", "Gandafs" or "Kandafs" running around. If you for example create or flesh out a religion or cult, it is good to take a look at the various churches and cults in our world, it is bad and a sign of a lack of imagination just to copy the roman-catholic church. Don't do that unless you are really unable to come up with something new.

Also avoid extreme turns in your story. Everything changing from one side to the other is okay, but difficult. The players may feel cheated. Plot changes should never ever put the PCs at a disadvantage. That does not mean that their situation should not change, otherwise it would not be a turn. What I mean is that the players should not feel cornered.

Also avoid to bring every idea you have. Less is often more. Subplots and red herrings are good, but they are a distraction. The players not only have to think about their own characters, but also of the NPCs, while at the same time lacking your superior knowledge.

Use stereotypes and clichés. They make your life much easier. A port tavern is easier to imagine if it is greasy and run down, but hard if it has marble floors and room service. As long as you stick to clichés, you do not need a justification. Every player I know of wants to find a weak spot in an adventure, give them little chance to find one. But do not overuse clichés. Otherwise the adventure is too blatant.

An advise I can give you is to keep the plot open. It should be finished and everyone should know that the job is done. But it is a good idea to keep some threads open. The players will have interest in them, unless they are brain dead, and, if you wish, you can add further adventures with one or more thread running through all of them.

Do not try to make a funny plot. Even if you find that something is hilarious, it is not sure if the players agree. A great example is Discworld. The world has its absurdities, but it is not outright funny. Neither are the characters. The fun develops more out of absurd situation or totally strange reactions towards certain circumstances. Never ever try to force jokes, it will not be funny. Also playing a funny adventure is often quite difficult and tiring. If you are not very good at jokes in roleplaying, either avoid it at all cost or use very small doses of jokes.

Try to avoid passages that need to be read out. Although this is tempting, because it is convenient for the GM and the author can present his ideas like he wants to and not through the mouth of someone else, I think it is bad roleplaying. And bad roleplaying should not be supported by adventures or modules. If the GM has to read more than a few sentences or lines, the game gets boring. If you want to hear people read, run for parliament.

Your first adventure does not need to be epic drama. Start with small ones. They are much easier and give you better idea of what happens. You have more control about the plot.

Do not create an adventure that requires a certain class of PC or a certain skill. An adventure should be possible to play by almost any combination of skills and classes. Otherwise you restrict the possible audience too much or force the GM to introduce a NPC that supports the players actively (see below).

The villains

The villains are the spice in your soup. They transmit your ideas and the adventure. Craft them carefully, but do not hesitate to kill them if necessary. The worst villains are the Dr.Moriarty types. No matter how often and how hard you kill them, they reappear. These villains should be left for superhero comics and bad movies.

A good villain is one upon which death your players have a feeling as if they also lost something. He should be an integral part of the environment. A convincing background is good. It is vital to have an idea of the general motivations and psychological traits of the main villains, as well as of the good guys. Do not try to put the main characters into a corselet. It is better to have an open character, where you just have an idea what he will do in certain circumstances, than a closed shop that moves on definite tracks.

Development is probably the key term for all NPCs, probably with the exceptions of the absolute minor characters. Especially the main character are more convincing if they develop through the adventure, particularly in a longer adventure or campaign. A self-confident arch-villain that could kill a village with a quick flick of his wrist can become unsure about himself, after the PCs have made a few severe blows.

It is not a bad idea to abuse a minor character as a on-going joke. I remember a Shadowrun campaign, where the PCs have knocked out a ticket inspector. Later in that adventure they wanted to raid a flat in some run-down area of Seattle. Unfortunately they got a clue wrong, forced a door open and in front of them was a person with a familiar face, a broken nose and a black eye. Of course they hit him real hard with a trenchgun and later, when one of the PCs had to go to the hospital, that person reappeared, this time paralysed from the neck downwards. I use them encounters not only for entertainment, but also to provoke surprise and astonishment in my players. It is also a good way to illustrate consequences.

The NPC in general

Besides the villain there are a number of other NPCs that need attention in creating an adventure. There are basically two types: the "victims" and the "actors". The "victims" are all these NPCs that do not serve a special role: the cannon-fodder, the shopkeeper, the prison guards etc. These NPCs do not require any preparation, a number of statistics are everything you need. The only thing you have to keep in mind is that they need to fit into the environment. A village is likely to have an inn and probably a blacksmith. However it is unlikely that a shop for magical ingredients or a weaponsmith can be found there. These should better be left for the towns and cities. Also avoid placing high numbers of possible opponents, monsters or normal NPCs, in the middle of nowhere. Remember that a forest is not Highbury at the end of the season. Less is often more here.

The other type of NPCs are the "actors". They fulfil a certain role beyond being the target of skill tests in the adventure. The major villains are of course actors. The actors again come in different flavours. Some introduce the PCs into the adventure, others are key figures for solving the plot. These NPCs should be crafted with more care than the "victims". It is generally not necessary to detail every possible aspect of these NPCs. In the end they are central for the plot. However the general attitude towards the PCs and their motivations should be written down. This should be enough to give the GM enough information to improvise the rest. In the end you cannot predict any possible situation.

Some adventures do have NPCs that support the PCs active. They not only provide clues or sell equipment, but should play an active part in the adventure. Most of them will accompany the PCs and appear almost as PCs, but played by the GM. I think that they should be avoided. Most players will try to abuse them for every dangerous task and some GMs will either play them as if they contain the whole knowledge of the GM or as if they provide nothing but skills in combat. An adventure should never rely on the corporation of such a NPC. If the PCs cannot solve the adventure, either because they do not have the relevant skill or because they do not fulfil some certain precondition, throw it away or rewrite it, but do not use NPCs to add the necessary knowledge or skill. A victory will always taste bittersweet if the players had to rely on a more active role of the GM.

Captain Righteous and his crew

Trying to think of all possible movements and actions of the PCs is almost impossible. No matter how stupid an idea is, the players are likely to come up with it. The more you try to put them on definite tracks, the more likely they are to force some freedom.

You can react in either of two ways. Either leave them enough room in your adventure, in which case the danger is imminent, that the whole adventure gets boring, or let them not feel that they are following the determined track. Either works good, but the latter is much harder to accomplish.

One of the most difficult things is to get the PCs involved in an adventure. There a number of ways to do this. One is to use PCs relatives, another is a trigger event. You can let a NPC approach a PC or the group or tie it to a specific item. Since players and GMs differ tremendously there is no perfect answer. Probably the best way is to give a number of possible introductions and leave the rest for the GM to decide.

Leave loopholes! Every combat, with the exception of the big final battle, should be possible to avoid. You do not know if the PCs are still in good shape in a certain combat. They may want to avoid it, rather than risking death. Also do not try to impress the players with the amount of damage your monsters can do. Use smaller creatures, but make them more cunning. If you desperately want to use a dragon or half a dozen trolls, do it, but be very careful in doing so. The final battle, should this be the climax of your adventure, on the other hand should be challenging. No pain, no gain.

An exception to the rule above are unique characters or monsters. If you want to introduce Gothmog or Smaug, be prepared that not half the PCs make it alive. These unique entities are difficult to deal with for the GM, the players and also the author. Gothmog did not became high-captain of Angband because he could be kicked around even by powerful PCs. Thus I never use such entities in combat. Therefore I am also not quite happy when some rule supplements give combat statistics of such creatures. You as an author should not tempt the GM of using such entities.

Also use loopholes for nearly all rolls. When the PCs have to make tests, there is also the chance of failure. It is therefore quite good if they can take an alternative path that does not involve such a test. If for example the PCs pursuit a group of orcs, that have just kidnapped the uncle of one PC, they can reach a bridge, small and slippery over a deep chasm. If they want to cross it, fine. But they should also have the option to climb through the chasm or use other means to reach the other side. Such security has to cost something, in this case time, but it should be possible. There are very few situations in real life, where you do not have an alternative.

Do not use monsters or NPCs to weaken the PCs. If your adventure is too easy, modify the adventure and not stuff extra opponents into the adventure. This is poor writing. If you write an adventure for very experienced PCs it is often difficult to make it challenging. In most games experienced PCs see even Dragons as nothing but easy prey. In this case avoid combat, unless you play "Eight Balrogs to go", and replace them with riddles or other challenges that do not require skill tests.

The Place

The place is, in my opinion, the most important factor. It has much influence on the events. Much more than most people would think. In the hands of a talented GM it may send creeps down the spine. When you hear place, think of drama. Most people love it, lust for it and want to participate. No matter what kind of setting: castles, mountains, chasm, forests or cities. A certain amount of drama is never wrong. Places in roleplaying games have to be made to impress the players. They should include something different. Every street is different if you take a closer look. Do not make everything the same. Add small things that differentiate from street to street.

Clichés are again good. But do not stick too closely to them. The hundred and tenth cemetery that consists of tombstones, mist, owls and armies of zombies down below is not funny anymore. However when you write your first adventure, start with clichés; you can iron them out during playtesting (see below).

The place itself does not to be spectacular. You do not necessarily need grand castles, high mountains and deep dungeons. I generally prefer places that have a much smaller scale, both literally and metaphorically, but then you have to work on the details. You cannot cover small weaknesses with scale, they will be more obvious. Small places can be as dramatic as big places.

Buildings and all other places made to habitat sentient beings should be comfortable. Even a group of goblins will begin to furnish their cave when they stay there for more than a year. When you design houses try to make them as comfortable as possible for the inhabitants. You may be the biggest sorcerer of the realm, but sleeping on a uncomfortable bed? No way! And who would want to live permanently in a damp dungeon? Just think of the arthritis.

Traps are another example. If you would construct a castle with quite a number of generally stupid servants and guards, how many traps would you place? Certainly much less after you have to replace half of your men every week, because they have run into a trap they have forgotten.

Make any house or dwelling place in accordance with the characters psychology that lives here. Furniture should match with the NPCs taste. As a rule of thumb, when you create a house, imagine if you would like to live there. If the answer is no, reconsider it.

It is vital to avoid dullness, when you create places. Every clearing has to be different. It is not necessary to make them radically different, but small differences are important. They spice up your campaign and do much to the enjoyment of the players.

Flexibility

Important! Flexibility helps the GM and the players. I remember an adventure I once played. The GM had thought it out. It was his first attempt, so he may be excused. We reached a crossroad, paths leading to the north, south and west. We took the paths west, after a hundred metres it ended on the edge of a deep chasm. So we went back and took the north paths. After a few hundred metres the forest became impenetrable. All of a sudden the crossroad has turned into a straight path.

Flexibility is certainly the task of a GM, but you can help him. When the path forks, not only describe what is on the right way, but also add some information of what awaits on the other path. A few lines will help every GM.

Timetables and fixed dates can restrict the flexibility. The advantage however is that the players are under tension and cannot fool around as they would otherwise do. Although there is no definite solution for the conflict between pressure and freedom, I advise you to use instruments of pressure (e.g. timetable, hunts, et c.) as often as possible, to avoid that the adventure loses its frame, but always keep enough room for the players to leave the path.

Which way again?

Handouts and maps?

I love them, but this is personal taste.

They can be helpful. The players have a much more direct idea of what is going on. In other words the world and its inhabitants leave traces in the real world. And last but not least most people - especially male human beings in and after their puberty - love to fiddle around with something. Although they are useful and often welcomed, do not overuse it, unless you play "Bureaucrats And Staplers" 2nd edition.

Keep in mind that handouts and maps are often the only things the GM cannot manipulate. Well he can do it, but most are too lazy. Therefore the author has to play the role of the GM in creating handouts. They are the most direct way for the author to communicate with the players. There is generally no GM that can misunderstand or bend your ideas. This is not really a problem with maps, but if letters or anything like this are used the GM has almost lost control. Therefore you have to be very careful about the choice of words and your style. Remember that you write from an omniscient point of view and little hints slip far too easy. The players have the tendency to tear every word apart that would make Lord Denning appear an amateur. They also tend to over interpret some things. This is mainly their own problem, but do not try to provoke it.

Vagueness is a good term when it comes to handouts. Misunderstanding is not. Every handout should be understandable. Don't laugh, I have seen handouts that definitely made no sense. The words should be clear and you should do your very best to built complete sentences (Note: a complete sentences generally needs a subject, a predicate and an object). Use a spell checker! Twice! Unless of course the NPC that has written the handout had some orthographical problems. For maps indicate where north is or make it clear in any other way. It is not funny to run a few days in the wrong direction before telling the players that they hold

the map upside down. In handouts with written words do not make everything crystal clear. Handouts are made to make the players think. But the possible number of interpretations should be limited. If your handout has more than three possible interpretations, you may have done something wrong.

The Consequences

Give some details of what has happened after certain actions. It is not necessary to point out that the wives of the ten guardsmen will cry their eyes out after their husbands have been slain by a group of overly enthusiastic strangers with pointed objects. The GM should however be given some ideas of what happened after the adventure and certain key events. If, for example, the PCs have caused a major inflation, because they discovered the long lost dwarven gold mine, this should be exploited. At least it should be mentioned.

Do not create NPCs that stand around like solitary rocks. They do have a background, even if it is not detailed and they belong to a community. Even if it is just the community of bodyguards for evil overlords.

The more you think of consequences the more convincing will be your environment.

The End of all

The final scene is what the players will discuss after everything is said and done. They will not hesitate to laugh about it. Remember that. The final battle or final action should be grand. There is nothing worse than an end that is just plain boring. Spend much time on this moment. It should be full of drama, tension and expectation. The end should be believable. Avoid "dei ex machina" and divine interventions. They players should work their butts off to reach it. If your adventure results in a great battle, try to balance it. Here is the only point where the death of PCs is no shame. If your adventure is criminological put the players under tension. The big boss is about to escape and the PCs need to chase him through the whole city in order to grab him.

Playtesting
Playtest the adventure! Often!

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