TRACY & CURTIS HICKMAN'S

X·D·M

X-TREME DUNGEON MASTERY



ILLUSTRATED BY
HOWARD TAYLER



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WRITTEN BY

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Acknowledgements

In anticipation of the loving memory of Grand Master Frank

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And especially to E. Gary Gygax* and Dave Arneson*

And for all the other creative pioneers at TSR, Inc from 1982 through 1985. I am grateful each day that you let me work next to you, play games with you and was given friendship by you. --Tracy Hickman and Curtis Hickman

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--Howard Tayler

**Gone from us but never forgotten.*

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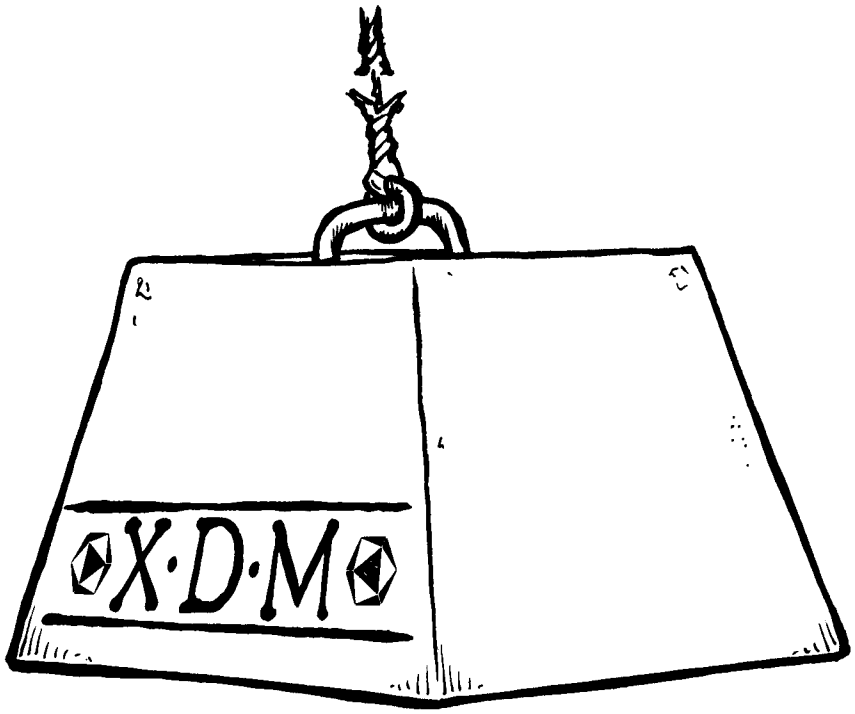
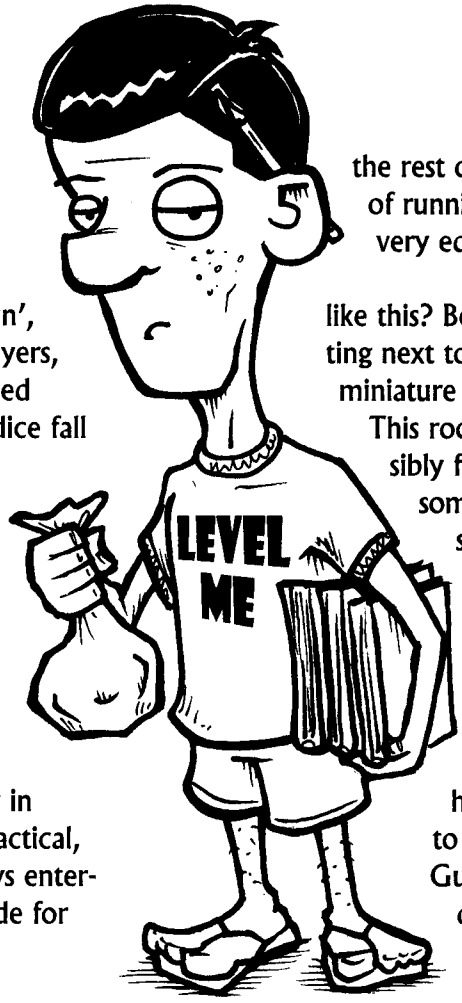




This ain't your mama's sorry, saggy old adventure supplement. We're talking the difference between 'bad' DMs and 'wicked bad' DMs. We're talking about taking your sleepy-eyed, hit-point-countin', wait-it-out-in-the-middle-of-the-party players, grabbing them by the front of their stained T-shirt and shakin' their world 'til their dice fall out.

XDM goes beyond the rule book–way beyond–with advice, tips, techniques, and ideas designed to take any complacent, sounds-like-a-stock-holders-meeting role playing adventure group and bust their game wide open. The text covers everything from radical theatrical techniques to sleight of hand and how to downright cheat if necessary in the quest of extreme fun. Sometimes practical, sometimes insanely ridiculous, and always entertaining, XDM is the Game Master's Guide for the rest of us. Taking the performance craft of running an entertaining dungeon to the very edge!

Why would anyone write a book like this? Because when we see a poor kid sitting next to a gaming table with a half-painted miniature in his hand, we think what you think. This room needs lasers. Big lasers, and possibly fire. In fact, the next time we hear some thirty-something guy with a plastic slipcover character sheet try and tell us that gaming is all about "leveling up," we may just string him up by his Velcro shoelaces. We live in an age where pyrotechnics, animatronics, and the greatest illusions in history are ready to order from our home computers–and we say it's time to use them. This is the Game Master's Guide for the rest of us. And since you didn't write it, we did.

INTRODUCTION:

Read This Even Though You Don't Want To

Being an XDM is much more than just another kind of game referee. (We scoff with hearty derision at the very idea!) It is a calling, a discipline, a mission, and a metaphor for life. It is not a path for everyone. Only the heartiest masters of roleplaying games—we few, we happy few, we band of XDMs. Gamers elsewhere who shun this calling shall think themselves accursed they were not counted among us, and hold their manhood cheap whilst any whisper the name of XDM.

You may very well ask "what qualifications these three have to teach me how to be an XDM?" The short answer is *lots*. If that's good enough for you, skip to the next few paragraphs.



Tracy Hickman ia a world renowned, best-selling fantasy author with hundreds of thousands of works to his name,[1] He is the adventure game designer of such classics as *Ravenloft* and *Dragonlance*[2] which were created in collaboration with his gorgeous, talented—and XDM in her own right—wife, Laura Hickman. His award winning efforts in the gaming community have caused many to admire him both for his skill and his hygiene. He has successfully hunted dragons in Java, is an award-winning sailplane pilot, and a conductor of the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders.[3] His amazing talent for dungeon mastering has shaped the world as we know it.[4] Anyway, what it comes down to is he has written several books—including this one. He is also a 496th level XDM (a Grand Paladin-lord Horned Dragon[5]). Laura is a 99th level XDM (a Grand Lady Pegasus) for reasons which, we would think, are obvious.

1 If you count individual words.

2 These titles are copyrighted and trademarked by Wizards of the Coast just like almost everything else in roleplaying games, or so they tell us. They are used here without permission since it is a "statement of fact" rather than an "infringement." The truth is that we don't have to put this footnote down here at all with this disclaimer except that we're enjoying using these things without the permission of Wizards of the Coast and want to call attention to the fact.

3 No, it's true! Tracy actually found and saw with his own eyes a Komodo dragon in the Surabaya Zoo in eastern Java; won the 'flour-bombing contest' at the age of seventeen in Heber, Utah while in a training glider and—being scared stiff at flying with the back window open—panicked and dropped the sack of flower, hitting the target out of sheer dumb luck; and once, as a stage hand at the Osmond Studios in Orem, Utah, lead the entire Dallas Cowboys cheerleading squad from the rehearsal hall to the sound stage, promptly embarrassing himself by getting stuck in a backdrop curtain.

4 If by "world" you take it to mean five or more members of your local roleplaying gaming group.

5 All XDMs have a numeric Level of Mastery which indicates their proficiency in XDM craft. Each level is accompanied by a descriptive name usually taken from an mythic animal and often, at higher levels, combined with titles. You'll find the XDM leveling system on page 21.)



Curtis Hickman is a respected magician (if such a thing exists) and son of Tracy Hickman. You may know him by his professional name, the Amazing Curtis. You may also see an illusion he helped innovate in the Mac King show at Harrah's in Las Vegas.[1] His other magical inventions have been seen in acts around the world including an effect recently performed by Criss Angel for his international television series "Mind Freak." He was a reviewer for a national magic magazine, and his writings have appeared in numerous publications.[2] Curtis is a reknowned 378th Level XDM (a Grand Mega-lord Taloned Griffin) who has spent the last four years training for 379th level.[3]



Howard Tayler has drawn over 15,000[4] pictures in the last nine years. Other cartoonists[5] eye his unbroken streak of daily updates at schlockmercenary.com with a mixture of jealousy and awe. He has been cartooning since June of 2000, and lately serves up over a terabyte of data to voracious readers each month. He is only a 110th-level XDM, but his cross-training in webtoonist and publisher has given him another two hundred and three effective levels bringing his total to 313th level . . . once this book has been illustrated, published, and has earned sufficient money to convince Grand Master Frank that those levels should count.

When you combine fifteen years of magical study and invention, with thirty years of fantasy game design and storytelling, with nine years of cartooning experience, you're bound to end up with something as spectacular as *Xtreme Dungeon Mastery*.

So there you have it. Three guys who love games and who are trying to give back in the best way they know how, by bringing forth the secrets of XDM gaming. In the following pages you'll find a sea of awesome things that could make your next role playing adventure a huge success. You will also find things that you would have to be completely certifiable to attempt. In fact, the publisher told us that the only way we could avoid being sued was to issue a great deal of warnings throughout the book.[6]

1 And really, there is no greater glory for a magician than to see his beloved work violently slaughtered night after night before a drunken audience of gambling senior citizens.

2 Although in some cases the library wasn't too happy about it since he wrote in them in ink.

3 Curtis notes: I blame Grand Chancellor Frank for my slow progress to level 379.

4 Counting individual panels.

5 They know who they are. We shan't embarrass them.

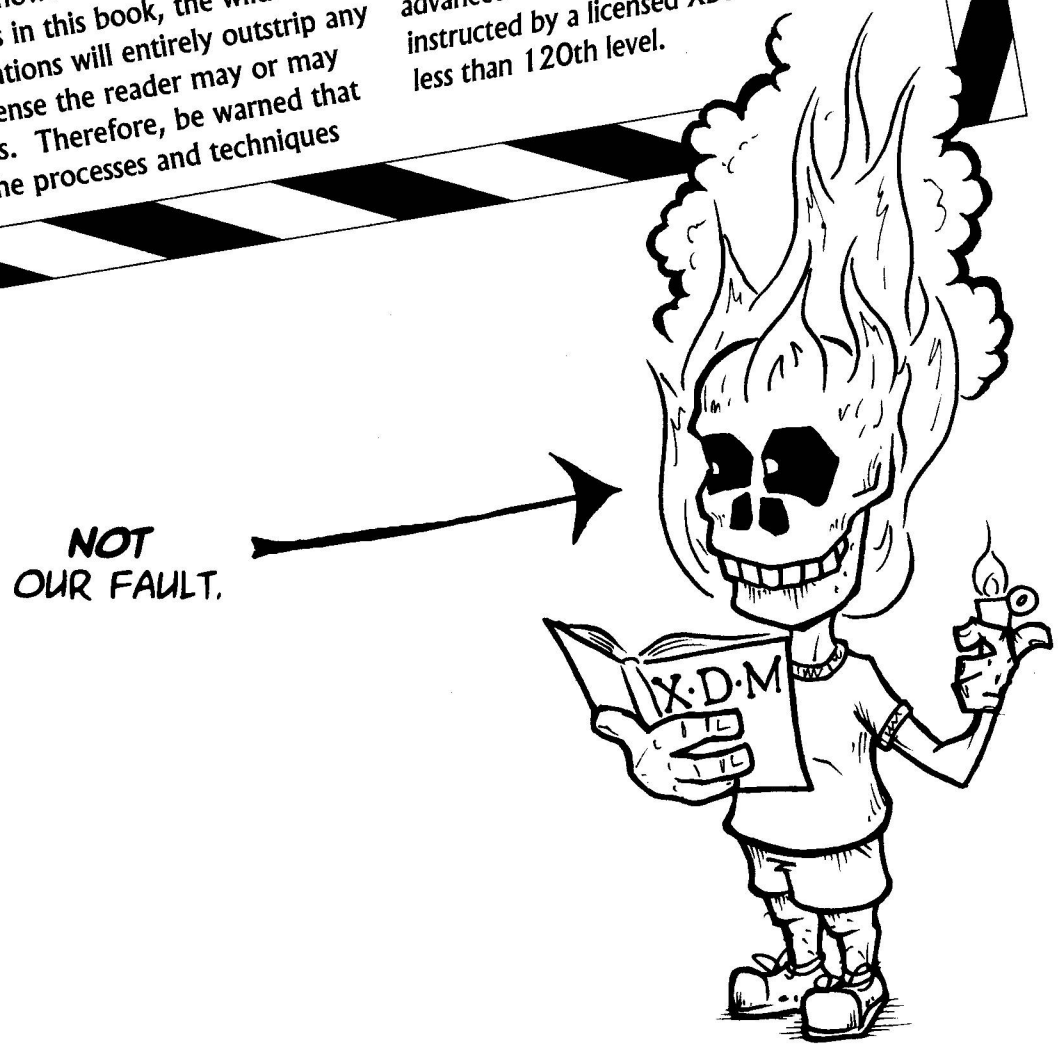
6 Warning! Reading can cause eye fatigue and over many, many years may even slightly affect your vision. Paper cuts and bruises could result from the improper handling of this book. Never read XDM materials if the book is on fire or you yourself are on fire. Also, never read this text while you are piloting an aircraft, disarming a nuclear missile, or are at a bonfire party with the Archbishop of Granada. This book *cannot* be used as a flotation device or as an alternate source of food.

DISCLAIMER

You Better Read This for Your Own Good and Our Protection

XDM is a serious undertaking and should not be entered into lightly. Many of the techniques and processes described in this book are extremely hazardous both to yourself and to others. Every effort has been made in this book to both keep you safe and keep us all out of court—one of the primary motivating factors in our cutting the "Running with Scissors LARP" section of this book.* Despite our efforts, however, we believe that in many places in this book, the wildness of our imaginations will entirely outstrip any common sense the reader may or may not possess. Therefore, be warned that many of the processes and techniques described in this book are included for entertainment value only and are not intended that you should actually build, perform, maim, or explode anything described in this book. We rely entirely on your good judgment in discerning between what is good fun in make-believe and what is downright frightening in reality ... misplaced as that judgment might be.

You should attempt to perform the advanced feats ONLY after being personally instructed by a licensed XDM Master of no less than 120th level.



* There is considerable precedent for this position. *The 'Neo-Anarchist's Cookbook,* for example, wisely omits publishing the key element in their design for a thermonuclear device—the "Accu-poach EMP Shielded Electronic Egg Timer" (Model: 675HPX, Catalog #: 2300777) currently available at most Radio Shack outlets.



The Secret History of xDMs Public Version

The Secrets of the *Société de l'Ultime Maîtres* have been closely guarded for centuries—and with good reason! Their principles shatter many of the most common assumptions about role playing games, how they should be played, and even calls into question the entire concept of leveling-up. Many consider such concepts heretical.

Such knowledge would be devastating were it to fall into the wrong hands (see "Rosenbergs" below). For this reason, the true history of *Xtreme Dungeon Mastery* has been guarded by XDM Masters down through the centuries and remains carefully maintained to this day.

What can be told, however sparsely, paints a vivid and tantalizing picture of the movement from its foundations in ancient Sumeria and Babylon, through its classical Greek revival period, its ruthless oppression under Roman law, its adaptation of Ottoman Empire and Ming Dynasty philosophies, its near extinction with the Knights Templar and exile among the Aztec states, the advent of role playing games in the 1970s, and *Xtreme Dungeon Mastery*'s resurgence in more recent times in the Utah desert.

Early Foundations of XDMs

The first rudimentary role playing games have been shrouded in the mists of ancient Sumeria and Babylon, stemming from the 24th century B.C. Fragments of writings found from those times—most prominently the *DM Shield of Kish.** Some *Société* researchers believe that the Code of Hammurabi was originally a failed attempt to codify the first role playing game.

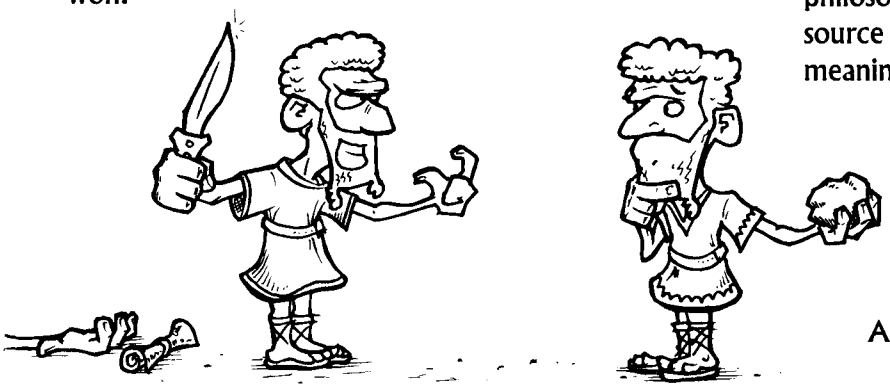
It is believed that sometime during the 12th century B.C., a young gamer by the name of Trakasi stole the *DM Shield of Kish* from the palace of the king and made changes to the rules originally laid down by Hammurabi—thus is the foundation of *Xtreme Dungeon Mastery*.

Classical Xtreme Tragedies & Comedies

By the sixth Century B.C., role playing games (backward as they were by today's standards) had

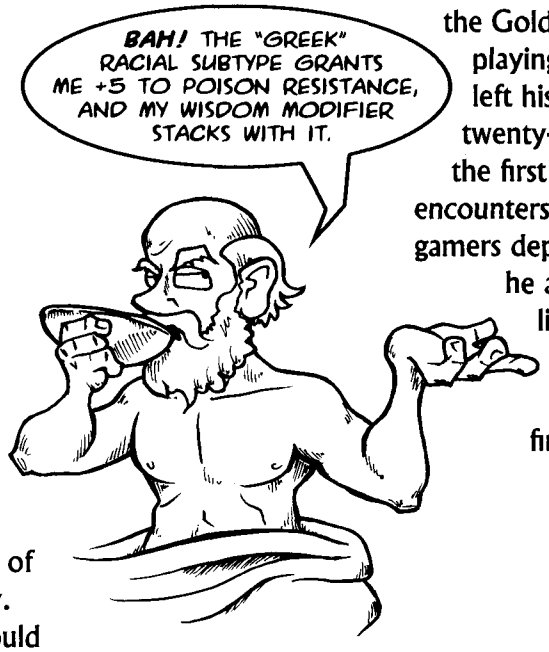
* This famous set of three stone tablets, while damaged and partial, shows rudimentary "to hit" tables and a weapons list consisting of the items "fist", "stone," "stick," "spear," and "hand-held rock flinger." This last item is considered to have been a fancifully imagined object rather than a weapon that existed.

found their way onto the Greek mainland. Kurkis of Icaria, younger brother to Thespis, brought the concept of theatrics into rudimentary *Xtreme Dungeon Mastery* games. No dice were involved in conflict resolution; rather, it is believed that a form of "Rock, Papyrus, Knife" was utilized to determine results. If surviving illustrations are credible, those holding the knife always won.



By the fourth Century B.C., Socrates, and later Plato—both involved in what was becoming the proto-XDM movement—introduced an unconventional approach to role playing originally called the "Socratic Method." The name was later misinterpreted as applying to another philosophy. With this new approach, players argued for or against fates from the gods. These games could last for months.

In the third Century B.C., Euclid provided the solution: the first polyhedral dice, which XDMs quickly adopted as being far superior to the 'knife' method.



Eastern Role Play: Birth of the Campaign

While Western gamers were struggling with the fundamentals of role playing, great advances in the art were also being made in the East which would profoundly affect the foundations of developmental *X-treme Dungeon Mastery*.

The eastern philosophies, which would later be unified into the global XDM movement, found an early proponent in Sun Tzu during the sixth century B.C. *The Art of War* is considered by all *Société* research scholars to be the first hard cover role playing game ever produced, as it was originally written on bound bamboo slats. The thirteen chapters of the book originally dealt largely with miniatures and simulation gaming but two of the last three chapters of the work–"The Nine Situations"* and "The Use of Intelligence"† brought in more role playing elements.

Quotations from Sun Tzu's work are at the philosophical heart of all XDM philosophies and the source of constant study to plumb the depths of their meaning. For example:

> *Therefore one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the most skillful. Seizing the enemy without fighting is the most skillful.*

And the XDM mantra:

> *All warfare is based on deception.*

Confucius, a popular gamer after Sun Tzu, chronicles his own experiences in role playing in his *Analects of Confucius*. Many have considered this work to be Confucius' attempt to establish a more free-form dialogue based role playing system.

About this same time–considered the Golden Age of Eastern role playing–Siddhartha Gautama left his palace at the age of twenty-nine to attend one of the first gaming conventions. His encounters with poor and decaying gamers depressed him so much that he abandoned his previous life to embark on a journey toward enlightenment. In so doing, he produced the first campaign setting.

* This chapter is considered the first adventure module.

† This chapter in particular deals with the role of the 'Intelligence' or 'Wisdom' statistic in gaming although its use was so bound up in eastern philosophy that general gamers still do not understand it's proper usages.

The Colloseum of Rome: Early LARPs

The rise of the prominence of the Roman Republic meant that the center of role playing was removed from its philosophical roots in Greece–specifically the Thracian Society of Role playing–and re-established as the Warriors of the Codex westward in Rome.

As the Empire grew, some regions accepted RPGs more readily than others.* This led to the assimilation of other cultural traditions into the games of the Empire. Soon everyone was playing large-scale Live-Action Role playing games (the first LARPs). These generated such interest among the general populace that grand and magnificent arenas and coliseums were erected throughout the Republic to contain the spectators of these LARPs. Unfortunately, while still in their primitive form, the games had some early issues with conflict resolution and determining just how real to make the combat results. This was especially difficult in the "Christians & Lions" LARP, where early playtests failed to resolve some inherent game balance problems.



* The Roman motto atop many of its battle standards read "S.P.Q.R." which has been historically misinterpreted to mean *"Senatus Populus Que Romanus"* or "The Senate and the People of Rome." XDM scholars have recently discovered that this inscription found on the Arch of Titus just southeast of the Colloseum of Rome actually was interpreted as *"Simulo Personae Qua Regulae." Simulo* (to make like) *Personae* (role of an actor) *Qua* (by way of) *Regulae* (a rule, pattern or model). Thus, the new and secret rendering of S.P.Q.R. known only to XDM insiders like you is better rendered in English as 'We role play by our own rules!"

The XDMs Templar

After the collapse of the Roman Empire and the rule of Constantine the Great, the center of all Western power shifted to the Catholic Church, whose influence over the courts of Europe was often absolute.

It was not until about 1132 A.D. that a splinter group from the Knights Templar established themselves as the *"Humble Gamers Extraordinaire Who Dungeoned in Mind in the Shadow of the Temple"* or, more simply, the XDMS Templar. Initially sanctioned by the Church with an open gaming license, by 1305 A.D. Pope Clement V decided to rescind all open gaming licenses and to consolidate all game rules back under the personal system. On Friday, the 13th of October, 1307 A.D., all XDMS Templar were arrested and their open gaming licenses revoked.

Disenfranchised, those few XDMs remaining forsook their Templar names and went into hiding. They traveled to the Far East where they adopted the Eastern *X-treme Dungeon Mastery* philosophies of Sun Tzu. They hid in Tibet, largely forgotten, until well into the 1700s. Other XDMs Templar filtered themselves in among the Masonic Orders whose secret gatherings had long been suspected as merely a façade for miniature gaming, role-playing, and cards.

The Aztecs

Little is known about early role playing games in the New World. Those few examples of RPGs that have survived the conquistadors (who, it must be understood, systematically destroyed all Mesoamerican RPG books and materials for being heretical) give only tantalizing glimpses of the possibilities presented by a few carvings on the walls of their abandoned temples. It seems clear, however, that the Aztec, Toltec, and Mayan cultures practiced a form of role playing but without a clear understanding of the concept. It appears that character death was often confused with player death in these games. True XDMs would *never* allow such confusion in their games and thus we see that these early Meso Americans cannot be considered part of the X-treme Dungeon Mastery movement's progress through history.

The Founding XDMs

The founding of the colonies in the New World by Great Britain was a natural outgrowth of numerous gaming groups who came to the American continent in search of less restrictive game rules. The British, however, were intent on maintaining the rules established in England and imposing them on the gamers in the colonies.

This all came to a dramatic head in 1773 A.D. when the British Parliament passed the Tea Act. A little-read provision of that act, as it was passed, called for the imposition of a tax on polyhedral dice imported from the Orient by the East India Trading Company. As polyhedral dice were only available through the East India Trading Company,* this was a grievous burden to colonial gamers. Their battle cry of "Taxation without representation? No dice!" was unfortunately too long to catch on with the general populace and was summarily shortened into a more catchy phrase.

No less prominent an XDM than Samuel Adams himself stood up in Old South Church and said, "This meeting can do nothing more to save the country!" This was a secret code to the Sons of Liberty–his local gaming group–to go down to the harbor in their gaming costumes and address the problem directly. The shipment of polyhedral dice had been cleverly hidden by Captain Roach of the *Dartmouth* inside bales of tea. The Xtreme Dungeon Mastery gamers threw the dice overboard and, for the sake of expedience, the tea along with it.

Société de l'Ultime Maîtres de Jeu (Maître d')

The French Monarchists often indulged in role playing games–mostly LARPs that were run on vast country estates. However, XDMs of their day were excluded from the court of Louis the XVI as being, by definition, "radicals." This gave rise the *Société de l'Ultime Maîtres de Jeu* (the Society of the Ultimate Masters of the Game). XDMs were then known as the *"Maitre 'd"*† and were systematically excluded from the courts and their excessive and extravagant gaming parties. The Society of Ultimate Masters of the Game then retreated from the public stage during the French Revolution.

Rise of the Cons

The secret history of X-treme Dungeon Mastery becomes clouded with mystery at this point. We do know that persecutions drove the movement into hiding after becoming implicated in a titanic sea disaster on April 12th, 1914.‡ Other unfortunate and unrelated events kept the XDMs hidden through the 1940s§ and into the 1950s¶. Only on rare occasions did the *Société* or the X-treme Dungeon Mastery movement become a matter of public interest. The infamous Rosenberg Trials of 1951 also involved the selling of the secret adventure mastering techniques catalogued by the *Société* to the Soviet Union but was overshadowed by the larger issues of nuclear secrets.** This lead to an XDM-gap between the Soviets and the West that was not resolved until late in the 1970's

The XDM underground movement,†† having been oppressed for decades, decided to stage protests against the government and the other "powers that be" in 1969. The most noted effort was arranging the "anti-war against XDMs" march in Washington that 15th of

* Anecdotal evidence suggests that these dice acquired by the East India Trading Company were actually manufactured by XDMS Templar in exile in the Far East.

† Game stores being difficult to run and make a profit (as always), the XDMs of the Society of Ultimate Masters of the Game often ran their gaming enterprises in conjunction with taverns, restaurants, and hostelries. This not only led to later confusion of the meaning of maitre d but also may help us understand why so many adventure games begin in taverns.

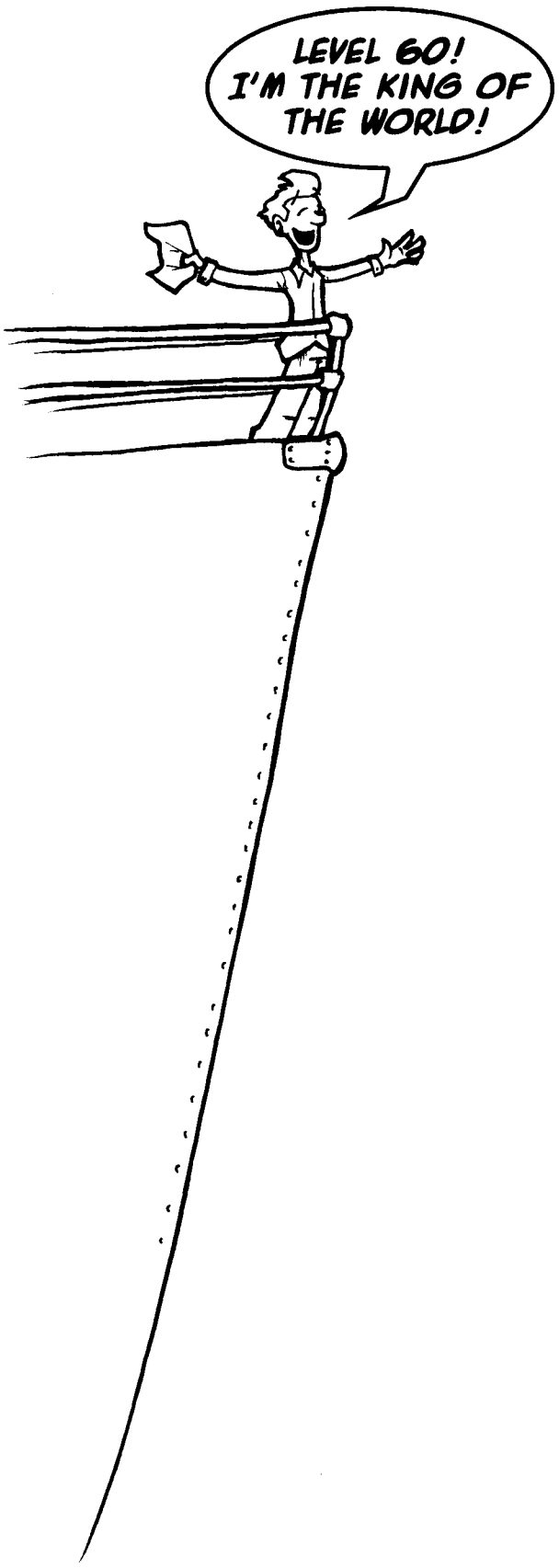
‡ It was reported that the Titanic's engine room crew thought First Officer Murdoch was just "playing that barmy game" when he ordered "all back full" from the bridge thus resulting in a delay in their response. It would have made no difference to the outcome. Still, rumors that both Fredrick Fleet and Reginald Lee were playing an RPG in the crow's nest persisted long after the court of inquiry.

§ Some said that Adolf Hitler lost a five-day *Kriegspiel* in 1938 and, in a purple rage, vowed to "prove the game was badly designed" by actually conquering the world. In a terrible miscalculation, the Wehrmacht took him up on it and plunged the world into catastrophic war.

¶ It was an ultra-classified secret that Joseph McCarthy was actually looking for XDMs.

** According to Alexandre Feklisov, the former Soviet agent who was the Rosenberg's contact, he had not provided Russia with any useful material about the *Société* or any X-treme Dungeon Mastery secrets. "[He] didn't understand anything about RPGs and couldn't help us."

†† Two guys named Larry and a taco named Hal.



November. This unfortunately coincided with another protest taking place that day.* Unbelievable as it may sound, no one among the hundreds of thousands of people there remember the two guys in the back yelling "Hell no, we won't roll."

Meanwhile, in China, the Cultural Revolution produced the *Quotations from Chairman Mao*–a little read book that was a blatant attempt by the government to stamp out wide-spread rules variants and self-published game supplements. The book imposed a specific official set of rules, from which no one was allowed to deviate. Mainland Chinese XDMs were heavily persecuted at the time because of their radical approach to role playing games which contradicted the dictates of the Cultural Revolution and the way Mao preferred to play RPGs. This continues today.†

The XDM underground continued its unheralded work, publishing their radical manifestos and manuals on mimeograph machines and Xerox sheets until Gary Gygax led an American-based team to establish the first economically viable RPG to land on store shelves. The popularity of role playing games renewed the urgent call for XDMs to emerge from their hiding places and to champion great gaming once again.

But it was not to be: by the 1980s and into the 1990s players became increasingly obsessed with more complicated rules sets, leveling up their characters and acquiring unprecedented items to overpower and unbalance their games. Regular on-the-line game referees were increasingly besieged by players who took over their games while still playing poorly, and by rules sets whose constant revisions and editions sapped their ability to run their games with a single, coherent set of rules.

It was not until 2005, when Tracy and Curtis Hickman–the secret leaders of the *Société*–determined to come forward, that the XDM movement began to emerge from the shadows. Then, in 2009, the Hickmans sold the print rights of the *Société's* most secret

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* You can imagine their excitement as half a million people turned out... followed quickly by grave disappointment and anger at Hal for choosing the date.

† If you have read the ENTIRE history of the *Société de l'Ultime Maîtres de Jeu*, you have unwittingly become an unofficial level two XDM. Congratulations, you are now at the level of "Festering Newt." We will make this official later on.

writings to the Tayler Corporation in Orem, Utah. The publisher immediately took these radical, over-the-edge, counter-culture ramblings and transformed them into a slick and commercially-viable product. While the Hickmans felt some pangs of betraying the radical ethics of the ancient *Société* in selling out to "The Man,"* they kept the money anyway† and now look forward to spreading the knowledge of XDMs across an unsuspecting world.

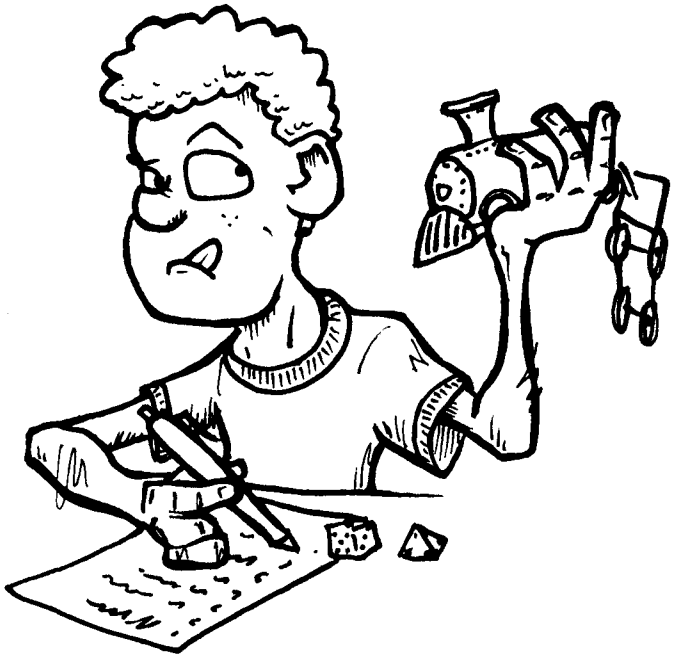


* In this case "The Man" turned out to be Sandra Tayler, the able and tireless editor, layout designer and general yeoman –or yeowoman–of The Tayler Corporation, without whose tireless efforts this book could not have been brought into being. It just doesn't sound all that tough to saying you've sold out to "The Woman."

† And we would do it again. No, we're not sell outs. Okay, maybe we are, a little.

GETTING STARTED AS AN XDM





CHAPTER ONE: IS BEING AN XDM RIGHT FOR YOU?

Is being an XDM for you? I know you've asked yourself this question dozens–if not hundreds–of times. Perhaps you saw an XDM recruitment poster and felt the stirrings of duty at the sight of the uniform. Perhaps you knew an XDM personally and thrilled to their heroic tales. Perhaps you saw a movie about XDMs and how they played a vital role in saving Western civilization during the Second World War. Perhaps you were even lucky enough to have an XDM run a game for you–and just *knew* that one day, you would be just like them!

Well, it isn't that easy, friend! Not everyone is cut out to become an XDM. Sure, it takes training and practice and lots of plain, hard work but it also takes a less definable quality–the soul of an XDM.

If you want to know if you have that inner "something" that separates an XDM from the mundane, drone-voiced DM of a common RPG. Then you can take this simple test to determine if you are cut out to wear the proud, black t-shirt of an XDM.

XDM Compatibility Test

Answer each question by selecting the multiple choice response that you believe most closely reflects your own. In the case of essay questions, answer as completely as possible in the space allotted. Scoring results are found on page 151. Do *not* refer to the scoring page before completing your responses to the test.

1. How many sides are on a dodecahedron?
   A. Two
   B. Four
   C. Six
   D. Twelve
   E. Does it matter?

2. Most of the players in your game are having a good time but one young player at the end of the table is looking distracted. You react to this by:
   A. Making fun of him and humiliating him in front of the other players in order to teach him character and backbone, the little wuss!
   B. Letting him play your computer/video games so that the rest of you more *serious* gamers can stop dragging his dead weight along in the game.
   C. Stopping the game and conducting a meaningful session with all the players about their feelings and willingness to include all members of society.
   D. Attacking his character in the game, having his enemy engage him in parley and drop hints about the next step in the game.
   E. Turning up the fog machine, lasers, sound effects, and pyrotechnics.

3. Two trains leave Chicago and New York at the same time in opposite directions on the same track which passes through Indianapolis, Indiana. The total distance of the trip is 828 miles. It is 169 miles from Chicago to Indianapolis. The train from Chicago is going east at an average speed of twelve and a half miles per hour. The train from New York travels west at an average speed of sixty-three miles per hour. Assuming you are on the Chicago train, will you be able to get off the train to attend the Gencon Game Convention before your fiery death in a head-on train collision?

A. Yes, the trains will collide after I get to Gencon.
B. No, the trains will collide before I get to Gencon.
C. Neither, the trains will collide AT Gencon.
D. I'll be fine since I always drive to Gencon to save money to buy XDM-sanctioned merchandise.
E. What's a Gencon?

4. Have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?

A. Never! Why would you even ask such a question?
B. I never stopped doubting, comrade!
C. I don't remember anything from my college years...
D. Do they play classic AD&D or Second Edition?
E. What is a communist?

5. A player in your game rolls a natural 20 on his to-hit dice and you mistakenly rule that he misses. The player jumps up from the table, quoting you the page and paragraph of the rule that says that he hits the monster. You answer him by...

A. Telling him to sit down and shut up.
B. Apologizing for the oversight and immediately correcting the problem.
C. Telling him you're a beta-tester for the upcoming rules version X+2 – which negates the rule he just quoted.
D. Telling him his character has just discovered a SECRET from the game.
E. Turn up the fog machine, lasers, sound effects and pyrotechnics.

6. Did you look at the answers before taking this test?

A. No! You told me not to at the beginning of the test!
B. I looked–but I didn't read.
C. In order to break the rules, you have to know why they exist in the first place. I'll just take the test, read the answers and then take the test again.
D. How else was I going to get all the answers I needed?
E. This was a TEST?



CHAPTER TWO: WELCOME TO THE CULT

Congratulations on your acceptance into our exclusive and secret society! Now that you've past our rigorous examinations* and have been recommended by a fellow XDM of no less that 20th level†, you are now ready to be officially inducted into our cult‡ (even though, being secretive, we *never* refer to ourselves as a cult§).

E. Gary Gygax took what existed in miniatures gaming in the 1970s–and turned it into a big deal. Since those wonderful early days of role playing games, however, it all seems to have gone stale, waiting for someone to come along and stir things up a bit. That's exactly what being an XDM is all about.

Do-it-yourself Secret Initiation Rituals

Every secret organization worth anything has their own initiation rituals. These rituals stand as guardians between the mundane players and the realms of power and magic inhabited by the XDMs.¶ (See "Threshold Crossing" on page 31.) So it is that the secrecy of these rituals, handshakes and salutes–the very symbols that identify XDMs to one another out of the mundane rabble–have been jealously kept from the knowledge of the world and passed down from XDM to XDM in private ceremonies down through the ages of time.

But since you bought the book, and in the interest of time and personal convenience, we are providing you with the new, updated do-it-yourself secret rituals and ceremonies that you can perform in the convenience of your own home, hotel room, or even a large public space filled with incredulous people!

Step 1: Complete the initiation fee New members are required to submit an initiation fee of twenty dollars ($20) in United States currency payable directly to either Tracy Hickman, Curtis Hickman, or Howard Tayler directly and in person. *Special Circumstances*: However, this initiation fee IS WAIVED COMPLETELY whenever you purchase a copy of this book from an authorized retailer** OR by purchasing any *other* XDM merchandise†† totaling more than

* Or, in other words, have finally figured out how to get the best score on the XDM Compatibility Test on page 16.

† This recommendation requirement is also fulfilled by purchasing this book.

‡ A "cult" in this case, takes the common usage as coined from 1920 onward referring to a cohesive social group and their beliefs or practices, which the surrounding population–or in this case gaming community–considers to be outside the mainstream. Yeah, baby, that's us.

§ You *never* refer to XDMs as "a cult" because it sounds too much like "occult" and most people can't tell the difference even if you explain it to them until you are blue in the face. They will instantly insist that you're telling them you're some sort of demonic worshipers, which is how Dungeons & Dragons™ got into that whole sorry nonsense in the first place.

¶ Sometimes referred to as "the Denny's off Exit 38."

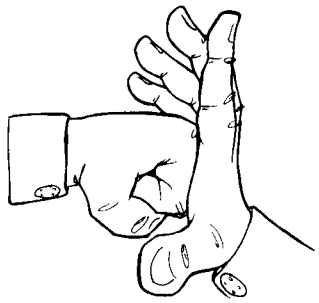
** Or out of the trunk of the author's car.

†† Available through our website at www.xtremedungeonmastery.com

twenty dollars ($20) in United States currency. If you have not already purchased this book then please do so before proceeding. Completing the do-it-yourself initiation without having fulfilled this requirement will do you *no good* and will not make you an official XDM*.

Step 2: Learn the XDM Secret Salute You give and reply to the XDM salute by performing the following: (a) Facing the other XDM (either walking or standing), bring both hands in front of your chest at about the level of your heart. (b) Open your RIGHT palm and strike it with your LEFT fist level with and in front of your heart. (c) Then immediately open your LEFT palm and strike it with your RIGHT fist in approximately the same location WHILE nodding your head sharply forward, your chin pointed down toward your hands at your chest.

You will perform this salute at all secret meetings of XDMs† and in the halls of sci-fi/fantasy or gaming conventions, where people will not consider it strange.



Step 3: Take the XDM Oath Having fulfilled the requirements of membership‡, it is time for you to take the XDM oath. This ancient oath, originally found on a scroll dating from the time of Hammurabi, has been carefully preserved by XDMS down through the ages. While the version of the oath that we know today has been retranslated into more compatible modern terms, it has nevertheless been unchanged in its essential sentiment since it was first performed anciently. Today, it is performed at the begin of all XDM Tribe meetings or official functions–usually at conventions or game stores far from the prying eyes of an unsuspecting and unsympathetic public.

This is completed by simply standing upright, feet slightly apart, performing the XDM Secret Salute (see above) and then repeating aloud the following:

I, (say your name here§) vow in a non-binding way

To exemplify the ideals of the Société of XDMs,

To run my games with extraordinary strength, courage, imagination and flair,

To màke make the game fun and exciting for everyone.

To toss out the rules when they are in the way of a good time.

To toss out dice when they are in the way of a good time.

To toss out players when they are in the way of a good time.

And to use ONLY officially sanctioned XDM game merchandise whenever such merchandise is available.

IMMEDIATELY at the end of the oath, you must perform the next step!

Step 4: Perform the secret XDM Ceremonial Dance: This is actually not a dance per se so much as a second salute. It is also used to conclude meetings of XDM tribes.

The ceremonial dance is performed by standing with your feet slightly apart, head up, and hands at your sides. (a) You then raise both hands at the same time, crossing your forearms across your chest (left arm over the right arm), forming an X with both hands in fists, at the opposite shoulder while shouting "X!" (b) Immediately push your left arm straight down to your side, keeping the left fist about a foot from your left hip, and shout, "D!" (c) Do the same with your right arm, pushing the right fist straight down until it is about one foot from the right hip as you shout out "M!" (d) Finish the move by once again raising both hands in front of your chest and

* It may also result in cursed dice rolls for an unspecified period of time in the future. You've been warned!

† If you don't know where the secret meetings are held look in the program book of your convention or fantasy/sci-fi event for a big picture and map to its location. Can't miss it.

‡ In other words, having finally *bought* something.

§ If you actually spoke the words "say your name here" rather than your own actual name, you gain one level as an XDM immediately.

performing the secret XDM Salute as described above but, at the nod, also jumping up in the air so that both feet hit the ground at the same time.

Step 5: Congratulations! You are now officially an XDM! You may now claim as yours the proud tradition of XDMs down through the ages and know that you are one of the elite gamemasters who are a cut above the rest.

XDM Levels: Why you can and players can't

Unless instructed otherwise,* all new XDMs begin at level one. This means that you have just begun on your path toward XDM enlightenment and have many glorious years of earning additional levels based on your experience and amount of money you have spent on XDM merchandise.

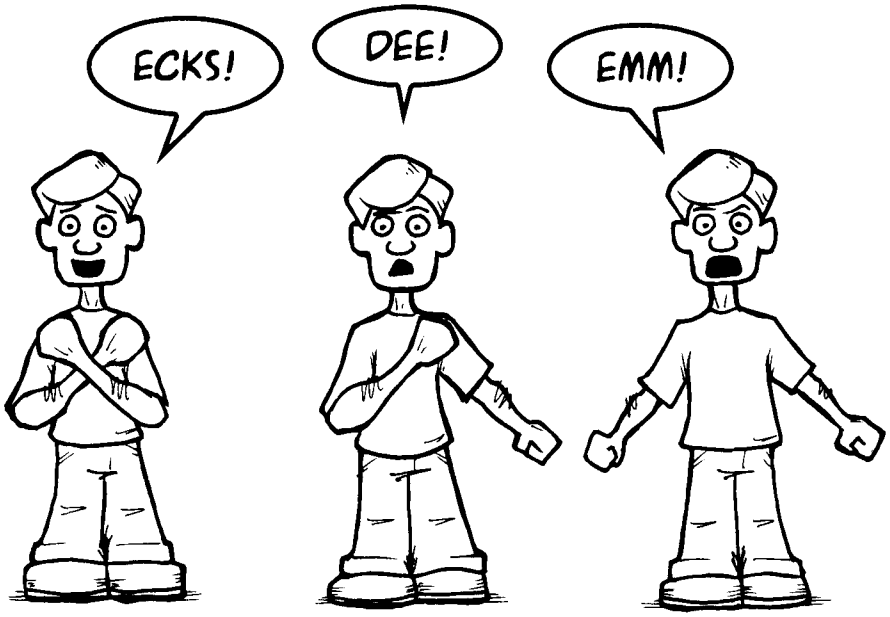
XDM levels are a means of either establishing your superiority over lesser-level XDMs or of gloating about your pure and humble status beneath the prouder, jaded higher-level XDMs. It's how we keep score, establishing the irrefutable social order among our fellow X-treme Dungeon Masters and maintaining our hierarchal leadership worldwide. Leveling XDMs keeps the world's chaos at bay.

This may strike some people as hypocritical considering the XDM's adamant stand against *players* leveling at all. (See "Character Improvement: Gaining Levels" on page 131.) The difference is that leveling characters is artificial; leveling XDMs, that's real!

All XDMs have two secret names which designate their level. You can determine what your secret level name is by referring to the following tables. To determine your level name, find your level's Aspect first and then type. Any XDM below level 10 uses the '00' type. Men and women have different (but equal) tables.

In addition there are certain titles that are reserved for the different leaders of the *Société*; Grand Master for example is reserved for those who are at the highest levels of leadership in the *Société* and thus are currently only in use by Tracy Hickman and Curtis Hickman.† Other titles include Chief, General, Number One, Emeritus, Number Two, and a few others, some of which may also be preceded by the word grand or used in combination. Howard Tayler for example is known as a "Grand Chief Number One Archduke Fanged Titan."

Since it is up to the above three Grand XDMs to determine anyone over level 100 status in the organization, it's a safe bet that they will remain the only Grand level XDMs for quite some time to come.‡



* Meaning that even as a beginning XDM you may have inadvertently leveled up.

† This will probably never change.

‡ Frank is also technically a Grand level although no one seems to remember why.

XDM Leveling Chart (Women) (Choose your levels then combine the names.)					
Hundreds	**Title**	**Tens**	**Type**	**Ones**	**Aspect**
000	--	00	Newt	0	Wet
100	Duchess	10	Pixie	1	Nub
200	Lady	20	Fae	2	Festering
300	Mega-Lady	30	Dwarf	3	Lurching
400	Paladin-Lady	40	Selkie	4	Flashing
500	*	50	Elf	5	Shining
600	*	60	Dryad	6	Horned
700	*	70	Siren	7	Fanged
800	*	80	Unicorn	8	Taloned
900	*	90	Pegasus	9	Flaming

XDM Leveling Chart (Men) (Choose your levels then combine the names.)					
Hundreds	**Title**	**Tens**	**Type**	**Ones**	**Aspect**
000	--	00	Newt	0	Wet
100	Archduke	10	Kobold	1	Nub
200	Lord	20	Gargoyle	2	Festering
300	Mega-Lord	30	Dwarf	3	Lurching
400	Paladin-Lord	40	Manticore	4	Flashing
500	*	50	Elf	5	Shining
600	*	60	Griffon	6	Horned
700	*	70	Sphinx	7	Fanged
800	*	80	Titan	8	Taloned
900	*	90	Dragon	9	Flaming

Levels above 400 are secret and the exact progression of these levels, the criteria for advancement, and the names of each of the levels is a closely guarded secret of XDMs and may only be known or discussed by those XDMs who attain Grand Master status. It's that or we haven't made up our minds about it yet ... but YOU'LL never know!

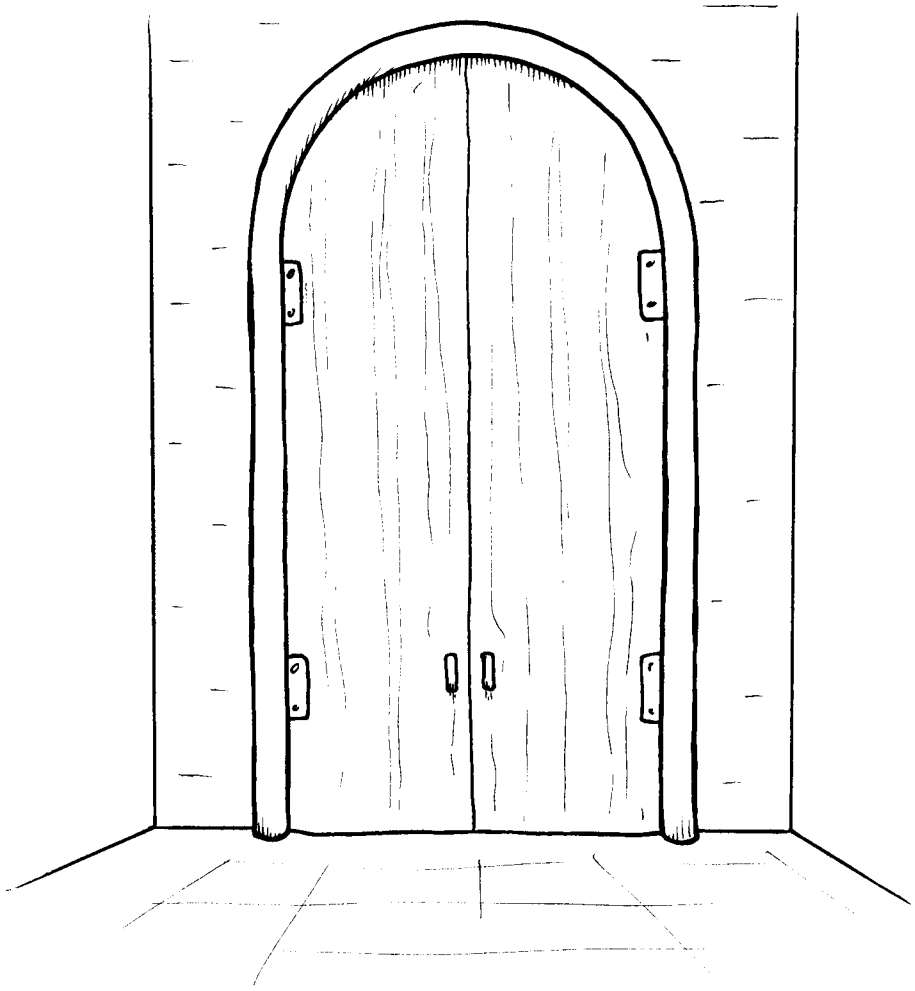
An XDM...

- Makes an effort to make the game fun and exciting for everyone.
- Tosses out the rules when they are in the way of a good time.
- Tosses out the dice when they are in the way of a good time.
- Tosses out the players when they are in the way of a good time.
- Paints the picture with style! (Show, don't tell.)
- Never cheats the players!
- Makes up the rules when necassary.
- Listens to his/her audience!
- Knows that the better the prep, the better the game.
- Always knows where the exit is, and keeps it handy.
- Uses stagecraft, pyrotechnics, sleight-of-hand, AND lasers!
- Plays out ALL consequences.
- Plays out ethics until the players squeal!
- Knows the difference between a good story and a bad joke.
- And . . . uses ONLY officially sanctioned XDM black t-shirts, jeans, dice, and protective gear.

An XDM NEVER...

- Caves in to ANY rules-lawyering.
- Backs down from a call: the 'No, pigs can actually fly here' rule.
- Reads aloud from the adventure description text.
- Refers to the rules book . . . EVER!
- Makes up the adventure as it goes.
- Starts a fire they cannot put out.
- Saws anyone in half they cannot put back together.
- Allows players to make simulated damage real.
- Listens to the voices . . . the terrible voices in your head . . .
- And . . . uses ANYTHING but officially sanctioned XDM black t-shirts, jeans, dice, and protective gear.

The Theory of XDM





Chapter Three: It's About the Players

Every XDM knows in their heart of hearts that role playing is about the players. If you're one of those adventure game masters who believes that running a game for your friends is an exercise in demonstrating how very much smarter you are than all of them, how powerful you are as a game referee, and the smug satisfaction that they have to do what you say. . . in short, if being a game referee is all about *you,* then you're just the kind of guy or gal we want as a *player* in an XDM game. On the other hand, if we catch you actually trying to *run* a game, we feel perfectly justified in taking you down some back alley somewhere and beating you senseless with a rubber dodecahedron.

Put more simply still, game masters who think that running a game is all about themselves are scum that should be banished to whatever dark plane of existence they have created for the suffering torment of their hapless players.

Power trips, self aggrandizement, nerd revenge ... a true XDM cares not for such things.

What a *true* XDM thinks about is how to give the biggest, killer performance of a dungeon the world has ever seen!

Player Types

In order to transcend the typical, dreadful game master, you must first attain a zen state while meditating on your players. You will come to discover, as have so many XDMs before you, that there are basically three types of players you will encounter during the running of your game. These are the three "Spirits of the Player" and familiarity with them is the key to achieving the XDM experience in your game.*

Warrior Player

"If it moves, kill it. If it doesn't move, kick it 'til it moves. Take its stuff. Buy bigger weapons. Kill bigger things."



The warrior player is all about combat. They love to pit their character and his arsenal

* Perhaps you object philosophically to the gross generalization of all players into three types as a kind of gamer profiling. Well, if you do, then you just lost a level! We worked hard on this part of the text, under an extreme deadline of our own. And these *are* the types of players you're going to find in games, so just get over it. And lose another level while you're at it.

of death against any and all monsters that come their way. If your entire party of adventurers were made up of this type of gamer, all you would need is to put them in the Interplane Arena of Death Matches and push at them a never-ending succession of creatures to bash. Logic need not apply outside of the combat rules. Setting is irrelevant unless it means more combat. Dice rolling, cheering, and testosterone are the primary elements for this type of game.

Social Player

"If it moves, talk to it. If it doesn't move, talk ABOUT it. Stay in character and speak with an affected voice."



The social player is all about putting the "role" into role playing. They sometimes attend games in costume and may have an extensive wardrobe dedicated to their player characters. If you happen to have an entire party of these social adventurers, your best move is to set them in a colorful tavern, get them all talking to each other in character and then go out for pizza. Odds are that they will *still* be talking to each other entirely in character when you get back. Campaign settings are their dream. Bad versions of old English and unrecognizable (and frequently shifting) accents are hallmarks of the social player.

Thinking Player:

"If it moves, how can I use that to help me win? If it doesn't move, how can I use that to help me win? The world is full of obstacles between me and winning, and I'll use whatever strategy I need to overcome them."

The thinking player is all about *winning*. Think type-A, driven personality armed with lethal weapons. Adventurers of this type do not just need a perceivable goal to win, they *demand* it. These gamers often think of themselves as "true gamers" and seem obsessed with "getting on" with the adventure. They hate campaign games that have a setting but no definable goal.



Giving such players a clear objective is not enough. They must constantly be reassured, during the game, that they are making progress. They are always voted Most Likely to Ask "What's Next?" If you have an entire group of these players, you need to provide them with a clear objective, puzzles, and obstacles along the way. You have to find some way to make them think they are extremely clever regardless of the intelligence of either the player *or* the character they are playing.

Fulfilling Elements of Game Design

If there were only one type of player or another forming your gaming group, then designing your adventure would be so much simpler. But, as your mother probably told you, "life isn't fair. Even if your games have to be balanced."* Your gaming group isn't going to be made up of any one particular type of player. You're going to have a couple of warrior types, two or three social players, and a few thinking players all jumbled together in your game group, each of them–to one degree or another–wanting something entirely different out of their gaming experience. Complicating this further is the fact that no single player actually fits into any one of these types completely. Each gamer will probably be a composite of all three in varying degrees.†

In a practical sense, any adventure game needs to address all three elements: combat, role playing, and problem solving, both in the design and in the execution of play. It also means that all three elements need

* If your mother didn't tell you this, then you obviously were missing something in your upbringing. Maybe she just shortened it for you.

† There ... are you 'profiler' people happy now? Lose another level.

to be available during the game at any given time. Let's take a look at each of these in turn.

Putting It All on the Page

When we're talking about game design here, we're actually talking about the design of the adventure itself–not the rules by which you are playing the game. All decent RPG games have rules about how to hit stuff, how to damage stuff, how to talk to stuff, and how to think through stuff. And, what's more, all of that is included in our very own XD20 RPG system at the back of this very book, so you're already covered on that score.

And we're not talking yet about how to organize your entire adventure; that's advanced structural theory which you will not be mentally prepared to receive until at least two chapters from now. Let's just start with the basic content of encounters in your adventure.

The real trick is designing an *adventure* with encounters that make proper use of all of those elements and provides the XDM with the ammo–I mean, tools–that they need to create killer adventure encounters that engage *all* types of players. Not *every* encounter needs to have all three elements (although it's great if they do). But all three elements need to be available within reasonable proximity.

Every encounter area in the game needs to provide an answer to the following questions:

What can I bash or break here?

Is there something here that I can smack down with my biggest weapon? You need to provide something that the players can beat up on, or likely as not, be beaten up *by*. This does not have to be present in every particular encounter, but the opportunity for it does need to exist–either through a random encounter or wandering monster table; or perhaps a nearby location from which creatures can be attracted by the sounds of the blundering antics of your players.

Also, don't forget the importance of suspense ... sometimes the anticipation of combat makes any later combat all that much better. Players need to feel the threat of doom all around them, even if that doom is just in the way you describe the adventure location.

Whatever you do, however, be sure to include SOMETHING nearby on which your players can vent their physical frustrations inside the game.

What here will say something to me?

This is a lot trickier than it sounds. It isn't limited to creatures that will engage your players in dialogue (although that certainly fills the bill) but can also be some aspect of *story* that appeals to the romance of your players.



Think also in terms of some patron of the arts standing in an art gallery and musing over what this painting "says" to them. If there isn't anyone in the room worth talking to, then there needs to be something in the area worth talking *about*. Consider, for example, what would happen if the group found lying on the ground in a room, a page torn from a logbook. The page is barely legible, but it tells of a former adventurer whose party had come this way and nearly met their doom. The group looks around and finds the bones and rusted equipment of what looks to be the members of a long-dead adventure party. Then, in a succession of rooms afterward, you find an occasional additional page, each one hastily written, torn and tossed to the ground.

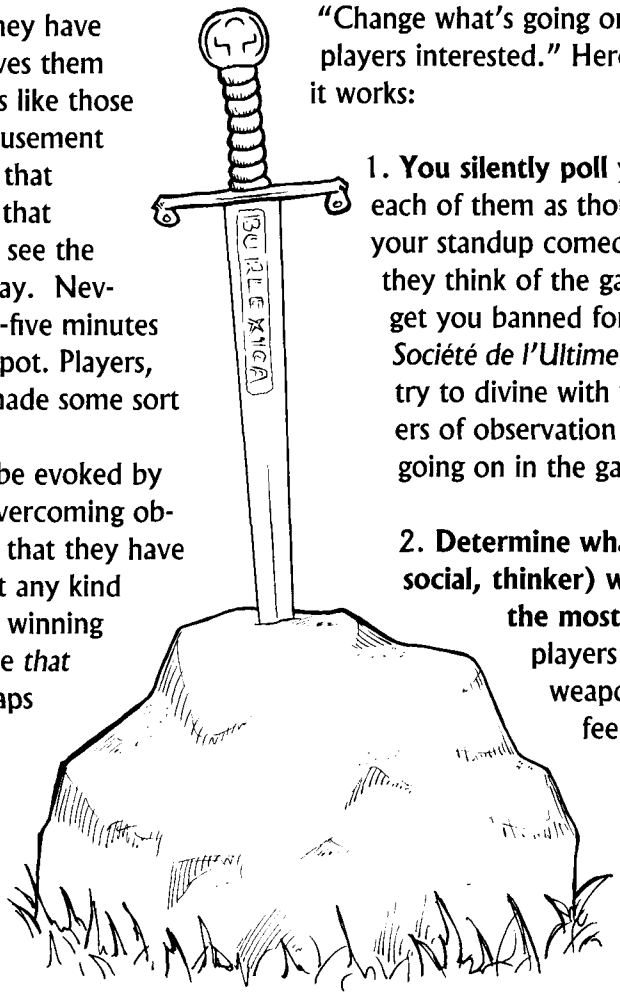
The romantic idea of this previous adventurer–his past and his fate–can not only satisfy the needs of

a social player, but will often result in training your players to follow the breadcrumbs of these pieces of paper right into some extremely elaborate trap.

Which reminds me that you also have to learn the romantic power of *not* telling your characters everything. You have to leave them with some mystery in order to keep them coming back for more. (See "Romancing the Castle on the Distant Hill" on page 34.)

What here brings us closer to winning?

Something in each encounter needs to give the players the feeling that they have accomplished something that moves them closer to the end of the game. It's like those long back and forth queues at amusement parks. They give you the illusion that you are making progress in a line that "isn't that long" because you can see the end of it just a few dozen feet away. Never mind that it will take you forty-five minutes to actually *arrive* at that magical spot. Players, too, need to feel like they have made some sort of progress in the game.



This feeling of progress can be evoked by *many* different kinds of things. Overcoming obstacles is one. Players always feel that they have made progress when they get past any kind of obstruction between them and winning the game. (Whatever they believe *that* to entail.) Puzzles, riddles, and traps are all good answers to this question because they are obvious obstacles that must be solved to continue on to the goal.

Sometimes this can be the physical layout of the adventure itself ("We're nearly a mile underground. We must be getting close!") Or sometimes the environment can give you these clues ("It's getting hotter in here. We must be getting close!"). Adventure structures designed for story (see "Narrative Bumper Pool" on page 44) can naturally give the players the sense of movement through the medium of plot arc.

Keep this in mind as you construct your adventure: The thinking players all want to feel like they are making progress that they can put on a chart.

Executing it all in the game: Polling and Juggling

All well and good to have these things in your game design but what do you do with them in the "real world" of playing the game?

Well, we recommend juggling.*

In this case, we also call this the "flying emphasis" which is an *X-treme Dungeon Mastery* way of saying "Change what's going on in the game to keep the players interested." Here, by way of example, is how it works:

1. **You silently poll your players** by looking at each of them as though they were an audience at your standup comedy act. Don't *ask* them what they think of the game–that would be crass and get you banned for several months from the *Société de l'Ultime Maîtres*–but *look* at them and try to divine with your inestimable XDM powers of observation how they feel about what is going on in the game right now.

2. **Determine what kind of event (warrior, social, thinker) will benefit your players the most.** You determine that your players who most like to grab their weapons and attack something are feeling a bit listless, so ...

3. **Execute the type of event that your players need.** Suddenly, they are attacked by marauding pirates! Sabers clash and the sounds of battle fill the air...

4. **Repeat the process ad infinitum.** Your warrior players are pretty happy with the outcome of the furious battle but now your social players aren't

* No, not that kind of juggling ... although we DO recommend juggling on page 83, but that's not the kind of juggling we're talking about here.

looking as interested in what's going on, so . . .one of the vanquished pirates is only *mostly* dead! He is gasping for air, cursing the day he became a pirate, and that dark day when he was captured while sailing back to visit his sick mother. Now the social players all are excited to hear this tragic tale, but the thinking players are wondering what all of this has to do with their mission to rescue the princess from the seaside tower. So now the mostly dead pirate gasps. "I alone was entrusted with knowledge of the *secret entrance* to the seaside tower." Suddenly, the thinking players are in the game again.



The point here is to have all these elements at hand and then emphasize whichever element of the game the players are most lacking at any given time. By having all three elements available, and being willing to emphasis each of them as necessary, you will have players at your table who are always engaged, excited, and participating.



CHAPTER FOUR: STORY IS EVERYTHING!

Tracy's first encounter with adventures was back in the dawn of role playing games. In those days, adventure settings were largely underground ruins, whose architecture was very wide and not particularly vertical; something of a ranch-style design in ancient architecture. And, again, in those days you didn't have to delve particularly deep before you encountered a monster that made absolutely no sense being there.

It was during those primal days that Laura Hickman suggested that a game should be built that made sense–if there was a vampire in the dungeon, then there should be a pretty good *reason* why there was a vampire in that dungeon.* More than that, there should be a *story* that underscored the adventure.

What we did not know at the time–and have since learned as one of the central secrets of the XDM movement–is that *reason* and *story* are inextricably, naturally, and unalterably linked in the foundations of the human experience.

Narrative: How We Make Sense of the Chaos

We live in a world of chaos. More and more complexity enters into our lives every day. Noise and information bombard us and conflicting data surrounds us at every turn in our lives.

The one function of our mind that helps us the most in making sense of this world of chaotic experiences is *narrative context*.

Narrative context is a process whereby our mind encodes and organizes the information in the world around us into a form that brings *meaning* to the chaos around us. Nasib Taleb in his challenging and excellent book, *The Black Swan*, calls this the "narrative fallacy." He believes that we, as human beings, mistake the self-warping and Platonifying narrative we construct for ourselves for the truth. He is partially right: this narrative map we construct for ourselves is *not* the true territory of our experience. However, story is the only means we have of making sense of the chaos around us.

Here's a little thought experiment: You're driving down the interstate. Someone in another car speeds around you, cutting you off in the flow of traffic. Suddenly, you become the valiant motorist, beset by the evil driver of the other car who has just viciously blocked your path. Every random event in your life is given meaning because everything that happens to us is put into the context of story.

This is a wonderful and convenient shorthand for us, but at the same time, if we're unaware of it, story is often used against us. In the old days, newspaper reports went out to get the "facts." Today they go out to get the "story." Every news story has a slant, which

* The direct result of this particular conversation was the adventure module now known as 'Ravenloft.'

is another way of saying that the reporting is framed as a story reflecting the particular viewpoint or judgment of the reporter. Since the reporter frames the story for meaning, that is the only interpretation that is given to us. In a way, framing the news prethinks the event for us because the reporter has already sorted through the facts, discarded what she thinks is irrelevant and only presents relevant information.

This is equally true of current politics in the United States. While we live in a free society, what we think and how we think about it is largely shaped by the information that we get. We all want to make an informed decision, but how informed can we be when all of our information comes from a limited number of news sources. Particularly if they all share information with each other and each of them is more focused on profit than information? We are all free to make our own decisions–but if the information on which we base those decisions is carefully selected and presented to us in the "pre-thought for you" form of a story, then how much of an informed decision can we make?

The point here is that story is a *powerful* framework which communicates meaning. A properly presented story, even if it's only a myth, can be far more persuasive than any pile of facts no matter how carefully checked. We will believe the story *is* the truth much quicker than any pile of data. That is why politicians avoid facts as much as possible and try to sell you a story, a dream, a vision, or anything resembling mythology. More people believe Oliver Stone's movie *JFK* to be the true history of the Kennedy assassination than those who have any understanding of the true history of the event.* Whoever controls the *story*, controls the *people*.

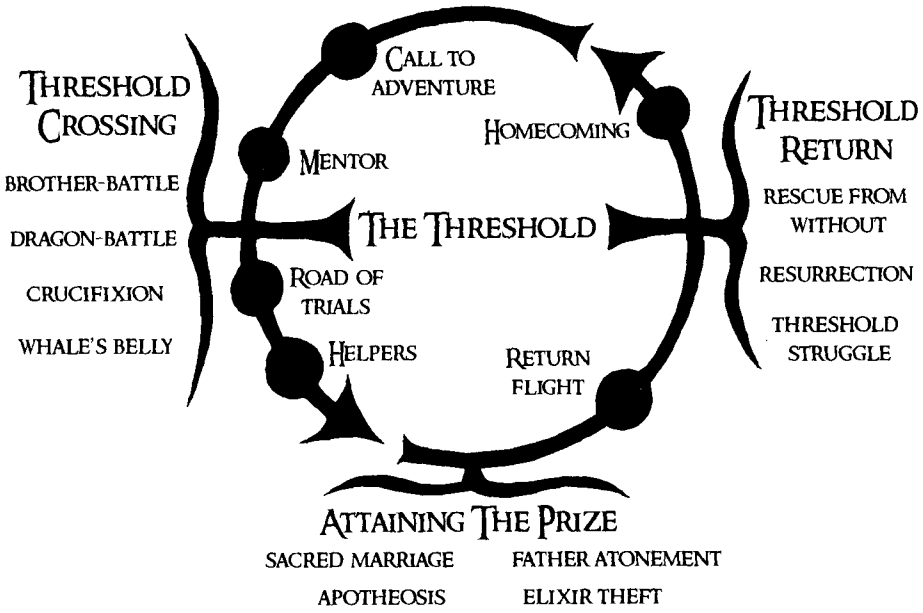
Or, in our case, the game.

Here is your crash course in the structure of the epic story. Use it wisely.

* History is full of false stories told to simplify reality. Captain Kidd *wasn't* an infamous pirate. Einstein was *always* a good student (especially in math). Ben Franklin's kite was *never* struck by lightning. George Washington *never* had wooden teeth and *never* cut down a cherry tree. The great pyramids of Egypt were built by Egyptian *citizens* who were well treated and *paid* (seriously). And so on...

The Campbellian Monomyth

Story is important is because this is the key to connecting with the roots of your players. Story is structure, as William Goldman says, and this structure is one that will bring life and meaning into your games. We're going to show you how to incorporate storytelling into your adventure designs in chapter five "Designing for Story," but for now it is important that you keep in mind the basic structure for the epic story as quantified by Joseph Campbell in his seminal book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. We've made a few little modifications here† but essentially it remains the Campbell model:



Call to Adventure

First comes the Call to Adventure. This happens to the hero at home–a place of comfort and familiarity. This is, perhaps, why so many adventures begin in a tavern, and I'll make no further comment on what this says about gamers.

This place may be a Kansas farmhouse, or a pleasant residence in the Shire, or your Uncle and Aunt's Vaporator farm on Tatooine.

The hero is in a place of homeostasis–reasonably content–but then something comes along that changes all of this.

† Our version will make point five past light speed.

The Mentor

Next the hero meet someone who changes everything and brings a catalyst for change into his otherwise humdrum life. This person is usually *somewhat* powerful but not omnipotent–they have to be limited in their abilities to some extent or they would just go off and fix whatever problem was at hand all by themselves and not bother with looking for a hero.

This person can be some guy named Professor Marvel roasting hot dogs out of the back of his wagon; or some grey-robed wizard known mostly as a troublemaker with great fireworks displays; or crazy old Ben Kenobi living in a mud hut whooping at the Sand People like an old guy telling kids to get off his lawn. These characters become mentors in some cases, but in all cases they provide the boot in the pants (usually figuratively) that motivates the hero of our story to get out the front door and on the path of adventure.

Threshold Crossing

This mentor then brings our hero to the threshold. This is a boundary (real or imagined) that separates the mundane world of common life from the realms of magic and power. This is usually protected by guardians who prevent the common folk from wandering into the realms of magic and power. (If any old fool could wander across the threshold whenever they wanted to, what would be the point in needing a hero?)

Crossing this threshold from the common world into the magical and powerful, can be extremely violent; as in riding a twister up into the sky, or hoping into a 'piece of junk' and hurtling skyward from Tatooine. Or it can be extremely subtle. In Peter Jackson's *The Fellowship of the Ring* movie, it is an important yet subtle moment.

Sam and Frodo are walking through a field when Sam stops and says, "If I take one more step, I'll have gone further than I've ever gone before."

It is so important that Frodo comes back and helps Sam take that next step. Together they cross from their previous lives into their new lives.

Whether it is calm or violent, this Threshold/ Boundary is an important one that separates the life before from whatever happens afterward.



Road of Trials

As the hero travels toward his goal or destiny, he is faced with trials along the way. These tests can come in a number of different forms: man vs. man, man vs. machine, man vs. self, man vs. nature, and the like. These tests are designed to keep the hero from achieving his goal either through dissuading him from his purpose, discouraging him, or barring that, flat out killing him.

The saying "That which does not kill us makes us stronger" applies here. This road of trials that our hero walks can be as evident as a yellow brick road or as obscure as the path through Cirith Ungol into Mordor. It can even require making the Kessel run in less that twelve parsecs and flying right down some trench to drop a bomb down a thermal exhaust port. Whatever the challenges or obstacles, these trials forge the hero's metal or break it.



Helpers Along the Road

Heroes on this path do not walk it alone, for there are always helpers as well as challenges. These helpers are not particularly powerful in and of themselves but they provide that extra necessary something for the hero just when they need it most.

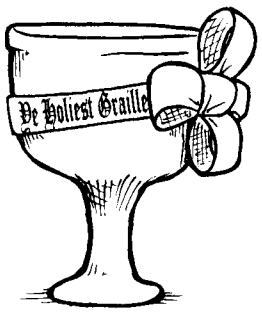
Helpers are also diverse and sometimes hard to recognize. They may even appear as enemies at first. They can be tin woodsmen, scarecrows, or cowardly lions. They can even be little dogs named Toto. Sometimes they take the form of droids or scruffy-looking nerf herders. They can be as regal as kings of the Rohirrim or as humble as hobbits. They can even be named Sméagol.

Attaining the Prize

Assuming that the trials are all overcome and the helpers are effective in their assistance, then the hero attains the prize. But this prize can be many different things.



1. **Sacred Marriage** Becoming one with God and the knowledge of God. This represents master of life.



2. **Father Atonement** Recognition by God or forgiveness. The hero reconciles the tyrant and merciful aspects of a father-like authority figure and in so doing comes to know himself.

3. **Apotheosis** Achieving the divine self or perfection. The hero's idea of himself is changed; his ego lost in something greater. This allows him to see the world from a larger point of view, allowing him to sacrifice himself to a greater cause.

4. **Obtaining the Prize** Knowledge or power of the Gods either given or taken. He is ready to receive an object or even an idea or new awareness that he set out to achieve and take it back to his community to better their lives.

These prizes are quite familiar to us if often diverse. Dorothy achieves apotheosis in so simple a phrase as "There's no place like home." Luke Skywalker deals with classic Father Atonement when at last he says, "I am a Jedi, like my father before me." Frodo ultimately *fails* his apotheosis at the very last moment–although Sam does not.

Now, a word of warning here to you all: in recent years a dreadful trend has developed in movies and on television to just *end* the story at this point. I mean, the prize has been *won* and so why bother shooting any more film? The car chase is over, the big effects shots have all blown up the sets, and all the exciting stuff has just happened. Let's just pack it in and go home to wait for the box office receipts.

But the story is only *half* finished!

Consider what is otherwise a pretty good story: the 1997 Wolfgang Petersen film *Air Force One*. This film had drama and swings in the balance of power between the terrorists and the beleaguered president Harrison Ford. The only problem for most of the film was that the arguements of Gary Oldman's terrorist character made more sense than those of the president. Then the heart of the movie evolved. A constitutional crisis erupted over whether or not the President should be relieved of his authority because he was under personal duress. Ultimately faced with the possible death of his wife and child right in front of him, our stalwart, otherwise kick-butt, Harrison Ford *does* cave in to terrorist demands. The President's vow never to negotiate with terrorists evaporates and the whole point of the 25th amendment to the United States Constitution is brought into question.

Fortunately, at the last moment, our heroic President (let's remember this *is* a fantasy) kills the terrorist; takes back the plane; and saves his family and *most* of the crew before the plane crashes in a dramatic visual effect complete with poetic justice as the traitor is the only person left aboard.

Our heroic President Harrison Ford is saved and achieves the prize.

The movie ends.

What? Just like that? What about the fact that he *did* cave in to the terrorist demands? What about the 25th Amendment and the Constitutional Crisis? Won't there be consequences for the fact that the President *failed* in his duty to protect his country and the world when they needed him most?

The point is that stories *do not* and *must not* end with attaining the prize. This is an incomplete story; a

story without consequences. Because it is an incomplete argument, it is a lie. It teaches that there are no larger consequences for characters' actions.

News reports of car chases always seems to end the same way. The (usually young) perpetrator sits in the back of a police car. The look on his face is not one of anger, rage, or even defiance–it is always of shocked surprise. Why? Because the movie didn't end and the credits didn't roll. He is surprised because the story *kept going*. How did he think it was going to end? With a glorious, somehow liberating, moment free of consequences?

There are three more steps in a complete hero's journey. When they are ignored, they rob the participants of something essential in completing the cycle and making the story whole. XDMs know that the journey is not complete until the circle is closed.

Return Flight

Once the hero has achieved (or failed to achieve) whatever it is he set out to do, then he has to find a way *back*. It's not enough just to toss a bucket of water on the witch, Dorothy has to drag her broomstick back to OZ, and then she *still* has to figure out a way back to Kansas. Sure, the ring is finally disposed of despite a little setback at the end and losing a finger, but now Frodo is sitting on the side of an erupting volcano and it's a long walk back to the Shire. Luke figured out his issues with his black-armored dad, but the Deathstar mark 2 is coming down around him so, now what?

It isn't enough to achieve the goal, you have to get back with the prize. This journey can be a long one (pony rides from Rohan to the Shire take a long time) or a short one ("Those ruby slippers can have you home in two seconds"), but it must be made.

There's an old saying among people who climb Mt. Everest. The goal is *not* getting to the top. People who have the goal of getting to the top usually die and remain up there. The real goal is to get back *from* the top.



Threshold Return

Having gone to the realms of power and magic, the hero must now cross *back* over the threshold in order to return to the mundane world and the life they once left behind. Dorothy clicks her heals together, Frodo returns to the shire, and Luke comes back to the Ewoks–a different home for him.

But coming home isn't *ever* what we expect it to be in the epic cycle.



Homecoming

So the circle is complete and the hero returns home. . .or does he?

The old adage that you can't go home again may well be truer than we know. The hero is often changed in the course of his journey, and, because of this change, finds it impossible to go home. There are a number of possible outcomes in the hero's journey:

1. **Refusal of the Return** The hero has found that he really *likes* it here in the realms of power and doesn't really connect with his former life any longer. In the movie *Stargate* for example, the Egyptologist Daniel Jackson stays behind at the end of the film.

2. **Rescue from Without** The hero in this case needs to be rescued by forces from the ordinary world–either because the hero has refused to return on his own, or because his is being blocked from returning with the boon.

3. **Crossing of the Return Threshold** Here the hero does manage his return to the everyday world and must accept that world as real. Sam manages to do this but Frodo does not.

4. **Master of Two Worlds** In this case, the hero returns with an understanding and appreciation for both the realms of power and the mundane. Luke Skywalker perhaps fits this bill.

5. **Freedom to Live** Essentially the hero returns with the prize and presents it to the betterment of the community. Dorothy does this in her pronouncement.

Joseph Campbell points out one most interesting fact: The hero is often so personally changed by his experience that he (1) loses all interest in or hope for the sorrows of the mundane world, (2) so unbalances the powers that once existed that they react sharply and destroy him, or (3) returns to a community that meets him with such blank misunderstanding and disregard from those whom he has come to help that his career collapses.

At the end of the Peter Jackson version of *The Return of the King*, the hobbits have returned to the Shire and once again sit in the tavern drinking ale. A farmer comes in and there is a great commotion about a pumpkin. Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin all stare at each other. The four of them have saved the world and all their fellow citizens are excited about is this oversized vegetable?

This realization turns somber for Frodo until eventually he *has* to leave for the Gray Havens. As he explains, "We saved the Shire, Sam. . .but not for me."

And... what's your point?

That's it: The great mythic cycle and, yes, it's important even in the adventures that you design. It is the overall structure for the story you are going to be telling with your game.

Mystery and Surprise

Romancing the Castle on the Distant Hill

There are a few more points that need to be made about story. One of them is the idea that distance is compelling.

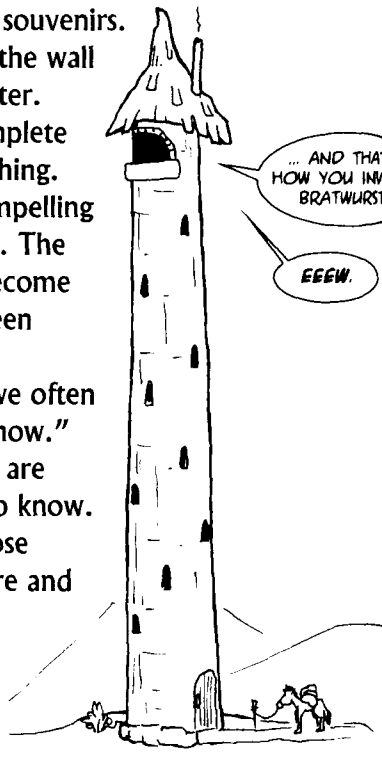
XDMs know that you need to have something on the other side of the wall, something beyond the horizon, something on a distant hill barely seen through the mists and the fog. That's because something far away–and unreachable–is *romantic*. No, not *that* kind of romantic. I mean the kind of romantic that is compelling, evocative, and mysterious.

Consider the following: You and your wizard companion are riding horses across the hills on your way to the king's city. You both crest a hill and stop. At the far end of a broad valley you can see a single tower atop a distant hill whose walls appear cast in continual shadow. Your companion turns to you and says, "That is the Tower of Sorrows. A great tragedy took place there long ago, and its gates are forever sealed. We will honor the memory of those who fought to keep its peace. None go there now."

Now, don't you want to go there? Hey, who wouldn't? But consider this next: Let's say we *do* go there, desecrate the honored memory of, like, whoever, and open the gates. We go inside, map out the broken walls, check out the collapsed roof and take a couple of stones for souvenirs. Maybe write our name on the wall for someone who comes later.

Aside from being complete jerks, we've just lost something. We lost that very same compelling desire that brought us here. The romance of distance has become fact and in that we have been diminished.

In the United States we often harp about our "right to know." Well, tough, because there are things I really *don't* want to know. To know something is to lose part of its compelling nature and its appeal. Just don't even ask about how to make sausage.



The point here is that distant, unattainable things are compelling and bring mystery into the world of your story. Your players do *not* have the right to explore every nook and cranny of your world, and it's better for them if they don't. There must be unattainable horizons and compelling vistas in the distance to make them believe that there is more to this world than what is on the page.

Twisting in the Wind: the Nature of Surprise

Another ingredient in the dark, beautiful elixir of the XDM game is surprise. That breath-stealing moment of revelation can turn an average adventure into a roaring inferno of shock and awe. . . or, at least, a "neato" experience.

First we have to understand what surprise really is. Let's boil it down to its simplest form: Surprise is the sudden revelation of an unknown or unanticipated truth. Therefore, ironically, deception is the foundation upon which surprise is built. This is because the truth must be hidden to some degree in order for astonishment to come to pass. After all, if the correct natures of all events at hand are properly portrayed, then no revelation of unanticipated facts may occur.

One might think that a great way to study surprise is to study the craft of the magician. They seem like similar fields. In many ways they are, except that the best magic is founded in the unseen, or unimagined principle, while in story the secret must be imaginable. It has to be something that your audience feels is a natural part of the story and is totally logical.

The goal of surprise in magic is to entertain by means of *deception*.

The goal of surprise in story is to entertain by means of *revelation*.

It's funny: Some magic is so devilishly clever. So clever in fact, that the secret is more entertaining than the effect itself. However, most tricks (like 99% of them) release a wave of disappointment when they are discovered.

"Oh you mean that it's a *trick* knife?" Either way, it is of little importance. When it comes to magic, the secret can be brilliant or it can be moronic. It really doesn't matter, because the audience is never supposed to know.

On the other hand, the purpose of surprise in story is for the secret be made known. Therefore, unlike magic, the secret must be more entertaining (or interesting) than the falsehood it protects. It's interesting that Bruce Willis helps a kid that can see dead people. It's *way* more interesting that Bruce Willis *is* one of those dead people.

It Starts With a Lie

The foundation of surprise is deception. In order to create a startling revelation in your game you will have to lie to your players. This is nothing new to a true XDM. However, instead of fudging dice rolls, we are attempting to artfully veil reality.

There are only two types of deception:

1. Active Deception
2. Passive Deception.

Generally speaking, the best deception when related to surprise is passive deception. This is because the lie of omission by its very nature lacks evidence by which to condemn it. The television show *Lost* is swimming in both sorts of deception but especially passive deception. If you don't know why something crazy is happening it is because they have omitted the key information you need to understand it. And if they are doing their jobs that key bit of information is super interesting.

When creating our foundation out of the above deceptions, there is one rule that must be obeyed at all times. *Don't cheat your audience.*

In order to provide credence and prevent the participant from feeling cheated the best recourse is to provide the truth within the frame of the story. In magic, there are only three ways to make something disappear. You can hide the object, you can move the object, or it was never there to begin with. Interestingly enough this not only true of objects, but even of something as ethereal as truth. Three ways to "vanish" truth in a story:

1. **Move the truth.**
   - Literally move key facts of an event to another part of the story, placing them non-linearly in the timeline.
   - Displace key facts by ascribing them to truths not associated with the matter at hand.
   - Use time-shifting techniques to alter the time at which key facts happened.

2. Hide the truth.

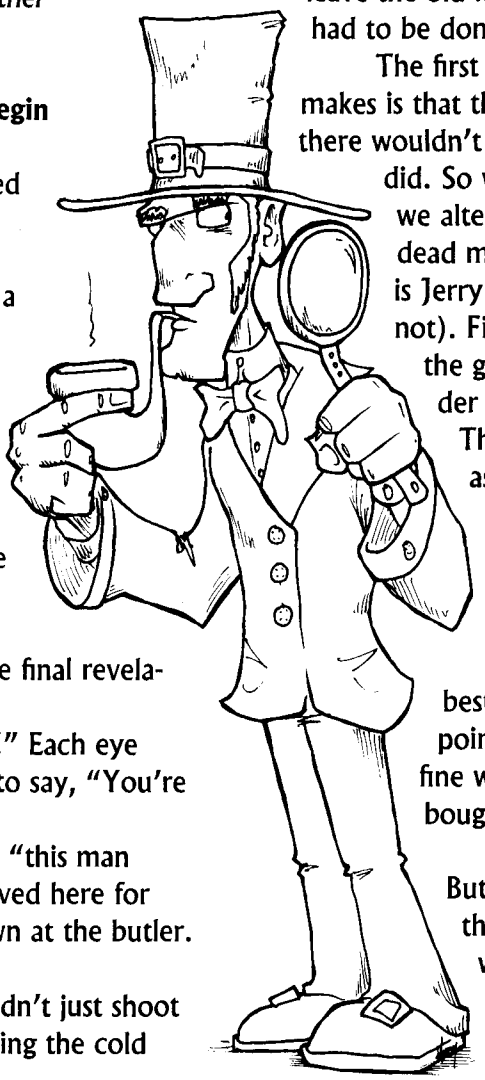
- Camouflage key facts with other unimportant facts, red herrings, or other means.
- Misrepresent key facts as unimportant.
- Ascribe key facts as belonging to *other* events.

3. The Truth Was Never There to Begin With.

- The truth alluded to is later revealed to never have existed.

To understand this, let's look at a typical murder mystery plot.

A wealthy old man is killed in the kitchen by his young butler Jerry after a scuffle with a gun. Jerry then also shoots himself. Our detective, Sir Wally Smokepipe, is investigating the scene despite the insistence of the police that the case is closed. After a series of events, each of which reveals several clues, we are ready to be shocked by the final revelation.



"The murderer is Jerry the Butler!" Each eye turns to Sir Wally as if they were going to say, "You're joking right?"

"However," Smokepipe continues, "this man is *not* Jerry! No! The real Jerry hasn't lived here for weeks has he?" The inspector looks down at the butler. The corpse denies nothing.

"Well how do you know that he didn't just shoot the bloke himself?" A woman says, kicking the cold body on the kitchen floor.

"His hands. You see, this particular pistol would have left a distinctive stain of gunpowder on his fingers.

"But inspector," a bearded policeman in the crowd interrupted, "Why would anyone agree to pretend..."

"They wouldn't. Unless, they knew that someone on the police force could help them escape, perhaps promising them part of the old man's hidden fortune. It would have to be someone new to the force though, wouldn't it?" Smokepipe turns to Cadet Johnny Goodguy, and repeats, "Wouldn't it?" Goodguy starts to perspire heavily. "However, nothing went according to plan. The kitchen looks as if there was a fight, but the old man could hardly get out of bed in the morning. No, as it turns out the man had no hidden fortune and in fact was a lot of money in debt. When things didn't go as planned, a fight between the two plotters ensued and shots rang out. But we couldn't leave the old man as a witness. No, something had to be done."

The first assumption that the audience makes is that the butler didn't do it–after all there wouldn't be much of a story here if he did. So we play off that assumption. Then we alter the truth by saying that the dead man on the floor of the kitchen is Jerry (which we will later learn he is not). Finally, we include the idea that the gun used creates a certain gunpowder stain on the fingers when fired. This is the unknown truth. Other assumptions and alterations are made: policemen are good, the old man was shot for the money, and there is only one man that was in on it.

I grant you that it isn't the best story, but it does illustrate the point. And if you didn't like it, that's fine with me. Odds are you already bought this book anyway.

The above is all fine in theory. But now you're saying "How is all that nonsense going to help me with the game I'm running in like ten minutes." For you, my lucky procrastinator, I present the following. Use it wisely.

Hickman and Son's Cheap Tricks for Surprise in Storytelling.

1. Lead them down the garden path.

Deliberately leave clues intended to cause the spectator to follow a thinly-veiled and incorrect line of logic. We learn that the killer left lipstick on the goblet. We also learn that the killer was wearing a polka-dotted blouse. However, in the end we learn that the killer was not a woman, but was instead Binky Manlydude, a traveling circus clown.

It's important to remember there must be previous evidence to support your revela-

tory claim. If in the above example I said that the killer was the ghost of Timmy the dolphin trainer. I'm sure my audience would feel cheated to say the least.

2. Lead them off the garden path.

Modern readers are very familiar with the garden path and most will not want to stay on it. One way around this is to make the first and obvious revelation a complete falsehood. This is like setting the husband up as the killer, and then revealing that it's actually his brother–presenting that revelation as the twist. However, in the final hour, we learn that the brother couldn't have done it because he died two weeks before the murder. Perhaps it was the husband after all, or another key figure in the story (or if you wanted to take it even further, maybe we then learn that the brother didn't actually die and was now ready to kill again).

Leading people too far off the path will eventually confuse and cheat them unless the reason for doing so is amazingly cleaver.

3. If you want to hide something paint it red.

Sometimes the best way to hide something is to make people dismiss it as being way too obvious. Again you have to be a bit careful here as your audience will feel cheated out of a mystery if there wasn't one to begin with. A great example is from the movie *Scream*. The villain of the story is introduced right away, and he is so over the top that you tell yourself he obviously didn't do it. Well, he did. What makes it acceptable is that it wasn't just him. The audience was looking for *one* killer. In fact, there were two. The second guy was also discredited at the start of the film for being too obvious.

A way to use this in a role playing situation is to have the big grand entrance into the Labyrinth of Mayhem, and then a little ways off a small secret entrance–an entrance that your adventurers find to be loaded with booby traps and other sorts of peril. It turns out that the best way in *is* by the giant gate. Of course you need a logical reason to do that, other than just to mess with them. Anyway this leads us to our next trick.



4. Use their knowledge against them.

The other great thing about the movie *Scream* is how Wes Craven used common horror movie knowledge against the viewer. Our heroine would back into a doorway and the audience would cringe at what would be coming next.

And then. . . nothing.

Nothing would happen, that is until you relaxed. Then–BAM. You should do this to your player's constantly. Keep them guessing. But again, do so artfully. You don't want to frustrate them, you want to entertain them.

5. Time displacement.

A favorite gimmick of television shows and mystery novels is to use time displacement to move key facts to different times in the narrative structure. Magicians do this too. A lot. The idea is simple yet can take a moment to understand.

A man goes to the police station to report some threatening phone calls he and his wife have been getting. While he is there, a call is made to 911. It's his wife saying that someone is in the house and is trying to kill her. She screams. Then, nothing.

They rush over there but it's too late. What happened? Well, we learn over the course of the story that the family uses an internet phone service

like Skype. The husband goes off to work that morning and comes back later wearing a ski mask. Being a tech guy, he previously rigged the phone so that any calls to 911 wouldn't go through, but would get answered and recorded on his computer instead. It would respond to his wife's pleas complete with a fake "911 what's your emergency?" and record everything.

After the deed is done, he sets his computer (with an hour auto-delay)to autodial 911 and play back her half of the recording. He then goes to the police station. Presto! You have a murderer that seems to have committed the crime at an impossible moment. The police are his alibi. He simply shifted the apparent time that the event took place.

The Revelation

Just as there is a right way and a wrong way to hide the truth, there is also a right and wrong way to reveal it. However, this one is easy: "Don't blurt it out, dummy. You just spent a lot of time and energy on this–don't kill it now." This is the payoff. So you need to do two things:

1. **Prove it.** If everyone has forgotten that Kanako the blood mystic is left-handed and hates dwarves. Then it won't mean much if your revelation is founded on these two points. At the end of a good (and I stress *good*) M. Night. Shyamalan film you will see a flashback, a rapid review of evidence, that supports where the twist is coming from.

   If you know that they remember it, or other wise feel that such a review is unnecessary, then don't worry about it. However, for those surprises that are a little more out there (so you're saying that all our characters are in reality, princess pixies?) you will need to show by practical evidence how the revelation is possible. How do you do this in a game? The easiest way I know of is to tell them something like,

   "...immediately your minds are flooded with the memory of recent events, how the Bartender called you "miss," how you can't stand anything but the taste of nectar. etc." Just tell them what they remember and they will remember it.

1. **Slow down.** Where is the fire? Milk the moment. Let it dawn on them. Give them that one last clue, and then after a short beat, someone (or all of them) will say, "Holy crap!" And then they will start to recite the evidence for you. You can just sit back and know that it all played out according to your plan.

Random Story Generator

Hey folks, step right up and hear the wonders of the amazing, tantalizing, invigorating, hypothesizing, philosophizing Random Story Generator! * *Guaranteed to put the dance in your dice, the sizzle in your story, and the mojo in your module! Ready to cure all your writer's block woes! Why, Dragonlance itself was created with the help of this little wonder*†*! Now you, too, can form amazing stories with this*‡*!*

What we have here is a system for creating adventure/story ideas in a matter of moments. It's a helpful tool and fun besides. If you are ever stuck for adventure ideas or need something to do on a Tuesday night, turn here.

How it works:

Pick one of the sentences in the "Storythings" section below. Any one will do–or if you must–roll for one. You will fill in the blanks by randomly choosing a word on the corresponding numbered chart.

For example a sentence will look like this:

A _2_ _1_ is _6_ ing a _1 or 3_ with a _5 3_ in a/the _5 4_.§

Which, filled out might look like this:

A *power-hungry Gnome* is *tricking* a *witch* with a *floating hourglass* in a *mystical cave*.

---

* Perhaps you do not feel you need a story generator. You instinctively know how to craft brilliant and epic stories that will live through the ages. Well, we'll see about that later, but if you ever get stuck, then this system may be all you need to jump-start your stalled imagination. Remember: randomly generated concepts are only dots on the page. You are the one who must connect them into a solidly structured story.

† No, it wasn't.

‡ No, you can't. Well. . . we haven't seen this happen yet. But you could be the first.

§ Just reading the numbers this way can sound a bit dirty. Try to keep it together. Besides, it could be worse. We originally used letters instead of numbers.

Or

An *immortal princess* is *freeing* a *giant* with an *invisible sword* in the *frozen valley*.

There! Two perfectly good jumping-off places for even better ideas to spark from. Some of the sentences won't quite work the first time. Feel free to re-pick any blank you wish. There are no official rules here.

After you have your story line, the first step is to think *why* would these things be happening? The second is to then change the idea the generator gave you to fit your "why" better.

So if I go with the second sentence. Why is the princess freeing a giant? Maybe she needs him to save her land. Or perhaps she is on the verge of losing her place in immortality and she needs the giant to do her dirty work. She uses a sword to free him. But it's not invisible–no it's made from souls long lost to her evil ways. And on and on it goes. Many times your final story or adventure plot will not resemble the one given you by the story generator–and that's great. In fact, that's how it's supposed to work.

Finally, take that concept you formed and use the many tools in this book; and you have got yourself an adventure better than most you pay good money for. The best part is: It's yours.

The Storythings

A 2 1 is 6 ing a 1 or 3 with a 4 5 in a/the 4 3.

Near a/the 4 3 a 4 5 is being 6.

The long forgotten 5 of 2 1 s has been 6 by a 2 1.

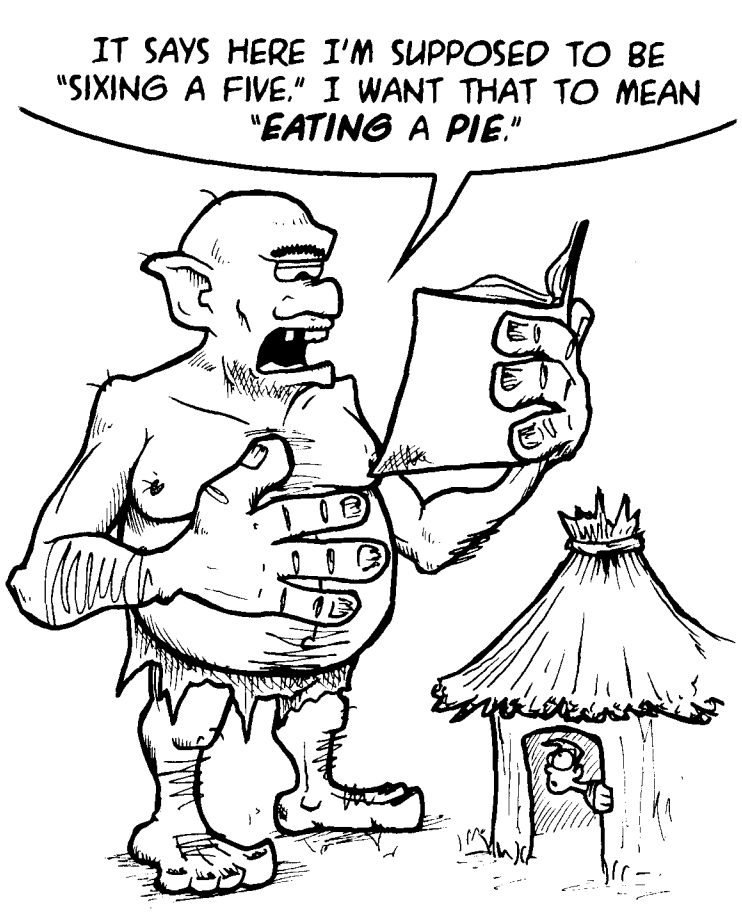
The legend of the 5 and the 4 3.

The 4 5 of the 1 3 has been 6 by a group of 1 s.

The 4 1 5 has been 6 in a 4 3.

The 2 1 of the 4 3 has been 6.

Of course, feel free to make your own blank "Storythings" to use with the tables.



1. Subjects				
1. Ranger	16. Void	31. Serpent	46. Sheriff	61. Fairy (Nymph, Dryad, Sylvan)
2. Rogue	17. Kingdom	32. Queen	47. Gnome	
3. Knight	18. Hunter	33. Warlock	48. Dwarf	62. Barbarian
4. Druid	19. Shaman	34. Witch	49. Crone	63. Prophet
5. Wizard	20. Troll	35. Banshee	50. Gypsy	64. Cripple
6. Priest	21. Ghost	36. Imp	51. Wanderer	65. Orc
7. Magician	22. Thief	37. Monk	52. Alchemist	66. Messenger
8. Warrior	23. Creature	38. Traveller	53. Giant	67. Evil
9. God	24. Devil	39. Stranger	54. Halfling	68. Plague
10. Spirit	25. Angel	40. Hero	55. Historian	69. Emperor
11. Phantom	26. Demon	41. Monster	56. Beggar	70. Judge
12. Vampire	27. Dragon	42. Zombie	57. Basilisk	
13. King	28. Gryphon	43. Maiden	58. Satyr	
14. Prince	29. Princess	44. Paladin	59. Cleric	
15. Peasant	30. Elf	45. Mist	60. Conjuror	

2. Descriptive (Subjects)				
1. Unknown	17. Ancient	33. Angelic	49. Possessed	65. Small
2. Forgotten	18. Horrible	34. Dying	50. Haunted	66. Dishonorable
3. Lost	19. Terrible	35. Noble	51. Secret	67. Traitorous
4. Wandering	20. Magnificent	36. Bloodthirsty	52. Melancholy	68. Thieving
5. Cursed	21. Escaped	37. Alien	53. Mischievous	69. Bleeding
6. Diseased	22. Winged	38. Missing	54. False	70. Scholarly
7. Insane	23. Apocalyptic	39. Invisible	55. Imaginary	71. Enchanted
8. Powerful	24. Silent	40. Mystic	56. Deceptive	72. Silver
9. Divine	25. Ghostly	41. Courageous	57. Cannibalistic	73. Golden
10. Fallen	26. Evil	42. Valiant	58. Shadowy	74. Legendary
11. Beautiful	27. Demonic	43. Weak-minded	59. Ethereal	75. Exiled
12. Dark	28. Undead	44. Immortal	60. Rich	76. Immoral
13. Clockwork	29. Cowardly	45. Giant	61. Lying	
14. Wicked	30. Dead	46. Mighty	62. Hideous	
15. Power-Hungry	31. Weeping	47. Malignant	63. Magic	
16. Heroic	32. Damned	48. Deadly	64. Foreign	

3. Places				
1. Hell	8. Faraway Land	15. Desert	22. Ruin	29. Clouds
2. Heaven	9. Sky	16. Cave	23. Inn	30. Plains
3. Crypt	10. Grotto	17. Mountains	24. Purgatory	31. Oasis
4. Abyss	11. Forest	18. Swamp	25. Valley	32. World
5. Dungeon	12. Ocean	19. Lake	26. Cliffs	33. Nation
6. Castle	13. River	20. City	27. Labyrinth	34. Country
7. Village	14. Island	21. Tavern	28. Graveyard	35. Continent

4. Descriptive (Place)

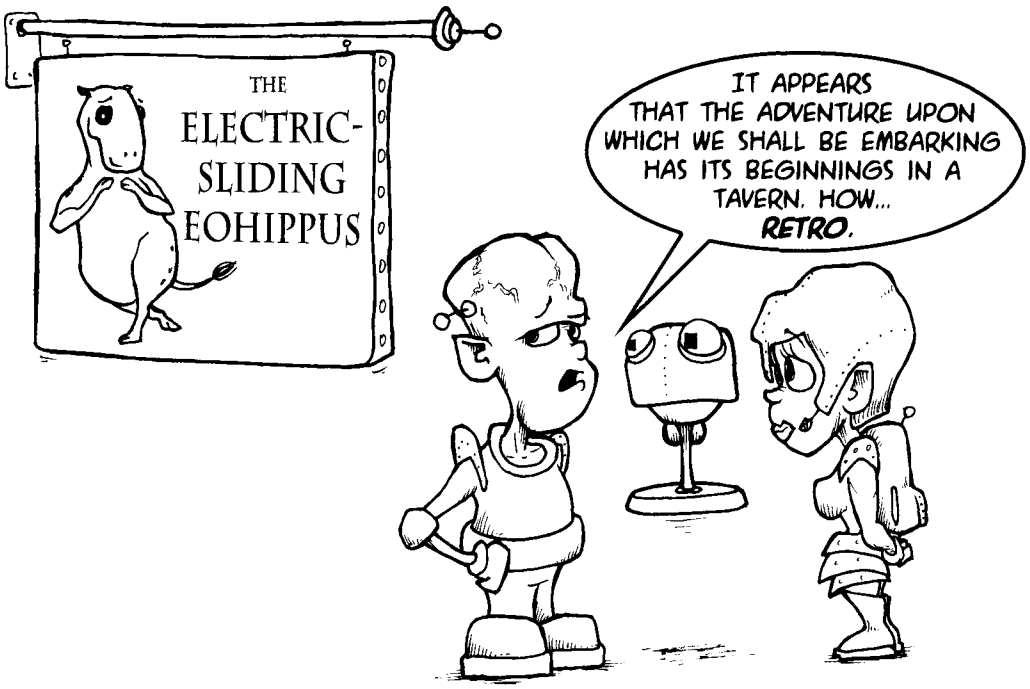
1. Shining	16. Burning	31. Redeemed	46. Decaying	61. Imaginary
2. Buried	17. Plagued	32. Massive	47. Dark	62. Putrid
3. Lost	18. Destroyed	33. Small	48. Evil	63. Exotic
4. Forgotten	19. Magical	34. Living	49. Sinking	64. Distant
5. Submerged	20. Lush	35. Hostile	50. Forbidden	65. Wicked
6. Cursed	21. Damned	36. Charmed	51. Quarantined	66. Ancient
7. Enchanted	22. Uncovered	37. Shadowy	52. Surreal	67. Magnificent
8. Dead	23. Desolate	38. Veiled	53. Dismal	68. Foreign
9. Ghostly	24. Blessed	39. Invisible	54. Righteous	69. Beautiful
10. Haunted	25. Consecrated	40. Dissapearing	55. Distant	70. Demonic
11. Windy	26. Chosen	41. Changing	56. Overrun	71. Misty
12. Abandoned	27. Captured	42. Malevolent	57. Conquered	72. Glass
13. Frozen	28. Perilous	43. Mystical	58. Heavenly	73. Golden
14. Ruined	29. Wealthy	44. Legendary	59. Slumbering	74. Silver
15. Floating	30. Flooded	45. Besieged	60. Enslaved	

5. Objects

1. Skull	15. Ship	29. Tome	43. Tablet	57. Parchment
2. Vial	16. Bomb	30. Orb	44. Coffin	58. Scroll
3. Potion	17. Sword	31. Tower	45. Storm	59. Fruit
4. Ring	18. Axe	32. Dust	46. Feather	60. Song
5. Hourglass	19. Spear	33. Spell	47. Rope	61. Key
6. Runestones	20. Dagger	34. Heart	48. Banner	62. Doorway
7. Jewel	21. Meteorite	35. Raven	49. Claw	63. Trinket
8. Crystal Ball	22. Compass	36. Robe	50. Relic	64. Herb
9. Beast	23. Goblet	37. Poison	51. Recipe	65. Wine
10. Dragon	24. Map	38. Water	52. Ancestor	66. Blood
11. Armies	25. Chest	39. Ice	53. Gloves	67. Quest
12. Fire	26. Necklace	40. Bow	54. Flower	68. Riddle
13. Treasure	27. Crown	41. Wind	55. Vine	69. Portal
14. Land	28. Wand	42. Lightning	56. Secret	

6. Verbs

1. Attack	10. Abuse	19. Escape from	27. Discredit, Besmirch	34. Blind, Desolate
2. Destroy	11. Bewitch	20. Love		
3. Find	12. Control	21. Purify	28. Deceive	35. Eradicate, Eliminate
4. Burn, Scorch	13. Condemn	22. Enchant	29. Challenge	
5. Freeze	14. Trick	23. Summon	30. Exploit	36. Undermine
6. Curse	15. Cast a spell on	24. Free	31. Plunder	37. Necrofy
7. Enslave	16. Damn	25. Ransom	32. Flood, Drown	38. Vilify
8. Capture	17. Punish	26. Torture	33. Entangle, Stupefy	39. Disenchant
9. Steal	18. Take revenge			40. Hide from



CHAPTER FIVE: DESIGNING FOR STORY

In the previous chapter, you learned all about the structure of story and its importance as a tool for communicating with the rest of those humans out there. That's all well and good for novelists and folk singers, you may say, but how does that have anything to do with games? How does story apply to adventures?

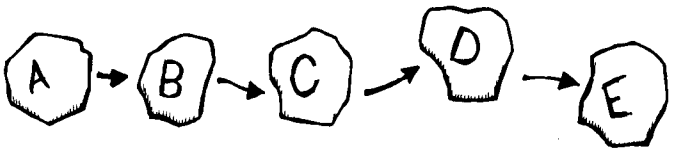
And you call yourself an XDM!

The previous chapter wasn't called "Story is Everything!" for nothing . . . er, something like that. The point is that you *can* effectively tell a story in a role playing adventure if you have the right tools.

Let's start by taking a look at the different kinds of basic adventure design forms.

Hand me your Nose Ring (Linear Design)

The first kind of design is linear, which means "in a line." This is the most controlled (and controlling) design concept. Players enter the game at point A. They have no choice but to advance to point B. There, they beat up a monster, take its stuff and–guess what?–get to advance to point C with no other options available. This proceeds for an excruciating period of time until the players reach the predictable (and fate-demanded) point E where the game comes to a predictable (and same) ending every time.



Leading players around by the nose ring comes to mind.

In terms of story, this is the easiest to control: You simply plug in your plot points at various locations down the line, and the players have no choice but to follow your iron-clad script from predictable beginning to entirely all too predictable end without ever having to worry about those bothersome ideas of free choice, play, gaming, or role playing.

This structure is ideal for games where you want to evaluate the progress of different groups–like a tournament, for example. You simply determine who got further along down the line than anyone else and declare the winner. It's not unlike a Japanese game show–Ninja Warrior comes to mind.

The other good thing about this game structure is that it has ultimate economy. The designer of the game knows that every single location in the game that he designs will be utilized and visited at one point or another. No part of your design will be wasted.

As if *that* was important!

The downside–and it is a *huge* downside–is that you have to strip all the fun things about role playing out of the game in order to force the players down the storyline. Sure, they may have a great deal of freedom *inside* the individual nodes of the adventure, but the result is always the same: there's only one exit to the rest of the adventure. Forget about thinking outside the box; no box can exist in a straight line.

Like, Whatever! (Open Matrix)

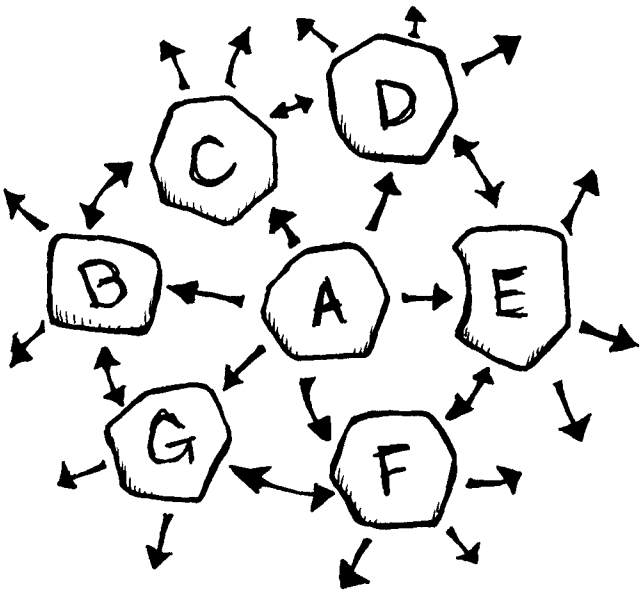
The second kind of design is at the opposite end of the spectrum, the open matrix design. You might know this by its more common name in role playing circles, the campaign.

It's easy to show the branching for a campaign setting. You start essentially at the central point A. Usually this is a tavern in a town because, as we already know, all adventures begin in a familiar place that we think of as home.* Then the characters can wander outside of the tavern to the street at B, or to the baker at C, or to the cooper at D, or to the stable at E, or to the blacksmith at F. We haven't travelled more than twenty feet so far, and we're already up to five additional branching locations. But what happens if we go a few feet further out, past the street or the baker or the cooper or the stable? Well, wait! There's more! This campaign matrix just keeps expanding outward the further the players go in the campaign, constantly expanding the boundaries of their knowledge and pushing back the frontiers of the world.

This seems like a dandy fine design, so far as the players are concerned. It gives the players the ultimate in free will; they can, with very few limits, go pretty much wherever they want to go and keep exploring new places.

Yes, it's a great place for players . . . and a living nightmare for adventure creators. Let's say, for example, that you're designing a campaign world for your players–the Realm of Subar–and you have just spent the last six weeks creating an incredibly detailed and poignantly storied underground Kingdom of Lost Wishes. It's enormous! It's epic! It's the best design for an adventure game ever created and all your players have to do is follow your clever trail of clues to its gates to make this dream a reality for everyone.

I can guarantee you that your players, filled with their own free will and choice, will either stay put in the tavern and talk endlessly to each other in character, or they will never pick up the trail you have so carefully laid for them, or they will get the clues and go in *any* direction *except* where the clues lead them.





* I don't even want to begin analyzing why game players all think of a tavern as home.

While campaign design has an appealing appearance, the reality is not very satisfactory for most players. Campaigns do *not* make for good storytelling because they have no real structure on which to hang the plot. So if you were wondering if the wonderful campaign that your players have been slogging through for the last twenty years will make a great book, I'm afraid the answer is no. Campaigns are not stories.

Worst of all, campaigns require their creators to design exponentially more with every passing day. You have to fight to keep the design ahead of the players, and ultimately you *still* have no story, just events without structure.

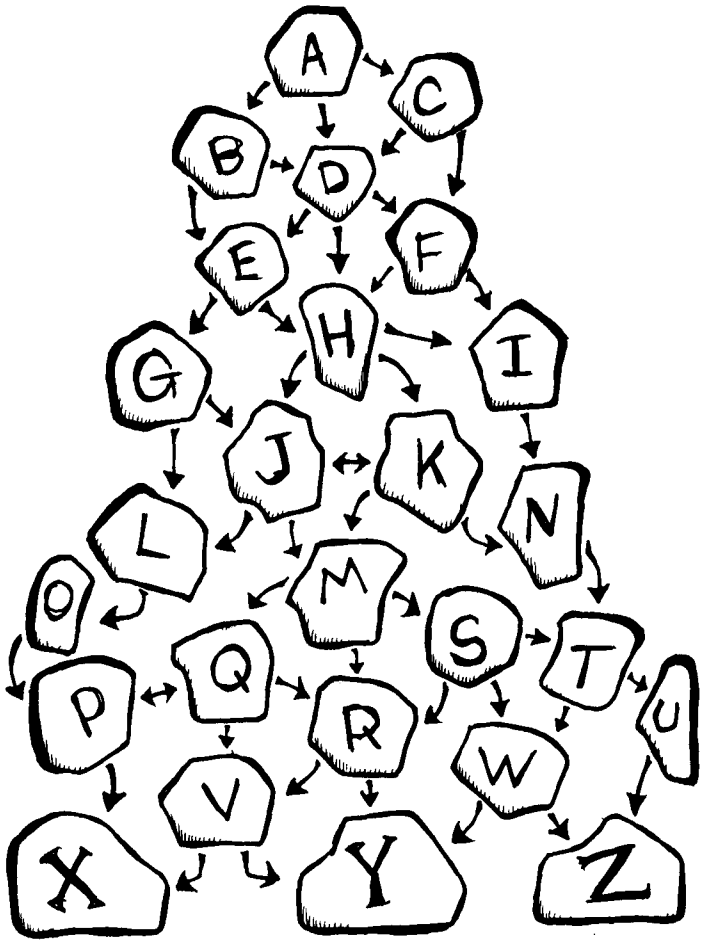
Narrative Bumper Pool (Closed Matrix)

The third type of design gives the *illusion* of free will found in the open matrix creation while providing the structure and flow of the linear design. It was first quantified during the early years of designing the Dragonlance series and has largely become a lost art today. We call this the closed matrix.

The truth is that you have probably already worked somewhat in this kind of design already. Any "dungeon crawl" is essentially a closed matrix design since you're pretty much limited to the halls, rooms, shafts, doors, and stairs. This form of design becomes more important, however, once you move out of the dungeon and into the open air.

The closed matrix concept looks a good deal more complicated than it actually is in practice. Players start at the beginning of the adventure A (yes, it is probably a tavern). They have the choices essentially of going to B or C or D. That's a significant number of choices, but they are choices that have *direction*. They are choices that move toward the end of the adventure and show advancement toward the objective.

Other choices the players might make all encounter either hard or soft "edges." These edges act like rubber bumpers, redirecting, or "bouncing" the players back toward the center of the design matrix. These bumpers can be any of a number of different kinds of things to motivate (soft) or force (hard) player to remain inside the limits of the game design. For example, these bumpers might be what we call a "time-lock." This is the equivalent of a ticking bomb count down. If doom is going to fall at a certain time then



the players are motivated to move in the direction of the solution. Traveling away from the solution will waste precious time. Another choice is the "option lock" where the options available to the characters get more and more narrow over the passage of time. Third is the physical lock where the physical boundaries of the game itself prevent the players from leaving until the solution is found or time runs out.

For example: Your players are in a tavern (sigh) and they hear that to the east there is a castle where the beautiful princess Miranda has been cruelly imprisoned by the Wizard of the Blue Beard and that his armies are marauding over the countryside. Everyone knows that the Wizard of the Blue Beard is never good news for any princess. If only there was someone to free her!

So your players naturally go *west*. While travelling west down the road, they encounter a courier who has been wounded in battle. He slips from his horse just as your players arrive. Gasping for breath, he hands your players a message that must be deliv-

ered to the princess to the *east* or all is lost. (He is a soft bumper, trying to motivate the players to take the hint and go east.)

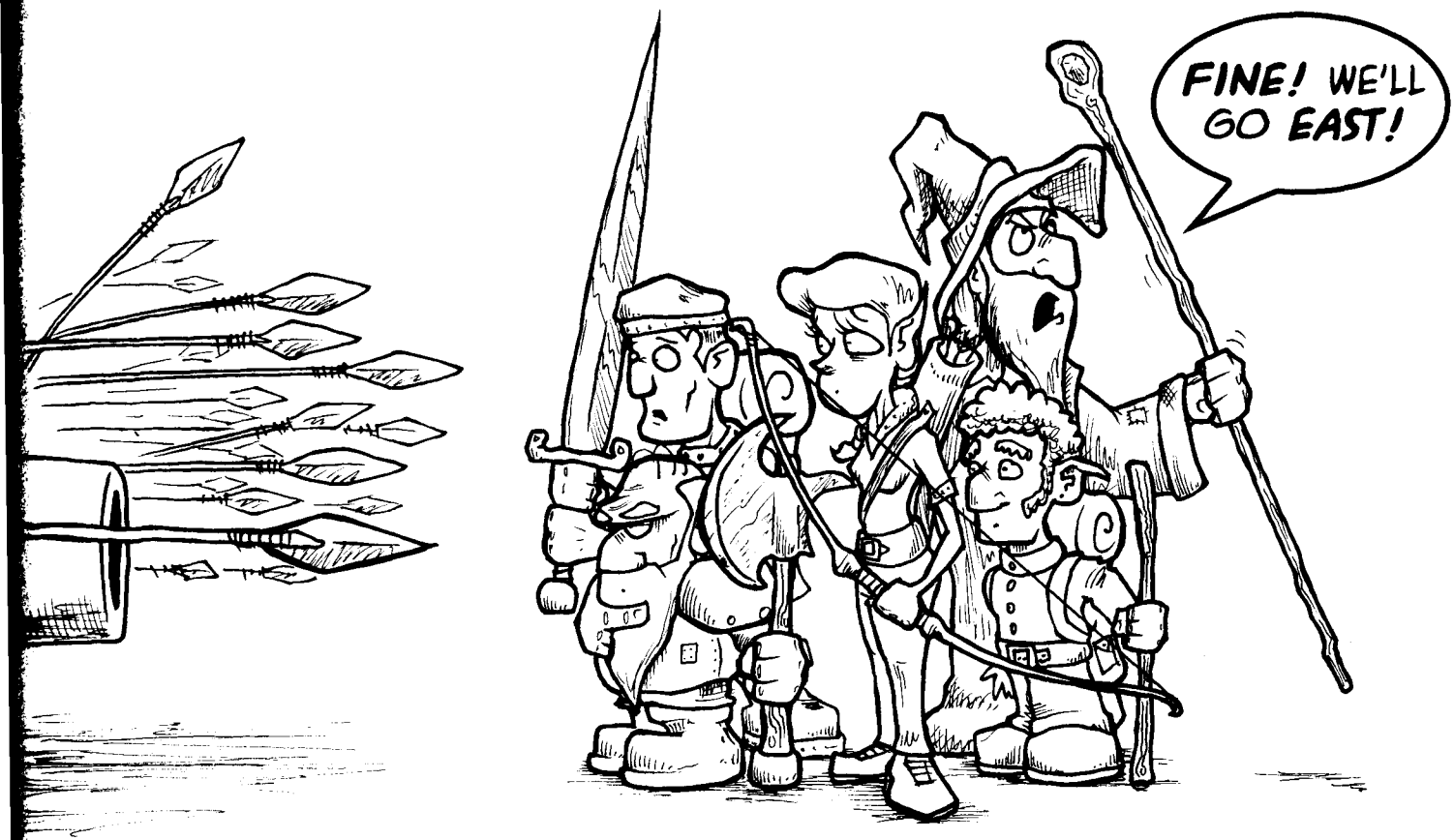
So your players naturally continue *west*. There they encounter forces of the king who are fleeing *east* from the battlefront. The Wizard of the Blue Beard's forces are overwhelming. Unless the powers of the princess can be freed from her imprisonment to the *EAST*, then the kingdom will be lost. (This is a second, more emphatic, soft bumper.)

The players, as one might expect, continue to the *west*. They actually find the battlefront and discover for themselves that the armies of the Blue Beard Wizard are, indeed, overwhelmingly powerful and their lines impassable. At this point, the players have encountered a hard boundary. If they insist on continuing west, well, they deserve to die in whatever way seems the most ignominious. Natural selection really should apply to heroes.

Within the designed playing field of the game, of course, the players are free to go and do as they please and make as many of their own free will choices as they wish. But notice that regardless of the choices made, the closed matrix has a *natural* and *organic* flow from the top to the bottom. The players always have a sense that they are making progress, and the later encounters can move the story forward because the general matrix itself is flowing in the direction of the plot.

As the end of the game nears, the options will narrow until the conclusion of the game merges with the climax of the story. You might have only one conclusion in your design X or you might have two or three Y & Z but it is important that you have a finite number of endings to deal with so that the rest of the story can flow toward them.

Closed matrix design is a lost art. But if you master it, then you'll be a *true* XDM!





CHAPTER SIX: SELDDIR

Screw You Intelligence check: Puzzles to Bewitch the Senses and Confound the Stupid.

Things that make your players actually have to think in a game are priceless. The reasons why are apparent, anything that gets you away from the dice and talky-talky for a minute or two is worthwhile. Puzzles force players to change gears and think with a different part of their brain.

Most importantly, they allow a deeper connection between player and character that is not only healthy but doesn't involve a life-size Thunderdome in your backyard. For a moment, the player is actually thinking in place of their character. No intelligence checks (at least not usually). Just them and a puzzle. I could go on about the duality imbedded in a player-character relationship, and the bounds of that relationship, but you wouldn't read it; you would just skip down to the puzzles. If you haven't already. Oh, and by the way Selddir is simply "riddles" spelled backwards.

Riddles

Riddles like the ones below have been used before, many, many times before, in RPGs around the globe. The problem is that usually they are presented wrong. The point, as mentioned, is to get your player thinking in place of their character. Nevertheless, you aren't asking your buddy Ed what the answer is, you are asking his character. Ed must answer for "Princess the Barbarian" not for Ed. This makes it interesting for the DM because there can't be just one right answer.

In magician terms this is known as "multiple outs." Your job is to interpret the answers given you according to the known intelligence, wisdom, or street smarts each player's character has. It is the responsibility of the player to come up with and justify answers to riddles–whatever those answers may be. As an XDM, feel free to help or punish them as needed.

A quick example: The party reaches the Three Doors of Mega Doom and are confronted with riddle "R-1" (see next page).

Go around your group asking, "What do you think?" If they are new to this idea, perhaps specify by saying, "Tell your party what your character thinks you should do." The point here is to force them to role play. Not to talk amongst themselves whilst one guy gets on his iPhone to look up the answer–no this is an RPG–if they don't like it they need to go play a regular old G. Anyway, Princess the Barbarian says, "We should go in a different way–me hate puzzles." Wilikers the Wizard says, "We should go in the third gate." The rest of the group is lost in various degrees of stupor.

Finally they all agree to do what the Wizard says. So now, ask the wizard *why* her character thinks

that. If she says, "meh it's just a hunch." Fine, let them go toward the third door. They will hear an evil sound come from one of the other two doors. Ask them if they want to continue or change their mind.

If Wilikers the Wizard says something like "Let's keep going. I want to kill stuff" Well, that wasn't a very intellectual response was it? Wizards should be intellectual. Punish Wilikers.

If the player says something like, "Well, three is an odd number, and the riddle says..." (still not the right answer) Fine, awesome, reward her. "Wilikers" is smart, and if the player is creative enough to give a smart-sounding answer then Wilikers should be rewarded or punished according to her creativity. This also means that while a player with great intelligence can give a relatively wrong answer and still be right, an idiot character can be right on the money and still be totally wrong–all depending on the reasons given for the character coming up with that answer.

This is a great system when you have creative people in your group. A party full of creative people, however, is a rarity. So, if presented with a problem that your group can't figure out but their characters definitely could... it's time to roll the dice. There is a system for this in the XD20 section of this book.

What follows are a number of riddles that we have enjoyed presenting over the years. Some of these are lateral thinking problems, and others are pure logic, still others are just stupid. The difficulty level of the puzzles is varied, but everyone is different so you should decide how hard or easy something is.

Some of them are common and others not so common. Remember: even the more common puzzles have a place. Naturally you should change the circumstances of each riddle to fit your particular situation. (You may find the answers in the Appedices at the end of the book.)

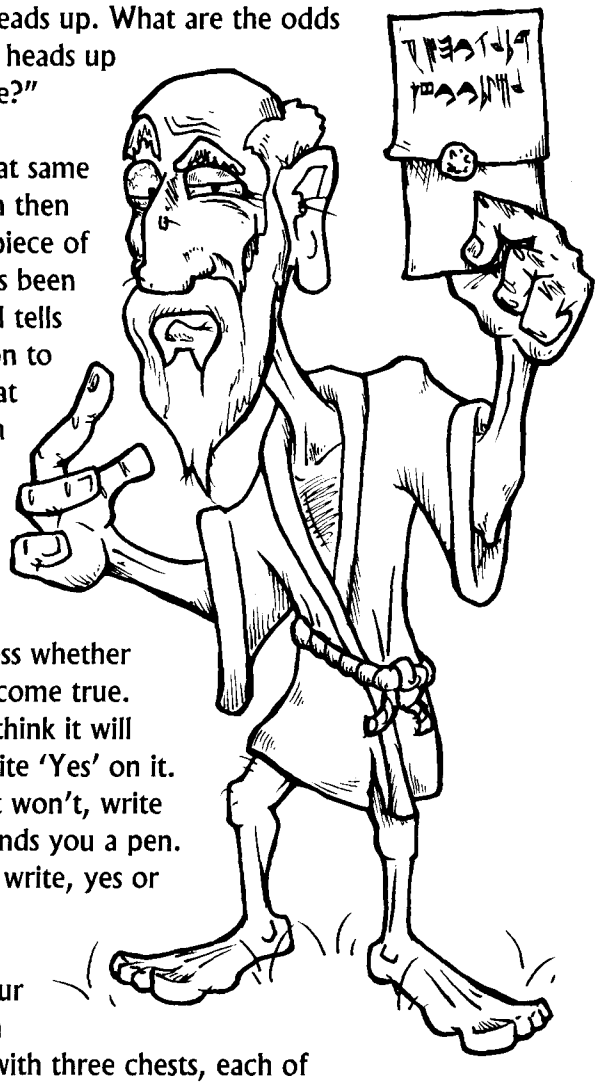
R-1: Three large gates are before you. Each gate looks the same in every detail. On an old sign standing before the gates, a message reads,
"Behind two lies evil. Only one the sure gate
Just choose with the odds, and not by fate."
After your selection is made (let's assume you chose the first gate) the second gate starts to rattle and dark mist pours from between the bars. It's not too late to change your mind, you can still go into gate one, two, or three. Which gate should you choose?

R-2: Twenty doors are lined up one after the other along a large wall. Above the doors, scratched into the stone are ancient symbols that, when translated, say:

"The path you desire, the one that is right,
will lead you to gold, glory, and light,
19 sons of evil were trapped here first;
to free one of them is a dark, dread curse."

Which door do you choose?

R-3: A crazy old man in the street stops you and says something about a bet. Pulling out a gold coin, he tosses it in the air and catches it deftly in his hand. He then looks at it secretly and does the same thing again. He now looks at you and says, "One of my flips landed heads up. What are the odds that it landed heads up the other time?"



R-4: That same crazy old man then hands you a piece of paper that has been folded up and tells you to hold on to it. He says that he has written a prediction in the paper and he will give you 2-1 odds that you can't guess whether or not it will come true.

"If you think it will come true write 'Yes' on it. If you think it won't, write 'No'." He hands you a pen. What do you write, yes or no?

R-5: Your party enters a secret room with three chests, each of

which bears an inscription. In the corner of the room stands a child with dark, soulless eyes. She says that in one chest is a ruby of great value. Another chest holds a disease, another a curse. The chest with the disease has a true inscription, the chest with the curse a false one, and the chest with the ruby has an inscription that could be either true or false. You may only open one. The inscriptions read:

Chest 1: This chest contains the ruby
Chest 2: The inscription on chest one is true.
Chest 3: The second chest holds the curse.

Which chest do you open?

R-6: After walking for some time, your party comes to a garden, at the center of which stands a statue. In the right hand of that statue is a sword of great power. In the left hand is a bell. Legend has it that the sword could destroy any foe with one blow. However, no one has been able to take it, for the statue's grip upon it is greater than any force known beneath the heavens. You may ask the statue one yes or no question. It will ring the bell once for yes and twice for no. The statue must give a true answer. Could you ask it a question that would force it to release its grip on the sword?

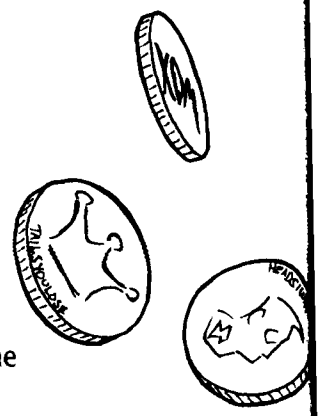
R-7: Your party is in an inn (wow, there's a new idea) and a drunken sailor puts a rare coin in a bottle, which he then corks. He challenges you to get the coin out. You can't take the cork out, you can't break the bottle, and you can't get someone else to do it for you. What do you do?

R-8: The crazy old man finds you again and shows you a hole in the ground. He starts ranting about how his math skills are greater than yours. His question is this, "How much dirt is in a hole that is 15 feet in diameter, but a mere four feet in depth?"

R-9: A stranger in an inn tells you this story: "A father asked his son to go into an inn and buy him some ale. When the boy entered, the bartender told the boy to leave. Defeated, the boy left the inn and returned home empty handed. The bartender turned to me and said, 'Did you know that was my son?' " The stranger then asks you, "How is that possible?"

R-10: You enter a magic forest where you are in desperate need of help from the elves that live there. They agree to help you on one condition, that you answer a question about their forest. "Our trees grow double their height each day until after 100 days they have reached their full height. After how many days would they be at only half of their height?"

R-11: Once again that same crazy old man comes up to you, and this time he flips two coins in the air (a copper coin and a silver coin that each weigh the same) and catches them. You don't see which hand caught which coin. Then he tells you that the silver coin lands heads up and asks, "What are the odds that both landed heads up?" (The XDM may wish to remember the answer to R-3 and ask himself if the color of the coins makes any difference.)



R-12: A crazy old man–let's say that it's the same one for consistency reasons–stops you in the woods and, pointing to a fallen tree, asks, "The tree was 25 feet high and four feet around before it fell, but was cut a foot above the base. If the tree had three feet removed from its top six years ago... how high would it be now?"

Physical Puzzles

Riddles like the ones mentioned above are fine as an example of how to change things up every now and then, but they are probably the weakest sort of puzzle. In fact, they are to be used sparingly. Also, don't ever let your group take too long to figure one of these things out. As in good cooking, if you add too much of one ingredient, you will poison your guests. Okay that's not usually true, but you get the point.

There is a much better way to force your players to think: the puzzle. Puzzles aren't hard to make. If you think about it, most puzzles are nothing more than a handful of chaos plus a clue how to order it. They can be simple–like three pools of water, each a different color, and three orbs elsewhere that match those colors. Or they can be a bit more involved,

such as figuring out which villager stole the sacred diamond by asking questions. The goal is to provide the players with some sort of problem, a bit of chaos, and a clue for them to solve and order that chaos.

Entire adventure environments can be a puzzle. Of course, any mystery is essentially a puzzle. Tracy once wrote an adventure called *The Anvil of Time* for the Dragonlance setting where an entire underground complex turned out to be one enormous mechanism for time travel that required the characters to move from room to room and level to level to set up the device and get it to work. The genius* in this design was in making the mechanism so big that the characters couldn't see the whole thing at once and could only understand its purpose after moving over multiple levels and through a variety of rooms.

Like magic, puzzles can also involve a considerable amount of misdirection. In the old Pharaoh adventure by Tracy & Laura Hickman, the designers wanted to put in a maze. The problem with a maze in a traditional role playing game is that the players are making a map on their graph paper. How puzzling can the maze be if the map is there in front of them? Their brilliant† solution came in the form of a *teleport* maze. The entire maze was comprised of ten foot wide by thirty foot long identical passages with magical mist-filled arches at both ends, and two more facing each other on either side. Step through the mist and find yourself in what looks like the same room you just left.

Tracy and Laura reasoned, however, that over the years adventurers passing into the maze would leave behind *some* differences (like their decaying bodies, for example), which allowed subsequent adventurers some advantage in working out the maze.

You can find inspiration for physical puzzles in any kind of process or mechanism. An old family game from 1962 called "High Gear" would have made a really great puzzle around which you could build an entire adventure.‡ A good source for inspiration might also come from *The Way Things Work* by David Macaulay, where you can see how any number of mechanisms actually work and then adopt them as a physical puzzle in your game.

The best kinds of puzzles are those that exist for a purpose. People don't go to the trouble and enormous expense of building a teleport maze covering an entire floor of their castle without good reason. If there is some elaborate mechanism for placing certain colored stones in certain colored braziers in order to determine a sequence of doors opening like a safe combination then those doors had better be guarding something reasonably valuable.

It's a Trap!



Traps are like puzzles, only deadlier. Puzzles can be benign ways of making you scratch your head, but traps are meant to stop your character cold–or kill your character dead. Traps, by their very nature, are supposed to be a surprise, something to catch you completely unaware while you are trespassing on someone else's turf. There have been entire dungeons the existence of which was just an excuse for one deadly surprise after another.§

Here's the problem with traps: They are most often employed as a weapon by bad game referees in their supposed struggle to assert their superiority over players. Unless they are properly handled, they are primarily punitive to players.

* The word 'genius' here was actually written by Tracy about himself. It is this sort of honesty and integrity that is the hallmark of XDMs.

† Again, Tracy's inserted word reflecting an XDMs aversion to false modesty.

‡ Why did I just give that away!

§ Gary Gygax's 'Tomb of Horrors' comes to mind.

XDMs always set traps properly using these guidelines:

Traps must be foreshadowed. The heroic characters slogging through your dungeon design must have at least *some* kind of warning that they are entering a mine field. This can be as obvious as a sign carved into the wall saying "Beware! No Living Personnel Allowed Beyond This Point!" or as subtle as an unseen breeze brushing up the hairs on the back of the character's neck, but they have to have some clue that there is something bad ahead of them.

Traps must make sense. Like puzzles, the location of traps must have a purpose. Architects of Evil Lairs do not just put expensive and elaborate traps willy-nilly in the kitchen hallway out of artistic license. If the trap is there, it has to have a purpose.

There has to be another way. All traps have a mechanism for disarming them – and we're not talking about a thief character named 'Stinky.' There is always an actual physical means of shutting off the trap and, yes, it will be located somewhere that makes sense. The exception to this would be an adventure dealing with a treasure house whose owner accidently secured his gold too well and now has hired your adventurers to break into his own treasure house for him.*

You also need to remember that if your trap is in the way of an essential element in your game, then you *must* have an alternate route by which the players can get to that element. You do not want your foolish players' characters all tossing themselves like lemmings onto the same trap for hours on end just because you didn't give them any other choice.

Too much or not enough?

With riddles, puzzles, or traps, you will always end up with the same question: How much do I tell my players?

This is a balancing act, and yes, it involves the whole difference between what players know and what their characters know. However, the most important thing is that players get the most satisfaction out of solving the riddles in the game themselves.† However, it is often difficult to judge how many or how blatant the clues your stalwart players will require to figure things out.

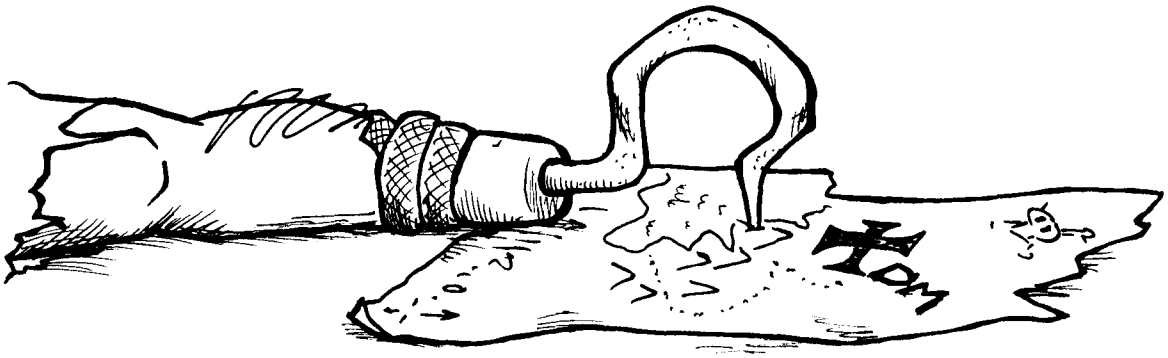
The best way to deal with this problem is *inside* the game design. For every mind-bending riddle, complex puzzle, or fearsome trap, you need to seed the clues and solutions elsewhere in the design. As a rule, three will usually cover it: the first clue only a subtle nudge, the second a bit more blatant, and the third a whopping smack across the head saying, "try THIS dummy!"‡ By seeding these inside the design itself, it allows you to provide the players what they need to solve the riddle without resorting to calling anyone names at the table. Better still, since they they obtained the clues through their own efforts, the players will universally feel incredibly clever no matter how blatant the clue required.



* Oh, no! I just gave away *another* great adventure idea!

† Or at least feeling as though they did.

‡ We are speaking entirely metaphorically here, of course, referring to the degrees of blatantcy in the clues or hints provided. We do *not* advocate actually smacking your players across the head regardless of your personal feeling on the matter.



CHAPTER SEVEN: THOU SHALT PREPARE!

So you have the basic structure of the adventure in mind. You've structured it around the Campbellian Monomyth. You've fitted it with mystery and riddles. You are a creative dynamo.

Guess what? Creative people are amazingly commonplace among game players. If you're playing a role playing game you had *better* be creative! We, despite our being 448th Level XDMs, certainly do not question your creativity. But it isn't the creative people who make the grade! Creativity is easy, disciplined creativity is a rare and beautiful thing. It isn't enough to come up with the coolest adventure of all time. You have to be able to *execute* the design in a way that is useful, organized, and coherent.

Preparation Time and When to Know How Far is Too Far

The rule is pretty straightforward: The success of your adventure is directly proportional to the amount of preparation you put into it. If you just slap together a map, jot down some notes, and determine to just make up the rest of it when you get there, we're going to tear your XDM patches off your pajamas at the very next regional meeting! No XDM worth his dice would approach a game with such a casual, sloppy approach!

Is it possible to take this preparation too far? One can speculate that there are game referees who have spent entirely too much time working on a campaign world which no one else will ever see, those who are "forever designing but never coming to a performance of the game."* There comes a time when you just have to move past the design and play it. A game that is not played is unfulfilled.

The Map is the Territory

The most easily recognized organizational tool you can have for your adventure design is a solid map. Because your adventure will take place almost exclusively in your mind and the minds of your players, this map that you create actually will *be* the territory of your game.

Your map is more than just a representation of the world for your game. It is the playing field on which all activities happen. Elements of this map represent some of the hard and soft borders of your overall game in a closed matrix design. It is also a graphic representation of the various encounters of your game design and their physical interrelationships. A good map can make your work as an XDM ever so much easier.

* Apocryphal 'Book of the XDM' 6:122

Take into consideration all of the following elements when designing the map for your game:

1. **The map needs to make sense.** You should have some basic concept of how cartography functions. Cartographers around the world have been making maps as long as people have been walking. The systems which they have developed over the millennia have evolved into their current form for a reason. Adopt their tools.

2. **The locations need to make sense.** Think about any structures (like castles, villages, or dungeons) in terms of their use. Picture people (or monsters) actually living there. Is this a defensive structure (as most castles are)? If so, then where are all of those guards going to be housed? They will all need to be fed and their mess halls will need to be near both the barracks and the kitchen facilities. The royalty they are protecting, however, most likely will not want to see the servants, but will certainly want them handy. How do the servants enter the areas of the royalty? How are they kept separate? How does traffic of individuals and their purposes flow through the structure?

   This also applies to the layout of towns. A study of medieval cities shows that their streets are terribly convoluted because it was a defensive strategy to confuse invading armies. Are your streets *intentionally* confusing or did you just draw a bad map?

3. **Consider rendering a profile view of any major building.** Most adventure dungeons, were they actually constructed, would have something of a ranch style appearance with a sprawling floor plan spread out very widely over a single level. There is no reason why anyone would actually *build* such a ridiculous structure.



Castle Ravenloft–from the classic TSR, Inc. adventure module *Ravenloft*–was actually reverse engineered by studying the layouts of French and German castles, noting the various required spaces and their relationships, and then drawing the *exterior* of what the castle looked like *first* and *then* segmenting it into levels and drawing floor plans for each level. It is true that there was considerable iteration going on in the process; the elevation drawing would be modified as the required interior spaces were put in place or the interior spaces would be modified to suit a better look to the elevation drawing. The result was a building that actually *looked* like a castle that someone would want to build. It also resulted in a unique map design (thanks to the brilliance of Dave Sutherland) with, as befits an actual castle, a lot of going up the stairs and coming down them as well. This, in turn, had a tendency to get the players completely *lost* inside the castle, a wonderful side benefit.

If your dungeon or building would look squat and squashed were it actually to be built, then you should consider taking the structure vertical, rather than horizontal.

4 **We know this is supposed to be fantasy, but get real.** Your wildest imagination only works when it is grounded in something familiar or that at least makes sense. Before you start drawing a map of your world that looks less like something from Tolkien and more like something from "How I Spent My Summer Vacation," you might consider ways to make it more real.

For example, start with these basic concepts about geology, geography, and geopolitics: Geography has a huge impact on civilizations. Start by slamming a few land masses together. Prevailing winds, mountain range placement, and the locations of large bodies of water largely determine rainfall. (Rain falls on the windward side and land tends to be drier on the leeward side. How fertile is the ground? How often does it rain? The answers to these questions, plus its elevation above sea level determine the types of vegetation found there. Rain falls on the mountains and their slope determines where the rivers run. (Duh!) More importantly, civilizations follow the course of rivers in their establishment (because rivers are the most efficient way of traveling long distances, natural roads). Use those same rivers as a guide for the classical spread of your civilization.

Speaking of civilizations, before you go planting ruins all over your map, consider some of the following questions: Who built these things here? When did they build them and why? What happened that caused whoever built these things here to abandon them? (Come on! *Nobody* builds "ruins.") Does some of the stuff they originally built here still work? Why? If monsters now inhabit these ruins, what caused them to move in here? How have they adapted this place to their own living requirements?

5. **If you ever say "because it's magic" again, I swear. . .** You have exactly five seconds to launch into an extensive discourse on how magic works in your world, why this magic still works after all this time, and why this particular piece of magic isn't just some weak, milkquetoast, pansy-sissy DM whining to excuse his way out of a bad design. If at any point in your explanation *any* XDM within the sound of your voice get's even the slightest feeling that you are somehow channeling Doug Henning saying, 'It's Magic!' then you lose two levels as an XDM and must immediately make a saving throw for your design or start all over!

Magic had better be a *reason* and not an *excuse*. Far too many fantasy and science fiction stories or games fall back on this tired wimp-out. "Hey, why is it that a pair of ruby slippers can get you home in two seconds?" "Because it's *magic*!" Nutz! You had better be prepared to explain why it is that the crystalline structure of ruby combined with the chromium that gives the gemstone its color interacts to merge the ethereal field surrounding the planet to produce a space-time fold between parallel worlds–one of which is in Technicolor and the other in a sepia tone brown and white.*

* This fold effect had better also be known to cause extreme weather conditions on both sides of the parallel universe often resulting in an atmospheric phenomenon known as "a Twista!"

If any of us ever catch you plastering over a plot hole, bad character motivation or poorly designed structure with the words "because it's *magic*," we will hunt you down.

Creating solutions to plot problems that are not just dismissed by waving your not-so-magical wand is part of the challenge and fun of creating worlds and the adventure that reflect them. When Margaret* and Tracy were working on the *Deathgate Cycle* the first of the worlds featured floating land masses in a seemingly endless sky.

Now, aside from this being apparently inspired by a traumatic trip to the record store when Tracy was a young teenager, why did these massive islands *float* in this sky? Was it magic? NO! Tracy considered how it would be that huge land masses would actually float in the sky. Either they were in a region without gravity–which would *really* complicate the story since he really needed gravity to work here–or there was something about the islands themselves that floated them in the sky.

What else floats? Wood? Very small rocks? A duck?† How about zeppelins and dirigibles? They float because they displace more air than their total weight, the same reason iron ships float. So, how is it that these islands weigh so little and displace so much space? Perhaps they are mostly hollow–like volcanic rock mixed with air when it cools–and then there would be something that filled those voids with a gas with less density than the surrounding atmosphere. What if there were fungus growing inside those spaces which created such lifting gases as part of their existence. Of course, this would mean that the islands in the sky were mostly porous and therefore wouldn't hold water very well ... which meant that my inhabitants would have to work pretty hard to keep any water that came their way. Water would therefore be pretty valuable as a commodity, which meant that perhaps water was their medium of exchange.

Suddenly the problem had led us to a really interesting world filled with new possibilities.

Sometimes it helps to take a different approach to solving such problems in your design. When Laura‡ and Tracy were working on the second book for their Bronze Canticles series, *Mystic Quest*, Tracy was faced with a problem of an ancient underground empire which connected the northern and southern sections of a continent. There was something on the map called "the Dwarven Road" that was supposed to be a big deal transportation system that had long since been abandoned from use. It didn't make sense that there would be these enormously long tunnels underground. Sure the mountains were difficult to get through, but how could forging a winding path through the mountain passes be more difficult or expensive than digging a tunnel through solid rock for hundreds of miles? Moreover, who would want to be *stuck* in a tunnel hundreds of miles long on their ox cart? Where would you camp? Where would you feed your ox and yourself? And who would want to stay for weeks underground just trying to get to the light at the end of the Dwarven Road?

It just didn't make sense and for the longest time Tracy couldn't figure out how to deal with it. Then a different approach occurred to him. "Hey, I don't have to figure out how to do it. The dwarves who lived here *already* did that. All I have to figure out is how the *dwarves* would have done it." The result was the discovery that the Dwarven Road wasn't a road at all. It was a set of directed underground rivers, with occasional cuts, conduits, and viaducts that linked underground lakes. You didn't take a cart. You rode the river.

If you have a problem in the structure of your story, game, or adventure *never* patch it over with magic. Roll up your sleeves, put your thinking cap on and look at the whole process as a *challenge*. Never give up! Never surrender to magic!§

* Margaret Weis, world-renown fantasy novelist whose name we are casually dropping here because we want you to know how cool we are being able to just refer to such an excellent person by her first name alone.

† You knew that there would need to be at least one reference to *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* somewhere in this book.

‡ Once again impressing you with the people we know, we mention Laura Hickman, the beautiful and talented wife of Tracy Hickman and his writing partner as well. Please tell her that this footnote is in the book next time you see her.

§ You knew there would have to be a *Galaxy Quest* reference somewhere as well, didn't you?



As for making a pretty map, there are a number of really fabulous mapping programs available to creators of adventure games. Tracy prefers Profantasy's Campaign Cartographer and Fractile Terrain software packages. Although by the time you actually get around to reading this part of the book they've probably developed an entirely new set of software tools and possibly three more operating systems.

Putting it all together: the adventure text

You've got the tools, you've even got all the parts. Now you have to put the whole thing together into a working, well-oiled, and functional machine. It helps if you have a plan and an instruction manual.

The first thing you should consider is that a written adventure is a one-dimensional string of information (text) used to transform a two-dimensional map into a *four dimensional* dynamic state.

Fine, we'll explain this for the lower level XDMs just reading this book for the first time. If you already know what we're saying, you'll just have to be patient while the rest of the class catches up. Text is one dimensional information*. You have to read it in a line and in sequence for any meaning to come out of the words. You cannot read a word on page ten, flip back to page one for another word and then to page six and expect the randomly chosen words for form a cohesive sentence. Charts are also essentially one-dimensional as well.† Tables and maps make a fine show of stepping things up into the second dimension (height and breadth). These together are the completed design, the "map" to the game experience, which in reality is *four* dimensional–a imagined state of existence, which not only has the three classical dimensions of width, depth, and height, but all of which are forever moving forward through the fourth dimension of time.

It's a real challenge to figure out how to do that effectively.

It is these very limits in dimension that poses the heart of any approach to writing down a game design. The first thing you need to decide in your adventure, then is which is the more important dimension in your game: space or time?"

Organization: Time vs. Space

There are two basic guiding options when you try to write down your adventure which you can easily choose between by asking your self this question:

Is the primary motivating force on the characters limited options or limited time?

The first is called an option lock while the second is called a time lock.

1. **Option lock** This means that the options available to the players will diminish over the course of the adventure until they literally run out of options. Players who are making their way through an underground dungeon are primarily faced with an option lock; there are only so many places that

* OK, whiney physics people, we *know* that the text exists in the third dimension *physically*. The ink, no matter how thin, has its own three dimensional space and the page certainly has a thickness beyond its width and height. We're not talking about the physical properties of the page, we're talking about the dimensions of the *information* itself. Feed *that* to Schrödinger's cat . . . who may or may not be around to chew on it.

† For you game design challenged, new XDMs, a "chart" compares one set of numbers to a matched pair of results. A "table" cross references two fields (across the top and down the side) to find the result at the intersection of the two fields. Now you can refer to charts and tables correctly and not have people snicker behind your back any longer at game design conferences.

they can go and even though they are free to wander around all they want, no one wants to go back to an empty room. So they keep exploring until the limit of their options is reached and they finally arrive at the end of the adventure.

Option locks deal more with space and choices than with time. Classic dungeons and outdoor adventures in a closed matrix with well defined boundaries are both examples of option lock environments. No matter how long the players wander around, eventually they will run out of options for places to visit. In this type of adventure the best approach is to make your text refer *primarily* to maps and locations independent from timed events.

2. **Time lock** This means that the clock is ticking on the bomb and that the amount of time available for the characters to solve the problem will diminish with every passing second. This is, obviously, a bit more urgent on time constraints for the players. If your players suddenly wake up and discover they are standing next to a thermonuclear device in the 100 kiloton yield range in the middle of the New Mexico desert with a loud voice counting down from the ten minute mark, and nothing for transportation but the Red Ball Jet sneakers on their feet . . . that's a time lock for you that no amount of running away will solve.

   Time lock relates more to *time* than to space or options. You will need locations and, no doubt, maps, but the *primary* concern of the adventure–the very heart of your organization of the text–will need to center around sequences of events and their relationship to choices.

Now that you've figured out the general approach to your adventure (linear, open, or closed matrix) and its primary concern (option or time locked) it's time get the whole thing organized.

Tricks of Adventure Writing

The Script

All XDMs know that the text of your adventure is a *script*. It's a reference work that isn't meant to be *read* but a guide to performance. This means that writing a good adventure has more to do with technical writing than it does with creative writing. While there are certainly a lot of creative elements in an adventure module, it's all about the *performance* in the end.

When you write your adventure, it is more important that it is organized properly than how flowery your purple prose flows on the page. Organization and ease of reference are the watchwords. It's your performance from these notes that matters more and the more organized your script the better your performance.

Cut Scenes

You're an XDM, a master of the game! Why overburden yourself with mundane details such as, say, doing the exposition for your adventure? Why should you do all the work while your players just sit around the table pretending that they hear what you are say, but all the while are secretly wishing you would stop reading that long description text and get on with bashing in the heads of a few monsters?

Hey, why is that *your* problem?

We humbly suggest that you use scripts and cut scenes to get you through those awkward moments.

A cut scene is a video game term for a sequence inside the game over which the player has little or no control. They are primarily used to advance character, plot, or background issues inside the game. They also provide texture, flavor, and atmosphere for the game. You might think of these little scenes as those same long, boring descriptions that you've been giving in every game. Until now.

We suggest that you *script* these cut scenes and have your *players* perform them. You can even produce these as cut sheets–copies of the script which only have the spoken lines for each of the players on them.

Implied Story

Actors on a stage are often encouraged to look not just over the audience but to gaze to the left or right of the proscenium. This effectively extends the stage because the audience, following the sightlines of the performer's eyes, believes that there is more in the character's world that is contained on the stage itself.

This is also true in the descriptions that you write for the various encounter locations in your

adventure. Most of the writing in encounter locations is dull and dry stuff, but the description text is your one opportunity to imbue the encounter with sights, sounds, smells, all the emotion and sense that brings a place to life in your players' minds. It is helpful, then, when considering what to put in these pieces of descriptive text, to look "beyond the proscenium" and extend the encounter through the use of implied story.

Implied story means placing descriptions inside the text that hint at greater events that have happened here in the past. Try the following examples:

> *As you open the door, you see that the back of it is charred. The room beyond appears to be the remains of a library. The books here are all charred, standing on shelves that skew away from the black crater in the center of the room.*

What happened here? Who did this? Are they anywhere around or is this something that happened long ago?

What about this description:

> *The mummified remains of a woman lay atop an altar. On the stairs below it, two skeletal figures lay frozen in the grip of combat, their rusting armor all that remains of their clothing. One's bony hand grips wisps of hair on his opponent's skull while the other's hand wraps around his enemy's throat. Both hold short swords in their remaining hands, plunged through one another's ribcages.*

Who were these people? Why are they here? What happened?

Remember that it is the nature of humanity to complete stories–especially where none is given. Every time players are confronted with what *looks* like a story, they will complete it in their minds, making up whatever pleases them to fill in the gaps and make it complete. The wonderful thing about this is that it involves the players more completely because it engages their imagination, allowing them to actually contribute something of their own creativity to the adventure.

Foundation

A good mystery story includes a surprise ending at which you can look back and say that all the clues were there all along.

In storytelling, we call that foundation. You lay the foundation for the work that comes later in the telling. The same is true in designing role playing adventures; you cannot have a monster that no one has seen before and has never been mentioned jump out of nowhere and



expect that creature to make sense. So if you have an ultimate bad guy at the end of your adventure, somebody better be talking about him very near the beginning.

Misleading

Detail calls attention to itself in a role playing game. The more detail you give something, the more certain the players are that there is something important about what you are describing, otherwise you wouldn't be describing it! The other part of that axiom is that detail slows down the game, but this is something you can use to your advantage by purposefully *misleading* the players with detail.

For example, in the classic adventure *Ravenloft* by Tracy & Laura Hickman,* the prevailing overburdened descriptions, which are pervasive throughout the text, lend an air of impending doom. Detail calls attention to itself. This means that if you take the time to describe something, then it *must* be important to the players. Players, of course, pick up on this early in their gaming–which means that you can use it against them, just as *Ravenloft* does. Two examples: In one of the early encountered hallways is a suit of armor. This is described in detail, and it is noted for the players that, while the rest of the hall is filled with cobwebs and dust, this armor is shining and clean. This, of course, freaks out players because it is so out of place. But the truth is that there is nothing wrong with the armor. It's just there to freak players out.

Just as quarterbacks in American football always try to use at least one running play early in a set of downs,† one of the techniques you should use as an XDM is to occasionally–not always but occasionally–pick something in the adventure and then describe it in intricate detail. Then, as players ask you questions about it, always secretly roll some meaningless dice and then look at the ceiling for a moment before answering with something like, "No, you don't see anything unusual after inspecting the thirty-foot tall clay statue of the grim man whose eyes stare down at you with hollow coldness despite the oppressive heat in the room. . . at least *for now!*"

That's called "keeping them honest."

* 496th and 349th level XDMs who, as you might have guessed, are the two premiere adventure game designers alive today.

† If you are unfamiliar with American Football then you are either from some nation *other* than the United States or have been living too long in the basement.

BEING THE XDM





CHAPTER EIGHT: ALL THE GAME'S A STAGE

It isn't whether they live or die, it's how you PLAY their game.

Gameplay, the XDM Way!

There is nothing like a game, nothing in the world! When you're playing an XDM-run game, that is. We're talking a no-holds-barred, pedal-to-the-metal, full-throttle adventure that grabs player characters by their bent-armor chest plate and drags them into the heart of excitement. How do you get to this place? You need a committed XDM.

An XDM game is more than a game–it's a performance, a fully-orchestrated improvisational theater with you as the combination director and main actor. Your players in the game only have to worry about portraying *one* character; you have to take *all* the other parts as well as fabricate the setting (through your descriptions). You also set the pace of the game and story; keep a picture in your mind of the interactions of *all* the performers; and interpret the results of physical, social, emotional, and ethical consequences of character actions; all while simultaneously adjudicating game rules.

That's what being a true XDM is all about!

XDM: The Modern Bard

From our very beginnings as human beings, we have been storytellers. As we have pointed out previously, story is hard-wired into us as humans. We perceive the world through the lens and framework of story (see "Narrative: How We Make Sense of the Chaos" on page 29). As early humans struggled to understand the world around them, they had storytellers who would pass down the stories of their ancestors and people, defining their heritage and past and instructing their future generations on the their society's social norms. This may first have happened around the communal fire or inside a protective cave. Storytelling is at the heart of the human experience.

Down through the millennia, the technologies for telling stories have changed greatly, but the need for telling stories has remained the same. Bards and storytellers wandering across the face of the world brought news and philisopies from far away and, with them, the first instances of cognitive dissonance–challenging thoughts and behaviors locally. Magicians, too, began touring the world with their acts, bringing wonder and spectacle to storytelling. The Greeks formalized storytelling into dramatics and plays. These forms eventually led to Shakespeare, Gilbert and Sullivan, Rogers and Hammerstein, and Andrew Lloyd Webber.

Radio allowed the sound of storytelling to be broadcast over large distances to mass audiences and the radio play was born. Movies similarly allowed the visual scene of storytelling to be conveyed to large audiences as prints would be sent across the country. Quickly both were melded together into the "talkies"

(motion pictures with sound) and one could both see and hear the story being conveyed in the flickering light of a darkened local theater. Then television took up the cause, broadcasting sight and sound right into homes. The great storyteller became available with the flick of a switch and the turn of a dial.

We have a universe filled with people trying to sell us stories constantly. Commercials are little stories interrupting bigger stories. The internet is filled with people, all speaking at the same time, with a relatively very few people bothering to listen. We are bombarded incessantly with noise trying to pull our attention to someone else's story. We are, in short, being diverted to death.

But the XDM is something special, a modern-day bard who has the opportunity not only to entertain, but enlighten, inspire, and connect with others on a personal level. You aren't performing for a massive audience;* a role playing game is a social connection between a few players gathered to create a story together with the help of some common rules and dice rolls.

Regardless of how well or poorly they play, the actual success of the game depends largely on you, the modern Bard.

Keep Rolling in the Role

Knowing how to best perform your role as the XDM in your game is perhaps the most difficult, demanding and rewarding part of your calling. You have prepared for this moment, considered your players, and chosen or crafted your adventure to suit their needs. You have everything at hand.

The curtain is about to go up. Success rests entirely on your shoulders. It's showtime! Here are some techniques to help your game experience be as X-treme as you wish.

Exposition Yourself!

Most adventure games start out with a setup. This is an expositional piece where the setting and story of the game are all laid out for the players so that they have some reference framework in which their character's actions make sense. This is called exposition and it can range from something as simple as "You are all sitting around a table at the local tavern" to novellas, to epic poems so lengthy as to put Homer to sleep.

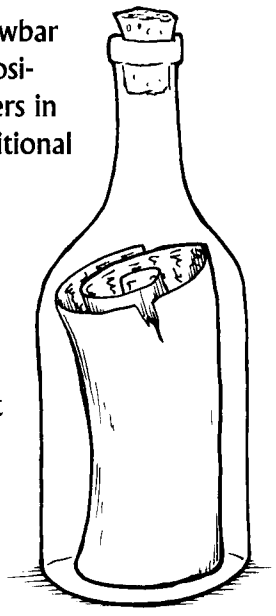
Often during the course of the game you will have other expositional moments as well, where the players may have uncovered a new piece of information, or triggered some event, which they will then need to observe or understand more exposition in order to forward the game's plot.

The problem with exposition is that it brings player action to a standstill. All the characters in the game have to just sort of stand around while you dump information on top of them.

Unless the information you are conveying is an absolutely jaw-dropping revelation that electrifies their interest (odds are against it) then you need to find a more creative way of conveying this information.

Cut Scenes One way we have already mentioned is through the use of *cut scenes* (see "cut scenes" on page 56). Let the players act out the exposition while you sit back and watch. If you have a really good group of players, you might give them each a piece of the critical information that everyone needs to know and then challenge them to create their own "improv" cut scene. They must work into their conversation the information that they have on their card. Tell them they'll get extra points for doing a really good job.

Expositional Props You can crowbar a tremendous amount of exposition into a prop. Prepare letters in advance containing the expositional information that you wish the players to discover, put them on parchment and use cool, mystic-looking fonts when you print them out.† Don't *tell* your players about the fragment of the map they just discovered, *give* it to them so that they can paw and drool all over it on their own time. Go to your local curiosity shop, antique store, Tai Pan



* Unless, of course, you're running a Killer Breakfast event. (See page 101.)

† You could actually resort to hand lettered calligraphy which would be even cooler, but that's entirely up to you and your calligraphic skills.

Trading Company,* or import store and find some inexpensive oddity that you can work into your game. Then put the secret message inside *that* object.

Go Multimedia In an age where everyone seems to have access to a video camera, editing equipment, and the firm belief that their video (unlike the *rest* of YouTube) is actually *good*. . . well, this leads to all kinds of possibilities for producing your own exposition video which you can show to your players through the "magic window" or whatever you decide to call your television or computer monitor.

However you decide to handle exposition, remember that it should always be broken up whenever possible so as not to slow down a game.

Dramatic Pause: Pace in the Game

Your mastery of storytelling can make or break a game, and your mastery over your voice will make or break your storytelling.

Picture yourself stuck in a seat in the middle of a large venue full of people. An expert or authority is standing at a podium in front of you speaking on a subject that is absolutely fascinating–to *them*. You might be interested in the topic, but the speaker has a voice with only one level of pitch, one tone of delivery and one cadence in their voice.† They go on, and on, and on. . . the same voice, the same pitch, the same relentless pace between their words.

It's like water torture.

Each day, unfeeling game referees are subjecting thousands of innocent game players to these inhumane experiences for hours on end. There is no respite or relief for these gamers, many of whom know of no other gaming existence.

But there is something you can do to help.

No, you do not need to send us money monthly to adopt one of these unfortunate gamers,‡ but you *do* need to be aware of the power of varying pace and vocal delivery in performing your game.

We're not talking about *what* you are saying (that's in the next section) but we are talking about *how you say it*.

Let's start with some basics that you will commonly encounter in role playing games:

Dungeon Crawling When your players are just moving through enclosed spaces and you have some description you need to give them, consider lowering the volume of your voice slightly and speaking in slower, hushed tones. Not only will your quiet voice have a tendency to bring down the volume of the player's voices but the slower pace will serve you shortly.

Foreshadowing and Anticipation When something *big* is about to happen to your players–whether it is good or bad–you should give your players a dramatic heads up for the hair on the back of their necks. Lower the volume of your voice and slow down the pace perceptibly. Speak your words with emphasis, as though each one were vital. Alfred Hitchcock, the master of suspense, so wisely said, "There is no terror in the bang, only in the anticipation of it." If you are going to give your players a really *good* scare, then you have to allow them to anticipate it, and then *relieve* them of it for a split second before you *hit them from behind*.

The motion picture *Alien* for example makes sure that you are afraid *long before* you get a chance to see the monster. Music and moody settings, allow you to be steeped in anticipation before the monster ever even appears. Your adventures need to make use of the same anticipation. The use of long and elaborate descriptions at such points will heighten anticipation while automatically slowing down the game.

And ... Action When the players suddenly find themselves in dire distress, you must make it *dire*! The pace absolutely *must* increase tremendously at this point and the pitch of your voice rise in the excitement. You *cannot* expect your players to be excited if you do not convey it with your voice. Everything must happen *fast*.

Here's the real problem: combat in role playing games–the *one* moment in the game that

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* This mention of the Tai Pan Trading Company was made without promotional consideration ... but we're not above taking it, should they offer us compensation for it.

† You might consider thinking of Ben Stein playing the teacher in 'Ferris Bueller's Day Off' at this point for inspiration.

‡ Although we are considering setting up a mostly not for profit foundation to assist these unfortunates.

absolutely requires speed–is invariably the most complicated, overburdened, and system-laden part of the rules. The system asks you to slow down *precisely* at the moment you *must* speed things up. This is the dilemma of the ages. But we're going to address this in "off-loading" on page 64.

What you *must* achieve during any action sequence is a high degree of energy in your portrayal and as much color in your descriptions as you can manage at that level of speed. Rather than simply interpreting players' success or failure in combat as "a hit" or "a miss," do your best to *describe* the results in graphic terms such as "your cutlass slices into the side of the Orc who howls in agony!" or "Your cutlass stroke goes wide, slamming against the table with enough force to slosh ale out of the mugs."

Purple Prose: How Not to Read Descriptions

One of your responsibilities as an XDM is to "paint the scene." This means that you are responsible for giving the descriptions that make the universe come alive in the imagination of the players. While you can do a number of things to help you in this task (such as creating exact miniature representations of the areas your players' characters are exploring), the most-used and basic tool in the XDM's arsenal is expositional description: just conveying to the players what their characters see through your words and gestures.

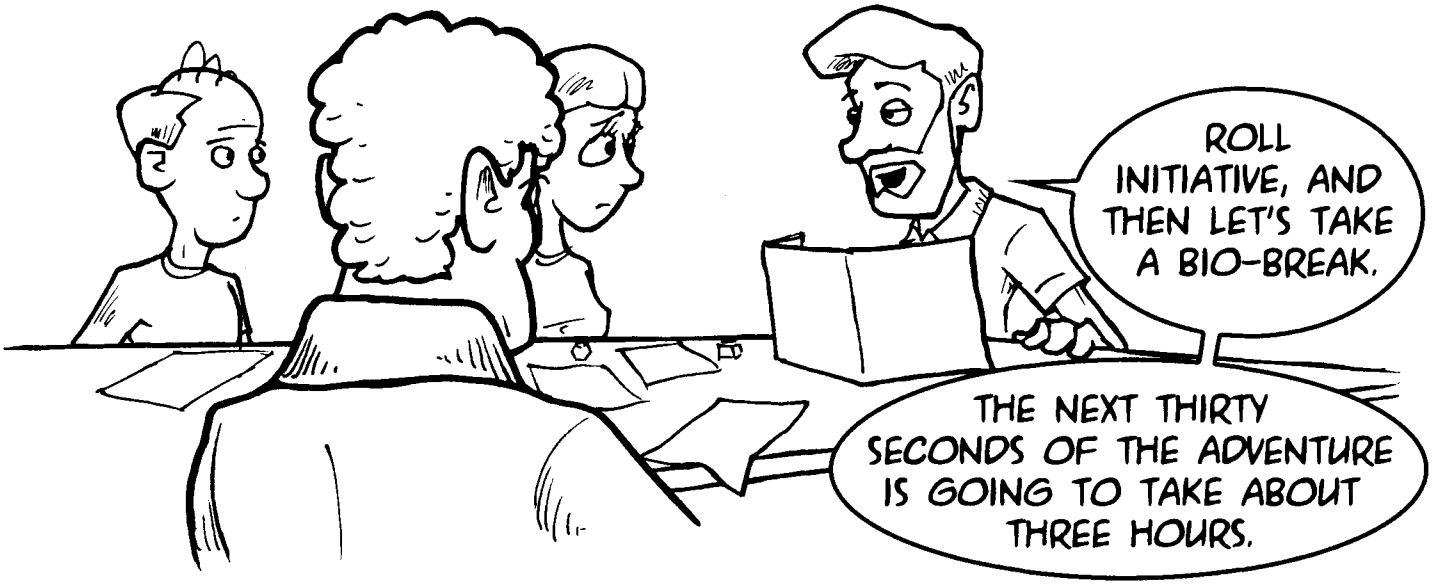
Many adventures, including yours, will probably include descriptive text. This is important because while the rest of the encounter description will probably involve rules-intensive (and rather dry) materials related to the mechanics of running the encounter, the descriptive text is the one chance you have to convey all the ambiance, nuance and color that this particular encounter involves.

The problem is that most game referees just read this text verbatim from the words printed on the page, which usually makes them as dry and lifeless as the rules text.

Descriptive text, even the most prosaic, should *never* be read verbatim by an XDM. Instead, the XDM should read the text beforehand to get a sense of the overall picture that it is trying to convey and then, *in her own words* describe the area to the players. By doing so, the XDM has the picture of the area in her mind and can address with her description any questions that the players may have. This is important so that you can maintain the effect, tone, mood, and ambience of the encounter long after you have run out of the descriptive text on the page. And speaking of the "picture". . .

Keeping the Picture

Any XDM worth his level should practice maintaining the "picture" at all times. This is a flight school term where pilots are asked to keep a mental picture of the space around their aircraft in mind at all times. In role playing games, the relative positions of the players and their surrounding environment can be of great help



to the XDM in maintaining a consistent and believable experience for the players. This is especially true when the mechanics of a game start interfering with the verisimilitude* of the experience.

For example, if the combat mechanics of your game require that all combatants take turns bashing each other, it can begin to sound ridiculously tedious rather than exciting. For an example, a quote from Stephen Leacock's† Nonsense Novels, *Guido the Gimlet of Ghent: A Romance of Chivalry*:

> *First Guido, raising his mace high in the air with both hands, brought it down with terrible force on Tancred's mailed head. Then Guido stood still, and Tancred raising his mace in the air brought it down upon Guido's head. Then Tancred stood still and turned his back, and Guido, swinging his mace sideways, gave him a terrific blow from behind, midway, right centre. Tancred returned the blow. Then Tancred knelt down on his hands and knees and Guido brought the mace down on his back. It was a sheer contest of skill and agility. For a time the issue was doubtful. Then Tancred's armour began to bend, his blows weakened, he fell prone. Guido pressed his advantage and hammered him out as flat as a sardine can. Then placing his foot on Tancred's chest, he lowered his vizor and looked around about him.*

Combat in most role playing games comes across very much this way because everyone takes turns bashing each other.

However, as an XDM, if you can maintain the picture of *all* of the characters and creatures in the combat and take into account their actions *as a whole* then the description of the combat (and the results) can become far more dramatic. Rather than doling out damage one slug at a time, have all your players make all their attacks–in turn if you like–and all of the creatures they are attacking make their own attacks. Keep track of the damages done in sequence and get these mechanics all out of the way as quickly as possible. *Then* (and only then) do you describe the combat in full, taking into account the fact that some people launching their bows from the back of the party might be interfered with by those in front of them, that a completely fumbled blow by the knight in the front of the group might well affect the two companions who are standing on either side of him. The picture will be constantly changing–with the pace that matches your game.

Polling and Shifting Emphasis

We've also mentioned this before ("Executing It All in the Game: Polling and Juggling" on page 27) but it is so important that we needed to mention it again here. You have many different types of players in your game and each of them have different needs they are looking to be fulfilled. Whether they are warrior, social, or thinking players, each one will be looking for some different aspect in the game play that will satisfy them.

You should constantly be polling the players as to whether their needs are being met. This is always done silently and will require you to develop some observational skills regarding your players. Are they getting bored? What works for them? As an XDM, you must be prepared constantly to shift the emphasis in your game to that which will bring your players along with you. It's a balancing act not unlike a stand-up comedian trying to figure out which jokes are working with that particular crowd on that particular night.

Offloading

As an XDM, you have a lot on your plate. You're responsible for keeping the game pace up, judging which characters live or die, weaving a tapestry of the experience by creating and describing settings, and playing the parts of all those "extras" that keep appearing around the player's characters.

So why should *you* do all the work?

Any game mechanics or busywork chores that you can offload onto your players you *should* offload and right from the very beginning. Why should you perform all the heavy calculations because your player has a plus-this sword and is minus-that when fighting canaries? It's *their* complex character; let your players do the heavy lifting. Have them tell you what you need to know: what number they have to

* Verisimilitude is the appearance of being true or real; likeness or resemblance of the truth or reality. It is a very big word to be used in role playing games, but since the level of realism in games is of almost obsessive concern to gamers, you should spring this word on them now and then whenever they start quoting rules at you.

† Stephen Leacock (1869-1944) was Canada's premiere lecturer, humorist, and author. His *Nonsense Novels* remain fun to read today. He is the favorite author of Tracy Hickman – go figure.

roll in order to succeed. They should tell you how much damage they think they did. You can always correct that if necessary.

Players should be in charge of their own map (especially if they get it wrong) and they should keep track of their own treasure (what the XDM giveth, the XDM can taketh away).

When you are working with players who are new to role playing gaming, then you'll need to help them out and tell them which dice to roll. But soon enough you'll train them right and they'll be whitewashing the fence* for you in every game. Never do any more work as an XDM than you must.

Smell of the Grease Paint, Roar of the Orcs



Showmanship during game play is one of the most important things you can learn. If you want the quickest way to improve your game, learn how to present the game better. If you learn only one great and important truth about gaming from this book let it be this:

An XDM is an actor playing the part of an XDM†.

This means that all the rules of rhetoric and thespianism‡ apply to you. To make this as painless as possible we have constructed a list of some things to work on and keep in mind.

1. **"Umm"** Don't say "ummm". It's a bad habit that everyone falls into. You are performing here. When you say "Ummm" it sounds like (and probably means) that you don't know what you are talking about. Eliminate this word (and similar verbal crutches) from your speech as much as possible.§

2. **Speak clearly and with emphasis.** No one wants to play a game with a mumbling fool. To entertain you have to be understood.

3. **Acting is not so much acting as it is reacting.** True acting isn't really acting at all. It's *reacting* to the elements that affect it. People are this way. Something happens and you react to it. Your reaction makes other people react. How they react makes you react. And on and on it goes. Don't think this means losing control. It doesn't. It means understanding what the correct reaction an NPC, environment, or you personally should have to a situation. Did a player do something funny? Laugh—loud. Make him feel good for contributing to the entertaining experience of the game. Do all drunks in taverns react the same when they are pushed. No! And don't always let some die tell you what they do either. You know this NPC, act for him.

   This idea brings us to a very important place. Did your players just blow up a silo? What is the reaction of the NPCs in the area? What did the explosion do? What about the smoke? Someone must have seen it. How *you* as an XDM react to this is key. To be honest this is the most important thing in the book. And we will discuss it ad nauseam further below. It's *that* essential.

* As in Tom Sawyer getting all the other children to white wash his Aunt Polly's fence in Mark Twain's novel, *Tom Sawyer*. If you still don't understand this reference then I have a fun fence I'd like to show you.

† This is actually a slightly altered bit of plagiarism. The real quote is "A magician is an actor playing the part of a magician." It is accredited to Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin, the father of modern magic. But that doesn't make it any less true for XDMs.

‡ Insert old and tasteless joke here.

§ If you ever catch one of us saying "Ummm," we did it on purpose and are allowed to 'cause we make the rules.

4. **Acting is not making faces.** When playing the role of an NPC, don't fall into the old trap that acting sad means making a sad face. Depression means not eating, not sleeping well, and probably an attempt to hide it. Again, if the NPC is sad, how will he react to that sadness? *Everything is a reaction.* A good XDM will show an emotion, not just say that the character is crying and then speak for him in a weepy voice. He will understand why the NPC feels that way and act (react) accordingly.

Ethics, or "Try telling THAT to an Angry Mob!"

One last thing to consider as you judge your games as an XDM: the ethics in your game must be consistent, functional, dynamic, and have consequences.

Here is an example from a typical role playing game. The names have been changed to protect the people who may yet purchase this book:

The thief comes in through the gates of the city. He walks up to one of the locals and asks, "Excuse me, where is the richest part of town?" The local woman smiles and points down the road. "Right down there! Turn left at the golden statue and you can't miss it." The thief steals the local woman's purse and follows her directions. He arrives at the golden statue, steals it, and then finds the richest home on the block. He enters the front door and encounters a blind and deaf retainer. He sneaks into the house, discovers 10,000 piece of gold, steals it, and then sneaks out of the house.

Wow. How droll. Heart pounding excitement. Let's try this again:

The thief comes in through the gates of the city. The city guard–much heartier men than one might suppose–spy him at once and drag him into a corner, questioning him thoroughly. They detain him in the city dungeons for a week before letting him go with a stern admonition.

Well this seems more likely, doesn't it? I mean the guy *is* a thief. He continues on.

The thief, recently released from the city dungeon, walks up to a woman near the main gate of the city and asks, "Excuse me, where is the richest part of town?"

The woman's eyes narrow as she looks at him. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh," the thief says, thinking on his feet for the first time, "it's my Uncle. He sent for me and he happens to live in the richest part of town, so I'm trying to find him."

The woman, still squinting at him says, "Indeed, and what is the name of your Uncle?"

"Uh... Frank," the thief replies with a smile. The woman calls the city guards who drag off the thief to the city dungeon.

This is a *city*, isn't it? People here are suspicious of each other and certainly suspicious of a complete stranger. This woman probably lives in the city and no more wants a thief here than anyone else. OK, we'll let this one go for now.

"Uh... Frank," the thief replies with a smile. The woman does not *call the city guard but says, "It's near the center of town. You had best find your uncle right away. The city guards don't take kindly to outsiders." The thief nods, then tries to steal her purse. The woman fights him for it! She starts beating him on the head with her purse, screaming for the guard. Others in the square rush to her aid, and they start beating on the thief. There are cries to hang him from the city gates! He is only saved because the City Guard rescues him, drags him off to the city dungeon where, a year later...*

So much for that simple purse snatch. Maybe he won't try that. He'll just go for the big score instead.

The thief makes his way to the golden statue and attempts to steal it...

Have you any idea how much a golden statue would *weigh*? He can't take it anywhere without a wagon and a team of draft horses. Forget the statue. . .

The thief finds the richest home on the street. Dodging a far more vigilant group of city guards, he waits until night and manages to make it into the front door of the house. He encounters the retainer who is blind and deaf–but not stupid! He sounds the alarm! The thief grabs a golden candle stick–the only treasure at hand–and leaps out the back window. The guards are back there, too! He quickly throws open the cover to the sewer, leaps down into it, and tries to make his way out. He is lost in its maze of tunnels, gets terribly sick, and at last is forced to come back out to the surface – where the City Guards are waiting for him. They saw where he went and knew it was only a matter of time. The thief is hung by his wrists from a wall in the dungeon. . .

Now, isn't that more exciting? *That's* adventure! *That's* action! *That's* dreadfully hard on the character in the game, but he had it coming.

The point here is that games played without internal ethics are boring. It's like Superman without Kryptonite. If you can get away with *anything* inside the game then where is the challenge, the danger, the thrill?

Jarod, Tracy Hickman's son, once had a group of his junior high school friends come to his house to play in his dad's *Ravenloft* adventure. Admittedly, these *were* junior high school boys, so just how much could you expect from them? Anyway, we gave them all characters with swords and the adventure began.

These boys managed to make their way into town and followed the sound of a woman weeping inconsolably in the upper floor of her home. They found her there, sobbing over the fate of her lost daughter. Well, these boys had made a lot of trouble coming into town and a mob was gathering outside. Mind you, you'll not find this written in the module, but it made sense in the setting that the townsfolk would gather because the XDM was keeping the whole picture in his mind during the game. Seeing the mob outside, one of the boys decided the best way to escape the situation was to *throw the sobbing woman out of the window to distract the mob.*

You can guess what the incensed mob did! It was the first time Tracy had ever seen the lynching of player characters.

The point here is that games without internal ethics, without socially enforced consequences for the actions inside the game, are boring. Worse, they teach a falsehood, that we are not responsible for our actions. XDMs *always* play the ethics inside their game to the absolute hilt not just because it makes for more exciting game play, but better people after the game is done.





Chapter Nine: Living through the Revolution

What to do when your players turn uglier than they already are!

In any XDM game there is the possibility, no matter how remote, that the players may actually attempt to question the authority of the game referee. As absurd as this appears on the face of it, there are indeed numerous reports of such events actually taking place. You may never have occasion to come across a player so foolish as to attempt this but, should you somehow find yourself in this situation, there are a few techniques which you can use to stave off the unthinkable.

The Jack Bauer Rule

Played superbly by Kiefer Sutherland,* Jack Bauer is a counter-terrorist agent for a secret United States agency on the TV show *24*. Because the show's entire season takes place in 24 contiguous hours of non-stop action, Jack Bauer has little time to enter into overly-lengthy negotiations with the terrorists that he counters. Whenever he senses that he has gotten everything he has out of them and that they are simply stalling for time, he has a universal solution to the problem.

Just shoot 'em.†

As an XDM, when confronted with a player terrorist who is trying to hold your game hostage to some obscure rule that he or she insists you follow and who is willing to enter into protracted negotiations while holding all the other players of your game hostage to incessant yammering about how he or she is being wronged ...

You're the XDM. Just kill their character.‡

Drop a safe on them out of a clear blue sky. Hey, it could happen, and should. Have the ground beneath their feet open up from an earthquake and swallow them whole. A vortex opens up and instantly teleports them to an alternate universe where the rule they are quoting actually works. . . far from your game.

Problem solved.

* Who also voiced the part of Raistlin in the *Dragonlance: Dragons of Autumn Twilight* movie.

† Disclaimer: We do not advocate or condone in any way the actual shooting of players or anyone else for that matter. Role playing games and fantastic television shows may pretend to bump off characters nightly, but the only gun in a game room should be locked safely in your imagination.

‡ Disclaimer: When we say "kill their character" we do not intend or in any way mean to portray that you should enter into any sort of character assassination on the actual player themselves no matter how deserving. We wish to clarify that you are to kill their character in the game.

The Australian Rule

A newly initiated XDM in Brisbane, Australia who attended the Gencon OZ Convention there in 2008 actually gained a level on the spot for coming up with this rule. If he ever buys this rules book, he automatically gets an additional two levels.*

Pop Quiz: A player at your table starts quoting verbatim to you an obscure rule that contradicts a ruling you have just made. She reads out of the rule book to emphasize her point and looks entirely smug about her ability to use an index. What do you do?

One solution might be what we now call the Australian Rule. You simply reach across the table and take her character sheet from her, placing it entirely out of her view. You then say to her,

"From this moment on, you play your character without ever looking at your character sheet. You can still play the same character, but terrible things will happen to it if you make a mistake on any of your statistics, rolls, or items."

Punish the character whenever the player misquotes any of its statistics or calls for an item the sheet does not have. Kill the character if the player makes a big enough mistake. You might be merciful eventually and tell the player you will return her sheet if she will put down her rule book and never look at it again.

We would have called this the Turnabout Is Fair Play rule but we think Australian Rule sounds ever so much classier.

There's ALWAYS Another Rule, Rule

One of the great things about having so many different role playing games around with exceedingly complex rules sets is that there are literally too many rules for any one human to keep track of at one time. It's like advanced mathematics: so long as you tell someone you are applying a rule from a different *branch* of the science there is little they can do except helplessly whimper.

So if someone starts quoting rules at you that are meant to question your authority, assert their own player superiority, or simply mess with you as an XDM, you don't have to take it because *there's ALWAYS another rule that you can apply ... even if you have to make it up.*†

To assist you in maintaining control of your XDM games‡, we provide you now with the handy Quantum Universal Incredulous Rules and Knowledge Generator, or QUIRK Generator. (see page 70) This handy table will allow you, with the surreptitious roll of a few dice, to create a reasonable-sounding rule, sure to confound any rules-lawyer player who is trying to hijack your game.

All you need to do is roll four times, once for each column, and combine the phrase in order from A through D. Then make up whatever you want about how it supports your position.

Example: A player challenges you, quoting some rule about how halflings get a +5 bonus when using cooking tools as siege weapons. He is getting belligerent and challenging both your authority and abilities as an XDM. You decide magnanimously not to use the



* But we're not giving him his money back for the book. Just the extra levels.

† Please note that the original Advanced Dungeons and Dragons Dungeon Masters Guide contained, in an obscure place in that labyrinthine tome, a rule that said, "Regardless of anything written in these rules, whatever the dungeon master says is the rule supersedes the rules written in this book." If one were to consider the logical extension of this simple phrase then there was no need for any of us to buy all those books afterward since we could make up any old rule we wanted. Your word as XDM remains law in the rather limited universe of your game so make the most of it and lose the guilt over using this chart.

‡ And put these uppity players in their place.

Jack Bauer Rule because the player happens to be the brother of a woman you're hoping to date. So you say, "Ah, but you're not taking into account the ..." then you roll four d20s. The results are 15, 3, 7, and 18. You then continue with "... Updated Tools vs. Impact FAQ." You then explain that this rule–which you recently received with your updated game materials and the player *obviously* does not yet have–completely explains why his particular halfling is at this moment being cooked by the monster in his own frying pan.

The XD20 Rule

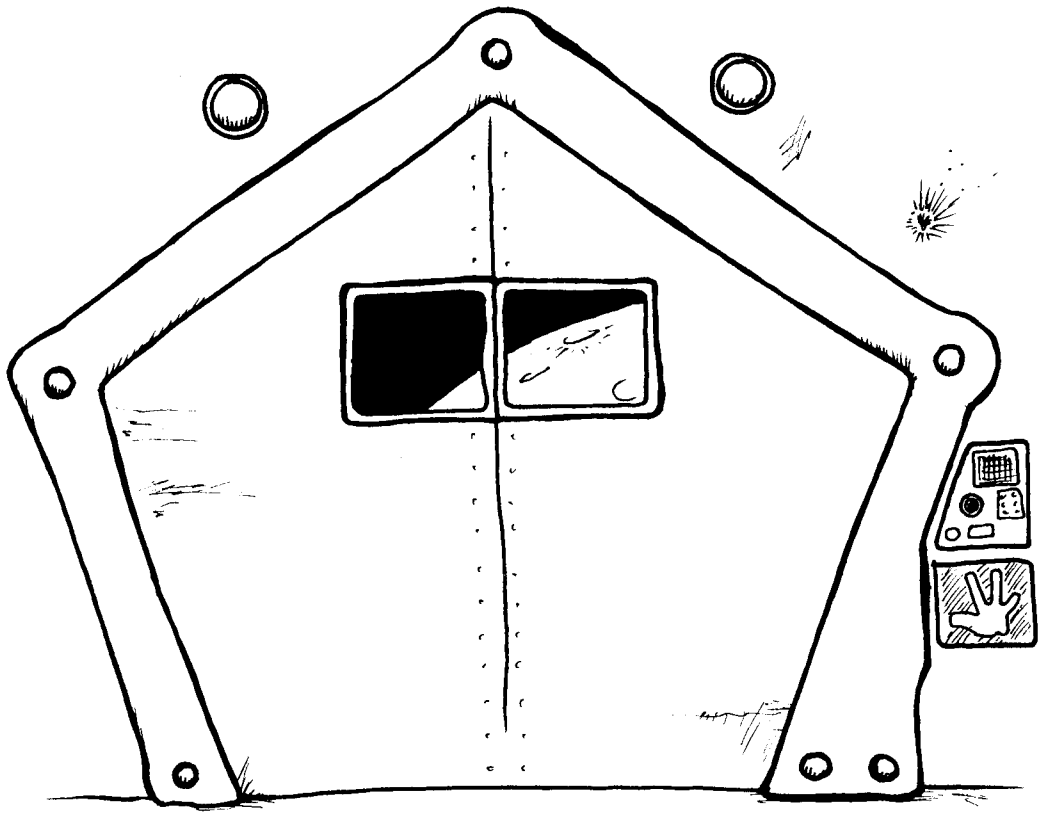
If you wisely choose to play your game using the XD20 system it will be hard for a terrorist to take over the game, since he doesn't understand the rules, and the XD20 system is so heavily dependent on the XDM anyway, that any rules basher would be at a loss.

If you are playing another system and are having trouble with players who want to run your game for you, we suggest switching over to the XD20 system until your players either have learned better manners or decide that they prefer this game after all.

QUIRK Generator

Roll (1d20)	Column A	Column B	Column C	Column D
1/11	New	Weapons vs.	Armor Modifiers	Table
2/12	Revised	Creature vs.	Stats Adjustments	Chart
3/13	Online	Tools vs.	Finite Sliding Scale	Variant
4/14	Official	Comparative	Speed Spectrums	Appendix
5/15	Updated	Blast Radius and	Range Modifiers	Module
6/16	Corrected	Magic vs.	Trajectory	Supplement
7/17	Advanced	Divine Aid vs.	Impact	Rerelease
8/18	Designer's	Action and	Penetration	FAQ
9/19	Original Author's	Character vs.	Player Intent	Published Errata
10/20	Canonical	Chaos Theory vs.	Quantum Reality	Beta Test

ULTIMATE XDM





CHAPTER TEN: ATMOSPHERE

Enough Fog, Lights, Music, and Lasers to Cause All Manner of Seizures.

Beyond Sanity and at the Edge of Reality-The ULTIMATE XDM Theatrical Setup-

You will need a buddy and a pyrotechnician to be managing things from a control center. They will have access to all your lights, sound, lasers, holograms, fog, and fire. Your buddy will mess with the first five. The pyrotechnician will mess with the last one–and probably eat your food*.

Sound

1. Use as many speakers as your receiver can take.

2. Set your speaker distribution to pump your audio through all 7+ speakers. The speakers should be placed in the room so as to completely surround your players. Include a *big* sub-woofer and have everything hooked through your receiver to a computer†.

3. Next, make a playlist of dramatic, epic, and otherwise adventure-esque music‡. Use iTunes for this list–from now on we will call this the "music list".

4. Use Windows Media Player§ to make a playlist of sound effects that will match the upcoming events in your adventure. Dungeon doors opening, armies marching, etc.¶ Also be sure to include fighting/action music in this mix. From now on we will call this the "SFX list".

5. Be sure to keep your music track relatively low. The music list is the soundtrack of your adventure and you don't want it to distract from the game.

6. Your SFX list should be off, but any given item on that list can be played to add dramatic and

* Let him. You don't want a guy who lights fires for a living mad at you, especially now that he knows where you live.

† You advanced users can add a mixing board in there 'cause it makes you look cool.

‡ The *Dragonlance* movie soundtrack is a great resource. Read that again and be sure you know we are talking about the *soundtrack*–which was awesome. We have no official comment here about the rest of the movie.

§ This is so you can have your sound effects play on cue over your music. There are other ways to do this, this is just the way we have done it.

¶ Yes this is stuff found online.

relevant effect to the game. Is there a thunder storm approaching? Can the group hear crickets in the field? Is there an avalanche, dragon breathing fire, wind in the cave?

It is important to remember that the audio is totally secondary to what the XDM is saying. The XDM should never have to yell over his own sound effects. Furthermore, the XDM and his buddy must be in sync for when a given sound should be played. This comes with practice and experience.

Lights

Dramatic lighting is a must. A XDM's go-to move with lighting involves the use of a gobo. Gobos create patterns of light in the air or splashing interesting shapes and designs across surfaces. If you have ever looked out of your window and seen what is often referred to as "God Light" piercing the clouds in a few of places, well than you have seen a giant gobo at work. To make a simple yet effective gobo:

1. Go buy some black wrap. You can find this online without any trouble. It's a lot like tin foil except thicker and ... black.

2. Get a reading light with a clamp.

3. Pull out a big piece of black wrap and cutout cool designs in it. Remember that what you cut out will be what is written in light later. We like to punch a bunch of holes of various sizes into the sheet as the broken up light streaming across the room looks wicked cool.

4. Bend the black wrap around the cone of your reading light, placing your design in perfect position for its projection.

5. Clamp your converted light to something near the ceiling or down near the floor and point it in the opposite direction. Use in a darkened room with just enough fog to allow your guests to see the effect.

Other ways to make your lighting more dramatic.

A. Use a china ball with a light bulb inside. This will diffuse the light and create a soft look across everyone in the room that is fantastic. Movies use this all the time.

B. White Christmas lights. Hang some black netting above your gaming area and weave your lights on it. Who can forget this old yet golden gem? A bit cliched perhaps but still cool looking.

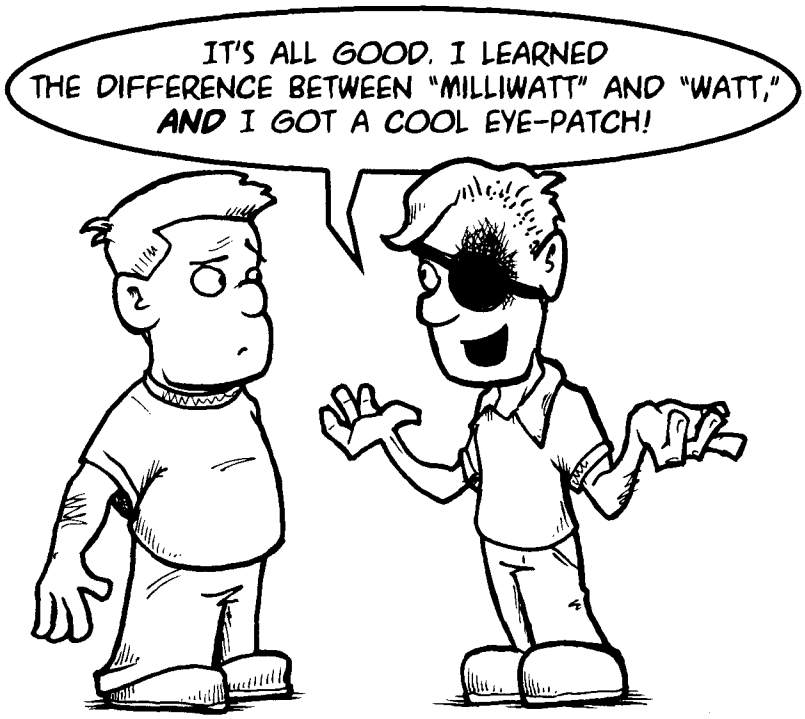
C. Use reading lights or floodlights to create dramatic light and shadow against walls, large sheets that hang and drape in cool ways. The ripples in the sheet or in the textured paint will create cool shadows.

Dimmers and switches are easy to wire and everything should be hooked back to your control center. Your buddy is there at the right moment to shut off all the lights, dim the lights, turn on the gobos. . . whatever effect is needed.

Lasers

The Poor Man's Laser Show

It's easier to create a sweet laser show than you think. Be careful that you set your laser display up so that it can't get in anyone's eyes.



1. Get a hand held laser–not one of those that burn a hole in your skin. The green kind are easier to see but a bit more dangerous and expensive. *Never look directly at a laser!*[*] Even the lasers that are weak and difficult to see can do damage after only a few seconds.

2. Get a pen spring. This is a little spring like what you would find in a "clicky" pen.

3. Get a small mirror. No bigger than two inches across.

4. Attach the mirror to the spring and the spring to something heavy, a block of wood should be fine.

5. Set your laser pointer so that it's pointed at an angle to your mirror.

6. Add some fog to a dark room and give your spring mirror a flick. This looks way cool.

Other cheap ways of doing super cool laser shows

A. Buy some diffraction grating (you can find it online) and attach it to a slow turning motor. The diffraction grating will split your beam in to several beams at various angles. Add another rotating diffraction grating (in the opposite direction) which slightly overlaps your first grating, and you've got yourself a field of laser beams going every-which-way, yet moving in a pattern.

B. Attach a small mirror to an old speaker (not the screen, but the actual speaker). Point your laser at it and play something trippy for music-driven laser effects.

C. Attach a small mirror to a PC fan at a slight angle[†]. Fire your laser directly at it. The laser will bounce off the mirror creating a cone. This is the popular "time tunnel" effect. As always be sure to add fog.

D. Get a piece of textured glass. Different textures will give you different results. Attach the glass to a slow spinning motor and shine your laser through it onto a wall. You can get really amazing patterns this way.

All of the controls for your laser spectacular should be routed to your control center.

Holograms

Okay, what we can do isn't technically "Holography." The truth is, this is better. Believe it or not there have been ways to make realistic three dimensional projections since the 1800's. Our favorite method for doing this sort of thing is with the Pepper's Ghost principle.[‡] When you look out a window at night you can see your reflection–even if there is a full moon out. In the reflection you look like you are standing outside the window in a semi-transparent state. Pepper's Ghost uses the same principle. If you have ever been to the Haunted Mansion in Disney World/Land, you have seen this spectacular illusion come to life with the ghosts in the large dining room. Here is what you should do to get the same effect in your game location. For the purposes of this explaination we are assuming that you are builiding a set large enough for a human-sized ghost. The instructions can be scaled down for smaller illusions.

First, find a place in your house that makes an "L" or cross shape. It could be a hallway that has a room halfway down it, or three rooms that are connected to each other, or even something as simple as a doorway. Build a "black art" set like the one seen on page 87 but without the platform–just a big black void. Depending on the scale of your illusion the set could be big or small. Your set should be in the adjoining room or space–somewhere the players can't see.

Second, go get as big a piece of clear Plexiglass as you can find. It needs to be at least the height from your ceiling to the floor and longer than the length of your set. If you can't get a piece of Plexiglass *that* big, get a smaller one and mask the edges in a creative way so that no one can see them or suspect them. Set that giant piece of acrylic glass at a forty five degree angle to the black art set.

It is very important that you light the area

* Duh.

† Not while it's still in your PC.

‡ Originally called the "Dircksian Phantasmagoria"–a trick of optics invented by Henry Dirks and further developed by John Henry Pepper in the 1850's.

behind the acrylic glass just right. The lighting in this area should be dim but not dark. A bit brighter than candlelight perhaps. Be careful, you don't want any light to shine on the glass itself since the specular highlights will be a dead giveaway. The black art area should be lit by lights hooked to dimmers and masked off with some black wrap. The lights will be controlled by your buddy at in XDM central command.

Place chair B behind the Plexiglass and a similar black chair A in the black art area. Test to make sure that the distance from the black chair to the glass is equidistant to the distance from the glass to the normal chair. This is easy to test. Have someone sit in chair A. Look into the glass from where your players will be sitting. If he looks like a ghost sitting in chair B, you've done it. If he looks like a guy floating in front of or behind–move chair B back and forth until the illusion is perfect.

Now you're ready.

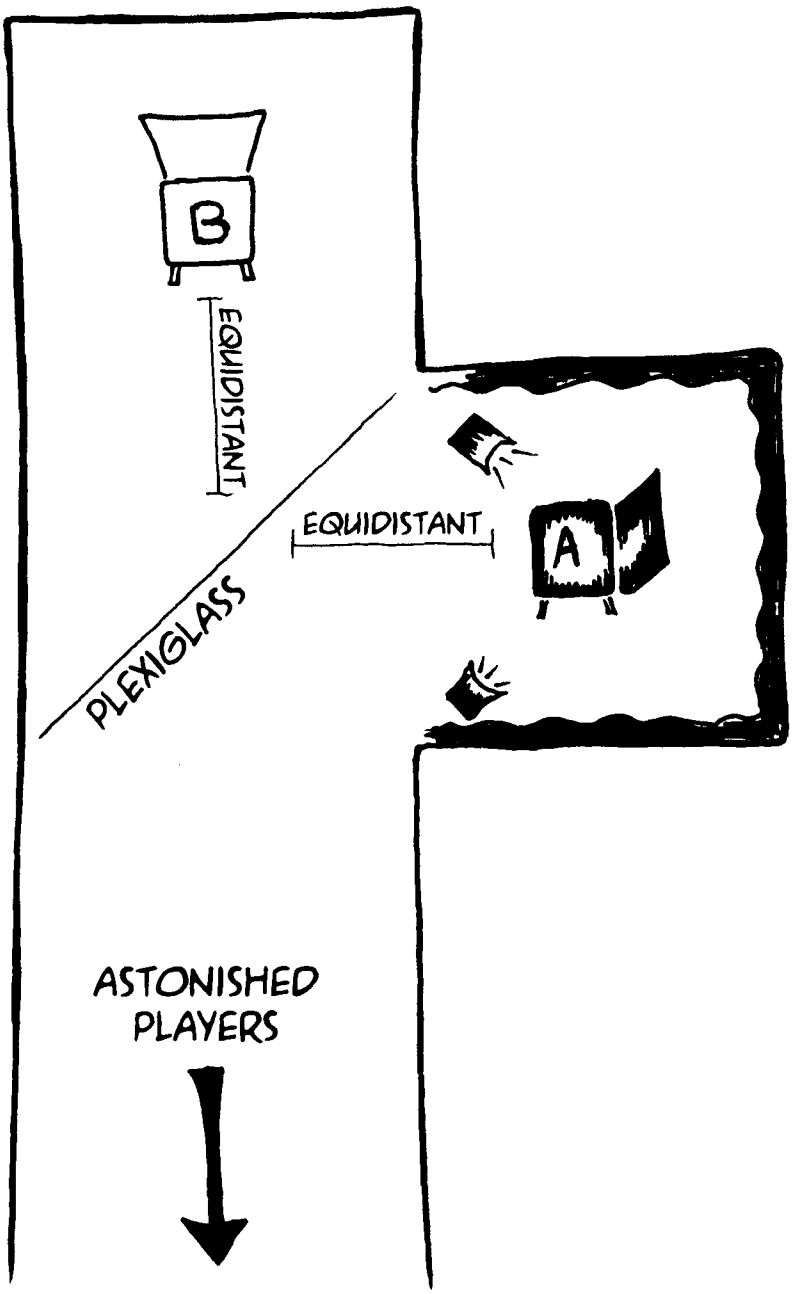
1. Make sure no one goes down that hall or into that room. As funny as it would be to see them just slam into an invisible wall.

2. Have your ghost actor in the black art area, just sitting there until it's time. Maybe you could convince the pyrotechnition to do this, since he isn't busy just now. Your ghost should be in a costume (nothing black, unless you want to do a floating spirit head, which maybe you do) and wearing makeup.

3). When you want a ghost to appear in the chair, your buddy in the control booth will just turn the lights up a bit in the black art set. The brighter the lights, the more solid the ghost becomes. Have the ghost deliver his message and then vanish from whence it came.

Be sure to use two dimmers. Once your ghost has appeared, fade one up and the other down. Then vice versa. This will create more of an ethereal effect as parts of the ghost fade in and out.

You can do more with this of course. We like to have the spirit interact with things that are behind the glass. A bit of thread, and some good timing, can make your ghost knock over a vase or even the chair he was sitting on. You can have the players ask him questions before he vanishes in an instant.



Fog

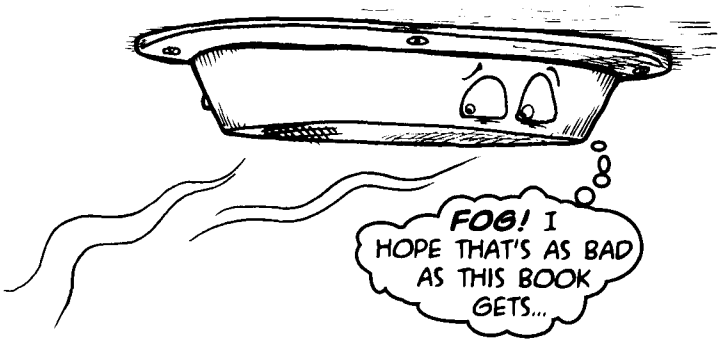
There isn't much to say here. Fog machines are actually quite common now days. Go to any Target at Halloween and you will find both floor foggers and air foggers. Keep in mind:

1. You want to get water based fog, not oil based. (Much easier to clean up.)

2. You can make your own floor fogger with dry ice, a large drum and a heating element, but they are not as safe or even usually effective.

3. Smoke machines will set off your smoke alarm.

4. As always make sure fog can be controlled from your master hub at command central. You are running a game and don't need to be thinking about the lights, music, fog, and what not.



WARNING! FIRE IS DANGEROUS!

Never let a minor do anything described in this chapter.

Never let an adult (responsible or otherwise) do anything described in this chapter.

Don't do anything described in this chapter.

Your house will burn down to a little pile of cinders, along with your family who lovingly puts up with your gaming, and your loyal pet dog Simkin.

XDMs who are irresponsible with fire are hung on our Wall of Shame, (We do not mean just hanging your picture there, either!) instantly losing all your levels. The world at large weeps for your sad attempts at doing this crazy stuff and you have blackened the well-earned reputation for safety of all true XDMs.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: DEVIL'S TOUCH

Pyrotechnics and Other Ways to Make the Fire Department Mad

NOTE: The BATF, NTSB, Department of Homeland Security, and Smokey the Bear have requested that we make a number of editorial changes in this chapter, with which we have reluctantly complied.*

After learning proper storytelling and basic XDM technique, nothing will short-cut you to a better game than fire. There are arguments for and against using this shortcut:

- The plus side is that fire can bring an element of mood, excitement, and verisimilitude to your game–as well as possibly wake up players who are nodding off.

- The down side is that fire is uncontrollable, unpredictable, and downright dangerous even under the best of circumstances. When used in conjunction with a role playing game, fire is the game prop most likely to land the entire gaming industry back on the front page of your local newspaper. Then there may be concerned parents and religious leaders calling for your head (if it is still on your shoulders) and the burning down of your house a *second* time–all in the name of preserving the community from the influences of an activity that is obviously dangerous even without the use of fire.

On sober reflection, the downsides of using fire in your XDM game seriously outweigh the benefits.

Still, we know you.

You're always looking for ways of taking your game out at the edge. You're a maverick in game performance. We also know that, when it comes to fire, you (like all the rest of us) are not to be trusted. So from here to the end of the chapter YOU ARE ON YOUR OWN.

If you burn down a small nation with a game gone psycho, don't show up on the news pointing at the XDM book.

We are in no way responsible for what *you* decide to do with this information. Feel free to sue someone else because we warned you that *anything* involving fire is dangerous. We also warned you that anyone using any of the information in this book without the uttermost care and responsibility, is just asking for *bad things* to happen.

* Read that *demanded* or else they will withhold all our economic stimulous bribes *and* investigate our tax-free status for the next hundred years.

Flash Paper

A.K.A. "Burning Carpet"

The XDM arsonist's best friend is flash paper. It is great stuff. It feels a bit like rough tissue paper and can be folded and written on. When lit, it bursts into bright flames, leaves no residue, and is spectacular to see. You can find flash paper at any good magic shop. They sell it in large sheets and in little packets. You will usually get a better deal by buying it in the big sheets and then cutting that sheet up as necessary. The best thing about Flash Paper is that it is relatively* safe. If you do decide to do anything in this chapter despite our many warnings that you shouldn't.† This is a good bet.

When you get your flash paper it will be wet. Just leave it lying out under a fan for a short time. It will dry out quickly. Always store it in a cool place and inside a plastic container. Never leave it in a hot car, or near a window. The stuff *wants* to burn‡.

Uses for Flash Paper

Cut out a piece of flash paper about 2" x 4" should do. Wad the paper up into a ball. Leave a little tab for you to pinch with your left hand. Hold a lighter in your right hand. Use the lighter to light the flash paper at the balled up end. The moment it is lit,§ toss the flaming ball up and away from you. This is like throwing a real-life fireball. It looks amazing.

You can wrap flash paper around things like playing cards, coins, glass, etc. The flash paper will burn but the object will not.¶

You can buy a flash paper launcher. Yes they exist. Our favorite is the Mestopholies Fire Ball Launcher created by Jim Pace. It not only will launch a ball of fire from your hands up to fifteen feet away, but also has a reel, so that the device will leap back into your sleeve the moment after you use it. This allows your hands to be displayed as empty. The Mestopholies Fire Ball Launcher can be found online at www.jimpacemagic.com. While you are there, be sure to check out his other fire products including fire wallets, invisible torches, and the like. Great stuff.

How to Make Flash Paper:

If you need flash paper, just go buy some. You will save time, money, and fingers. But for the sake of completeness, and against our own better judgment we provide you with the following recipe.

Go get some [redacted] and [redacted] We're kidding.



* Note that since we're talking about fire here. When we say "relatively safe" we mean in comparison to such things as nitroglycerin, fuel/air explosives, and military-grade incendiary ordnance.

† Did we mention that fire is uncontrollable, unpredictable, and downright dangerous? Just thought we should mention this again. If you just *have* to have a flaming effect, then flash paper is as far as you really need to go. Oh, and did we mention that fire is uncontrollable, unpredictable, and downright dangerous?

‡ Curtis notes: When I was twelve I almost burnt down my parent's house with this stuff. I had a pad of flash paper. I removed one piece and attached it to a regular piece of paper, then lit it. The flash paper went poof. It vanished, leaving the paper to burn slowly. I panicked and dropped the flaming paper–onto the pile of flash paper. WOW WHAT A BLAZE! The blaze freaked me out even more, so I pushed the flaming flash paper off my desk and onto the floor. Fortunately, it burned down after a moment or two, leaving a puddle of melted carpet as a reminder not to do *really* stupid things.

§ When we say "moment" we seriously mean *moment*. If you wait for a confirmation from your friend that the flash paper is lit, you will have a fireball in your hand instead of in the air.

¶ Don't do this with the flash paper around regular paper because the regular paper will also burn. See the previous footnote on when Curtis was twelve. Yes, apparently he really was that stupid. Learn from his mistakes, grasshopper, and be wise.

The thing is, we could tell you *exactly* how to make professional flash paper, but you would probably just end up dead and we would get put on some sort of list.* Instead we've decided to give you the recipe to make ghetto flash paper. The process is still really dangerous, but not as horrid or involved as the professional way.

You will need

1. To put on protective goggles and wear latex gloves the entire time. Do everything **outside and away from your home**†. Well you can put the goggles on inside but. . .you know what I mean.

2. A bottle of [redacted]‡ (sometimes known as [redacted]) this is found in hardware stores and is used as a [redacted].

3. [redacted] innards. Cut one lengthwise over a big sheet of [redacted]. Inside the [redacted] are small [redacted]. Carefully collect them and put them in a Ziplock baggy for now§. Don't lose any of that [redacted] Its dangerous pyrotechnic capabilities will light your home aflame, giving no thought for poor little Simkin.

4. A small propane burner.

5. [redacted] paper. Something [redacted]. Many people like to use [redacted]. Cut the [redacted] into small squares. About 2 inches by 4 inches should do.

6. A small cooking pan, a small glass pan, and a baking tray.

7. A fire extinguisher. . .just in case.

What you will do:

Step 1: Pour one or two cups of the [redacted] into your cooking pan. Then mix in two tablespoons of the [redacted] from the [redacted].

Step2: Place the pan onto your burner and cook on a **very low heat** for around 45 minutes. A thin film will form on the top.

Step 3: Remove the pan from the heat and skim off just this syrupy film into the small glass pan. Put your [redacted] into the pan, making sure that it is totally covered. Let the [redacted] soak for 10-20 minutes.

Step 4: Remove the [redacted] and place it on a baking tray.

Step 5: You have two choices here. You can place the tray in the [redacted] for about an [redacted] at around [redacted] or you can lay the [redacted] in the [redacted] until it is dry. Either way, *you have to watch it,* or it will burst into flames. Then your life will be ruined. You will know it is dry when it looks golden yellow.

Step 6: It is ready! Remember to store your flash paper in a cool dry place. For long-term storage of your flash paper, first moisten it with water.

Again, is all this really worth the effort? Go buy some instead.

Flash Cotton, Flash String, Flash Bills:

These are just what they sound like. Flash string burns from one end to the other. Flash cotton is used in a number of fire utility devices. Flash Bills look like currency, but are in fact flash paper.¶ You can find all this stuff online.

Flash Pots!

A.K.A. "Arson"

Flash pots are pyrotechnic devices used for creating small, controlled explosions on stage. Image the shock (and incontinency) resulting from an

* The Department of Homeland Security assures us that there *is* such a list and that we may, or may not, already be on it.

† Like out by the Unibomber's cabin. No, wait. That's too flammable. Perhaps somewhere inside the Nevada Nuclear Test Range.

‡ We would like to thank the United State Forest Service for their kind assistance (and insistence) in editing this section of the book. We apologize for whatever unintentional ambiguity may have resulted as a result of their editorial guidance.

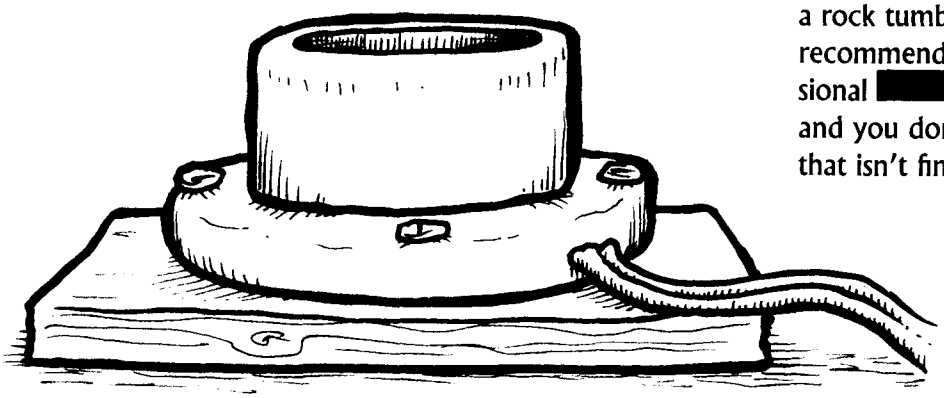
§ You are getting close to reproducing a moment from some weird, gritty 70s drug film. It's probably best if your neighbors don't see what you are doing.

¶ I don't know why you would need flash bills for your XDM game, but there it is. Wait! You could tell your players that the bills represent their treasure gathered from the last adventure, and that some wizard is making their treasure vanish unless they hurry and stop him from, well, you get the idea.

explosion happening during your game. What crazy sort of RPG has explosions? Our kind!

This isn't the sort of thing that you would do while sitting around your mother's kitchen table, or actually inside any moderately sized enclosed space. Only use a flash pot in a parking lot, your drive way, or an auditorium–some large open space–and always with several fire extinguishers at hand.

Truthfully, flash paper is better suited for role playing games. Flash Pots are more applicable to LARPs or other games that are played over large spaces. It is important that you get your mother's permission to use these if you are a male under fifty years of age.*



How to make a flash pot:

This is too complicated for us to describe here. If you want to make your own, [redacted] has good design. Even the old classic [redacted] has a very nice workable design.† You can, of course, find professional flash pots online–they run about fifty dollars.

To work a flash pot, all you do is place about a teaspoonful of powder into the receptacle and flip the appropriate switch at the appropriate time. Kaboom!

Flash Powder (for flash):

This powder bursts into a quick explosion of bright flame when lit. It is more hazardous than other materials here, but great when properly used. Only use in small amounts in a flash pot. It's usually made up of [redacted] Go online and you can find it in various colors and forms.

Black Powder (for smoke):

Black powder is actually safer than flash powder. If you want your flash to have a small burst of flame and a big puff of smoke this is your stuff. Again add some [redacted] for even more effect.

[redacted] (for sparkle):

Look for [redacted] online if you want to jazz up your flash pot explosions with fiery bits of sparkle. Again, it's best to just buy the stuff. We've seen methods to make your own involving a coffee grinder, a rock tumbler, and a myriad of other things, but we recommend just going online and buying the professional [redacted] That way you know it will work, and you don't have to worry about buying a powder that isn't fine enough.

A Giant Incredible‡ Fireball!!
A.K.A. "Homeland Security Watchlist"

If you are a diehard XDM gamer and want to continue your gaming career in prison, this should do it. Say that you're running your XDM role playing game in the middle of a plowed field, or open desert space one hundred yards square on a side. Naturally, you would want the attack of your giant flaming dragon to have a visceral impact on your players. What you need is the Giant Incredible Fireball!

This should all be done on your favorite game site, located just past the middle of nowhere. I'm sure you regularly play your game in the middle of an open, barren place.

What you will need:

1. A lot of [redacted] should work well. You can get this in 25lb bags from a [redacted] supply store.§

* Men cannot be trusted to have good judgment when it comes to pyrotechnics. All males under the age of fifty remain the mental equivalent of twelve-years-old when it comes to explosive devices.

† We want to thank the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms for their assistance in editing the flash pot portion of the book. They also ask us to tell you not to smoke or drink irresponsibly. Or is that not to smoke irresponsibly or to drink? Whichever, don't do it.

‡ The Department of Homeland Security asked that we change the actual name of this device and we have dutifully and patriotically complied with their request. Did we have a choice?

§ Although probably not after the publication of this book.

2. The essential and most dangerous ingredient [redacted]

3. Tissue paper. The facial kind would be fine here but make absolutely certain that it contains no [redacted]

4. Visco "Safety fuse"*

5. A #10 size can. This is the size can you find in restaurants and bulk food stores.

What you will do:

Step 1: Dig a little pit that you will set this thing in. Do not make it too deep.

Step 2: Punch a hole in the can using a sharp awl.† It needs to be just big enough for the Visco fuse to fit through.

Step 3: Put your fuse inside so that one end is in the middle of the bottom of the can. The remaining length should extend outside the can. It is a safety fuse so it will burn slowly, but we don't trust you, so use more than you think you need.

Step 4: Pour your legally obtained [redacted] into the can. It doesn't need to be much, but you shouldn't be able to see the bottom of the can when the [redacted] are spread out. Never use more than the precisely described amount.

Step 5: Cut out a circle of tissue paper the diameter of your can and place it over your [redacted] (this will prevent the [redacted] from sifting into the [redacted] which could also blowup the can, killing you, and your dog, and your neighbor's dog, too).

Step 6: Carefully pour [redacted] into the can on top of your tissue paper making absolutely certain [redacted]. *Never* fill the can more than two thirds of the way up **at the most‡ or else the whole thing will** [redacted].§

Step 7: Make sure the area is clear. Be carful that no one is going to walk up at the wrong moment asking, "Hey what-cha got in the can?" Assuming everything is safe, [redacted] and get away to a *minimum* disteance of 45 feet. You will feel the heat of this thing! The [redacted] will ignite which will blow the [redacted] into the air and, at the same time, set the resulting cloud aflame. The result is nothing short of spectacular.

The Armageddon Hellstorm
A.K.A. "NSA Blackops Hitlist"

Have you ever been running a game for your friends and thought, "Boy! I really could use a realistic volcanic-inferno that engulfs entire city blocks in a highly-concussive fireball. That would be the perfect end of tonight's adventure!"

Well, of course you have! Who hasn't?

Our solution to this pressing question is the Armageddon Hellstorm Display.

Here is the simplest way to build one out of materials you probably have around your own home:

First, obtain a large microwave safe casserole dish. Second, you must [redacted].

After your plane lands you will cross the border into [redacted] there you will find some [redacted]yans. When you talk to the [redacted]yans be sure to ask for the weapons grade [redacted] and not the [redacted] that they try and pass off as the real [redacted].

Next, with INFINITE CARE you gently [redacted]

As it has safety in the title, we are allowed to print this.

Awls can be dangerous. Use awls with caution. Never run while olding an awl. Never allow small children to play with an awl. Never llow pets near an awl. Do not attempt to use an awl while under the ıfluence of certain medications. Do not drink and use an awl.

‡ Can you use the [redacted] in here too? You bet. Sprinkle some in as you pour in the [redacted] for a little extra glimmer in your bang.

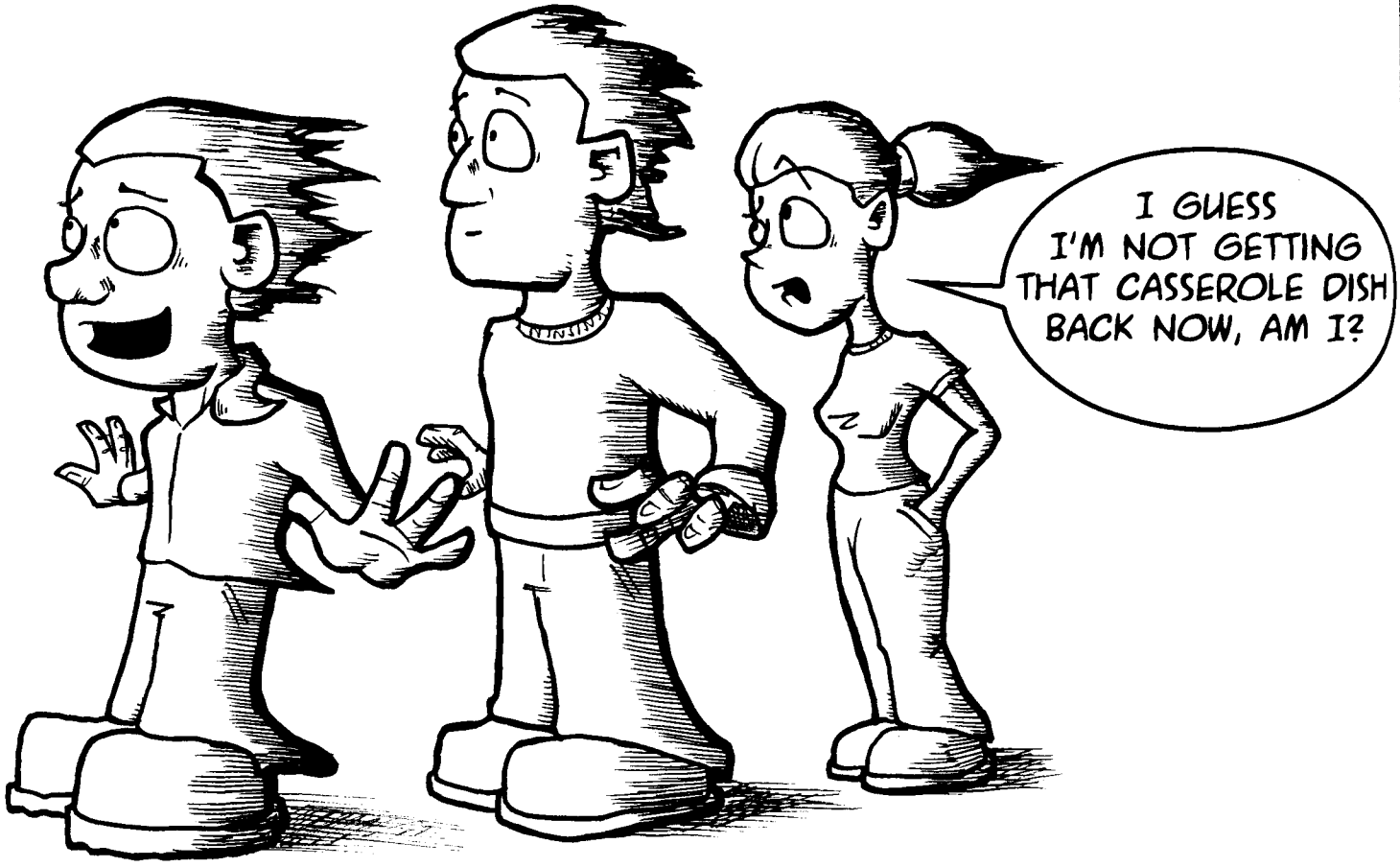
§ And we're not kidding! It will do this and probably much worse!

[redacted]

[redacted]at a minimum distance of five miles.

It is fun to pretend to do things like this, but that is the entire point of role playing games–to imagine things. Indeed, the greatest display that you could ever create will never rival the imagination of your players. You should first and foremost rely on them being imagnitively enthralled by the game, rather than tricks and gimmicks–especially dangerous ones.

If all else fails, remember that this information was given to you by non-certified pyro-magic guys in a book about gaming. We're magicians, should you really trust us?





Chapter Twelve: Wonders of the Gods

Die tricks and other pointless miracles to bewitch the senses and impress dates.

Contact Juggling

Nothing will make you look more like you have mystical powers beyond what this world can manifest than contact juggling. It is an art that when successfully performed will mesmerize your gamers and help break down the walls of reality. Unfortunately it is, far and away, the hardest thing you can learn from this book. Contact juggling can take years to master for some, and many years for others, but don't worry, most of you will give up long before then. Still, for the few brave XDMs who survive, you will have an amazing tool that you can use during character monologs, plot exposition, and anytime you feel bored and just want to show off your awesomeness.

What the heck is it? For many of you, it will suffice to say that contact juggling is what you saw David Bowie perform with a small crystal sphere in the film *Labyrinth*. For the unfortunate few of you who have never seen the musical with Jennifer Connelly and a barrage of Muppet goblins, let me do my best to describe it. (Contact juggling, not the movie, which would do nothing more than make you say, "People paid money to see that?" But listen here buddy, you paid good money for a book about how to be an "xtreme game master," so let's not throw stones.)

They call it contact juggling because the ball never leaves contact with your body. Instead the ball rolls fluidly from one side of the hand to the other and back again in an organic and hypnotizing motion. It might then roll down your arm, across your chest, and onto the back of your other hand. Again, the ball never leaves contact with your body. Witnesses sometimes describe it as watching a bubble float effortlessly from hand to hand in smooth, sweeping motions.

Contact juggling was developed by Michel Motion (who also performed it for David Bowie in the movie) and has since grown so popular that almost every professional juggler will use elements of it, even during a regular "toss juggling" demonstration.

There are various patterns and moves associated with this form of juggling. These are usually divided into groups such as palm spins, body rolls, walks, holds, and so on. Here we are primarily concerned with the iconic move known as "the butterfly."

Preparation

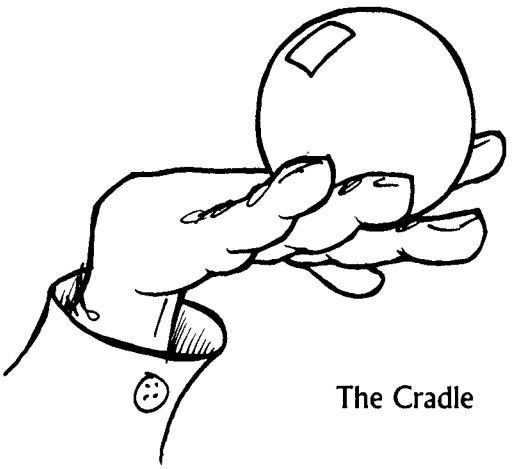
Professionals sometimes disagree on the best way to learn, however, most of them recommend starting with a practice ball specifically designed for contact juggling. The Mister Babache Contact Ball is such an item with a relatively low cost, large size, and light weight. However, feel free to use anything you can find. A

small silicone ball is also a viable option. Curtis started with a clear acrylic ball. These have a bit of weight to them and can break things when dropped (things like lamps, windows, and feet), but when you're watching yourself in the mirror, it looks way cooler than some lame plastic ball. You may also consider starting with a pool ball, as it has a similar weight to it but is less costly to damage. Finally, no matter what ball you use be prepared to drop it over and over and over again. Dropping is the only thing you will know how to do really well from the start. Congratulations.

The Butterfly

It looks like a dance. In fact, it is named after a Middle Eastern dance that looks a bit similar. The movements are a tad awkward to learn and even more awkward to put in motion, so it is usually taught in parts then combined to create the whole. So, take a deep breath as we start you on the path few XDMs will dare to tread.

1. First, you should get used to holding the ball on the back of your hand. This is done by placing the ball in the "cradle". The cradle is made up of the first, second, and third fingers. The second finger is below the other two, creating a dip or gap between them. The ball is then primarily balanced and held by the first and third fingers.



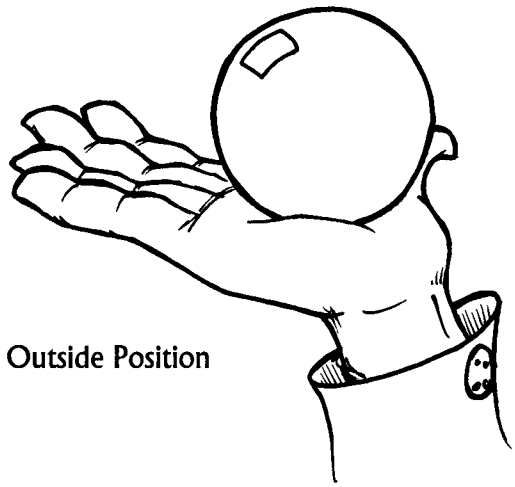
The Cradle

Once you are in this position you need to get used to the feel of holding the ball there. Move your hand around so that the ball rolls over your knuckles and then back into the cradle. Then quickly shake your hand left and right, up and down, and any other direction you can, again while still ending with the ball in the cradle.

2. The next thing you have to learn is how to hold the ball in "home position." Hold your main hand (whichever hand you write with) so that the palm is facing the floor just below shoulder level, the arm parallel with the chest. Your elbow should be slightly below the wrist and the hand a comfortable distance from the body (about four or five inches should do it). The fingers are pointed to your left if you are right handed. The ball should be in the cradle. This is the inside or "home" position.

3. Now toss the ball from home position up into the air just a little and catch it back in the cradle with the arm still in home position. Continue to do this until you feel comfortable with large tosses and can get the ball back into the cradle even if it moves out onto the smooth part of the hand.

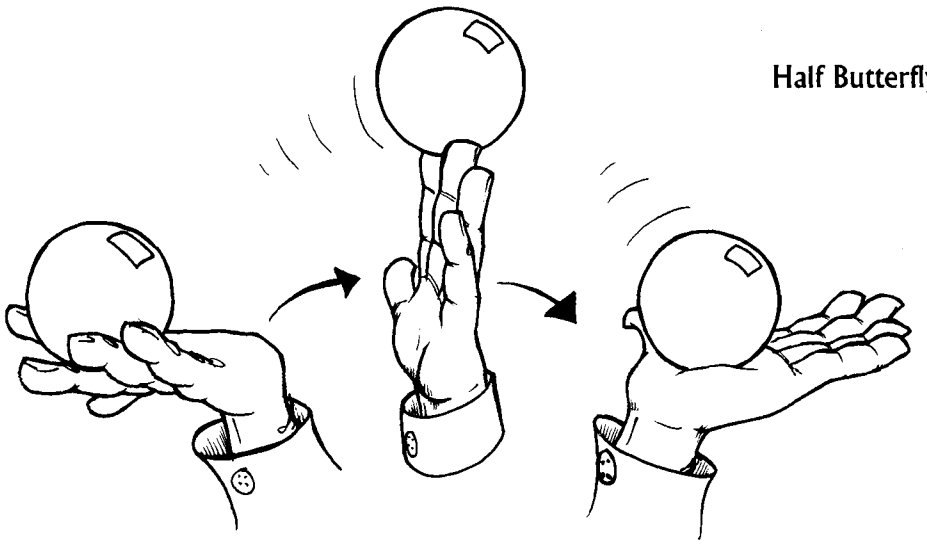
4. Now move your hand so that the palm is horizontal to the ceiling. Your arm takes the shape, more or less, of a server carrying a tray. This is "outside" position.



Outside Position

5. Practice your tossing exercises in outside position as well. It will be much easier.

6. Now the time has come to put the two together. This is where our method of teaching



Half Butterfly

varies from others. Others tell you to now toss the ball from outside position to inside position. Going back and forth always making your toss smaller and smaller. Instead: Try rolling the ball in home position with a movement of your wrist and elbow over your fingertips and into your palm in outside position. This probably won't work, but it will at least give you a better idea of what we are attempting to accomplish. Next, pick the ball up off the floor and put it back in home position. This time, roll the ball up into the air off your fingers and catch it in outside position. Then do the same thing back to home.

The focus here is rolling the ball and learning to control its motion. Practice this, making the motion smaller and smaller until you are giving the ball just enough energy to go over the top of the fingers and roll down into outside position. Repeat this step until both directions are second-nature and the ball never leaves contact with your hand. If you do, you will be performing a half butterfly.*

7. Now learn to do it with the other hand.

8. Before we continue, let me say that if you've really made it this far, congratulations. Once you can do half butterflies in each hand you need to put them together to form the full butterfly. This can be done in many ways but the coolest way (and consequently the hardest way) is by doing the back-to-back transfer.

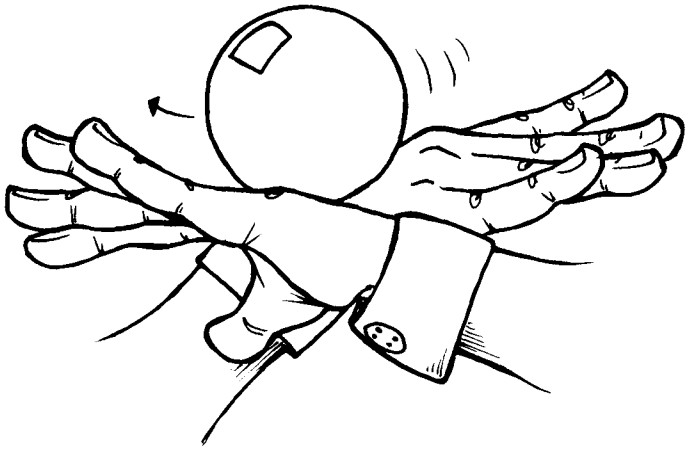
Hold the ball in home position with your main hand. Now put your other hand in home position in front of that. You are going to roll the ball out of the cradle down the smooth part of your hand over the smooth part of your other hand and into its cradle. Practice this by simply moving the back hand underneath and in front of the hand that just caught the ball. By repeating this over and over, you will not only get a hang of it but when done fluidly it's a trick known as the staircase.

CHEAP TRICK

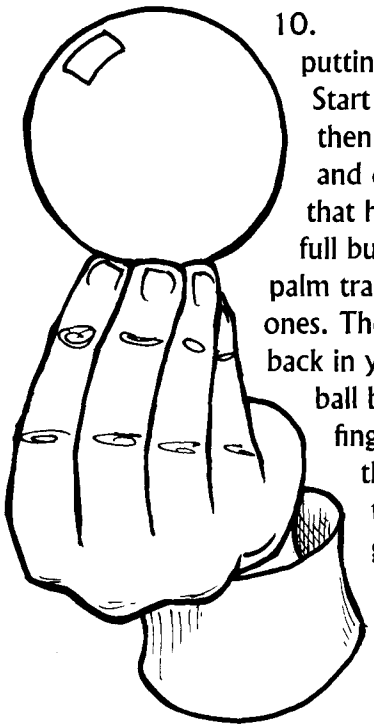
To make back-to-back transfer easier, shorten the distance the ball rolls on the smooth part of the hand. If you must, roll it from cradle to cradle over the knuckles. Keep working on making that distance longer, as it looks far more impressive.

You could, of course, just skip the back-to-back transfer and use the palm-to-palm which is simpler. This is done when the ball is in outside position. The hands move to meet in front of the body (your fingers pointed away from you this time) and the ball is rolled into the palm of the receiving hand. That hand then moves back to outside position and does its half of the butterfly.

* This does look better as you get more height and more of the ball is revealed. Still, it's harder. The cheap way of doing it is to make the ball roll from the cradle up and just in-between your first and second fingers. Doing this creates a track that greatly helps keep the ball under control. Practice while sitting on the couch. The arms of the couch will keep the ball from rolling too far away from you and makes practice in general more comfortable



9. Once you have the back-to-back transfer down, it's a simple matter of transferring the ball and continuing the butterfly in the receiving hand, then reversing the motion to the other side, and so on. In the full butterfly, the ball should never stop moving. It is one fluid, continuous motion and is a wonder to behold.



10. If you get that down, try putting a small routine together. Start by doing a half butterfly, then moving to the other side and doing a half butterfly in that hand. Next, move into a full butterfly mixing palm-to-palm transfers with back-to-back ones. Then a staircase, and end back in your starting hand with the ball beautifully displayed at the fingertips. If you feel like it, throw in the following cheap trick, as it will draw some gasps when done right.

CHEAP TRICK

In the middle of a butterfly or half butterfly try this: Move from outside to inside position, only don't roll the ball to the back of your hand. Instead keep it there in the palm.

Granted, if something isn't done, the ball is destined to fly directly toward the nearest fragile object. So press or hook your thumb to the back of the ball and press it against your hand. The thumb should end up near the bottom, but not at the bottom, of the ball. This creates the illusion that the ball is stuck to the hand and defying gravity. Tilt your hand just slightly toward your body if necessary to help hide your thumb. Continue back to outside position and then butterfly as usual. The pacing of this is important. Just keep the movement of the hand and arm consistent with the rest of your butterflies. It's funny and when done right, a touch disarming.

Finally

Contact Juggling is a hard thing to learn and entire books have been written on the subject. If you would like more information than we have room to provide, including tricks with multiple balls, body rolls, walks, and much much more, check out *Contact Juggling* by James Ernest. There are also a number of DVDs and other resources out there, so feel free to Google it.

Appearances

Effect: The XDM walks over to a corner of the room and stands on a platform which you can see under and to the sides. He lifts a large sheet up into the air and drops it dramatically, revealing a long lost player, an NPC come to life, or the pizza dude. All with the help of a little black art.

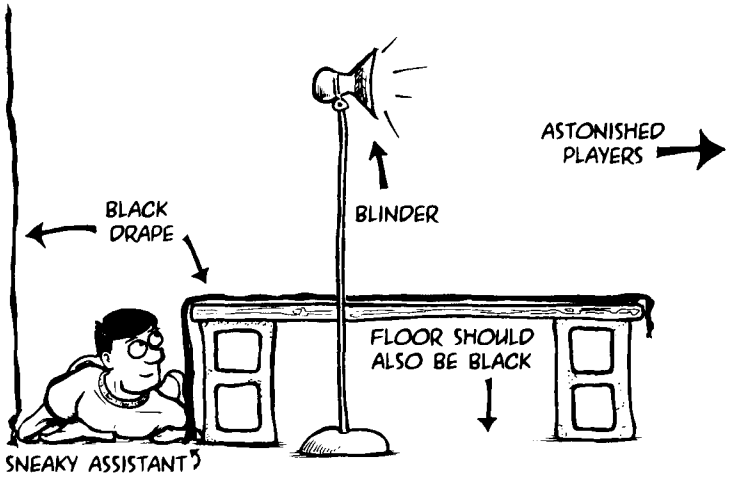
It isn't actually as pagan as it sounds.* Magicians for generations have amazed the public and accomplished all manner of feats using this ancient technique. In fact it is still used in fantastic multimillion dollar illusion shows today, from David Copperfield to Criss Angel. You can do the same thing in your garage for around 30 bucks.

Imagine the stars at night. Now place a bright street light in the middle of that scene. Can you still see stars around it? The dynamic range of your vision is not large enough to make out both the dim stars and the bright light all at once. So if there was a person draped in black behind that light, you wouldn't be able to see them either. Taking this basic principle a bit further, it becomes possible to vanish, float, and basically do anything you want with a bit of black cloth.†

Imagine a stage where the entire background is draped in black velvet. A bright white ball is in the middle of that stage. Dim lights surround the area pointing to the audience, subtly blinding them. If a black velvet-covered stick were to move that white ball around the audience would see nothing more than a white ball floating in a black void. This is a bit obvious, but, when used more subtly, can really amaze an audience and, yes, even a gamer. But, hey even if they don't freak out, it's about entertainment more than amazement in the XDM business.

Crash Course in Black Art

First you, are going to need a lot of black cloth. If you are rich (or own a velvet factory), then getting yards upon yards of the perfect black material should not be a problem. The rest of you have to settle for the blackest felt you can find. The difference lies in the "reflection coefficient" each of your materials possesses. In other words, how much light a given object will reflect. Some of the finest black velvets will have a reflection coefficient of as little as .04%.‡ Whatever the little light leftover (like that .04%) must be compensated for by the use of blinding lights, also called "blinders." These lights are pointed directly toward your audience and act as the street light did in our example above. Good black art will use blinders as subtly as possible.§ For example, in a stage illusion Curtis once created, the blinders were nothing more than the one set of rear lights slightly lowered and angled toward the audience, thereby giving the impression that it was merely back lighting for the scene with no ulterior motive.



One way to further fill in the black void and increase the dynamic range of your setting is to use black/UV lights. The florescent bulb variety are the best, however, the cheaper bulbs you find in a joke or party shop will work as well. By adding florescent materials to the scene, the dynamic range increases due to the glow that overpowers the darkness of the black material. It can be difficult making this work right, as some dust will glow under black lights as well. Keep a lint roller handy.

How do you use black art in your game? Say that your players have entered the realm of doom and a beautiful magic spirit appears to tell the group what to do next. Forget telling them about it. Let's do it.

The first thing you will need to build is a backdrop that is *all* black. We'll leave this part mostly up to you, however we will mention that some PVC pipe, buckets full of rocks, and some clamps can get the job done quickly and cheaply. You will also need to cover the floor with the same black material, at least the area beneath and around where your platform will go.

* Although, to be fair, more than one spiritualist cult has used this technique to strike fear into the hearts of crippled children and orphaned widows. This is only okay if your game is being played by just such a group.

† Only from the perspective of the audience, and only when on a black art set. Robbing a bank with a black sheet on your head will probably just get you shot.

‡ The New Make-up of Magic, Micky Hades, 1974, P. 37,

§ Despite the name, "blinders" are NOT meant to *permanently* blind your audience.

Next, you need the platform. This is the stand that your spirit will appear on. A good cheap option is to build a makeshift stage out of four or more cinderblocks and a large piece of plywood. Attach your black material to the back of your plywood and have it hang down behind your cinderblocks. Now place your blinders, perhaps add some fog and lasers, and you're done (see the picture on page 87).

Have your assistant get into position behind your black art screen (the black material attached to your board). She can crawl there from a hole in the background, or just be lying there waiting all night until her moment arrives. When the time comes for the spirit to manifest herself, simply hold up a cover of some kind (usually a cloth) and, when she steps into position, let it go. Naturally, you will want some story to go along with all of this. Making people appear is all fine and dandy but a reason for all your odd actions is preferable.

Cards aren't only Collectables

Use the Force...*

The first thing, and probably the most useful, you can learn about card magic is the force. A "force" is a handy way to make someone "randomly" select the specific card or object that you secretly want them to. Yes, it really is a sort of Jedi† thing. We will go over the many advantages of the force in a moment, but first go get a deck of cards and follow along.

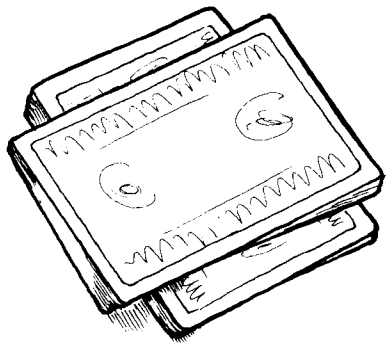
The "Cut a Little Deeper" Force

A handy way to force someone to "randomly" select the card that you secretly want them to, via cutting. The name itself implies what you will be doing. You have them cut the deck, but not too deep. The first cut is placed face up on the deck then you ask them to "cut a little deeper" and turn all of those cards face up on top of the deck. Finally, you ask them to spread through the now face-up cards until they get to a face down card. This, you tell them, is their randomly-cut-to card. Handily enough for you, it also happens to be the original top card of the pack.

The "Criss-Cross" force‡

Step 1: Have someone cut the deck but not complete it.

Step 2: Place the cut-to portion on top of the other half as if you were to naturally complete the cut, only instead place it on top crosswise. Here say that you will "mark" their cut.



Step 3: Allow a moment for time misdirection. Then lift the crossing half off the bottom half and turn over the "cut-to card" this, again, is the top card of the deck.

The "Touch" Force

So you have learned how to have them cut the cards to force them, but what if you want to do that handy magician thing where the cards are spread between the hands and they just pick one? Try this:

Preparation When no one is watching, get your forced card to the top of the deck. Let's say that you are using the six of diamonds.

Step 1 Hold the cards in your dealing hand and start to deal off a few cards into your other hand. (For simplicity let's just assume you are right handed.) You should now have a few cards in your right hand and the rest of the deck in your left hand. Do this as you say, "Let's have you pick a card."

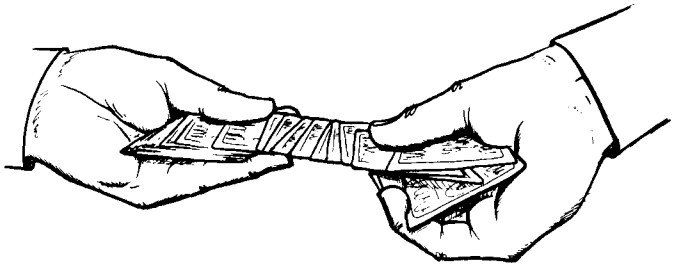
Step 2 Without pausing, start to spread the deck from your left hand into your right–over the three or four cards already in that hand. All you have to do here is keep this stock of cards underneath the spread cards. You can do this by

* We swear we have never heard of this *Star Wars* you speak of... despite what we may say elsewhere in this book. Please George, don't sue us.

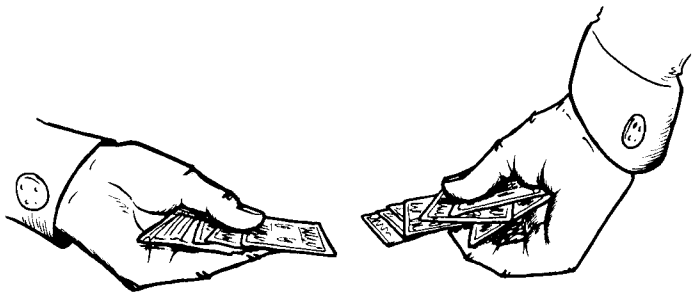
† I'm sorry George. I can't seem to shut up.

‡ This was invented by Max Holden in 1925. It doesn't matter how old it is, just how well it works.

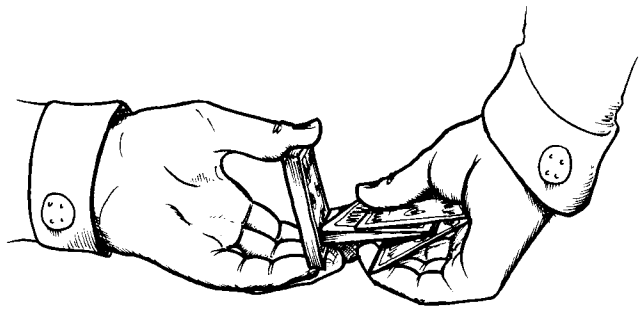
keeping the right fingers wrapped around them and allowing the spread cards to glide over the fingertips. Say something here like, "In fact, you can choose from anywhere in the deck just touch any card you like."*



Step 3 Continue to slowly spread through the cards until your victim touches a card. Separate the cards below the place they indicated. You are now holding about half the deck in one hand and the remaining balance of cards in the other with the touched card at the bottom of the right hand spread.



Step 4 Now, use the cards in the left hand to close the right hand's spread over your concealed packet of cards. The concealed packet combines naturally with the other cards and everything is held together



Step 5 Once the right hand packet is squared† (and you are confident that the cards are all generally aligned), tilt your right hand up and show the bottom card to the spectators. . .err players.‡ If everything has gone according to plan this should be the original top card: or the six of diamonds.

Now What?

So what can you do with a forced card? We can promise you that the most amazing things you have ever seen with cards were accomplished with a force. From a selected card appearing on the other side of a glass window to a "freely" selected card being predicted years in advance, a card force was behind it all. Below are some of the things that I like to do with it. As you read these please do so with XDM eyes and try to see how these effects can be used to entertain your players in the natural course of a game.

Hickman's Spectator Cuts the Aces

"Spectator cuts the aces" is a very old magic theme, a problem that some of the finest minds in magic have struggled to accomplish. The problem is that you need to somehow finagle the end result (the four aces) even though the cards are under the control of the volunteer almost the entire time. This usually means that the magician has to perform some absurd or awkward move in the action of turning the four cut-to selections over.

This is, of course, when all the heat is on and rarely in magic do you want to perform the secret action as everyone watches the exact place you do it. This is why we have misdirection. Unfortunately, in this effect you really can't misdirect too much because any direction away from the cards is a bit conspicuous, and your goal is not to lead them *away* from the effect, but *towards* it.

Still, as we said before, many magicians have come up with astounding ways of performing this particular feat. However, none of them meet the directness that would come from the spectator actually cutting to the aces with no sleight of hand from the magician. Let me present to you Hickman's Spectator Cuts the Aces.

The Secret: They actually cut to the aces.

Mind blowing isn't it.

* Be sure to emphasize "touch" since if they pull a card out you're hosed. You can also have them just yell stop, which is usually easier in situations with lots of people and large tables.

† You may wish to give the right-hand packet an additional tap on the top to square them all the way around.

‡ I like to turn my head away to emphasize that I couldn't know which card it is.

The question is, how? Well if you didn't skip the above, then the answer shouldn't surprise you because it's really simple. In fact, we can sum it up by saying that it's a combination of two Cut a Little Deeper forces and a Crisscross force. When you combine them in a particular way, you get a very deceptive piece of magic.

Preparation Place three aces on the top of the deck and one ace on the bottom.

Step 1 Tell the player that he is going to play a quick game of "Texas Smoky" with Jack the Grifter. The winner gets whatever is relevant to the story, maybe a talking kangaroo.

Step 2 Have the spectator do the Cut a Little Deeper force twice. Each time place the cut-to card face down and to the side. Remember to place the remaining face-up cards back into the *middle* of the deck face down, leaving the top and bottom cards always the same.*

Step 3 End by doing the Crisscross force. In the aforementioned "moment of time misdirection" show that the first and second cards they cut to were aces. Then move back to the "marked cut." Pick up the top half with your right hand and turn over the face down card on the bottom half with your left saying, "what is really strange is that you also cut to the third. . ." now turn your right hand palm-up, showing the bottom most card in the top half of the cut saying, ". . .and fourth ace."

You have just created a Maverick-esque moment for a player who is about to be the lucky recipient of a talking kangaroo. If you do this right it will fool the pants off people†.

"Revealed in Ashes"

Revealing the name of a selected object by rubbing ashes on your arm goes back centuries. It's weird and a little freaky. Perfect for a late night game‡.

Preparation Go get yourself some ChapStick. In private, write the name of your force card (We'll use the six of diamonds again. You use whatever you want) on your forearm. You will do this in a shorthand form. So "The Six of Diamonds" becomes, "6♦." Use shorthand because otherwise it takes a long arm and a lot of ChapStick. Have a piece of paper, a pencil, a lighter, and an ashtray or small bowl handy.

Step 1 Force the six of diamonds card on someone. Feel free to use any method you like.§ In this case, I personally would use the Touch force. Once they know their card, gather the deck and put it away.

Step 2 Tell your helper to "think of your card and concentrate on it." Look into their soul and struggle for a moment. Tell them that perhaps they should write the name of their card down to help them focus. Look away as they do this and have them crumple their scrap paper into a little ball when they are finished.

Step 3 Take out the lighter and the bowl. Set their prediction aflame, allowing it to burn all the way out in the bowl. You should have a little pile of ashes left. Wait a moment, twenty five seconds or so, to make sure the ashes are cool.

Step 4 Rub the ashes over the ChapStick writing on your arm. The ashes will stick to the ChapStick and reveal the name of the card they are thinking of in ash.

Anything can be written on your arm and revealed in ashes; a clue to your game; the location of the magic whatsit, *anything*. This is a fun trick, but the principle can be used for a myriad of cool game moments.

"Quill of EVIL"

During your adventurer's travels they come across a strange quill of evil. The quill is said to foretell the future. At different points during the adventure anyone can pick up the quill and write with it. The curse of the quill is that anyone who tries to look at the prediction before it happens goes blind for a short time. After a number of predictions are made, the quill runs out of ink and the papers are read. Each prediction, some of which are *very* specific, has come to pass.

The Secret: If a player ever asks to use the quill you will pick up a pen and small piece of paper

* My favorite way to accomplish this is to shuffle the cards together making sure that the top and bottom cards stay just where they are supposed to. Shuffling like this will also really confuse anyone who may think they know what you are doing.

† Not literally. Which in most cases is a REALLY good thing.

‡ This uses fire. Be careful. Duh.

§ No guns.

(about Post-it* size is good) and ostensibly write down a prediction about a specific event that is about to take place. Perhaps something like which door the players will choose, specifics about what will happen in the next battle, or go for broke and predict actual die rolls. Whatever floats your boat–you will be one hundred percent right each time. How could such devilry exist?

It's easy with our old friend time displacement. What you write down for prediction number one is in fact the *last* event that will happen–an event that will be forced upon the player. Then the next prediction you will make will be for the first event. Your third prediction will be for your second event, and so on.

Allow us to illustrate. The quill of evil starts to move before your players enter a room. So the XDM picks up a piece of paper and writes "The queen of hearts will be chosen" crumples the paper up and tosses it into a bowl. Erik the Vicar searches for traps. He finds one but still takes a fist full of poison to the face.



Some time goes by and the players come to five doors but can only choose one. "The quill of evil starts to write," and the XDM picks up another bit of paper and on it secretly writes "Erik will find a poison trap". The paper is balled up and placed with the other. The players choose the second door. In the next room an old gypsy woman is found with a deck of cards. She asks someone in the party to cut the deck and she marks the cut by placing it crosswise (Crisscross Force) on the other pack. Before the cut-to card is looked at, the quill of evil starts to write. The XDM writes on a piece of paper "the second door will be chosen." That prediction is tossed in with the others and the XDM announces that the quill is out of ink and the predictions may be read. Of course they all came to pass. Do you see how time displacement can make just about anything possible?† Anyway, it's a fun way to make something as odd as a magic quill that much more real.

But wait a second. This is a game after all. What happens if my party finds a way to read the predictions before they happen? Well, as the veritable god of their world you can naturally prevent such things from happening but we have a better idea.

Let them. Even help them to find a way to do it. It creates a really interesting game dynamic. So after doing the pen of evil effect, perhaps they find a vial of water that grants them immortal sight for a moment. Now you must write on the paper about an event that hasn't happened yet. Like, "Sherry the elf kills the magic princess with a rock." Now you have to make sure that no matter what the party does, the event comes to pass. If Sherry commits suicide before anything else happens, you have to make up a way for what you wrote to happen. Perhaps Sherry rolls a 20 on her suicide roll. You could say that her force and conviction were so strong that Sherry's blade shattered in her hand, preventing her death and forcing the rocks to shake and fall on the princess. Basically no amount of ingenuity or die rolling will undo what the pen has written. It's a fun dynamic, especially if the predictions they read are unfortuitous.

Isn't that not just cheating, but a complete massacre of the rules of the game? No. First let me remind you that the Quill of Evil is evil. Second, deciding the fate of your players once they have discovered how to read the predictions without going blind is not cheating or rule genocide at all. (Even if it was we doubt that we would care.) But it *is* perfectly fitting. Still, for the sake of your sanity, allow us to illustrate why with an oft told folktalke narrated by the Angel of Death herself:

"There was a merchant in Baghdad who sent his servant to market to buy provisions and in a little

* Post-it is yet another trademark that we have used in total disregard for laws that might prevent us from doing so. Also, if you actually do this effect using actual Post-its, you will be deducted 20 XDM levels and forced to wear the "I took XDM too literally" sign to our next meeting.

† This is yet another reference to the section in this book called "Twisting in the Wind." It's a *really* good section. If you skipped all that stuff in the beginning and somehow got here first–we officially demote you down to a level Two Skuzz Puff. But then for you Level One Nub Cakes, I guess that's a promotion, So. . . good work.

while the servant came back, white and trembling, and said, Master, just now when I was in the marketplace I was jostled by a woman in the crowd and when I turned I saw it was Death that jostled me. She looked at me and made a threatening gesture, now, lend me your horse, and I will ride away from this city and avoid my fate. I will go to Samarra and there Death will not find me. The merchant lent him his horse, and the servant mounted it, and he dug his spurs in its flanks and as fast as the horse could gallop he went. Then the merchant went down to the marketplace and he saw me standing in the crowd and he came to me and said, "Why did you make a threatening gesture to my servant when you saw him this morning?" That was not a threatening gesture, I said, it was only a start of surprise. I was astonished to see him in Baghdad, for I had an appointment with him tonight in Samarra."

There are a million things you can do with a forced card. Take a duplicate of the force card and put it in your buddy's wallet. Have the name of the force card revealed in laser fire and fireworks.

Be inventive! You're an XDM–that's your job.

Card Flourishes:

Whether you're a card cheat in the old west, a wandering gypsy, about to play any one of the billions of card games out there, or doing an effect from this book, you need to know how to do so with flair. Card flourishes are an art of their own. Many of them look impressive and, if done correctly, are easy. That is the idea. There is an old magic saying, "Make the difficult look easy and the easy look difficult."

What follows are just a few of the thousands of card flourishes out there. To make it simple we've rated each one on a scale of ducks. Five ducks being hard, one duck being easy. (Why ducks? we don't know. Why stars?) We're not going to venture too far into the five duck category, because there are plenty of amazing flourishes that don't require nearly as much work.

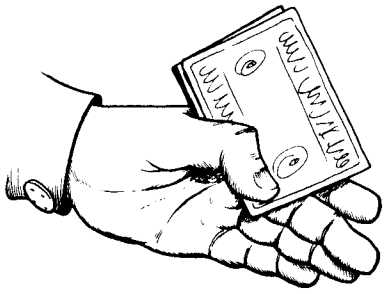
Before we begin, please note that you should go out and get a quality deck of cards! Don't even look at that horrid excuse for a deck sitting in your kitchen drawer. You need new cards. You need quality *non*-plastic coated cards. You also don't want to spend a fortune buying these cards. Basically, you need Bicycle cards.*

Please note that to save us all a lot of confusion in this section we will be assuming that you are right handed too. If you are not, we are sure that we're not the first to pity you. Still despite your sad lot in life we just know you can drum up enough moxie to convert the following text to fit your special needs.

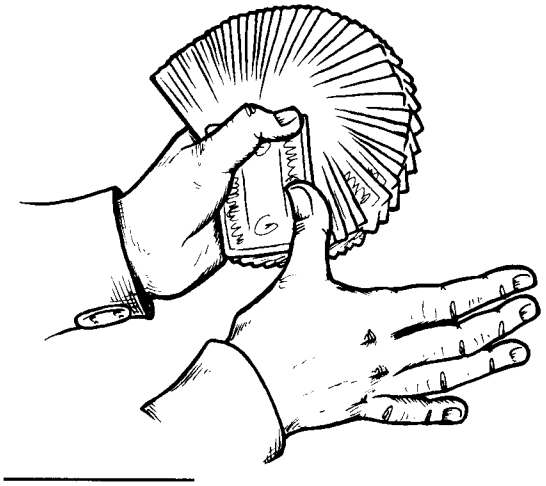
The two handed fan

Four ducks at first glance, but really it's probably more like one or two.

Step 1 Hold the cards in your left hand. The cards should be in the crotch of the thumb, angled toward you slightly. The thumb is putting pressure on the pack at the bottom near corner



Step 2 The right hand now comes over, and with its thumb, hits the near long edge of the cards at the top left corner. It then makes an arc around the other thumb, putting the majority of its pressure on the uppermost card. The fingers in back support the fan.



* Bicycle is a trademark of the U.S. Playing Card Company. Rumor has it that their main offices are made of 85,720,645,496 playing cards carefully stacked by a blind Chinese man.

It's also a mode of transportation.

The snapback fan close

Assuming you did the last one right, two ducks.

This is a clever and magical looking way of closing the two handed fan.

Step 1 Bring your left index finger to the bottom of the fan. The tip of that finger should be in contact with the bottom center of the lower-most card. The middle finger should be mostly in contact with the spread above that bottom card.



Step 2 Two things are going to happen at the same time. You extend the index finger, forcing the card fan to begin to close. The middle finger pulls down on the fan, thus forcing it to close in an arc.

Step 3 Once you can't lower your middle finger or extend your index finger any further, reverse the motion to pull the fan completely shut with the index finger. Leave the middle finger where it is. It's done its job and deserves a break.

Some things to keep in mind

The fan should close fast. Remember its the *snapback* close. When viewed from the front it should look like the fan is closing itself.

CHEAP TRICK!

If you want to do an old-fashioned gag, pretend to grab a piece of hair and tie it to the fan. Then close the fan with the left hand pretend to pull the invisible line, as if shutting the fan with the hair. It might seem silly, but world-famous magicians still use this bit in their performances. And really does look cool.

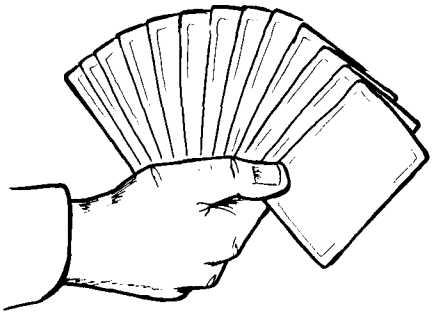
The One Handed Fan

One little duck

This is a fan that by itself is only mildly impressive, but when two hands of them are combined you get one very impressive display know as the S-fan.

Step 1 Place half the deck on the fingers of the right hand so that the long edges of the pack are parallel to them. Your right thumb contacts the bottom inner corner.

Step 2 While maintaining pressure with the thumb and bottom fingers, make a fist. Unlike the fist you might use to beat a level one orphan cleric, this fist is made with the fingers flat against the palm, thumb set against the bent index finger's knuckle.



The S Fan

The evil warlord twin brother of the last little duck

Step 1 Do a one handed fan in both hands. It's really not that hard*.

Step 2 Move the hands so that the top of one fan comes in contact with the bottom of the other thereby creating an S shape with the cards.



* Having just re-read this before going to print, it seems to us that this is sort of an insensitive and ignorant thing to say since we can already do it. If you were offended feel free to blame grand master Frank. We usually do.

To close Reverse the motions of creating the fans and bring the two hands together. The cards should collapse neatly into the hands.

Note: Curtis has been doing magic for a long time and still gets as great a reaction from the S fan as he does when performing a complicated version of the Sybil Cut (a Sybil cut being a twenty on the five duck scale, and too complicated for us to describe here).

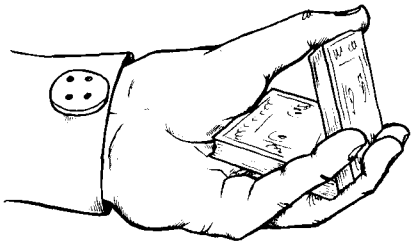
Speaking of cuts, lets introduce you to an old friend of the magic community known as the Charlier cut.

The One Handed Cut or Charlier Cut

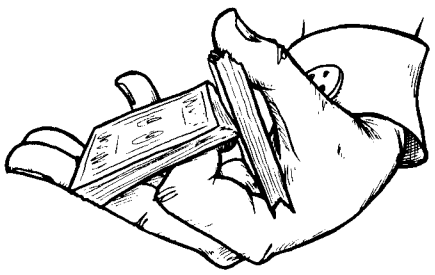
Two and a half ducks... probably the bigger half

Step 1 Hold the pack at your left hand fingertips, lengthwise between the fingers and thumb. Your pinky should be at the bottom edge of the pack to help keep things tidy.

Step 2 Now release the bottom half of the deck by rolling your thumb up a bit so that it loses the lower half and keeps the top half.



Step 3 Using your index finger, push up on the bottom packet until you have forced that packet to just clear the top packet. Now lower your finger and use your remaining fingers to help bring the new lower packet under the new top packet.

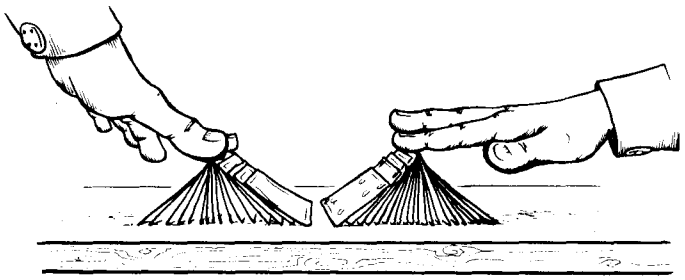


The Card Spread

One duck

Step 1 Grip the deck lengthwise between the fingers of your hand and spread the cards on the table. The pressure comes from the deck pushing down on the cards as the hand sweeps quickly across the table. The fingers don't drag the cards but rather regulate the distribution of the cards. A light touch is needed and a little practice to make it smooth and even, but really, how hard could this be?

Step 2 (We're not done yet?) Now tilt the first card in the spread up and with the finger ride the crest of the wave you just created. Ride it both down and up the spread. It should look like a peak or wave moving down the spread. In fact if you move the wave to the middle of the spread and then split the wave with the other hand you can move two waves around.



Step 3 When you get tired of this or feel the spread starting to fall apart, bring the wave to the end of the, fan thus flipping all the cards face up.

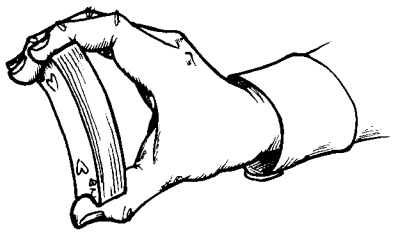
Note: This won't work on smooth surfaces. In fact, if you ever attempt this on glass, feel free to give yourself 5 moron points.

Springing the Deck

Five Ducks and a Yeti

Like anything this starts out hard and then with practice gets to be so second-nature you will look back and wonder why we're calling it five ducks (granted, you may look back on this and say that anyway). Still, just starting to learn how to spring the deck from hand to hand can be quite aggravating, especially if you are constantly picking up cards. Trust me, it's worth every moment you put into it.

Step 1 Hold the cards in your right hand with the four fingers on the top short edge and the thumb on the bottom short edge.



Step 2 Squeeze the deck, creating a concave bend into your palm.

Step 3 Now spring the cards by releasing them with the fingers. This is done by straightening the knuckles out and evenly regulating the flow of the cards.

Step 4 Catch the cards in your left hand which is held just below, in front, and to the side of your right hand. The hands fingers create a bowl for the cards to fall into. (I apologize to those that did step three without reading step four first. Let that be a lesson to you.)

Step 5 Square the cards and know that, yes, you looked cool.

CHEAP TRICK!

There is a way to totally cheat at the card spring. If you do this right, you might get away with it. On the other hand, it lets you do some really funny flourishes, even if the gimmick it is obvious.

1. **Staple or otherwise connect alternating ends of your cards. In other words staple the short end of the top card to the next card. Then take that card and staple the opposite end to the card beneath it. You will end up with a deck that is one big zig-zag connected pack.**
2. **Now you can release the cards from one hand to the other from great distances and they will cascade perfectly (if a bit zig-zagged) every time.**

Note: If you are doing this and trying to get away with it, you will want to conceal the deck with the hand until the last possible moment. After all, people might get suspicious of the large pieces of metal stuck to your cards.

Die tricks and other Pointless Miracles

Vanishes

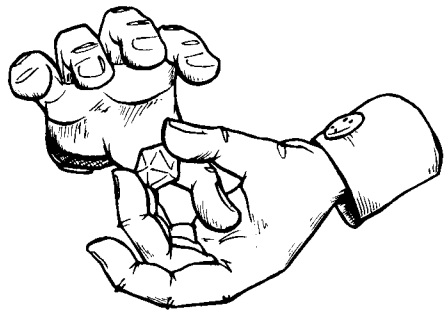
The ability for a XDM to vanish dice at will is... well pointless. . . but fun. After all, there is no wizard or creature that would have *actual* dice to make vanish. Perhaps it's best used as a symbol of fate vaporizing, the creature disappearing, or some other really esoteric nonsense.

As mentioned earlier, there are only three ways of making anything vanish. By moving the object, hiding the object, or it was never there to begin with.* So, in an effort to deliver the XDMs of the world the best in illusion technologies, we will provide you with a few techniques that involve a combination of all three methods.

Die Vanish I:

Featuring The French Drop (aka Le tourniquet Vanish†)

Step 1 The die is held between the thumb and forefinger of your palm-up hand. The other hand moves over to take the die.



Step 2 The moment the second hand is covering the die your first hand releases its grip on the die allowing it to fall into the palm. The second hand then wraps its fingers around empty space.

Step 3 Tense up the hand that now holds nothing (but supposedly holds the die) and relax the hand that now conceals it. Your eyes should be fixed on the hand that apparently took the die... and I mean *riveted* on it as if your eyeballs were literally super-glued to it.

* *The Psychology of Magic* by two guys who have never been in my kitchen before.

† WARNING: A tourniquet should only be used as a last resort if all other efforts to control bleeding have failed. If your players are bleeding during your game, you're doing something wrong.

Step 4 Finally, massage the empty space in the second hand and slowly reveal the vanish of the die.

Step 5 Reveal or ditch the concealed die in the first hand:

A. Produce it from your elbow, behind a player's ear, or out of a cheese sandwich. Just reach over with the first hand and act like you plucked the object from the nether region.

B. If you are seated, you can casually let the die drop into your lap under cover of the table's edge.

C. If you are standing and have been practicing your misdirection, you can do this: Lean forward with the second hand and begin to vanish the die. As you do this turn your body a bit to the side and when all eyes are on your second hand allow your first hand to drop its die into a convenient pocket (jacket, pants, etc). This sort of thing takes practice but when done correctly can be amazing. Having said that, I don't recommend that you do it, at least not for a long time. It's not that I don't trust you–it just takes a bit of practice.

You can, of course, make anything small vanish with this method. Just remember what the father of modern magic said:

"To succeed as a conjurer, three things are essential–first, dexterity; second, dexterity; and third, dexterity." –Robert-Houdin

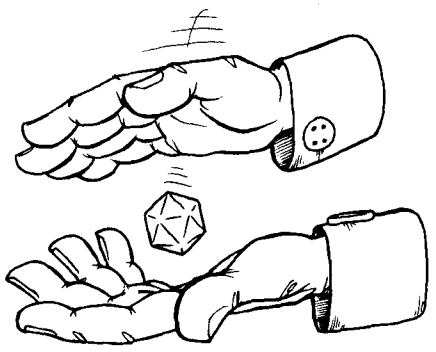
Die Vanish II

The return of the Die Vanish (This time it's personal)

Effect The XDM causes a D20 to vanish from his hand using the wave of a pencil. With a second wave, the die reappears in that same hand.

This effect is a classic of magic and, despite being super easy, is high-impact when performed correctly.* The bad news is you have to be wearing a jacket or sport coat. Place the pencil/pen in the inner jacket pocket and you are ready to perform.

Step 1 Toss the D20 from hand to hand a few times. The hands should be relatively close together while doing this. The right hand rotates over the left and the left hand over the right.

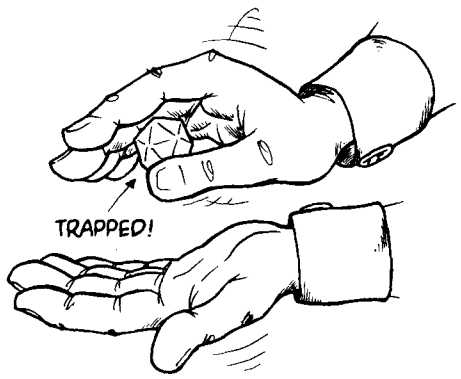


Step 2 Now dump the die into the left hand, its fingers quickly closing around the die.

Step 3 Your right hand immediately moves into the jacket and up to the left breast pocket. Remove the pencil and display it saying something devilishly witty like, "Here is my magic pencil."

Step 4 Wave the pencil over the left hand and open it to reveal the die is still there. No one will be impressed, I hope.

Step 5 Say that you must have done something wrong. Place the pencil back into your inner left breast pocket and say you will try again. Repeat Step 1.



* A wonderful trick accredited to James F. Herpick. Yes, some of the footnotes are real.

Step 6 Now make the same motion of the right hand dumping/tossing the die into the left as you did in Step 2 but this time use your thumb to clip the die behind your closed fingers (figure 3 exposed view). Close your left hand around the empty space as though it held the die. The illusion should look almost identical to a regular action of tossing and catching the die. You should be staring at your left hand which is now tense. Your right hand should be an afterthought and appear relaxed.

Step 7 Your right hand once more moves under the jacket and up to the inner left pocket. There it will release the D20 into the sleeve and take out the pencil once more. Your left arm should already be bent so that the die doesn't make it past the elbow.

Step 8 Tap the pencil against the hand again, presenting your superior intellect by saying, "I think I have to tap it."

Step 9 "And now it will vanish!" Slowly open your left hand to reveal that the die is now gone.

Step 10 A moment later, clearly show your right hand empty except for the pencil finishing your statement by saying, "Completely."

Step 11 Now raise your right hand as you sing the praises of the magic pencil. Your left hand will now naturally drop to your side with its fingers relaxed and curved inward, ready to catch the die that is about to fall right into it. (Be sure to look only at the all wonderful pencil. Remember, they will look where you look.)

Step 12 Close your left hand around the die but keep the hand relaxed and raise it back into position. Now say, "But if I were to give it three taps. . ." and tap the hand three times.

Step 13 Open the hand to show the die has returned. Accept standing ovations grudgingly because no one likes a Mr. Smarty Pants.

Volatilis Sors

(Latin for "Winged Fortune")

This is an amazing feat that dates back to a small fringe society of XDMs living in hidden caves near Oman. They didn't want to give up their secret but threats were made and Mountain Dews™ were confiscated.

Effect: You roll your D20 and don't like the result so you make a small waving motion over the die and it literally and visually re-rolls itself. If you don't like that result you can always wave again, or snap your fingers, getting the die to float back up into your hands, ready to be rolled. If someone complains feel free to hand them the D20 to see just how utterly normal it really is.

IMPORTANT!

What you are about to learn is a trick magicians pay more than the price of this book to learn. We debated mightily over whether or not to include it here. We decided that if you are serious enough to buy this book, then you are serious enough to do what follows with respect and good judgment.* This isn't a gag. This is in-your-face, pee-your-pants, slap-you-around magic! If you can't handle the practice and diligence it will require, just skip it and add sock puppets to your next game.

Volatilis Sors Preparation

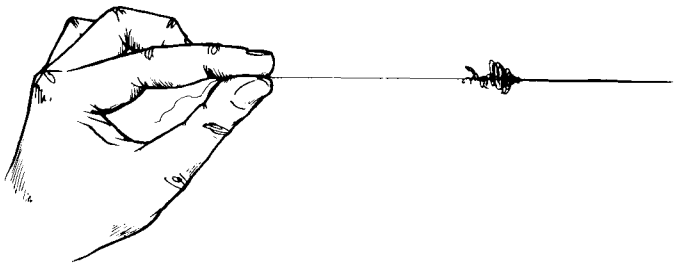
Part One The first thing you will need to do is go out and buy some black thread Wooly Nylon Extra. It's used for serging and should be found just about anywhere sewing supplies are sold. Don't use any other kind of serging thread. It won't work. The easiest way to find the stuff is just to go online and order some. Also pick up some of that tacky stuff you use on posters. Keep some tape handy.

* If you didn't buy this book and are reading this in a store or off some photocopied version found on a torrent or other P2P network, you are undoubtedly going to the "special hell". Go buy a real copy, you worthless shell of a human being, and save your already tattered soul from unspeakable destruction. Oh, and lose 3 levels.

Part Two In the super secret and hidden room you are using for preparation, place a bright white sheet of paper down on your work surface. It will help.

Part Three: Unwind a stretch of the nylon (about the length of your arm should do). This stuff is wonderful. It's a lifetime supply of real–no kidding–invisible thread. Each length of Wooly Nylon is made up of many teeny tiny little strands, strip one of those out and you've got yourself a wisp of thread that's thinner than a human hair yet can support a D20, and under the right conditions, is impossible to see.*

Part Four: Look at the very end of your length of thread and find just one strand poking out with the rest. Make sure it's just one. Use your paper and a bright light to help with this. Pinch it with one hand and slip the remaining strands down this single strands length. It will clump up a bit–that just means you're doing it right.

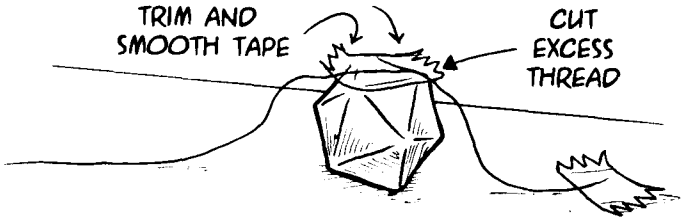


Part Five: Take your tacky stuff and roll it around the single strand you are holding. Now stick this little ball of fun to the table.

Part Six: Continue to slip the other threads down the length of the one thread, grabbing below where the clump is and moving the strands until it clumps again. Now reach up and slip more threads down the line toward the new clump. Repeat this until you have singled out a piece of invisible thread at the aforementioned length, stripped from the others.

Part Seven: Put a bit of tape at the base of your singled-out strand and break it off from the bulk of the thread.

Part Eight: You now have to attach it to a die. We like use the 20 sided die because it's common, but really it's your choice. The color of die you use is important. Dark semi transparent dice are good, since the thread is harder to see against them. *Never* use white dice. Duh. The tape you will use to attach it with is also important. Glossy tape (not matte, invisible finish) tape works much better, but your results may vary. Cut off a small bit of your tape and place the bottom of your invisible thread across the die. Affix the tape to one or more of the triangles trapping the thread in between. Break off the excess length of thread. Smooth out the tape and remove any extra bits, so it becomes invisible on the die.

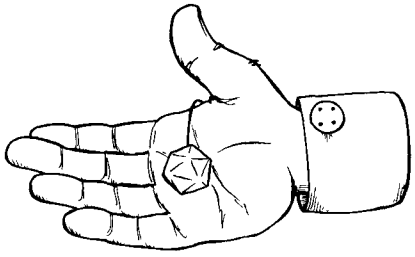


Part Nine: Now take the tacky stuff and place it under your belt to the right side of your body (or left if you roll with that hand). Make sure that your clothes are dark colored, but preferably not black.

Part Ten: Carefully put the die in your pocket. You're ready to do some crazy amazing stuff all at your whim.

Volatilis Sors Performance

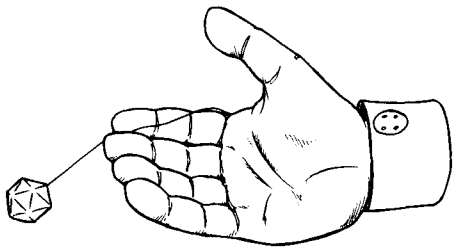
Step One: At any time you wish, pull your D20 out of your pocket. Take care not to break the thread.



* It also breaks super easy. Once you learn just how much it can take and how to handle it, thread breaks will become much less common.

Step Two: Hold the die in your hand as you normally would to roll a die. With your hand palm up the thread will run under the thumb

Step Three: Roll the die like you normally would. Be sure to stand close enough to the table to allow slack in the line. The die must move freely.



Step Four: With the line still hooked under the thumb, turn your hand palm up over the die. The thread should now make a firm line from your waist, around your thumb and down to the die. Be careful not to make the line *too* firm or the die will move prematurely.

Step Five: Keep your fingers close together and bend them toward your palm quickly–as if you were doing the first half of a "come here" gesture to the tabled die). By tugging on the thread the die will jump up in to the air no more than an inch and basically re-roll itself. The thread hasn't really gone anywhere you just tugged at it for a moment. To your players it will look like you did a magic wave over the die and it re-rolled itself.

Step Six: Repeat if you wish (don't overdo it) and, if you feel like it, have the die float up into your waiting hand. The die should be on the table and the thread still under your thumb (in the crotch of the thumb between the thumb and forefinger) your right hand turned palm down. Slowly move your waist back as your right hand moves up and forward*. The die will rise into your hand where you will catch it. Don't do this too slowly because it will look weird–like a thread is slowly hoisting the die into the air. Do it just tad slower than the reverse speed of gravity.†

Important tips!

1. You can 'unhook' your thumb at anytime to allow your hands full range of motion. And vice versa. Start by rolling the die and then leaving it on the table until the next time you have to roll. Then get the thread back into position. You don't have to see the thread to do this. You know where it is. Don't make a big deal out of it, you can feel when it's in the right place.

2. Invisible thread is great in florescent lighting or any sort of diffused indirect lighting. Daylight is horrible. Light your environment evenly. You want the background lit just as well as the foreground. The thread looks invisible, not because it's too small to see, but because your eyes can't focus on it. One glint of the thread and the gig is up. This is why wearing a black outfit isn't the best idea. A nice red with a bit of a design is perfect. If you can find something like that which looks good on you, great, otherwise most anything will work‡. Jeans are ideal since the color and grain work wonderfully as a backdrop. Don't forget the table either. If your table is white, you're doomed. Wooden tables are perfect.

3. Practice this. A lot. And we mean *a lot*. Practice in front of a mirror or video camera. Do this before you show anyone. Even then, show someone you can trust first. Volatilis Sors takes a great deal of practice.

4. THIS IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING! DO IT *ONCE* A GAME ONCE EVERY TWO TO SIX *MONTHS*, AND DON'T TELL ANYONE HOW IT WORKS! EVER! This is a secret of the XDMs and we would like to keep it that way. It won't be special if every time you reach for a die, it jumps up into your hands. You do this more than once in a game, and they will catch you. The first time it's pure magic–EVERY TIME AFTER THAT IT'S A *PUZZLE*. Don't give them a second chance to figure it out. Use it sparingly.

* Don't just thrust your hips back. That's weird. Lean forward a bit–as if you were trying to get a closer look at what you were doing. The hip moves backward as a result.

† Which, if you think about it, is relatively fast.

‡ Do this in a white shirt and you will be seeing me at your door with my cave dwelling friends from Oman. Each of us with a Mountain Dew in one hand and a mini bat in the other.

5. If the trick is not working, try adjusting the length of thread and the placement of the tacky stuff.

6. Use this subtly and without any sort of build up. It just happens. Doing this without drawing attention to it makes it that much more powerful.

7. You can rig the tape on the die to come off easily. Providing a quick out, just in case anyone wants to look at the die. Perform this *away* from people. They are grabby. Just leave a little tab of tape that you can grip in an emergency. Or break the thread at the very edge of the tape. What's the player going to say, "Oh I know how you do it. You've got tape on your die?"

Über Volatilis Sors

(Latin for "Über Winged Fortune")

Effect: The XDM decides to ignore everything he has ever learned about being subtle and do a full float of a D20. Perhaps to impress a loved one.

Preparation: Same as in Volatilis Sors. Only this time, strip out a thread that is a few inches longer. Place a bit of tape over the tacky stuff and hide it by placing it firmly behind your ear, allowing the thread, and die, to hang down in front of you. Place the die in your breast pocket or just hold it in your hand.

Performance:

Step One: Keep the die handy. This isn't an impromptu effect, but do your best to make it look like such. Pull the die out and hold it in front of you so that gravity makes the thread taut, almost to the point of lifting it off your hand. You should be leaning forward slightly.

Step Two: Grab the die in both hands by its edges and spin it like you would on a table. Lean to your left and the spinning die will float left. Lean to your right and it will float right. Use your hands as needed against the thread to help control it. Your hands should always look like they are controlling the die. You want the players to think that the magic is in your hands, not in some invisible connection to your head.

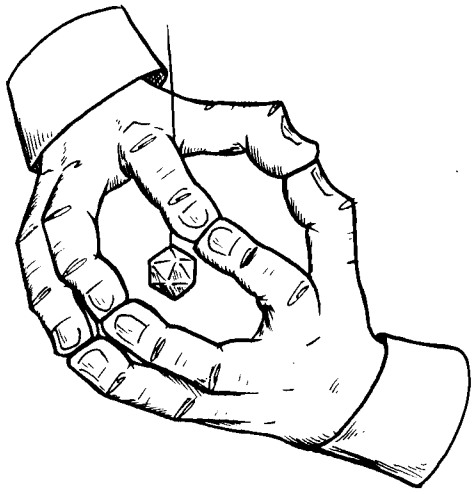
Step Three: Do some tricks. When the die starts to slow down, float it up into your hand.

Über Volatilis Sors Tricks:

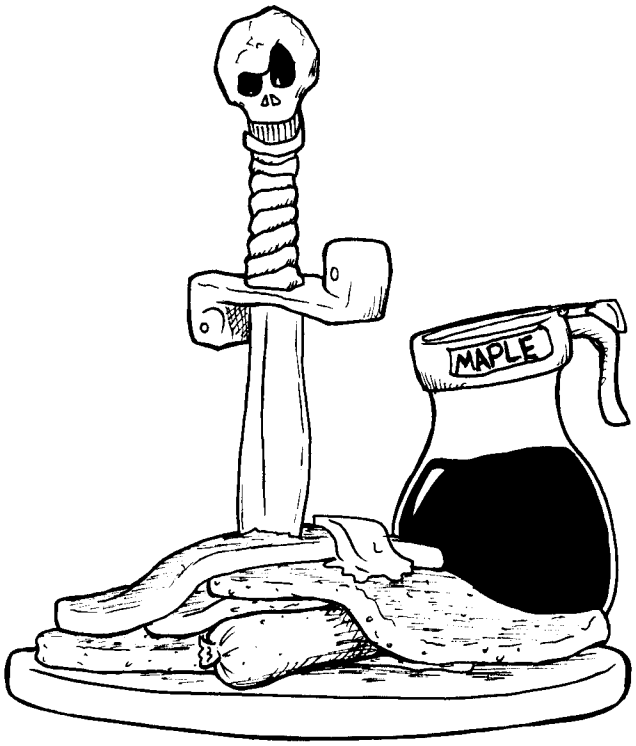
To float the die up Hook the thread between your thumb and forefinger. Move your hand forward and lean back at the same time. The die will rise. Alternatively, put the thumb of your opposite hand on the line and push the thread down.

To pass the die through a hoop of fingers Create a hoop out of your fingers around the thread above the die and in that same motion pass the hoop down and around the die.

Cage of Wonder Carefully create a cage by putting the finger tips of your hands together and arching your fingers to separate your palms. Do this around the spinning die, the thread going in the middle of the big hole your thumbs and forefingers created. Now rotate the cage around the die as best you can without hitting the thread.



Around the Back: This is a bit... umm hard and gutsy. But hey if you're looking for a challenge this is it. Use a touch more thread for this one. Spin the die to your right with a throwing motion and lean in that direction too. The die will clear your body and start to arch around the back side. Help it on its way by continuing to lean your head where it needs to go. The thread will wrap itself around your neck. Lower your shoulder and move out of the way as the die comes around the other side. Catch the die when it finished its journey. Reverse the actions to untangle the thread from your neck.



Chapter Thirteen: Killer Breakfast to Go

XDMs have traditionally pushed the horizons of role playing gaming. Never was this so evident than in Killer Breakfast, the event where "You'll Die Laughing!"

If you have attended a Killer Breakfast as they have been run at select conventions around the world, then *congratulations*, you have just gone up a level as an XDM! Killer Breakfast has been run personally by Tracy and Laura Hickman (Level 829 and 262 XDMs respectively) at the LUCCA Convention in Lucca, Italy,* at the Gencon OZ Convention in Brisbane, Australia, and has become a hallmark of the Gencon Convention in Indianapolis, Indiana. When you perform a Killer Breakfast you are continuing an international tradition!

If you have never attended a Killer Breakfast then the rest of us feel very sorry for you. You should not hesitate one more moment and go to www.killerbreakfast.com where you can watch one of our more spectacular performances through the miracle of online video streaming. You can even subscribe to it through iTunes. There is no better way to learn what Killer Breakfast is all about than watching it being performed.

If you have purchased this book and happen to live in a survivalist compound cut off from the internet or civilization in general and *still* want to know what Killer Breakfast is about, we'll try describing it, but you should know that I'm worried about you and hope you find a way to escape soon.

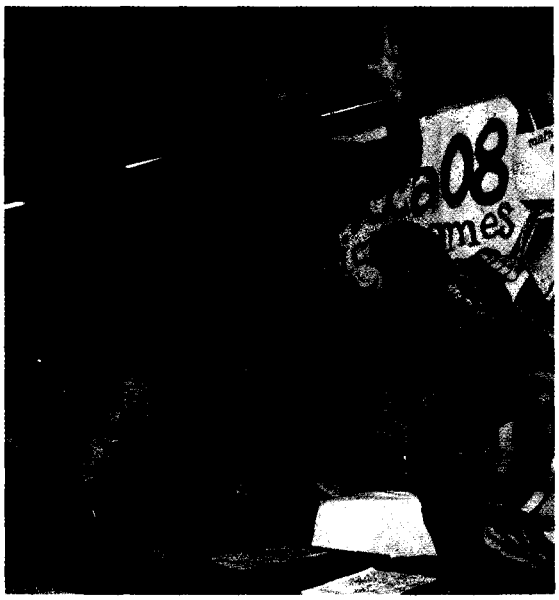
Killer Breakfast is a parody of traditional role playing games performed in front of an audience and using audience members as participants. It takes role playing game rules and turns them on their head in the grandest tradition of XDMs.

A Brief History of Killer Breakfast:

This bizarre method of playing role playing games came about some years ago when Tracy Hickman decided to auction off a game. He realized–after the players in that game had spend quite an amazing sum for the privilege–that a lot of people probably wanted to play in his game but there were only so many seats that a game session could accommodate at a time. He wondered if there was a way to share his XDM skills with more people during a single session.

Thus Killer Breakfast was born: a fun game that could involve a lot of people at once. Let each of them play for a short time, kill their character, and move to the next.

* This was conducted in English by Tracy & Laura and converted into Italian by our incredible translators. Player's responses were in Italian converted into English. We're not entirely sure if we got everything right but as everyone had a good time we cannot complain. See photo on p 102.



The concept was simple, and it was first performed at the Gencon Game Convention then being held in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The game was initially called "Killer Dungeon" but on a subsequent year, a program director for the convention took a dislike to Tracy and, in a punitive move, programmed the event to take place at 9:00 a.m. on Saturday morning, unquestionably the worst possible time to hold a Gencon Event.

Rather than take offense, Tracy decided to wear it as a badge of honor. From that time onward we have proudly run each of our Killer Breakfasts on Saturday morning, defying convention traditions by drawing huge crowds. The only exception has been on those years when we have moved the event to Friday in order to accommodate our devout Jewish gamers.

Killer Basics

The basic idea is that this is a role playing game being run by the most unjust, unsympathetic gamemaster who ever lived to make player's lives miserable. Death comes quickly in this game, and if it ever comes justly, it is almost always by accident.

At least, that's the player's perspective on the joke.

XDMs know differently. Having a jerk for a game master isn't fun or funny. Creating an outrageous caricature of a bad game master *is* funny. Making a joke out of all the bad ways people play role playing games? *That* is hilarious.

Here are the basic rules of a properly run Killer Breakfast:

1. *The first rule of Killer Breakfast is: YOU WILL DIE.* No amount of rules lawyering, begging, or whining will change this fact. Your character in the game is going to die shortly after you start playing. Get used to the idea right now.

2. *Players start with a first level character.* This is a pre-generated character sheet which has the statistics for a character not even a kindergarten teacher would love. This character is given to the player at the last possible moment before coming on stage so that they will have as little emotional attachment to the character as possible.

3. *Players sit down at an empty spot at the table on stage.* At this moment, the player is asked to write down the time, including seconds, that his character "sprang to life" meaning the moment he or she sat down at the game table.

4. *New players at the table must explain how their character arrived at this particular point in the adventure.* If players' explanations of how their character got here are not sufficiently entertaining, valiant, or clever, then they DIE at once and



must leave the table. If their explanation is too long, too boring, or too stupid–then they DIE, get up from the table and make room for the next player to be more interesting.

5. *There are three ways to survive from round to round.* Your pathetic character will be pitted against creatures so horrible, so vicious, and so powerful that they will kill you on an initiative roll alone. The only way you will survive from one round to the next is if you do one of the following three things: A something incredibly brave, B something incredibly stupid (almost always the same thing as A), or C something incredibly entertaining. *The moment your death is funnier than you are, you DIE!* You'll have to be amazing to live from round to round.

Now, these are the rules of the game but there is a lot more to a Killer Breakfast than just offing characters. "Dying is easy. Comedy, that's hard" is the absolute mantra of a Killer Breakfast. It's no trick to kill a character in a role playing game, but getting the player to laugh while you're doing it is the real challenge.

Be forewarned: Running a proper Killer Breakfast is a *grueling* challenge. It is the equivalent of doing two hours of improvisational theater *and* standup comedy at the same time. It is *not* for the faint of heart.

Death Takes Planning: Themes, Props and Stunts

Preparing an XDM Killer Breakfast requires a great deal of advance planning. The Killer Breakfasts at Gencon include the advance preparation of a specially-authored DVD with unique video segments. Your Killer Breakfast does not have to be that elaborate but you should know that preparation for a properly run event can take considerable time and effort.

First, you should settle on a *theme* for your Killer Breakfast. In recent years we've enjoyed running our events as crosses between popular sci-fi and fantasy genres; and music forms to create "Killer Breakfast Musicals." We've crossed *Dragonlance* with the broadway musical *Grease*. We've crossed *Star Wars* with the Back Street Boys. We've crossed *The Lord of the Rings* with John Cash. (Someone describe this particular performance as Frodo meets

Basic Killer Breakfast Cue Cards

"Game over, man!"	"Beam me up, Scotty!"	"I have a bad feeling about this!"	"It's only a model!"
"He's dead, Jim!"	"Surrender, Dorothy!"	"Never give up! NEVER surrender!"	"This group will self-destruct in ten seconds ...good luck, Jim."
"Use the force, stupid!"	"Godzilla! Godzilla!"	"By Grabthar's hammer... you shall be avenged!"	"Snakes. Why did it have to be snakes?"
"That's one vicious bunny!"	"Grignak! Grignak! Grignak!"	"Run, Forest! Run!"	"The engines just can't take it anymore!"
"Oh, no! They killed Kenny!"	"Danger! Danger, Will Robinson!"	"Activate the Omega 13!""	"I'll get you, my pretty ...and your little dog, too!""
"Sha-na-na-na ... sha-na-na-na ... hey, hey ...goodbye!"	"It's only a flesh-wound!"	"Run away! Run away!"	"Hasta la vista, baby!"
"I'll be bahck!"	"Stay frosty!"	"Set for stun ...NOT!"	"Make it so!"

NASCAR.) The point is that you need a theme for your Killer Breakfast that is off-beat and rife with comedic possibilities.

You should then start collecting items and props for your performance. We suggest the following:

- **Generic Tickets** You can pick these up a most local office supply or department stores. Get yourself a roll of numbered tickets. This can help your crew keep the audience in order by giving out tickets in the order people arrive and then calling them up to play in that same order. It also helps you to know afterward just how many players you managed to off during the performance.

- **Watch with a second hand** It's always helpful to have an official time keeper who can clock them in and clock them out when they are done with one standard official time.

- **Character Sheets** You need to prepare these in advance. True XDMs use the XD20 system as the basis for their Killer Breakfast games. Prepare six Killer Breakfast character sheets or download the traditional ones from www.xtremedungeonmastery.com. Be sure to create enough copies of all six of these character sheets to cover the number of characters you expect to blow away during the course of the game.

- **Cue Cards** Killer Breakfast does not just involve the players on the stage. It gets the audience into the game, too. You need to have cue cards for the audience containing things for them to shout out in unison during the game. We included a short list of our favorites for your convenience but any popular fantasy or sci-fi phrase will work.

- **Bad Miniatures** These are more for show than actual use during the game, as there generally isn't enough time to deal with positioning miniatures. We personally recommend the use of Lego people as miniatures–especially the little medieval or sci-fi Lego people. They are easy to transport, do not require any painting, and fall over on their own quite easily.

- **Hideous Toys** Every year we go to the local Toy Liquidator's Outlet store to search for truly hideous toys–toys that are ridiculous or which one might think would give children nightmares. Then we bring them with us for Killer Breakfast. Thus, players can be confronted by such things as a mechanical dragon designed to latch onto your arm and growl. Using bizarre toys as set pieces in your Killer Breakfast performance can be a real boost.



- **Piles of dice** We usually bring a large number of dice, not so much to determine anything at all, but mostly to strike fear in the hearts of gamers. There's nothing like seeing the look on their face when you say, "The dragon hits you! Let's roll for damage. . ." and you pick up about fifty dice in both hands.

- **Audio/Visuals** If you are going to feature music in your Killer Breakfast–and what XDM wouldn't? Then you'll need to write parody lyrics that fit your game to the music, obtain a karaoke version of the song, figure out how you will get the words to your audience (either project them for the

audience or provide them with photocopies), and figure out how to play the music and sing it at the same time. This will largely depend on your capabilities and the technical equipment available to you where you are performing. Learn to deal with the unexpected.

We also recommend that you get yourself a crew, especially if you are expecting to run this event for a large number of people. A crew can be invaluable to an XDM in Killer Breakfast; you have enough to worry about without dealing with crowd control, ticket collection, ticket giving, timing, and other general housekeeping items. A well-trained crew can mean the difference between an enjoyable event for your players and a sluggish one.

For over ten years now, Laura and Tracy have been privileged to be assisted in our Killer Breakfast performances by a group calling themselves the Kokomo Irregulars. These gallant volunteers each year come to the Gencon Convention and provide staff support for our event that is unparalleled and unexcelled. You can't have them: They are ours and we'll fight you for them.

Killer Beats

So you are still intent on running a Killer Breakfast, eh? Don't say we didn't warn you. The next step is for you to create a beat chart that includes the timing of your Killer Breakfast performance. You only have a limited time to perform and you need to make sure you get everything in before the next seminar demands you give up the room.

This beat assumes you are running a two-hour Killer Breakfast.

Preshow

Before the game begins you should arrive about an hour early if possible. You will need to make sure that any audio/visual needs have been properly set up and that they are working as you expect. Do this even if you have performed in this venue before, because there are always last minute changes, which will need to be dealt with promptly. Set out your character sheets, look at the room with an eye toward how people will flow through the room, where they will get their character sheet, which side they will come up to the stage, and which side they will depart the stage.

Hold the audience outside the room if possible but be sure to allow enough time for them to enter the room and find a seat. Depending on the size of the audience this can take upward of half an hour–another reason why you should arrive so early. Spend this entry time pacing up and down in front of the audience like a caged tiger, eyeing them hungrily. Just before the game begins, do a few calisthenics to show them that this is serious business.

The Grand Opening

You should begin the show by explaining the rules to Killer Breakfast to them in the most entertaining way possible. Tracy and Laura have an online video called the *Killer Breakfast Safety Presentation* which provides a proper start to any Killer Breakfast. XDMs may avail themselves of this video as well as basic cheers by special ordering the DVD (NTSC format) through the XDM website.

After you have gotten the rules explanation out of the way, it's time to open the game itself. If you are using music during the game, this would be the ideal time for the opening number which should set the theme and tone for the game. For example, in the 2007 Gencon Killer Breakfast performance *Phantoms of the Ravenloft*, we opened with the following lyrics set (with apologies) to the tune of "Phantom of the Opera:"

(LAURA)
We wrote adventure games / for TSR
But one above the rest / Was quite bizarre.
Now it's returned again / though not the same...
The writers of the Ravenloft have come...
To play their game!
(TRACY)
Come play my RPG / for these two hours
We'll kill more characters / than ten Jack Bauers!
It's Killer Breakfast time. You glance behind...
The makers of the Ravenloft return...
To blow your mind!

It was at this point that Laura and Tracy both climbed aboard a recently-procured luggage dolly and had our crew push us through the audience while we sang.

(LAURA)
Those who have played the game, draw back in

dread. Characters spring to life. . .
(TRACY)
Then drop down dead!
(DUET)
And though you plead and beg / and roll your dice. . .
The DM of the Ravenloft will kill. . .
And not think twice!

This is exactly the kind of big production number that XDMs live for! Plan on these opening sequences (including the game introduction) to take up no more than ten minutes. You need to get the players into the game.

Set #1& 2

Next you need to plan on a couple of sets. A "set" in Killer Breakfast is essentially a scene like in a play or a movie. It usually takes place in a specific setting or location (you won't have much time to do more) and deals with a specific joke or dilemma that is related to the general theme.

For example, in the 2008 edition known as *Animated Killer Breakfast*, we used the theme of role playing meets Walt Disney. The entire adventure was structured around a bizarre version of Disneyland. Players started in a tavern set (where the Town Square is located) and then proceeded to encounter bizarre sets that mirrored the Jungle Cruise, Pirates of the Caribbean, the Matterhorn, and It's a Small World. In this case, Set 1 would be represented by the Town Square Tavern, which was surrounded by a bottomless crevasse, and Set 2 was the Jungle Cruise through a dragon-infested swamp.

Important Tip: You should try to completely clear the table of players–in other words, kill all of them at once–before you change sets. It makes for a nice transition for the audience and lets you start fresh, with little baggage in each set.

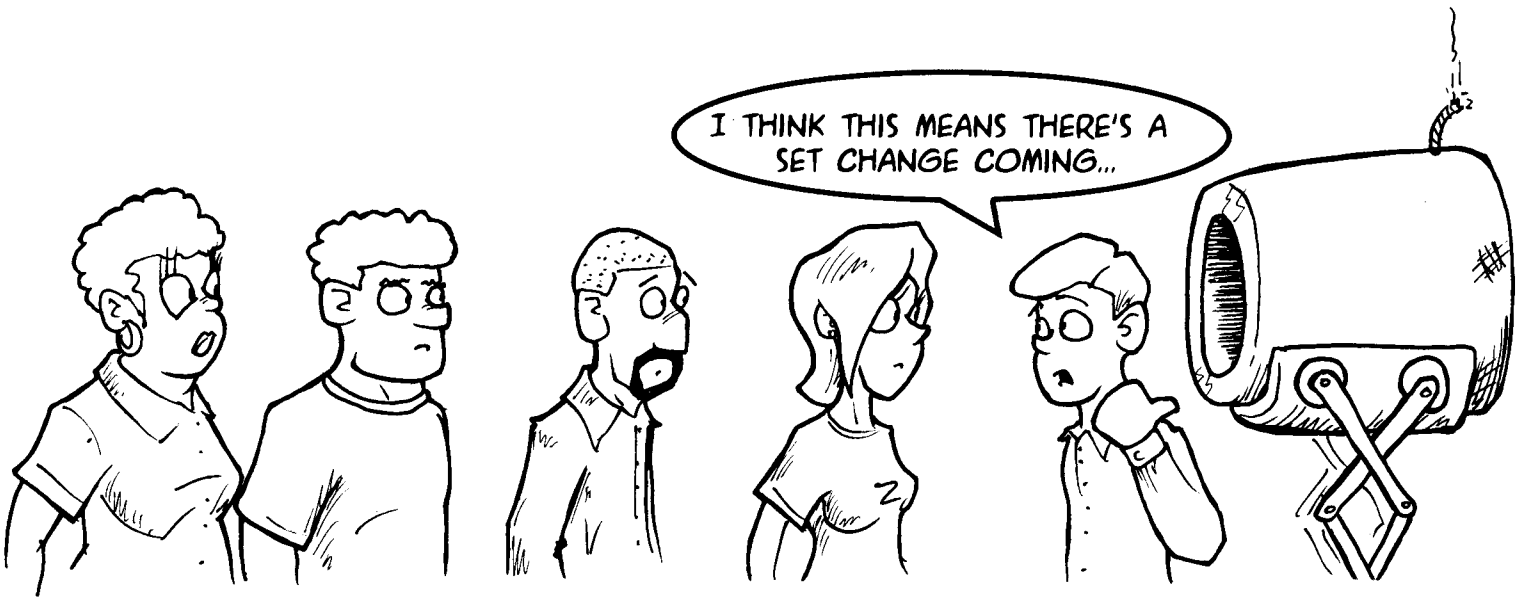
Both of these sets should take just about ten minutes each, bringing your game to about the thirty minute mark. You'll need a pacing break at this point, so give control over to your associate to run the first Laura Quest.

Laura Quest #1

Laura Quests are little audience participation games that break up the Killer Breakfast and give the XDM running it a chance to breathe. They are named after Laura Hickman, who originated the Laura Quest and who has been performing them now for years.

There are three traditional Laura Quests:

1. **Alien Abduction** This involves beach balls being thrown into the audience, asking that they bounce it back and forth over their heads until the music stops. Those still holding the ball when the music stops gets a prize. This is often a special T-shirt but can also be something as mind-blowingly exciting as being bumped to the front of the line to come on stage.



2. **Red Shirt Aptitude Test** This is based on a South American game called Cai. In this game, the leader on stage demonstrates four different positions–hands forming visor over eyes, arms crossing chest, one arm bent with the other arm touching the elbow, and arms at sides with hands on waist – then tells the audience that when she shouts Cai they must perform one of the three hand positions that is *different* than the one she is doing. If they match her, they are out.

3. **Dice of the Gods** This is a game where people are asked to roll their D20 die. Anyone who rolls anything other than a 20 is out. Keep rolling until you get the number of liars . . . I mean **winners** down to a manageable size.

These quests are important as they provide an opportunity for the audience to be involved *and* they allow the XDM to gather his or her thoughts before launching into the next sets. Plan on this taking you to about 35 minutes into the performance.

Set #3

This is a bit longer single set that you should plan on taking you to about the fifty minute mark in the performance. It will be important to keep the pace of the game high through this set.

Laura Quest #2

You get another break here at the fifty minute mark. This Laura Quest should again take about five minutes and get you back into the game fresh at just before the hour mark.

Set #4

Make this one a ten minute set and perform it with energy. You will finish this at about the one hour ten minute mark in the performance.

Stretch Song

You *really* need a breather at this point in the marathon, so this is the perfect place to perform the Stretch Song. This is the middle song of the three that make up your performance and is intended to give everyone a little rest. This song can even be a ballad, so long as you have someone who can perform it. In 2007, for example, Laura performed "Don't Kill Me Now, Dungeonmaster" to the tune of "Don't Cry for Me, Argentina."

It was way foolish. . .
That move I made. . .
I forgot and just opened the door. . .
And my dex-ter-i-ty didn't help me one bit,
But I'm a cleric,
And checking for traps isn't what I should do.
That's Frank's job,
because he's a Thief. . .
I blame him, and think you should, too!
To run this game's not easy.
You should get paid.
For suffering through play that's poor,
from idiots like Frank,
who really should quit.
You are a GEN-IOUS!
Quoting tables and charts off the top of your head.
And I think your hygiene's quite good,
no matter what anyone says!
Don't kill me now, dungeon master!
The truth is. . . I don't deserve it!
All through my wild play,
the maps that we drew!
I brought Dor-i-tos. . .
And always liked you!

This musical number should take you just past the one hour, twenty minute mark and set you up for the push toward the end of the game.

Set #5

This set is about fifteen minutes and should take you into your final Laura Quest. It is easy to let your guard down in this set. Keep your energy up and the death count high. Plan on this set running to the one hour thirty-five minute mark.

Laura Quest #3

This is the final Laura Quest and your last breather before the end of the performance. It should leave you with just twenty minutes to go.

Set #6

Your final set and you should make this one special. Craft this set around a large scale battle in which you can involve the audience. This set needs to be spectacular and have an epic scale to it. It should also be devastatingly explosive. It is not uncommon to reach for either the Holy Hand Grenade of Antioch or a thermonuclear device at this point. Finish off the entire audience while you are at it–and leave them with a bang!

Big Finish

Having thus destroyed not only the players onstage but the entire audience as well, there is nothing left to do but sing the closing song. Traditionally, this has been our rendition of "Chainmail Woman" to the tune of Roy Orbison's "Pretty Woman" but you can choose your own appropriate closer as you see fit.

Running the Gauntlet

Now that you have the basic mechanics in mind about how to put together a Killer Breakfast, we come to the most important and difficult part.

That would be you.

Why? That's because a successful Killer Breakfast relies most heavily on the expert performance of a world-class XDM. Tracy is a 1772nd Level XDM and he finds the performance equivalent to a marathon.

The ultimate success or failure of a Killer Breakfast rests firmly on the shoulders of the XDM running the show. You have to think quickly on your feet, be prepared to change direction from moment to moment and keep your mind searching for the next interpretation of player actions and how they might be construed–or misconstrued–in the most entertaining fashion. Have no illusions: Performing a Killer Breakfast is about being instantly funny for two hours using material that is constantly being thrown at you from very intelligent players who would like nothing better than to put you off your game.

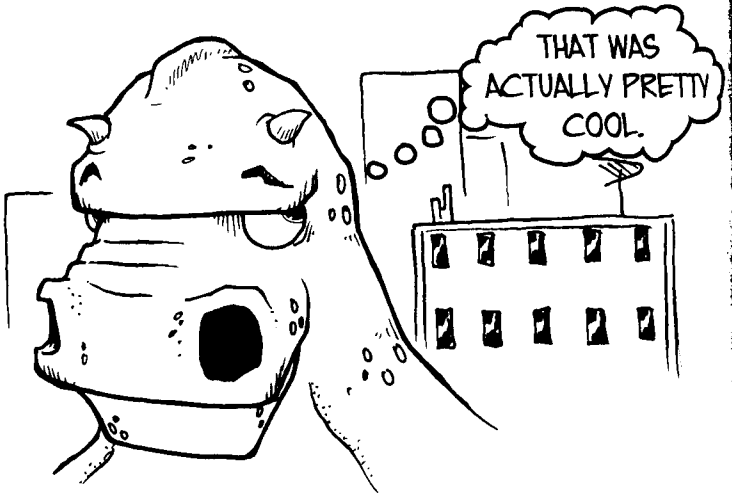
What's So Funny?

The first law of XDMing a Killer Breakfast is that it must be entertaining–which means *you* must be entertaining. Having a sense of humor, timing, and pacing are critical to making your Killer Breakfast function.

More importantly, you need to have a sense of what is truly *funny* based as much as possible on the actions or descriptions you get from the players in the game.

One technique for making this work is to get action descriptions from *all* of the players at the table *before* you determine the results of their actions. You need to keep a picture in your head of *all* of these actions and consider how those same actions might contradict or clash with each other. By combining character actions you can often come up with outrageous consequences.

For example: A giant Japanese monster is stomping down the street toward your players' characters. You ask *each* of the players at the table what their character is going to do. One says she is going to leap into a tank and drive it toward the monster. The next says he will pull a missile out of his backpack and fire it toward the monster. The third says she will jump out of the way. The fourth also jumps into the tank and fires its gun. The fifth hides under the tank. And the sixth calls for the Japanese Air Force. The easy interpretation of this, after all the actions have been declared is that the third character leaps in *front of* the second character's missile, is carried away by the missile, but his weight deflects the rocket down *under* the tank where it hits the fifth, hiding character (kill five, kill three), blowing up the tank (kill one, kill four) just as the shell is fired into the air, exploding among the planes of the Japanese Air Force, causing several to fall from the sky into the street below as flaming debris (kill two, kill six).



Keeping the Lid On, While Staying Off the Bottom:

Don't count on the players to provide entertainment; sometimes you'll come across a golden player who is truly entertaining–and when that happens, it makes your job so much easier, and you should keep them around as long as possible. But for the most part, you can count on players in any Killer Breakfast game to feed off the bottom–to reach for the lowest common denominator of potty humor and the grossly juvenile.

It is your job as an XDM to both keep the lid on, meaning that you ensure that the game does not get out of hand, and keep your players from dragging your game down into the muck.

When we talk about keeping the lid on, what we are mostly talking about is maintaining firm control of the performance. Players in a Killer Breakfast performance will naturally attempt to wrest control of the game away from the XDM. Some players mistakenly see this as a contest between you and them, rather than as an entertainment.

Kill their character. Do it now. Do not pass go, do not collect $200 . . . just kill them.

At the same time, you need to keep everyone out of the gutter. The moment someone starts using bawdy humor and tries to drag your game with them into the gutter . . . well, you should just kill them, too. Send a message that you will *not* tolerate such behavior in your game; XDMs do *not* dwell in the gutter!

Tempo! Tempo! Tempo!

Comedy is all about timing, and in this case that also means tempo! You have to keep the energy high all through the performance. The moment you slack off, you're showing weakness and your players will pounce!

Pace yourself during the game and take all the advantage of the songs and Laura Quests to give our overheating brain a rest. But when the bell rings, you have to come out swinging and not let up until it's all over.

Death Is Firm, Final, and Unquestioned!

The moment you sense someone at the table is going to argue with you or challenge your call rather than play with you, kill their character.

Right now. Kill their character and do so in the most emphatic and unquestionable way possible. Never argue with them (they don't deserve it), never explain anything to them (they won't understand it), and don't listen to them rave on (they aren't worth the time).

Just kill them, boot them off the stage, and move on with the game. You're an XDM! Stand tall! You're *supposed* to off their character and you don't owe an explanation for it to anyone, least of all some pansy, whiny player.

Dealing with Bribes, for Fun and Profit

Finally, one tradition has made its way into Killer Breakfast for good or ill, and that is bribes. In many role playing games, bribing the gamemaster is a tried and true means of getting your way when the dice are not helping you. This is reflected in the Killer Breakfast parody of such games.

A few Twizzlers and a bag of Doritos is fine, but sometimes these gifts can get entirely out of hand. So we have tried to establish the following as iron-clad rules:

1. **No Cash Bribes** An XDM never takes a cash bribe. The *only* exception to this rule is when the game is being run as a charity fundraiser and then *only* if all the money given as bribes is donated directly to the charity. End of story.



2. **Never Reward Extravagant Bribes** You must never reward an expensive bribe with any more consideration than an inexpensive one. Kill one just as quickly as the other.

Death was never meant to be this much fun.

Kenny Baker Game

The Kenny Baker Game is a really fun concept that Tracy's daughter, Angel, mentioned at one point. During this game the role of the game master is constantly changing from person to person. In fact, in an ideal Kenny Baker* situation, this would also mean that all the players rotate as well. In other words, every so many minutes (15?) everyone at the table moves over a spot. The guy who was playing the warrior is now playing the elf, the girl who was playing the elf is now playing the wizard, and the guy who was playing the wizard is now the game master. The game master, of course, is now the warrior.

Murder in the Dark Game

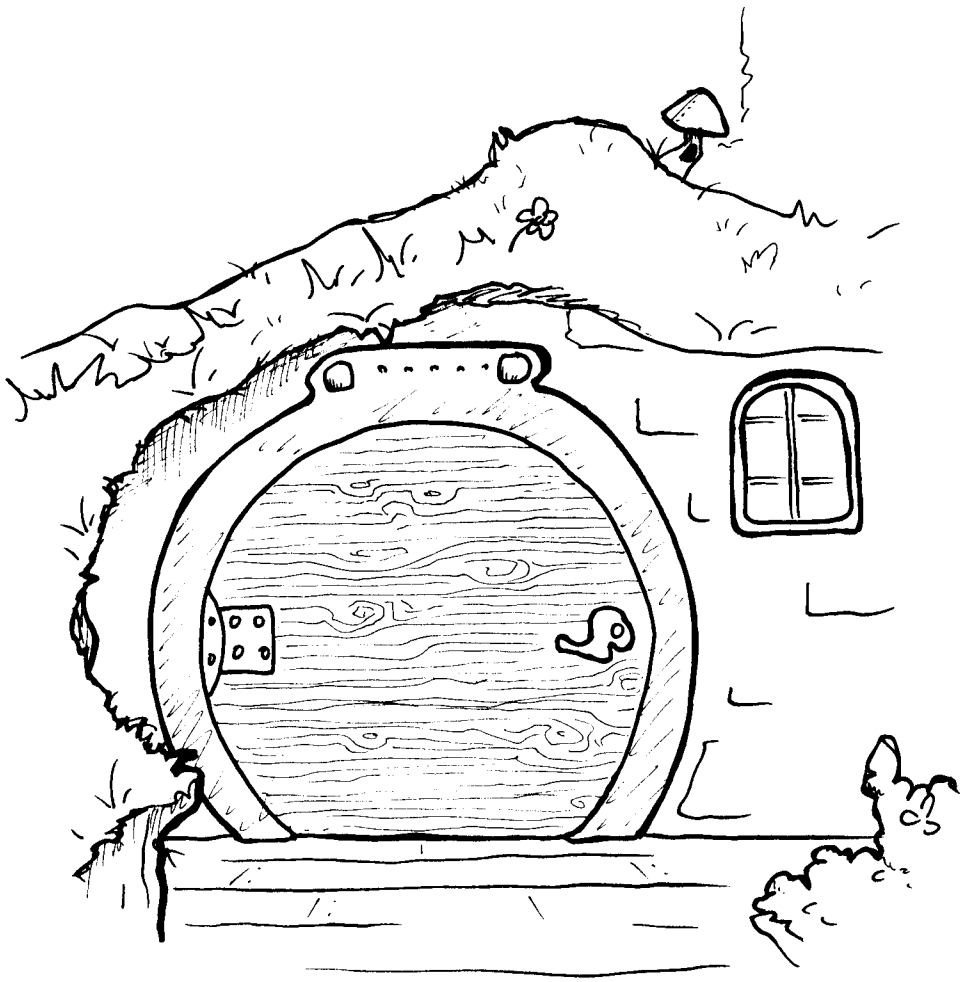
Murder in the Dark is a game that youth play at parties. The concept is sound, however, and elements of it might be use to create some very interesting and strange dynamics during a role playing game.

For example, if you have five players, then you have five slips of paper. Each one says something different. Perhaps one says, "You have joined this group in order to kill the very King you are trying to save." And another says, "You owe a debt to the King and have joined this group in order to prevent his assassination." The thing is, the papers are passed out at random, and not necessarily at the start of the game. Even the game master doesn't know what everyone's motives are.



* The reason it's called the Kenny Baker Game is based on a variation of hearts that our relative Kenny Baker came up with, in which after each round, the hand you have is passed to your left.

XDM: THE PLAYER'S SECTION





CHAPTER FOURTEEN: HOW YOU PLAY THE GAME

Kardan slogs knee deep through the black, foul waters. His massive biceps twitch with anticipation, their enormous power barely held in check. Each bone-chilling step he takes through the ankle deep water about him heightens his building rage, nearly blinding him in his lust for justice and revenge. Almost forgotten are his compatriots, five true friends who have pledged their life to him and may well be called upon to redeem that pledge this very night.

Three days before, the mighty warrior and his companions fought their way into the Mountain Temple of Thog-kjara in search of Kardan's betrothed, the Princess Illirion. The barbarian's mortal enemy, Imhothis of Chaos, threatened her death. Kardan knew that the High Priest Imhothis cared nothing one way or the other concerning the life of a princess. His only thought was to cause pain to the barbarian lord beyond any wound that weapons of steel might inflict. In this, Kardan knew with clenched-teeth surety that Imhothis had succeeded. His love suffered because of him, and the knowledge of it burned his soul.

Kardan drew his great sword Eiric, flames licking down its shining length. Its flickering blue light illuminated the deepest corridor of the temple dungeon. Rotting wooden cell doors sagged in their stone framework on either side, their ranks disappearing into the blackness beyond the light of his burning sword. Kardan bared his teeth, growling as he advanced through the swirling black waters around his feet.

Suddenly, Kardan's mammoth body shook at the sound of a scream. Illirion! Her voice pierced his soul!

The sound had come from just beyond the door to his right!

Freeze frame. Pop quiz. Multiple choice, and please feel free to reread the above text again before each answer.

Kardan's next action will be:

1. Kardan will check for traps. If he does not have this ability, Kardan will turn to a member of the party behind him and determine which of them *can* check for traps.

2. Kardan will take this opportunity to search for secret doors. This should take about ten minutes.

3. Kardan simply assumes that the door is trapped and devises a complex means of opening the door from a safe and prudent location down the corridor utilizing fifty feet of rope, several

spikes, block, tackle, and pulleys, which he has noted on his character sheet.

4. Kardan, to be fair to the other party members, asks them to vote on what they should do next.

5. Kardan will move to the back of the party and allow the thief with better stats to take care of this one.

Before you answer this simple quiz, let's take a moment to join another adventure in another place and time and see if this is more familiar to you. The scene: a kitchen table. The pizza is cold, the drinks are warm, and the eternal dungeon goes on. . . and on. . . and on. . .

DM: "Like, uh, you are in this hallway and it ends in a door."

ALLAN: "A door!" (Turning to fellow players Betty, Charlie, and Ethel.) "Hey, it's a door. What do we do for a door?"

CHARLIE: (To Allan.) "What kind of door is it?"

ALLAN: (To the DM, suspiciously.) "Right! What kind of door is it?"

DM: (Checks notes. The description in the adventure does not tell him the kind of door. DM momentarily considers whether there is a Random Door Type Table somewhere in the *Dungeon Master's Guide* that he is not aware of and then responds.) "It's ... a wooden door!"

ALLAN: (To fellow players.) "It's a wooden door! Okay. What do we do for a wooden door?"

BETTY: (Leafing through her spell book pages) "I think there might be a spell for this kind of thing. Fireball. . .Flamestrike. . ."

CHARLIE: (To Allen.) "Ask him what kind of wooden door it is."

ALLEN: "Right!" (To DM) "What kind of wooden door is it?"

DM: (Somewhat flustered, searching his memory for the types of wood he learned in shop class but cannot think of any.) "A *wooden* wooden door!"

ETHEL: (From the middle of the party. Ethel learned long ago that those who stand at the back of the party can get attacked there, too.) "Which way does the door open?"

DM: "Toward you, into the corridor."

ETHEL: "What kind of handle?"

DM: "Oh, for crying out. . . a regular handle, like a lever."

ETHEL: "Okay! Now, I climb the wall over the door and with my hammer drive a spike into the stonework over the door, then I go down the hall back the way we came from. . . oh, 30 feet and drive another spike into the wall. Then I take my 50' piece of rope–see, it's right here on my character sheet–and make a loop in it, and using my ten-foot pole ..."

DM: "You dragged a ten-foot pole into the dungeon?"

ETHEL: "See! It's right here on my character sheet. Anyway, I use my ten-foot pole and drape the loop over the handle. Then I bring the rope over the spike and over the other spike and then, standing thirty feet away from the door with my back against the wall, I pull the rope and open the door."

DM: (After a short pause while the DM considers whether he wants to bother with the actual physics involved in this feat of engineering.) "Okay."

ALLEN: "Wait! We flatten ourselves against the wall, too!

DM: "Fine. Whatever. The door is open."

ETHEL: "I climb up over the door and peek down carefully from the top of the window casement. What do I see?"

DM: "You see. . . (big dramatic pause) . . .a ten-foot wide corridor running thirty feet in front of you. At the end you see. . ."

ALLEN: (Filled with dread) "Yes?! Yes?! What is it?"

DM: "It's. . . another door!"

You know this game. You've *played* in this game! It is the reason why "Knights of the Dinner Table" was the first place we turned to when we got our copy of 'Dragon Magazine' each month. (When it still was a magazine with pages.) We've all sat at B.J.'s table.

The Deadly Dungeon Session

This happened to Tracy in a dungeon session. He was playing a barbarian character surrounded by the dungeoning equivalent of forensic accountants. Every door we came upon had to have paint chips sent to the lab for cobalt carbon dating. The party would spend thirty minutes on such a door. They would waste an entire evening on a single room. Until they finally ended up in an ornate chamber. The room description stated that the walls and pillars were covered with runes but gave no further details. The players quite literally couldn't read the writing on the wall, but you couldn't convince the players of that. They spent all night in that one room looking for something that just wasn't there.

After that playing session, Tracy was angry and discouraged. One of the other players said to him,

"Hey, you're a barbarian. Be barbaric!"

An idea can be a dangerous thing.

The next week, Tracy was determined to play his barbarian like a *barbarian*. The game started in that same rune covered room.

The DM said, "Well, you are in a room where runes cover the walls."

And one of the forensic accountants said, "If I hold the gnome upside down, can she read the runes?"

Tracy turned to the DM and said, "Where is the door nearest to my character?"

"Well," he said solemnly, "to your left you see an intricately carved door with images of–"

Tracy didn't wait for him.

"I go and open the door."

A stunned silence around the table ... then chaos!

The other players shouted, "No he doesn't!"

Tracy shouted, "YES, I DO!"

The next room happened to be inhabited by two minotaurs, who had heard the shouting long before the barbarian charged in. One of the party was critically injured and several took some bad lumps, including the barbarian.

Just as the cleric was wrapping up a round of healing, Tracy turned to the DM.

"Is there another door in the room?"

"Well," he said cautiously, "behind a massive stone altar, a banded metal door is–"

"I open it!"

The party must have gone through thirty rooms that night. They chased that barbarian all around that dungeon from one mess to the next. Eventually they came upon an evil wizard. Tracy's forensic accountant fellow adventurers were obviously settling into a pointless, and tediously prolonged, parley with the old mystic.

Then and there, Tracy decided that his barbarian hated wizards. He concocted some story about the barbarian's sister being turned into a goat for a while when he was young, and he never had gotten over it.

The barbarian walked up to the wizard and spit in his face.

What a battle!

The party fell back into the corridor; the magic flew! The party's own wizard, in the excitement, got carried away and threw a fireball into the room which was only thirty feet square with a ten foot ceiling.

Toasties!

Many a brave PC was charbroiled that night.

But what a great story to tell!

The Boring Long Life Character

Why do we play these games? To be boring? Do we say to ourselves, "Let's all get together next week and, instead of leading our everyday, boring lives, lets make believe we are fantasy characters leading boring lives."

Truth be told, we don't care for PCs who are

higher than 8th level. We are deeply suspicious of those who claim to have a thief/druid/assassin (69th level in each) with a sword of +20 Instantly Kill Anything and +60 Armor of Weightless Impenetrability and 50 bazillion gold pieces. Such characters are as boring as they come. They are no fun. They aren't even interesting. What kind of story can you tell about a character like that?

"Oh, my character was challenged by Zeus to a wrestling match and I, like, killed everyone on Olympus last night."

Yawn.

Many years ago, while Tracy worked as game designer at TSR, he talked to a fellow over the phone. This youngster had called with a question and the switchboard sent him up to Tracy.

"The characters in my game are all around 65 and, like, if they killed a god, would anything bad happen to them? I, mean, would the clerics be pissed or something?"

Perplexed, Tracy asked this kid if he used the official AD&D modules.

"Yes," he replied, "we go through about three or four of them every Friday night."

Monty Haul has found a new standard!

No, thank you! Give us a character that does brave deeds! Give us a character about which we can tell a good story, even if he does buy the farm!

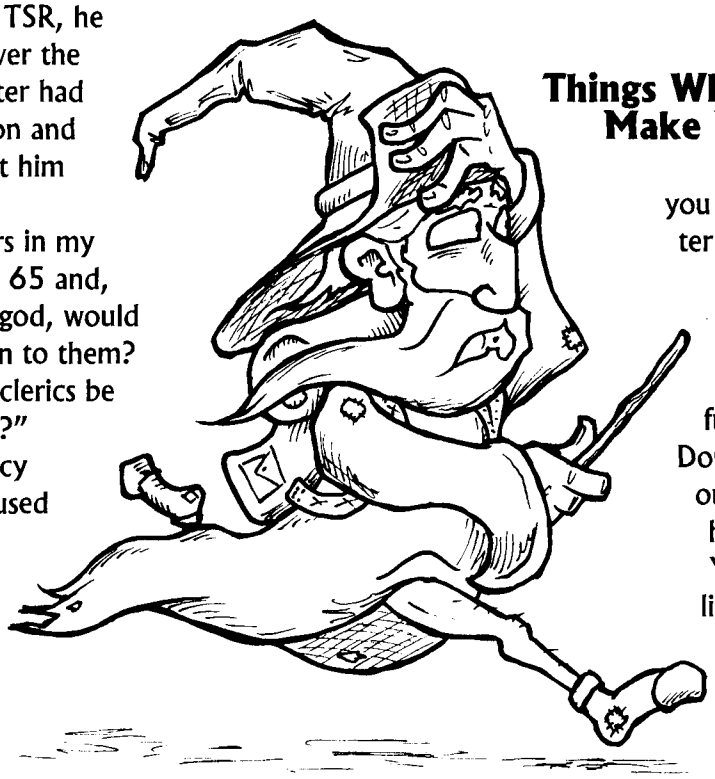
It was Ben Franklin who said, "To be remembered, either write a book or do something worth writing a book about."

The mistaken notion, which was built up over the last twenty-five years, is that in a role playing game *surviving* means *winning*. This philosophy resulted in a lot of people giving up heroics for security. You can soak up an awful lot of experience points by sitting back and letting other characters do the dying for you, but where is the fun in that?

You must start by making up your mind to be heroic, even if your character dies.

Look, we know your character is special to you but he could die from some DM's dumb trap and what would you have? No story worth telling. If your character is boring alive, then he is worse than dead.

What is the alternative? Become the hero that you long to be. It isn't whether you live or die, it's how you play the game. So if you're going to play, play well! Be a hero!



Things Which You Can Do to Make Your Game Better

There are some specific things that you can do that will make your character better.

Find your Character's Kryptonite

We all know how helpful character backgrounds can be. Don't just let your character spring out of nothing—give him a place he comes from and a background. You'll be surprised how much this little exercise in storymaking will help you define the likes and dislikes of your character.

However, as you are creating the background story, take a lesson from Kryptonite. Did you ever wonder why there are so many different kinds of Kryptonite? Why is this stuff (a supposedly ultra rare element from a destroyed planet far from our own) so readily available to nefarious underworld figures when they need it?

Surprisingly simple: Superman would be Superbore without it. He would be unstoppable, and where is the story in that?

Achilles had his heel and every good character has had his or her equivalent since. Your character needs some vulnerability and you are just the person to see he gets it.

Give your character automatic reactions

This doesn't have to be as restrictive as it sounds. You should give your character:

1. **Three things he will fight over** This can be anything: A lady in distress; a man in distress; injustice to the poor; injustice to the rich ... whatever your character background might indicate.

2. **One thing he will quail from every time.** Fear of anything works fine here. Fear of any type of monster or object or action. Tracy once had a cleric who professed a profound fear of rope. This seemed harmless enough to the rest of the party until they remembered the entrance to the dungeon was down a thirty foot shaft. This forced another player to tell Tracy's cleric a story about his "magic rope powder" which would make any rope absolutely safe. That the mysterious powder was salt was never mentioned in front of the fearful cleric.



3. **One thing he will fight to the death for.** Make it a good one, because this may be the last one. Don't be shy; pick something well beyond the abilities of mortal men. Something noble and impossible sounds good. You might also prepare a tear-jerking speech to deliver for your death scene if whatever you picked proved to be a little beyond your range.

Take charge of your own destiny

No one controls your character or should control your character but you. What your character does should be up to you and not some committee of others. In your hands is the ability to control the game flow. If the game is dragging, *you* can change that. If the game is too fast–well, it's never too fast.

Of course, we realize that the appeal of role-playing games is that it can be a cooperative endeavor. We heartily encourage a spirit of camaraderie among party members.

But if the result is not heroic, then it's time to take matters out of the hands of the committee.

We suggest the following guidelines:

If your character has not done anything in the last five minutes, do something. Anything!

If you cannot solve a puzzle in ten minutes. Leave it. If you can't solve it, you either haven't found enough information to deal with it properly, or the DM isn't doing his job right. The answer lies elsewhere, not in standing around and pondering. If you think you have a solution, come back. Otherwise, get on with it.

Be dramatic

If you have any training in theater, use it. Your voice is your most powerful tool in any role playing game. Through your voice you paint the picture of your character. Let your voice portray your feelings.

Also, draw on real feelings. Don't let your character just wander like a mindless hulk through your games. Your own experiences can give depth of understanding to what your character is feeling.

Be creative

Try to take an innovative look at everything that is around your character in the dungeon. Using *everything* around you: If you can see it, odds are you can use it to some dramatic advantage. This means training yourself to observe everything around you and have the innovation to use it.

Once Tracy was in a dungeon where the party ran into a library. It was obvious that the book in the center of the room (the one with the column of light shining on it) was the one the DM wanted us to look

at. Tracy, however, started asking about the other book in the library.

"Just books" said the DM.

"Give me some titles," Tracy replied.

The DM, thinking to embarrass him, came up with some terrible titles like *Love Rituals of the Orcs* and *Passion Dances of the Ogres*.

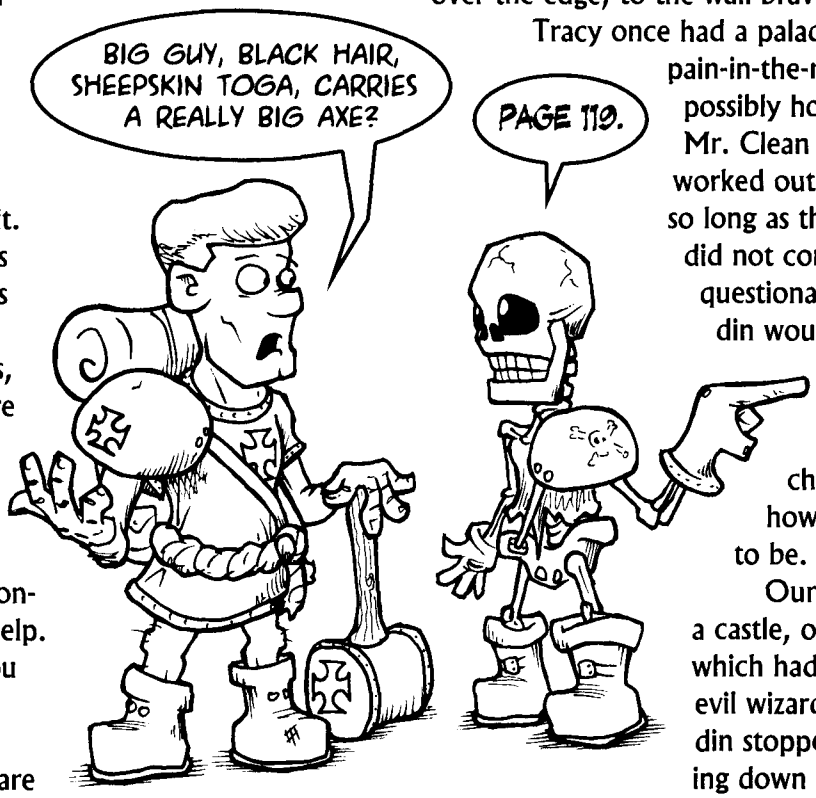
Tracy's character took the books.

The DM then forgot all about them. . .

. . .Until the party was confronted by a group of orcs and Tracy pulled those (fully illustrated) works out and displayed them to the attackers.

Now, *that* distracted the orcs!

If it's described, it can be used. Drive your DM crazy. Even if you don't *use* everything you find, be *aware* of it so that you *could* use it if you needed to. MacGuyver often escapes with nothing but a paperclip. If you have a paperclip, then use it.



Inanimate objects are not the only things that you can use to your advantage. NPCs, when run properly, are a great source of information about what is going on around your character as well as occasionally providing direct help. NPCs can be fun if you use them right. Don't engage in meaningless parleys unless all you are after is pleasant conversation.

Be Thoughtful of Other Players' Needs

In your headlong rush toward individuality, remember that the needs of other players in your group are going to be different than yours and are just as important as your own. You must keep your other players in mind in the same way that a good PC would keep the other members of his party in mind, as well as their capabilities, strengths, and weaknesses. Just as your party is balanced and works to utilize all the talents of its group to its advantage: so too must your game group work together for the best success.

Conclusions

Consider this: What are the hit dice, armor class, and damage statistics of a minotaur that you discover after hastily busting down a door?

Now, what are the hit dice, armor class, and damage statistics of a minotaur that you creep up on after spending twenty minutes checking a door?

They are the same. Statistically, setting aside first round surprise factors, there is no real statistical difference between being careful and being gonzo, hang-it-over-the-edge, to-the-wall brave.

Tracy once had a paladin that was the worst pain-in-the-rear paladin you could possibly hope to avoid. He was Mr. Clean all the way. Tracy had worked out a deal with the DM that, so long as the members of the party did not conduct any outwardly questionable act of evil, the paladin would not check their alignment. This meant that we had a paladin in a party of neutral and chaotic evil PCs. But, oh, how careful those PCs had to be.

Our quest was to retake a castle, owned by a good king, which had been taken over by an evil wizard. At one point, the paladin stopped the party from breaking down a door on the grounds that the door was actually the property of a good man (the king) and that wrecking his property would be wrong.

This group got in the habit of sending the paladin to "scout ahead" quite a bit.

At one point, while the paladin was "scouting ahead," the party turned right where the paladin had gone left, and encountered two bugbear guards watching a small treasure. The gnome was the only member of the party who spoke bugbear and, being something

of a rascal, began negotiating with the bugbears. If the bugbears would tell us where the really *big* treasure was, then the party would retreat and nobody would get hurt. This seemed agreeable to the creatures since they would still be guarding their own treasure.

It was at about this time the paladin returned. Seeing the bugbears, he drew his sword at once and charged.

Playing a game this way not only makes your game improve but it *demands* that others play better as well. The player of the gnome character had only seconds to think. He turned to me and held up his hands, saying,

"No! Stop! They want to repent!"

The paladin stopped.

Holding his greatsword with the tip down and resting his palms on its hilt, the paladin asked the gnome to address the bugbears for him in their base and fallen tongue.

The paladin began, "If they will but repent. . ."

The gnome translated, "IF YOU WILL BUT TELL US. . .

"Of your evil ways. . ."

"WHERE THE TREASURE IS. . . "

"Then I will spare your lives!"

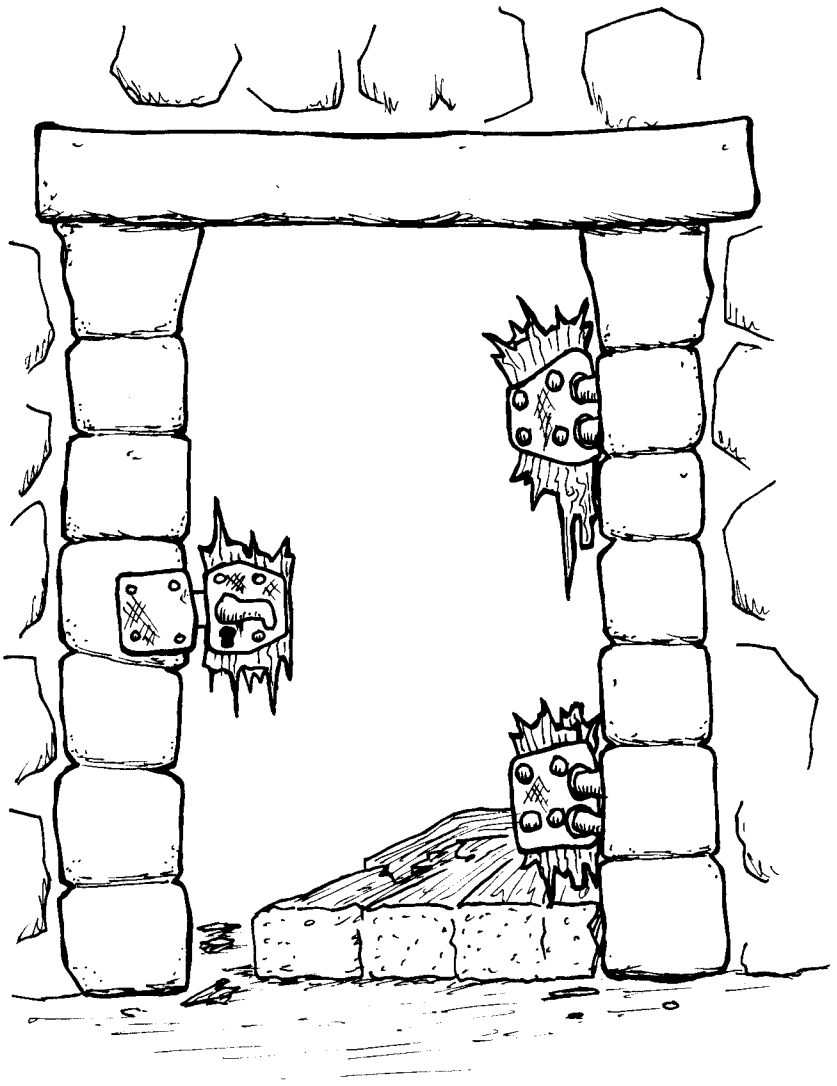
"WE WON'T SIC HIM ON YOU!"

The bugbear's eyes grew wide, then they replied with very explicit directions to the larger treasure.

The gnome turned to the paladin and said, "They agree."

It isn't whether you live or die. . .

XD20 Role Playing System





CHAPTER FIFTEEN: THE XD20 BASIC GAME

Once in an XDM's lifetime, a revolutionary concept of unprecedented power manifests itself to the gaming world. For the gamers of the Renaissance it was the invention of the twenty-sided die. For you my lucky friend, it's the XD20 game system. You learn this simple system once and you will never have to learn another system. . . ever again. Ever wanted to play a Jedi master who fights Lord Soth in Toon Town, *without* having to do insane calculations that breakdown the very physics of time and space? Ever wished you could teach your buddy how to play his first dungeon crawl *without* having to hand him volume after volume of player's references, tables, and charts? Ever wanted a system that will make it actually possible (however unlikely) for a level one halfling to kill a level 24 death knight? My dear friends of the XDM fraternity, the time has come. Welcome to the XD20 Role playing Game System!

The XD20 Role playing Game System, produced exclusively for XDMs, is a shift in gaming paradigms. With this game system you will soon be taking your players on fantastic adventures that are filled with the same excitement, wonder, and impending doom that you recall so fondly from when adventure games were new.

If you're like us, you've spent a lot of time, effort, and creativity on games which are so complicatedly daunting that you are the only person in your house who could possibly play them. Let's face it: We are surrounded by games that no one is willing to play with us. Indeed, there is a high likelyhood that your spouse, friend, mother, father, sister, brother, or children flee at the very mention of one of your role playing games.

Well not anymore!

Welcome to the XD20 Basic All-Purpose Role Play Game. For you Role playing Afficianados out there, this is the Basic version of the XD20 game system. The Advanced version contains a lot more words and strives to maintain the illusion of being overly complicated. But this basic version is the game you can play with your parents, spouse, friends, siblings, or kids.

Think of it as an olive branch, the bridge between our world and the rest of humanity.

Introduction to Role Playing

If you aren't familiar with role playing games, what are you doing reading about this one? Only officially sanctioned XDMs are allowed to have this book–and if *they* can't explain what a role playing

game is about, then tell them they have just lost four levels. You won't know what you said, but it will probably shock the socks off them!

Actually, XD20 is a really good system for teaching people who are new to role playing what this game of heroism-on-the-edge is all about. You're going to take a part, just like in a play, only the lines aren't written for you–you'll be making up what your character does along the way. Think of it as low-pressure, improvisational theater . . . or play pretend if you prefer.

Look, just get some dice. Your XDM will show you which one to roll and when.

About the XD20 Role Playing System

The XD20 role playing game system is designed to adapt to *any* genre of gaming. You can play generic space adventures, generic fantasy adventures, generic horror adventures, generic mystery adventures, generic romance adventures . . . not to mention clandestine adventures in any heavily trademarked and copyrighted story-world that may, by the wildest of coincidence, seem to model *Star Wars*-like* or *Lord of the Rings*-like† world to which you may or may not have paid a franchise fee.

You, as an XDM, can model *anything* with this system, including all your *other* favorite role playing games. Knock yourself out.

What you need to play (setting up)

You need the following items in order to play a game of XD20.

- **One (minimum) twenty-sided die** (more dice are better and a full set of polyhedral dice are best of all ... ask someone if you don't know what these are).

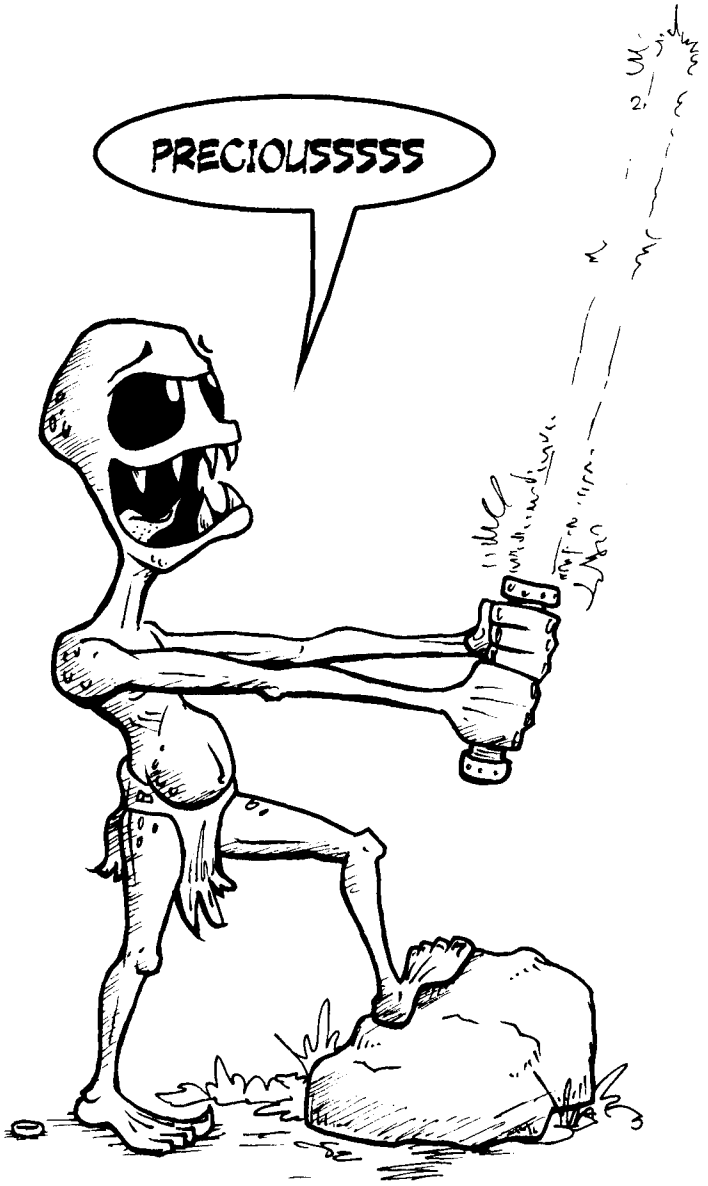
- **One properly completed XD20 Basic Character Sheet for every player.** (See page 122 for filling out a basic character sheet.)

- **One regulation XDM‡ Gamemaster.**

That's all you need. This *is* the basic game, remember?

Object of the game

The object of your game will be whatever crazy thing your XDM says is the object of the game. It could be to recover the Arc of the Covenant, rescuing the princess from a Death Star, or tossing jewelry back into the volcano that it was forged in. It can even be getting back to Auntie Em in Kansas. Whatever your XDM says is the object of the game, that's the object of the game. Get used to it.



* *Star Wars* is the unquestioned copyright of Lucasfilm, Ltd. and is used here without their permission. We are, of course, referring here only to *similar* milieus that may contain common elements with that heavily guarded work.

† *Lord of the Rings* is certainly copyrighted by the J.R.R. Tolkien Estate and is used here without their permission. We wouldn't think of condoning your use of the word "hobbit" in your game–certainly not in print.

‡ If you do not have a regulation XDM, one may be appointed for you.

How do you know when you've won? The XDM will tell you when you've won. How do you know if you've lost? Same way.

Playing the game

Here is how the game is played:

Step 1 The XDM describes where your characters are located and the situation in which they find themselves. He will describe your setting like he is telling a story. He might include lasers and fog machines if it will help.

Step 2 Each of the players, pretending to be their character, (hence "role playing") describes the actions of their character to the XDM. Possible actions include moving, hitting stuff, doing stuff, or talking. *Describe your actions like you are telling a story.*

Step 3 The XDM *may* (but is not required to) have the various players at the table roll dice to determine if their described actions succeed or not. The XDM tells the player a "target number" which they must equal or exceed in order to succeed at their described action. This number is based on the character's STAT from their character sheet and is modified by factors such as how difficult the action would be to perform. The XDM will take care of this for you. Trust the XDM.

Step 4 Whether the action described succeeds or not, the XDM will describe the result. If the player's character is hurt as a result of any actions, then the XDM will have you subtract any damage from your character's health as noted on your sheet. If your character's health drops below zero then your character has "died" in the story, another way of ending the game. The XDM will describe the results like he is telling a story.

Step 5 The players' location and circumstances having changed because of their actions and those of any creatures they have encountered, the XDM takes everybody back to step one. Repeat until the win or lose conditions of the game have been met.

XD20 Engine

The XD20 system resolves all (and we do mean ALL) issues with the roll of a twenty-sided die. Whenever a number is needed in a range other than D20, use the XD20 Results table found in the Appendices (page 156) to determine the resulting number.

Or, we suppose you could actually get a set of all these different dice and make your life much simpler, but we really wanted you to feel like you were getting your gaming money's worth and that meant putting in an overly complicated and elaborate table *somewhere* in the book.

Creating Your Character

The heart of any role playing game is the character and the sheet (or sheets) of paper which detail their capabilities, items owned and usable, spell details, and endless lists of specific skills.

But not here.

Basic XD20 Character Generation

1. Write your name on your BASIC character sheet.

2. Write your *character* name on your BASIC character sheet. You can make up any name you wish. Try to picture your character in your mind so that you don't give it a name that the other players will giggle at.

3. Determine what TYPE of character you are playing. Some suggestions from other games include: knight, bard, cleric, assassin, thief, wizard, pilot, rogue, raider, or archeologist. Choose whatever is appropriate for the game your XDM is setting up.

4. Determine your character's STAT. That is gamer-talk for "statistic." In BASIC XD20 you only have one. It's called "My Stat." You determine your STAT by rolling one d8 (that's an eight-sided die) and *subtracting* that number from fifteen. This results in a number between seven and fourteen. *Remember* in the XD20 system, the *lower* your stat number, the *better* your

character.* Think of it as if you are at a football game and shouting "We're number one!"†

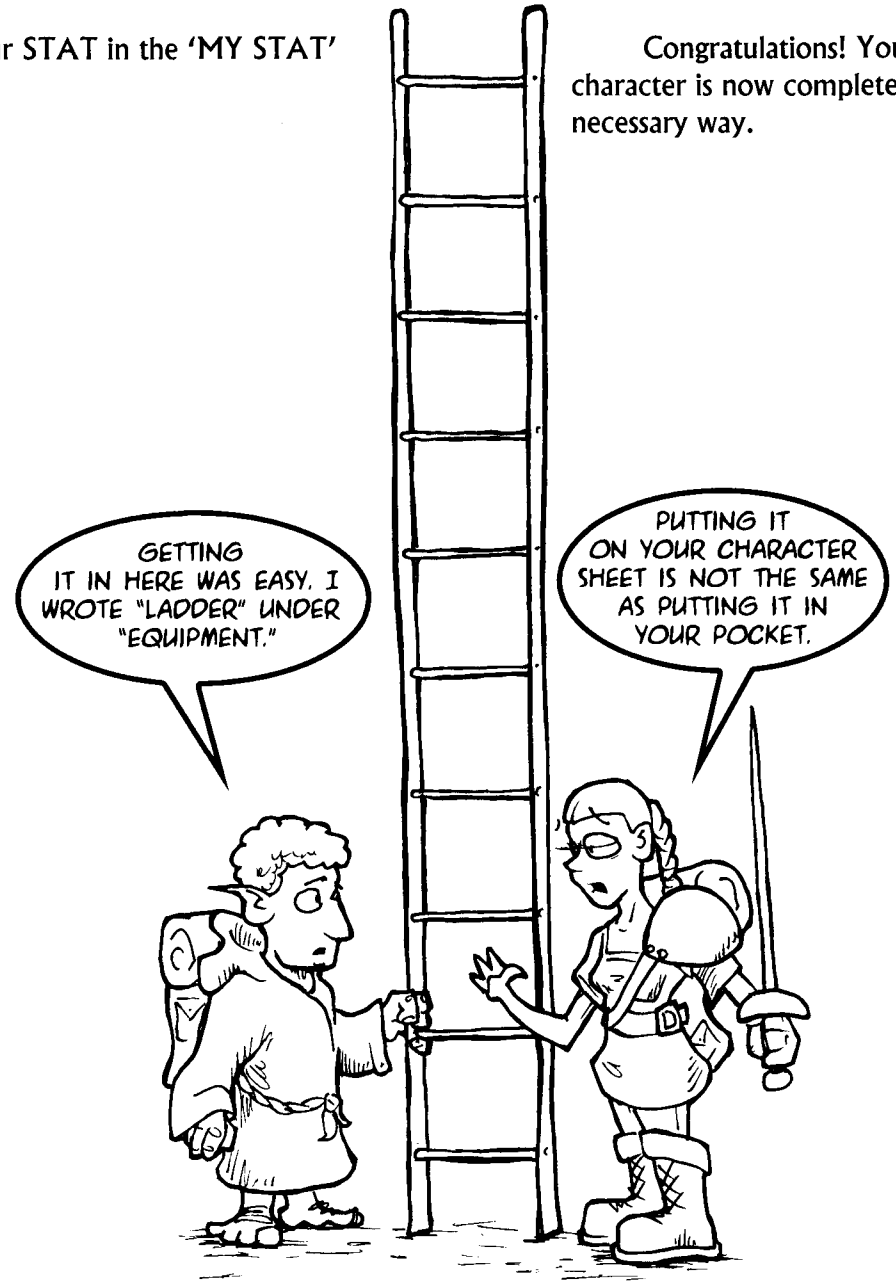
5. Modify your STAT. If your character TYPE has mystic abilities (can cast spells or heal other characters mystically) then check the MYSTIC box and add 2 to your STAT.

6. Write down your STAT in the 'MY STAT' space provided.

7. Determine your HEALTH. This is how much punishment your character can take before dropping dead and, likely, falling out of the game. Write down your STAT number x 2.

8. Determine your Character Level. Write the number 1 in the space provided.

Congratulations! Your BASIC XD20 character is now completely detailed in every necessary way.



* This aspect of XD20 system is one of our favorites because it *totally* messes with the minds of established RPG gamers. They look at their character sheet for the first time and often start out by bragging to other players about what high stats they have for their characters.

† Shouting "We're number twelve!" would not be nearly as good as shouting "We're number six!"

BASIC XD20™ CHARACTER SHEET

PLAYER NAME _____

CHARACTER NAME _____

CHARACTER TYPE _____ MYSTIC ☐

MY STAT

HEALTH

CHARACTER LEVEL

PERSONAL, NON-BINDING BASIC CHARACTER NOTES _____



Chapter Sixteen: The XD20 Advanced Player's Guide

We knew that you wouldn't be satisfied with the basic system, especially since it essentially says, "Go get an XDM and let him do all the work." So here you are with the Advanced Player's Guide so that you can take our nice simple system and make it overly complicated,* just like every other game company.

Advanced XD20 Character Generation

Advanced XD20 characters are far more complicated than the basic character and vastly expand your options in play.†

Follow these instructions carefully and you will soon be ready to play in the high-powered world of Advanced XD20.

1. Write your name on your advanced character sheet.

2. Write your *character* name on your advanced character sheet. (See basic character instructions on names.)

3. Determine the type of character you are playing. (Advanced XD20 characters follow the same types as those mentioned for basic XD20 characters, but if it makes you feel superior, you can believe that advanced characters allow for a vastly wider variety.)

4. Determine your characters STATS! Yes, you now have *three* rather than just one. These stats each have a name: TAC, PSYCH, and WAH. TAC stands for "Toughness and Constitution," representing your physical strength and health; PSYCH represents your intelligence, wisdom, smarts; and WAH represents your mystical power, karma, and even luck. Determine these three numbers by the same method as in Basic Character Generation. For each of your STATS, you roll one d8 (that's an eight-sided die) and *subtract* that number from fifteen. This results in a number between seven and fourteen.

   Remember: in XD20 system, the *lower* your stat-number the *better* your character. Do this for each of your STATS separately. This results in three separate numbers, each between seven and fourteen.

5. Modify your STATS: If your character type has any mystical abilities (can cast spells or heal other characters mystically or do anything else beyond

* But still paradigm-altering and more fun.
† Comparatively speaking, that is.

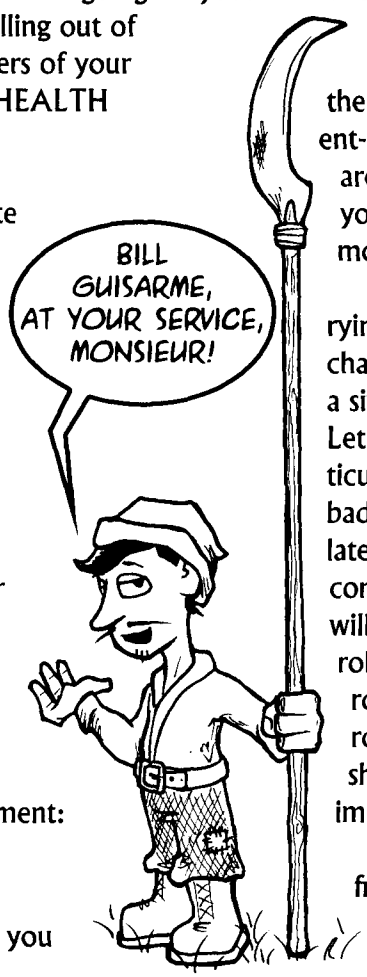
the powers of mortal men) then subtract 2 from your character's WAH STAT and add 4 total to your TAC and/or PSYCH STATS.*

6. Write down each of your modified STATS in the three boxes provided.

7. Determine your character's health: This is how much punishment, physical or mental, that your character can take before dropping dead or going nuts and, in either case, most likely falling out of the game. Total the two *lowest* numbers of your STATS and write this number in the HEALTH space provided.

8. Determine your Character Level: Write down the number '1' in the space provided.

Congratulations! Your Advanced XD20 Character is now completely uber-detailed in every way that counts!



Stuff: Skills, Weapons, Supplies, Armor

Okay. So you want to know if your character is a black belt in Tae Kwan Do, is carrying a Bill-guisarme†, has enough rations for an expedition to the South Pole or Kevlar body armor? Such critical questions are answered by the XDM using the official and definitive XD20 rules statement:

"Maybe."

If asked for a clarification of this rule, you may answer with:

"That depends."

Look, let's face it, what you have on you at any given time is going to be dependent on (1) how prepared you were in the first place and (2) the situation you find yourself in.

Ask if you are carrying a battleaxe. Well, if your character type is "warrior" or especially if it is "knight" and the game we are playing is set in a fantasy version of Medieval Europe then I'd say the odds are pretty good you've got such a weapon on you. On the other hand, if you ask me if you are carrying that same battleaxe and your character type is "paleontologist" and the game we're playing is set on a present-day dinosaur island, then the chances are going to be much more slight unless you're referring rather irreverently to a mother-in-law rather than the weapon.

If, however, you claim to be carrying a thermonuclear weapon and your character type is a "cabin boy" playing in a sixteenth century Caribbean pirate game? Let's just say that the chances of this particular item appearing are astronomically bad but still possible (more on why this is later). Like most things in role playing, it comes down to a quick roll. Your XDM will assign you a number that you have to roll on a d20. If your odds are good, the roll will be easy. If your odds are bad, the roll will be hard. If your odds are clown shoes ridiculous, your odds are *near* impossible.

Sometimes in role playing games, you find varying levels of quality in equipment. This is usually expressed as a "plus" or a "minus" weapon or device signifying its modification to something or other.

Important Safety Tip In the XD20 system *lower* numbers are better. Therefore if someone wants to hand you a "+10 dragon-slayer sword," you should just laugh at them for trying to pawn off such a cursed piece of junk on you! What you *really* want is a "-5 rusting sword" because it will not only improve your d20 die roll in combat by 25% but will probably also cause rust on the target.

Yes, we really intend to mess with established role-players' heads here.

* You can subtract all four from either your TAC or your PSYCH STAT, *or* you can subtract one from your TAC STAT and three from your PSYCH STAT, *or* you can subtract two each from your TAC and PSYCH STAT, *or* you can subtract three from your PSYCH STAT and only one from your TAC STAT, *or* you can subtract all four points from your PSYCH STAT. Hey, that's why this is ADVANCED!

† A guisarme (sometimes gisarme or bisarme) was a pole weapon used in Europe between 1000-1400 A.D. It was used primarily to dismount knights and horsemen. Like most polearms it was developed by peasants by combining hand tools with long poles: in this case by putting a pruning hook onto a spear shaft. This weapon is, in modern times, known only to RPG fanatics as generally the most useless weapon any role playing gamer could possibly choose.

Remember to write down stuff when you get it so that you can remind the XDM later that he was foolish enough to have allowed you to have it in the first place.

Doing Stuff: Movement and Actions

This is a role playing game so you're only *pretending* to be doing stuff.* That's why we have rules to determine whether the stuff you imagine yourself doing actually works with what everyone else is supposed to be imagining together.

Okay, that didn't make that much sense to me either. The point is that when you were out in your backyard playing army, or cops and robbers, or Rambo, or whatever, it always came down to one guy saying,

"Bang! You're dead!"

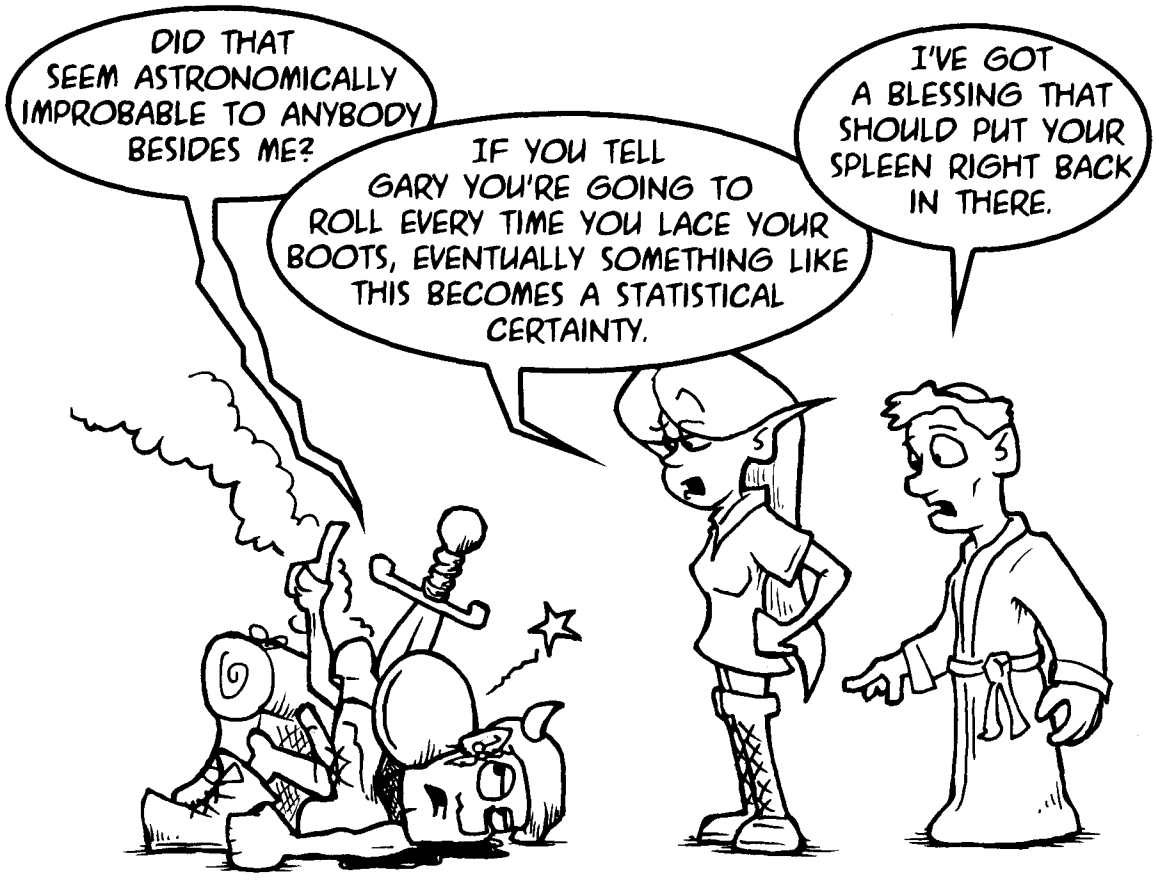
And then the other kid saying,

"Nu-huh! I shot you first!"

This argument would go back and forth until one kid either went home or laid down on the ground for a few minutes before being miraculously revived by a nurse or a medic or whatever.

Now, instead of being out in the fresh air, out of your mom's hair, and getting some decent sun, we've moved the whole thing indoors, onto your mom's table. Then we play the same mind games in a more troll-like existence.† More importantly, however, we have rules and dice that determine whether the things we imagine actually succeed or not.

Whenever you attempt to do something in an XD20 game, it just works. Unless you are trying to do something that has a reasonable expectation of failure. I mean, it would be mind-blowingly annoying for everyone to roll a die every time they took a step down the street. ("Did I trip?" "Did I trip?") On the other hand, if you were trying to step across a ten-thousand foot deep crevasse bridged only by a one-inch thick greased steel cable. . . well, not only would that be far more exciting that just walking down the street but most definitely require some seriously considered dice rolls.



* In theory, although this being an XDM game, you'll probably be doing more than just sitting around the table sucking down junk food in your quest for ultimate valor.

† The very quintessence of progress.

The basic process for resolving any physical action in the game is as follows:

1. **Describe the action** When you do something in the game, describe it. It's as simple as saying, "I walk down to the end of the corridor," or, "I leap into the dragon's mouth, brandishing my hatpin."

2. **Should I bother?** The XDM should then ask herself whether this action warrants any kind of dice rolling. Is there a possibility of interesting failure? If something might go wrong, then you probably need to roll some dice.

3. **Determine the Target Success Number** The XDM will look at the most appropriate character STAT and, using that as a base, determine a success number. Easier things have lower numbers. Harder things have higher numbers. Remember, when it comes to die rolls for success less is best. The XDM will add to (bad) or subtract from (good) your basic stat number to determine this target success number.

4. **Roll one d20 for basic success** If you roll the target number or *higher*, then you succeed. Otherwise, you fail.

5. **Roll one d20 for degree** You now roll 1d20 die to determine the *degree* of your success or failure. You might succeed spectacularly with a roll of a 20, or you might fail spectacularly with that same 20 if you blew your success roll.

6. **XDM explains what happened as a result** The XDM now interprets the result based on whether you succeeded or not and to what degree you succeeded or failed. Take your lumps and get on with it.

Hitting Stuff: Combat Resolution

This is probably the one thing you'll be rolling the most dice for so let's get it over with. Players love to bash things; they want to take out their lifetime of frustrations by pretending they're beating the living daylights out of something. It's no real substitute for punching someone, but throwing dice will just have to do. We certainly recommend *pretending* with a sword over the real thing.

Your character has just encountered a monster which, for reasons now unclear but which made sense at the time, deserves to be put down and right now. As the old saying goes, sometimes you catch the bear and sometimes the bear catches you ... but which is it?

That's why we have combat resolution.

If it's time to smack the monster or see if the monster smacks you, use the following basic combat resolution:

1. **Combat rounds** All combat is resolved in Rounds–like boxing rounds, but usually with a lot more deadly force involved. Generally, everybody involved in the current donnybrook gets to take a turn doing something–swinging, screaming, fleeing, praying–during a combat round.

2. **Who shot first? What's on second? I dunno, third base** Unlike real life, combat rounds in most *other* role playing games are usually ordered affairs with everyone taking turns beating one another's brains into the floor. Think of this as the way the British would have preferred to fight the war in the Americas if those pesky colonists hadn't cheated by ducking behind trees and firing their guns whenever they wanted, instead of taking turns.

   That's *not* the XDM way–as if you hadn't guessed by now. Players and monsters get to take their actions during a round whenever the XDM says they do. If that means that all the players get to take their turn and *then* the monsters all attack, that's fine. If that means that the monsters attack first and *then* the players get to react, that's fine too. If that means that the XDM just points to the player when it is their turn to act and the whole thing is mixed up and crazy in a way that more resembles actual life, then *that's* fine too. So long as one rule is always followed: *everyone gets to do something at some point in a combat round.* (Or more if the XDM says they can.)

3. **Did I hit him?** Combat is resolved pretty much like any other action. The XDM determines a Target Success Number based on the character

or monster's most appropriate STAT. The XDM will add to (bad) or subtract from (good) your basic stat number to determine this target success number.

4. **Roll one d20 to determine basic success** If you roll the target number or *higher*, then you succeed. Otherwise, you fail. Remember that you *always* succeed with any 20 rolled and you always fail spectacularly with any roll of a 1.

5. **Roll damage** How much damage you do is determined by what you're using to do the damage, duh! Using a fist against someone is a whole different story than using a tactical thermonuclear weapon. Once your XDM establishes the damage a weapon does, you should probably write it down and keep it. Otherwise, ask the XDM how much damage your weapon does in dice terms and then roll those dice for damage.

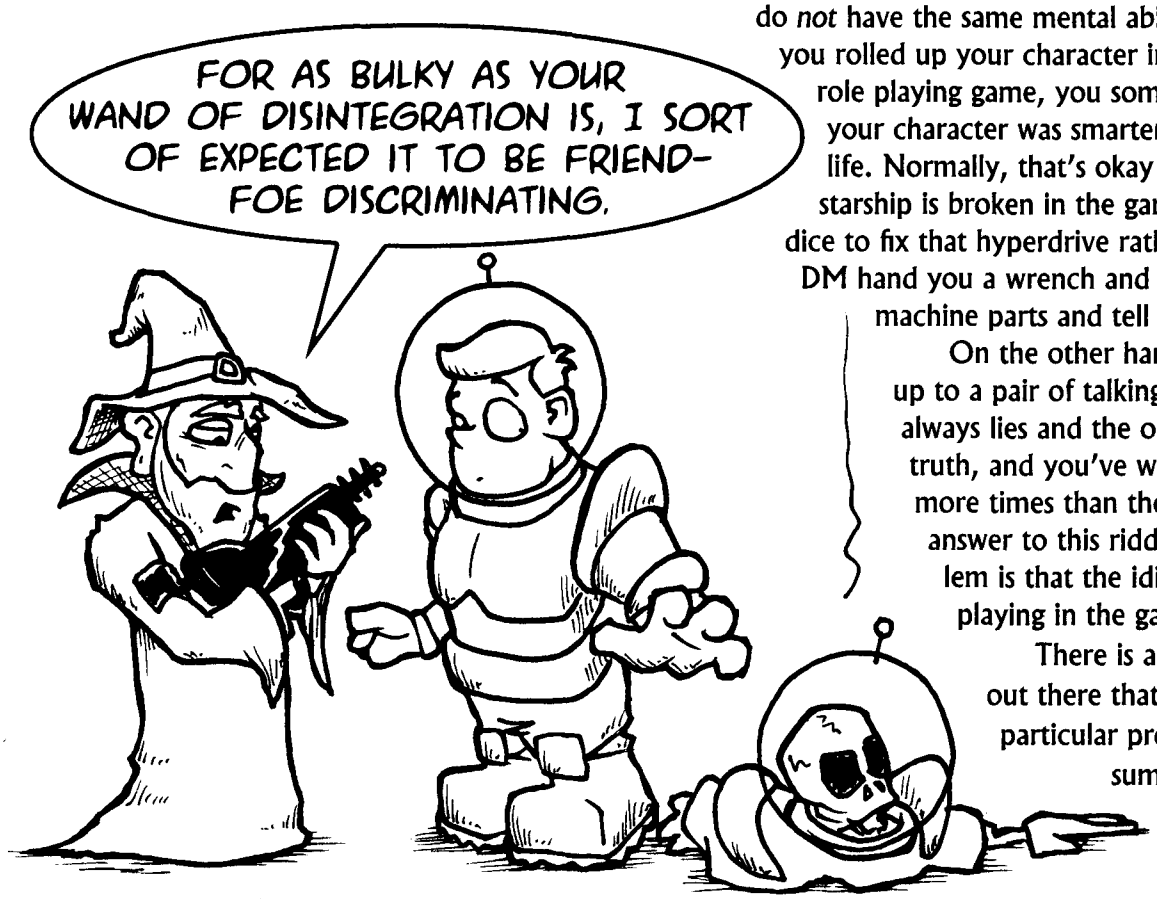
6. **Assign damage** Anyone damaged in the game–characters controlled by the players, or monsters controlled by the XDM–subtracts damage from their Health Stat. Once your Health stat drops below 1, you had better be prepared to do some fancy begging to keep your character alive because unless the XDM says otherwise, your character is *dead*. Dead characters are honorable and revered in all XDM games, but *only* if they die in heroic ways. Dying stupid is cause for ridicule. Death may be mitigated in the XD20 system by healing or miracles or magic and the like. These should be treated as, respectively, "doing stuff" or "mystical stuff."

Thinking Stuff: Sure You Think You're Smart

Here is the basic problem with "mental" mechanics and problems in role playing games: You and the character you're playing almost certainly do *not* have the same mental abilities. Face it, when you rolled up your character in your favorite *other* role playing game, you somehow knew that your character was smarter than you in real life. Normally, that's okay – because if your starship is broken in the game, you *want* to roll dice to fix that hyperdrive rather than have the DM hand you a wrench and a box of washing machine parts and tell you to build one.

On the other hand, if you come up to a pair of talking doors where one always lies and the other always tells the truth, and you've watched *Labyrinth* more times than the DM, you know the answer to this riddle cold. The problem is that the idiot character you are playing in the game might *not*.*

There is at least one game out there that gets around this particular problem by just assuming that the dice are smarter than you–or at least,



* It seemed like such a good idea to trade out those "mental" points for "strength" points when you created your character. I mean, what game character ever actually *uses* those mental statistics anyway. Stay tuned.

the proper arbiter of how smart your character is in the game. Your character comes up to a sphinx and the massively powerful critter poses you "the question of the ages." Never mind what that question is, or what "four legs in the morning, two in the afternoon and three in the evening" has to do with man's progression through this mortal coil. All you have to do is roll your dice against your character's smartness factor and either your character gets it or doesn't–whether you do or not.

While this makes a certain level of game-sense, I mean, come *on*! This is a game played mainly on the imaginary stage of your mind, the place where puzzles and riddles are supposed to be solved. Where is the problem-solving in role playing if the dice just solve the problem for you? And they don't even give you the solution but just tell you that the problem "is solved," much the same way the government works in economic bail-outs.

Here's the rule in XD20 games: Think of your character in the game as though he were your buddy sitting next to you.* If the game presents you with a puzzle requiring the use of higher-order differential calculus and you don't happen to be into that sort of thing recreationally, then turn to your player character, roll the dice for him or her and see if *they* know. Your XDM will consider their appropriate STAT or PSYCH score in the same way as doing physical stuff.†

On the other hand, if you happen to be a forensic pathologist in real life and are playing an XD20 game being run by a forensic pathologist and all the other players at the table also happen to be forensic pathologists, it is legitimate for your party to do an extensive autopsy on any dead bodies that you might find lying around in the dungeon‡ . . .even if your player character has an intelligence of 18.

* On the other hand, if you actually *believe* that your player character *is* sitting next to you or speaking to you from his miniature on the table, please have someone at the table assist you to the nearest health professional available.

† See "Doing stuff Movement and Actions" on page 127.

‡ Sure, laugh if you dare ... but I have actually heard of such a group of role playing gamers.

Casting Spells and Mystical Stuff

Wait! Wait! What are my spells? *Where* are my spells? Here is the thing that could blow your mind: Feel free to cast anything you want. I mean, you're like a magician, priest, voodoo something, right? Surely magic is based on fundamentals rather than prefab units. So unless the XDM says otherwise, invent any spell you want for the circumstances you are in.



Be warned, however. It is up to the XDM's discretion as to your odds of casting it, and what the effects are. Magic, being what it is, can occasionally–ok, often–go wrong. For the most part, casting spells is the same as hitting stuff§ when the magic you're cooking up is intended to do damage. If, however, you want to cast a utility spell, like mass sleep, do the following:

1. **Tell the XDM all about the magical spectacular you would like to create** If you have tried to pull off this same spell before, just give it a name. If it is something you've cooked up special for the occasion, or if the XDM wants more specifics out of you, you're going to have to be a bit more descriptive about what you expect out of your magical effect.

§ See "Hitting Stuff: Combat Resolution" on page 128.

2. **Flight or fizzle?** The XDM will modify your appropriate statistic (which will be your STAT in the basic game or WAH in the Advanced game) and tell you what you have to roll for your attempt at this to work at all.

3. **Wimp or wow?** Roll your second d20 to determine the *degree* of success or failure of the spell.

4. **What or whatever?** If deemed necessary by your XDM, you may need to roll additional d20s to determine other random factors, such as duration, location, etc.

Example You are facing an army of stone warriors so you say, "I will cast a sleep spell!" The XDM, feeling unusually generous, tells you that it flat out fails because stone warriors don't sleep. As they continue to approach, you revise your previous idea and declare "I will cast glacial sleep on the stone warriors."

The XDM wants to know what it is about glacial sleep that makes you think it would make any difference to stone warriors. You explain that glacial sleep "is a special spell against stone warriors that make them fall into a frozen state similar to human sleep."

The XDM asks you your level. You say 7. The XDM asks you your WAH. You say 13. He then says, "Okay roll an 18 or better." You roll your d20 and get a 19! The XDM grumbles and then says, "Great the glacial sleep spell hits the stone warriors. Roll for effect."

You roll again and get a 5. The XDM interprets this and says that about a quarter of the warriors are frozen in their tracks.

Of course many spells won't require so much rolling. If, in the above example, you had been a level 18 casting sleep on a small army of level one peasants the XDM would probably ask you to roll for success (perhaps a 12 or better) and that's it.

Character Improvement: Gaining Levels

Since the beginning of the modern role playing game, players around the globe–whether crouched around a table clutching the paper character sheets or hunched over a keyboard while playing in massive multiplayer online environments–all players have had one singular, overriding obsession: To level up.

Until now.

Leveling is, for the XDM, a plague that has infected the otherwise healthy body of role playing. It is an entirely artificial measure that has no application in the real world. It is true that in military forces, a Private (E-2) may be proud to be advanced to Private First-Class (E-3) and that certainly looks like leveling up. However, just because that E-2 is now an E-3 doesn't necessarily make him appreciably harder to shoot at, nor does it allow him to take more damage under fire. Even if he makes it all the way to E-8 (Master Sergeant) while he will, admittedly, be one tough hombre that you probably shouldn't mess with in a bar fight, he is still equally susceptible to damage from a grenade between his feet as that same E-2.

We're not saying that characters *shouldn't* advance. We all want to get better and your player character is no exception. What XDM is against is the idea that any player characters with enough levels becomes an indestructible tank on legs.

We were going to throw out the whole leveling thing altogether, but everyone started to whine and cry so. . .*fine*! You can have a leveling system and here it is.

You accumulate experience points for just about anything you think you should accumulate experience points for doing. These are awarded entirely at the discretion of the XDM and it is none of your business how they determine this number.

When you have accumulated sufficient experience points, your character will go up to the next level. How many experience points are required to get to the next level is a complicated formula, part of which involves concentrated meditation. Your XDM will let you know when this has happened.

When your character goes up a level, add the number of levels that your XDM tells you to add –hopefully, just one–to your previous character level. If, for example, you were level

1 before and have just advanced one level, your character is now level 2 and has access to all the rights and privileges that this new level provides.

That's it. It does not affect your other statistics one bit. You do not get more health points. You do not get more TAC, PSYCH or WAH points (if you're playing with Advanced XD20 characters). All the level allows you to do is say to the XDM, "But, hey, I should be able to hit this untrained goon more easily because my character is level 2!" or, "I think I could cast water lily on the menacing child, cause I've finally reached level 18!" Your XDM will take this into account–or not.

Conversion from Other Systems

You've spent hundreds–if not thousands of dollars on *other* role playing game systems, have a red wagon full of reference books that you love, and you just can't go cold turkey with the superior (if abbreviated) XD20 system. We understand. We even sympathize. All you really needed was this book, but it's too late for that now. Most of the statistics for XD20 games are generated based entirely on the expert and highly-trained judgment of the XDM. So if someone wants to use a weapon or magical artifact from another game, glance at the overly complex statistics for the device, assign it a TAC stat and a Damage stat–Health stat or even a PSYCH or WAH stat if you feel inclined–and call it good.

Advanced XD20™ Character Sheet

Player Name _____

Character Name _____

Character Type _____ Mystical Type _____

My Stats

TAC

Psych

Wah

Health

Character Level

Personal, non-binding basic character notes _____

_____

_____

_____

_____



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: XD20 DUNGEON MASTERY HANDBOOK

Introduction to XD20 for XDMs

You are an XDM. One of the few. One of the proud. One of those select few who have been privileged to be admitted into the inner circle of knowledge passed down from the ancients. XDMs bring life and fun back into gaming.

You have fought for this, purchased the franchise rights,* and now are ready to be what so many have dreamed of becoming. A fully-fledged XDM!

THIS SECTION OF THE BOOK IS FOR AUTHORIZED XDM EYES ONLY!

If you are not an officially sanctioned XDM and you are reading this section of the book, then you should know that this part of the book is protected by an ancient Tibetan curse, passed down from Sun Tzu, which will affect *all* of your die rolls during periods of the full moon *and* many of your other die rolls at all other times. Woe unto you who look upon the words of the XD20 Dungeon Mastery Handbook without first having been purified, or possibly having purchased franchise rights, or at a minimum paid full cover price for the book rather than just reading it in the store. For you will be subject to this curse. All the powers of the gaming spirits shall be withdrawn and leave you desolate. You shall search in vain for a game that will satisfy your lust for entertainment, and each shall turn to dry cardboard in your hands. You have been warned![†]

Theory of Game Relativity

Anything that happens in a game, or that might work in a game, or that players want to do in a game, is relative to its story setting surroundings. A revolver might be reasonably common in a 1920s horror setting, but you'd be hard pressed to come up with one during the Crusades. Likewise, a phaser[‡] might come in handy during the Battle of Thermopylae, but good luck finding the right batteries.

While your players *seem* to have the ability to pull just the right rabbit out of their hats at any given moment ("Oh, so Xerxes is attacking? I pull a tactical

* If you haven't purchased your local franchise rights, you might consider doing so!

† Like we could really stop you, but this did give us the opportunity to write a cool curse. It's the way they did copyright back in the old days before governments got around to it, so we thought it might be effective here. Oh, that reminds me, this book is copyrighted.

‡ Phaser is a direct-fire, beam-based, energy weapon from the Star Trek universe, and we're sorry for borrowing it here.

nuke out of my backpack!") they may be *very* limited by the rules of the setting in your game. You decide if your world is based closely on historical classical Greek mythology–in which case you can forget the tactical nuclear weapon even remotely showing up, and you should smack any player suggesting it–*or* you can decide that your world is completely gonzo and Spartans actually *did* have tactical weapons of mass destruction available to them.

HOWEVER, (and did you notice how big we made that however) you must do the following or forever lose your status as an XDM:

(1) Establish the rules of your setting from the beginning.

(2) Only change them under extreme duress.

An XDM *must* be consistent in his interpretation of the setting rules. You may *not* give phasers to Spartans without giving disruptors to the Persians.

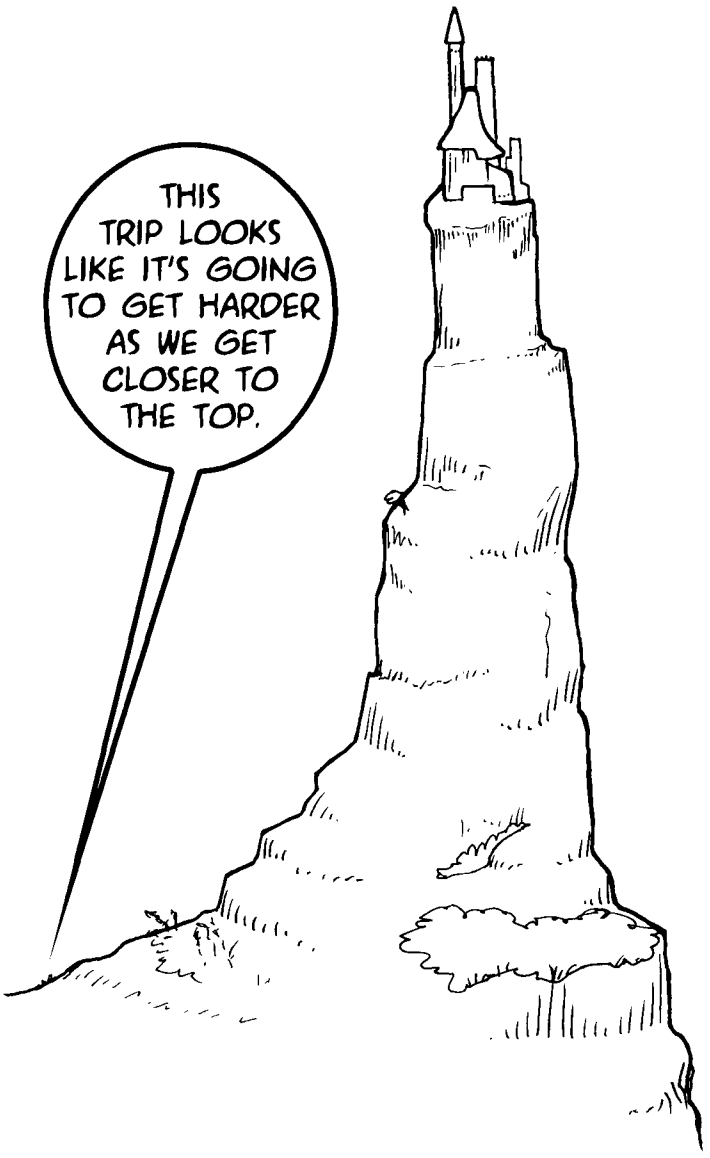
Adventure Design

You've come up with the basic rules for your setting (anything from strictly historical, to anything-goes gonzo), and it's time to create the design for the actual adventure. Here's what you do to make it all come together:

1. **Establish the basic structure of your adventure** You do this by first considering your adventure in terms of the Cambellian Monomyth (see page 30). Yes, you should do this even if your game is about mutant clowns attacking Sheboygan with cream-pie bazookas*. Just because your game is goofy, doesn't mean you can ignore structure. If anything, games about mutant clowns attacking Sheboygan require *more* attention to structure. Narrative structure is the frame on which you will hang everything else in the game. Make it strong.

2. **Determine the general matrix approach for your adventure** We've already talked about this, too. We called it "Chapter Five: Designing for Story" and it is on page 42. You should select either linear design, open matrix, or closed matrix for your adventure. Mount this on the narrative frame. Think of it as the body of the car–the general shape into which everything else will fit.

3. **Create a basic beat chart for your adventure** A beat chart is an outline of the encounters in your adventure. An example can be found in "Killer Beats" on page 105 The nature and approach to this beat chart will depend upon which matrix you just chose for the game. *In every case make sure that difficulty of the encounters rises with the rising action.*



* "Mutant Clowns Attack Sheboygan with their Cream-Pie Bazookas" is a trademark of Tracy Hickman, Curtis Hickman, and Howard Tayler and is used here with their permission. Adventures based on this incredibly marketable idea should obtain the permission of the copyright holders before being written. XDMs desiring to write adventures in the "Mutant Clowns Attack Sheboygan with their Cream-Pie Bazookas" setting may obtain the non-exclusive rights to do so by sending $5 U.S. to the copyright holders. Copyright 2009, all rights reserved.

If you're using a Linear design then this beat chart will simply be a series of encounters one after the other. In this case it is important to establish directly in the chart the arc of the story itself. Encounters will have a clear increase in difficulty up to the climax.

If you are using an open matrix campaign design then you will still want to chart some sort of story, but it will be almost without *any* dependence on location. You will still tell a story but it will unfold pretty much wherever the players find it.

If you are using a closed matrix–then you are a *true* XDM! Create your beat chart based on expanding locations, make sure the story arc is established throughout the flow of the matrix, and impress gamers with your incredible game design skills.

4. **Fill in the rest** You have pretty much all you need to run the adventure at this point, but if you want to lock more of it down on paper, design cool and impressive maps. Be prepared by filling in all the blanks you feel are needful.

Adventure Translation

One of the cool things about the XD20 system is that you can just pretty much lift any old adventure from anyone's game system and still have a good time. You have to throw out all their cumbersome mechanics but, hey, that's what being an XDM is all about! Approach a published adventure module like a chop shop: Take what's valuable from the adventure and leave the rest in a canal.

The important thing is that you take the awesome parts of an adventure, then mount them on an XDM chassis.

Target Difficulty Determination

This is the big one, the very heart of XDM resolution. It's up to you to make this call and no one else can do it for you.

Everything starts with the base STAT for any action–whether that is fighting, moving, thinking, or magic. The trick comes in assigning reasonable modifiers to any action in the game. That is where an XDM's judgment is key. *You* have to make that judgment call based on what's happening in your game at the time.

We can't be there and hold your hand during the game call, but we can give you some guidelines about what might constitute a decent general modifier. Try these and see if they work in your game.



Level	Modifier	Description
Like Breathing	-20	Seriously. We mean like breathing. If someone in your game is going to try and use gravity on Earth, this modifier would apply
You kidding me?	-12	These are various degrees of easy, ranging from the almost sure bet, to the casual approach to something that shouldn't be a big problem.
Forget about it!	-10	
Relax, everyone!	-8	
Walk in the park	-6	
No problem	-4	
I got it	-3	
Done this before	-2	
Not so tough	-1	
Maybe . . . maybe not	Even	If no other factors apply, then modifiers don't either. Let them roll against their stat.
Not sure	+1	On this side are the various degrees of hard, ranging from a bit tricky, to who in their right mind would even attempt this.
New to me	+2	
Anybody else?	+3	
Tricky	+4	
Palms wet, mouth dry	+5	
Sweatin' bullets here	+6	
Must change shirt	+7	
Change something else...	+8	
No way I'm doing that!	+9	
Who do you think I am?	+10	
Let me out! Let me out!	+11	
Improbable	+12	
Astronomical	+13	
Impossible	+14	
Inconceivable!	+15	
Clown Shoes Ridiculous	+20/+20	"Clown Shoes" is our XDM code for something so pointlessly ridiculous that bringing it up is laughable. "I'm going to try diving into the sun and coming out the other side." Yeah, buddy, roll the dice and we'll see. "Clown Shoes Ridiculous" is the ONLY time the automatic 20 success rule is changed. The first roll determines if the attempt came off at all. The second natural 20 would indicate success, with any other result interpreted as a degree of failure. We gotta draw the line somewhere.

Now that you have your nice big table to look at, we are going to tell you a basic XDM secret that you *must* keep from your players and, for that matter, from all the other, non-XDM game referees on the planet. This secret is *so* powerful that, should it get into the wrong hands, it could destroy hobby gaming as we know it:

XDM SECRET
For Your Eyes Only

It all comes down to rolling against only twenty numbers*

No matter how realistic you try to make your game, no matter how detailed the rules or the modifiers, it *still* comes down to a *single* die roll that can only respond with one of twenty numbers. This means that the resolution scale of the games response can *only* come in 5% increments.

You can spend all day dealing with charts which try to grapple with the idea that one weapon essentially is .03% more accurate than the next weapon on the list, but the second weapon does .265% more damage. But in the end, you're still rolling that same d20 and it is physically *impossible* to accurately simulate any difference less than 5%.

You can spend all day winding down through charts and tables for absolute accuracy and it *still* is only going to come down to the resolution of the dice you roll.

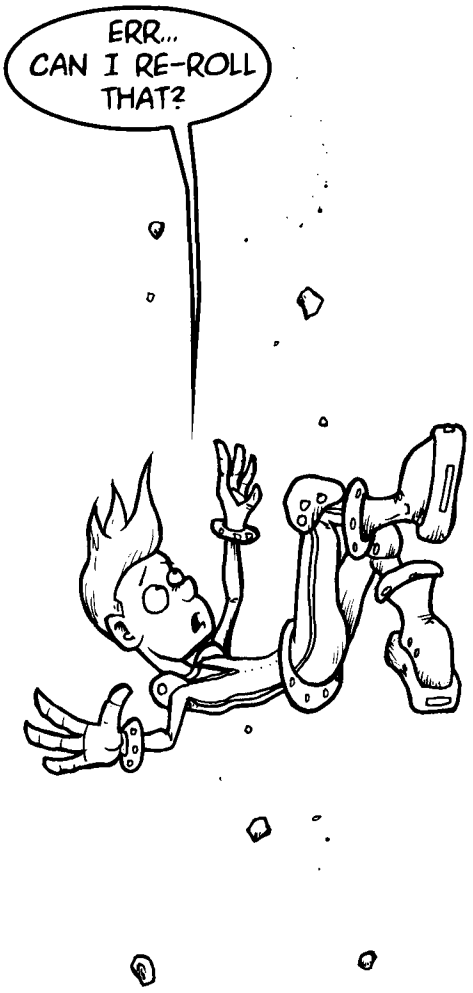
We're not doing aircraft accident investigations here, and we don't need that level of realism. Just cut to the chase, assign a reasonable number and get on with the game.

Dealing with Doing Stuff

Yes, we already told you how to take care of doing stuff back on page 127. That's fine for mechanics, but your real job as an XDM is to bring *meaning* into the numbers of this game. That means that you need to interpret the results for the players.

Here is where we separate the XDMs from the everyday wimps: Your interpretation of the meaning behind the roll is critical to the game. Do not tell a player he has failed his check. Tell him what that failure *means*! Give it to him in graphic detail. You must never say "Oh, you missed your TAC check. I guess you didn't make it over that chasm." Instead you should say, "You *leap* across the gaping chasm but, weakened by your last encounter with the ravenous Yak, your legs fail you! You claw a the air but you already know you won't make the ledge on the far side. Your body slams against the far chasm wall, the force rebounding you into the empty gulf below..."

It is your job to interpret the dice rolls and give meaning and impact to their results, not just report sports scores.



* Yes, we know all about bell probability curves when totaling multiple dice thrown and how it gives a finer resolution than the one we're talking about. We *have* been doing this for over a quarter of a century. However, the point is that while you get a nice probability bell curve out of throwing two or three six sided dice, it *still* comes down to only six possible results per die thrown. Just get used to the idea that the finer the resolution of the game system, the more complex and *unplayable* it becomes. Deal with it.

Dealing with Hitting Stuff

We already dealt with this a lot in the player section on page 128. I'm sure you would like us to give you lots of additional rules like how to deal with partial cover, hard cover, moving cover, cover charges, sofa covers, and other really small-detail simulation issues that crop up in all such games. Perhaps you would like a table that lists the penetration modifiers for various types of fences, walls, crates, and trash cans versus a variety of crossbow bolts, rocks, depleted-uranium howitzer shells, and beam-energy weapons.

Gee, doesn't *that* sound like fun!

Well, we're not going to do it. Haven't you been paying attention? If you really want all that stuff, go ahead and buy other people's RPGs. Use their information as a guideline for making your call. It all comes down to the modifiers *you* assign to the roll and, let's be honest, who among your players should question your judgment? If you want to include all that stuff in your calculations on a final target number for the roll, that's fine with us. So long as you remember the XDM secret we gave you above.

You should creatively interpret the meaning of combat dice rolls. Temper your descriptions for your audience. Keep it light for younger, or more sensitive, players.

Dealing with Magic (or not)

This is probably where you have to work the most in a game. Magic is, admittedly, a problem because a proper XDM does his best to put the work off onto players in the game. Still, there can be no help for it, so you'll just have to suck it up and do it.

The biggest problem with magic is that it is so... generic. Many hack authors through the ages who wished to get around plot-holes they dug for themselves know you can smooth anything over with a liberal application of magic. The heroic character, who your readers will follow through a contracted three-book series, is suspended a thousand feet in the air by chains from a cavern ceiling over a hungry lava dragon. He is doomed and this is only book one. Save him with magic. Your princess is thrown overboard from the pirate ship with a cannon strapped to her dainty feet and hands. Save her with magic. Got a character standing under an Armageddon-sized meteor about to annihilate the known world and all you can come up with is. . .well, maybe that's a bad example, but the point is that magic, unless handled properly, is a crutch.

Too often magic is viewed as the *exception* to the rule, rather than a subset of the rules themselves. This rather scientific-logic sounding statement means that in most role playing games they spend several chapters telling you how the physics of the universe are handled (combat, movement, skills, action resolution) and *then*, after you barely have your head wrapped around those concepts, present you with a section on magic that turns all that on its head with a completely different set of rules.

Nutz to that.

What are you going to do? Here is how you, as an XDM, should deal with magic. Some of it starts before the game begins.

1. **How relevant is magic in your game?** Remember when we had that fatherly talk on page 134 about the Theory of Game Relativity? You first need to decide just how much magic is involved in your game. Is there no magic at all? Does it flow like water, to the point where everyone can cast spells willy-nilly? Does it require considerably training to even achieve the smallest effect or is it an incredibly powerful force which can easily get out of hand if not carefully controlled? All of these are possible and you have to know that before the game starts and make it clear to your players just how it's going to be.

2. **Adjust all magic for relevance** Once you establish how magic works in your game, stick with it and always start with the same general adjustments for magic your setting.

3. **Do not treat magic as an exception to the rules** You must always treat magic as an integral part of your universe, not as an exception. Consistency in treating magic is the key.

As with all other resolutions of die rolls in the game, it remains your job with magic not to just give the results but to interpret their meaning as well.

Resolving the Impossible

You come to a point in the game where your players are asking to do things that are simply impossible in your setting.

Then they can't do it. Isn't that the definition of impossible? No matter how much they want to clap for the fairy and wish with all their heart that the giant forty-thousand ton boulder rolling over them will *not* flatten them into an unrecognizable sticky mass, well, it would be a disservice to them to let them live just to be nice.

What is this "being nice" people keep telling me about anyway?

The point is that characters *must* die in games so that *real* people who play them don't get the wrong idea. Games where characters do not die–or where they never fail–do a huge disservice to the world by teaching these people that they can do stupid things and be all right.

Moreover, unless there is some element of risk in the game–in this case, adventurers risk their lives–then the game loses all purpose and challenge.

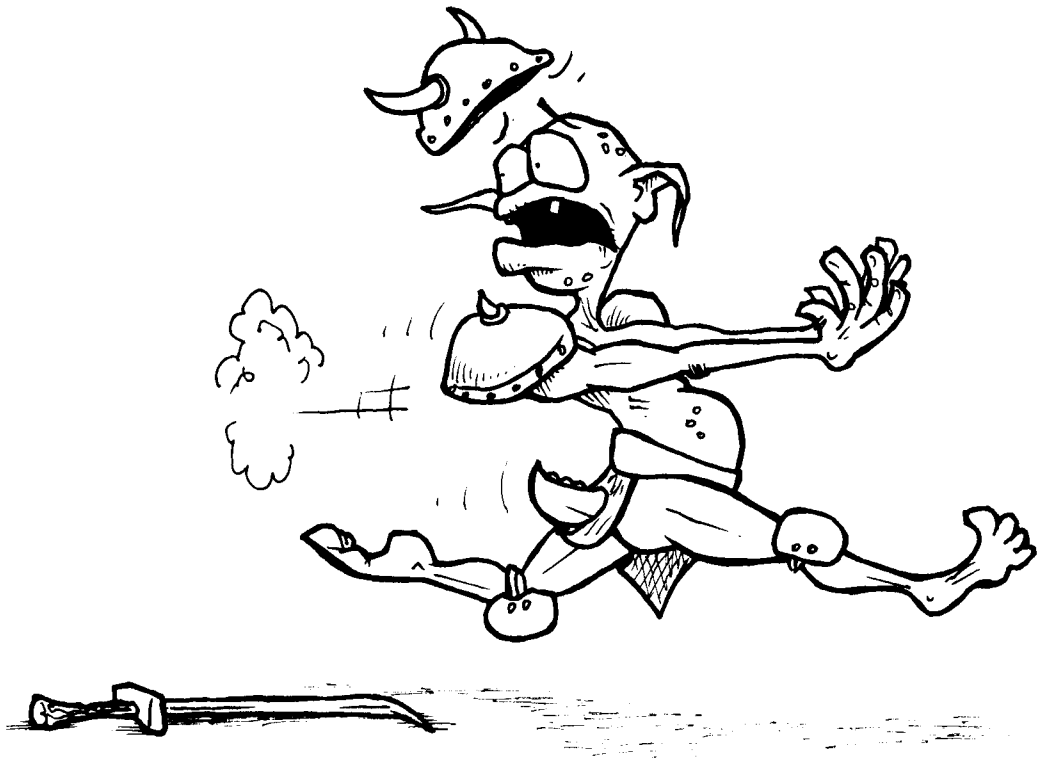
So, if the characters in the game would rather die, then let them do so and decrease the surplus player character population.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: XD20 CREATURE CODEX

Note: We were going to put in an extensive and comprehensive list with statistics of all the mythological, magical, monstrous, and mundane creatures that you might encounter in whatever genre strikes your imagination, but the thought exhausted us. Look, you probably already BOUGHT those books filled with all that stuff from someone else, so why just buy it all over again? Drag out your favorite monster book, convert the stats on the fly, and have a good time.

However, we know that you will want some form of crutch for your game so we present to you several exclusive monsters available ONLY in the XD20 game system. Since you profess to be an XDM, we'll let you practice by filling in the statistics for these monsters. You even get to NAME them. How unique is that?



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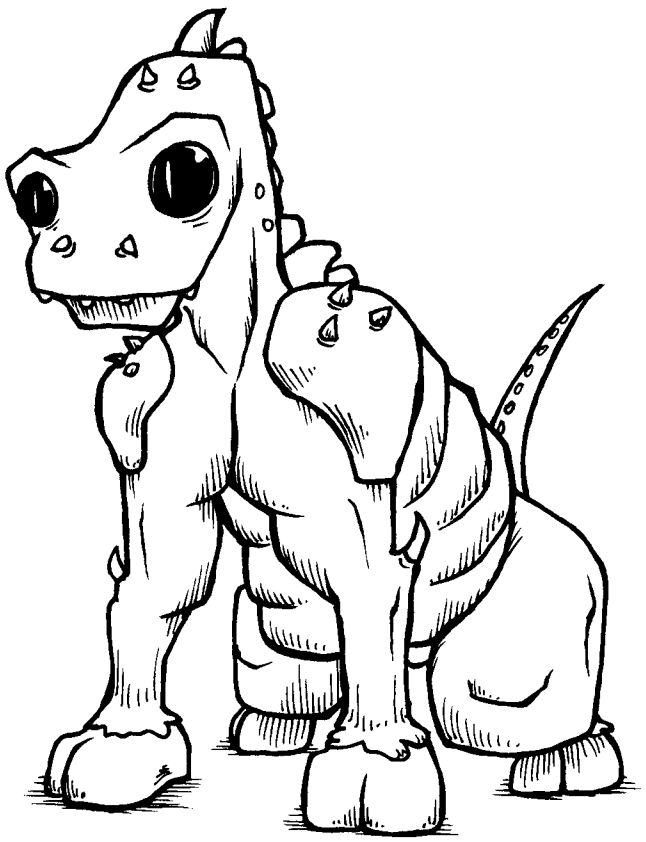

CREATURE NAME _____

CREATURE TYPE _____ MYSTICAL TYPE _____

CREATURE STATS

TAC _____ PSYCH _____ WAH _____

HEALTH _____ CHARACTER LEVEL _____

CREATURE'S NON-BINDING ABILITY NOTES

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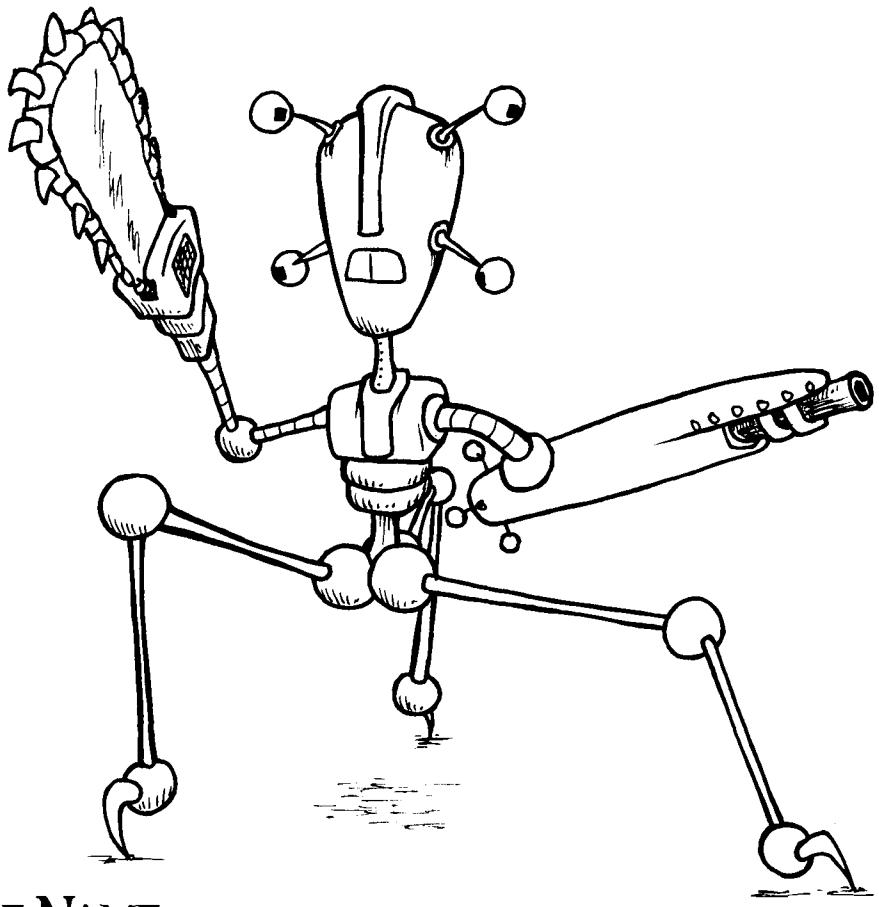

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CREATURE TYPE _____ MYSTICAL TYPE _____

CREATURE STATS

TAC _____ PSYCH _____ WAH _____

HEALTH _____ CHARACTER LEVEL _____

CREATURE'S NON-BINDING ABILITY NOTES

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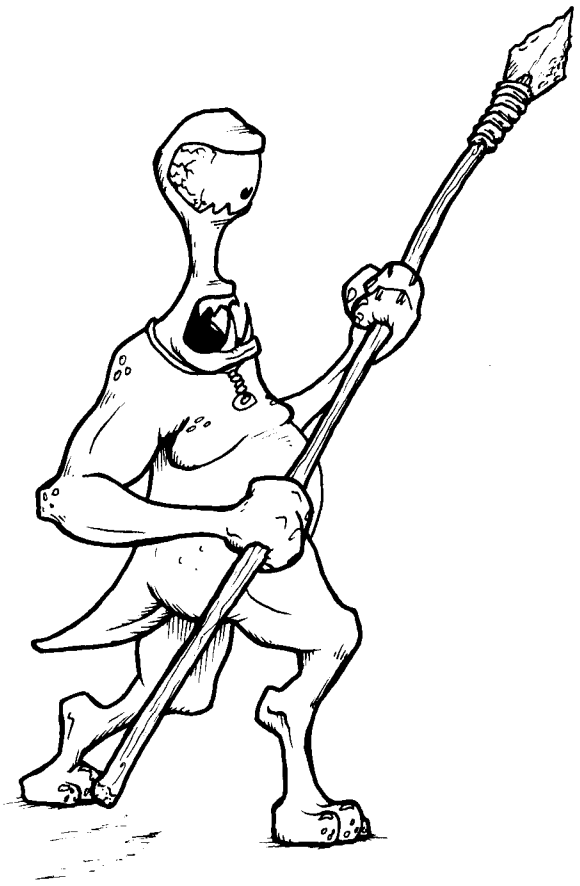
Advanced XD20™ Creature Codex



Creature Name _____

Creature Type _____ Mystical Type _____

Creature Stats

TAC _____ Psych _____ Wah _____

Health _____ Character Level _____

Creature's non-binding Ability notes

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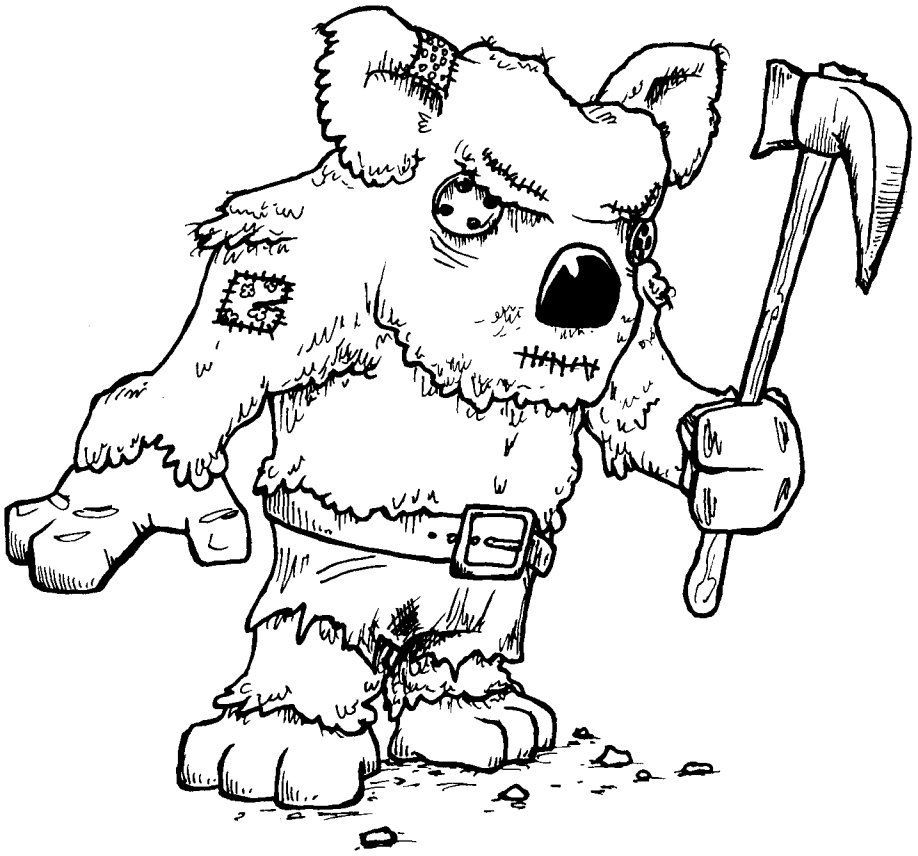
ADVANCED XD20™ CREATURE CODEX



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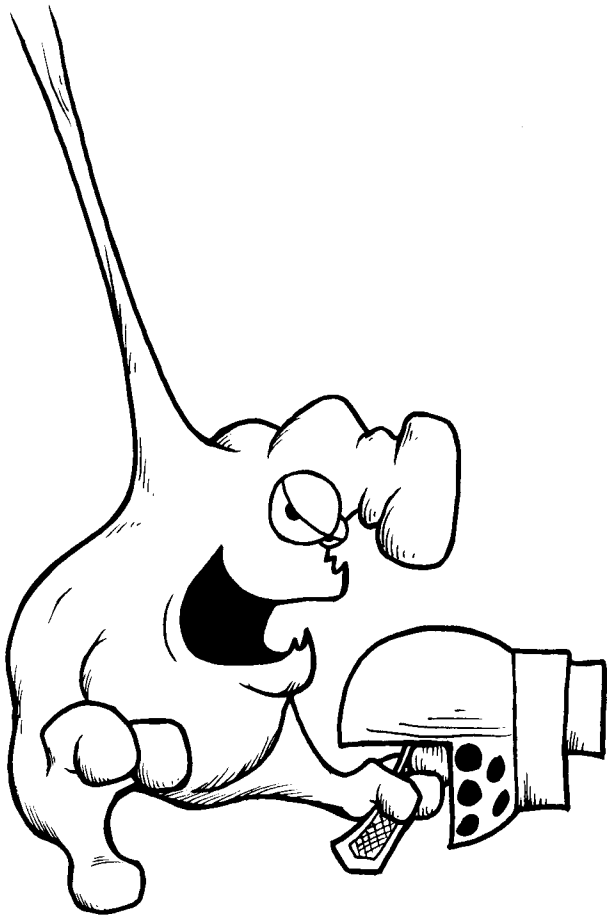

Creature Name _____

Creature Type _____ Mystical Type _____

Creature Stats

TAC _____ Psych _____ Wah _____

Health _____ Character Level _____

Creature's non-binding Ability notes

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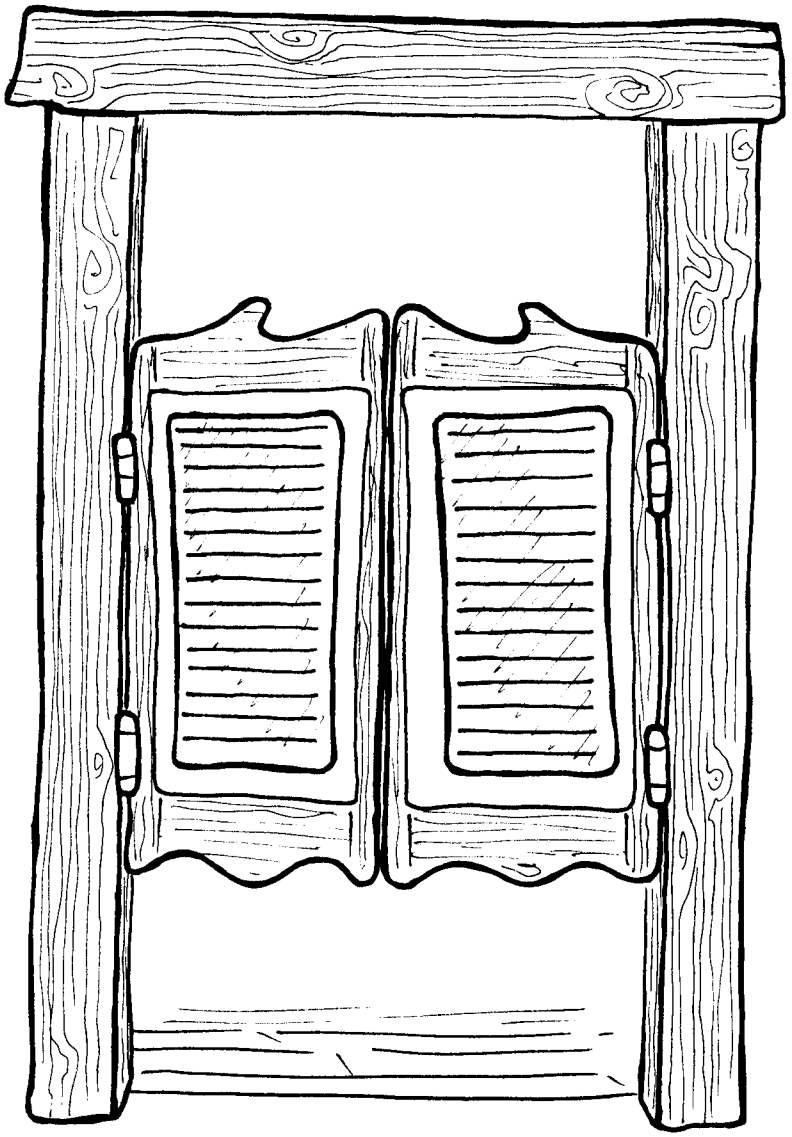
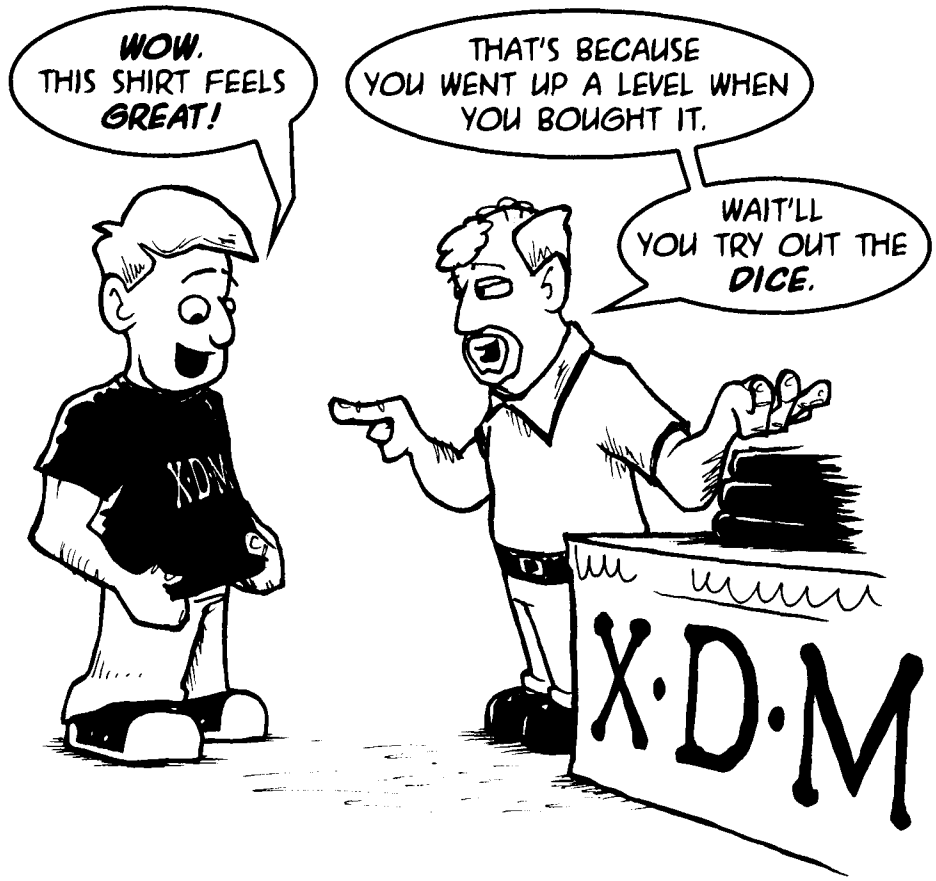
ACCORDING TO THIS MAP, WE SHOULD HIT "HOMECOMING" IN A PAGE OR TWO.
THERE BE TAVERN DOORS AHEAD. I'D SAY WE'RE THERE, AN' IT'S TIME FOR YOU, ME, AN' THE WEE FAIRY TO DRINK THAT ELIXIR WE STOLE...

APPENDICES





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* Look, we just got started with this, so how much of a phenomenon can it be if we're letting you in on the ground floor?

† Total value of items included does not exceed $2. Why should our scam be any different than other scams?

‡ Well, we signed the original. We cannot vouch for the multiple copies we subsequently printed.

§ Okay we will actually *sign* the picture. We can't be complete jerks.

XDM Compatibility Test Scoring

1. How many sides are on a dodecahedron?
   A. 0–You don't understand basic physics, do you?*
   B. 2–Well, at least it is an ODD size for dice.
   C. 1–Monopoly dice, friend.
   D. 10–Technically correct.
   E. 20–XDM's rarely see the need for dice!

2. One young player at the end of the table. . .
   A. 0–And don't come back!
   B. 2–Never leave a player behind!
   C. 0–You NEVER stop the game for psychobable!
   D. 20–Excellent technique for figuring out his style!
   E. 10–Just because it's cool!

3. Two trains . . .
   A. 10–Technically correct but you'll still have to wait for your badge.
   B. 2–At least you tried to do the math.
   C. 1–It only FEELS like trains collide at Gencon.
   D. 20–Thinking outside the box. A bribe on this test doesn't hurt.
   E. 0–Why are you even reading this book?

4. Have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?
   A. 4–Shows commitment.
   B. 4–Shows commitment.
   C. 2–Not fast enough.
   D. 10–Your priorities are in the right place.
   E. 0–Too much solitare.

5. The player jumps up from the table . . .
   A. 2–Technically correct, but also leads to bloody fights.
   B. 0–Never apologize for a ruling!
   C. 20–Total fabrication; the making of an XDM.
   D. 10–Good technique if you can come up with a reason behind it.
   E. 5–OK technique, but better to solve the problem.

6. Did you look at the answers before taking this test?
   A. 10–for being honest.
   B. 2–You might be president one day, but not an XDM.
   C. 20–This is the essence of being an XDM!
   D. 5–For being honest about cheating.
   E. 0–You may have a future as a non-player character.

XDM Compatability Test Results	
Score	Results
12 or less	You are a perfect candidate for getting the pizza for the game.
13-30	Have you considered becoming a professional 'Non-player Character'?
31-60	Congratulations! With significant training you can become an XDM.[1]
61-80	Congratulations! You are natural born XDM material![2]
81-120	Congratulations! You are an XDM! You qualify for our advanced placement program.[3]
More than 120	Remedial mathematics courses are now open at your local High School

* The Möbius die has yet to be invented. We have XDMs in Turkey working on it.

1 Your training will start at level 1 as soon as you purchase this book.
2 By purchasing this book, you will be admitted at once into your XDM training program at first level.
3 Advanced placement program means that all of your initiation fees have been waived. All you will need to purchase is this book as your coursework materials. You start as a level 1 Wet Newt XDM

NOTE: Don't spell it out to the group that a question which would release the sword is possible. The sword is a gift to that one devilishly clever soul who figures it out. Otherwise the statue, oracle, beast, whatever, simply answers their questions "yes" or "no" as is relevant to the adventure.

R-7 Push the cork into the bottle and shake the coin out.

R-8 Zero. There is no dirt in a hole. That's why it's a hole.

R-9 The bartender is the boy's mother.

R-10 99 days. If it doubles each day then it would be half its height the day before it's at full height, or day 99.

R-11 The odds in this case really are 50-50. The fact that coins are different colors does make a difference. We know that the silver coin lands heads up we now only have two possibilities:

1. Silver= Heads, Copper=Tails
2. Silver= Heads, Copper=Heads

R-12 This is one of those things that sounds like a riddle (and in a odd way is) because one is inclined to look for the easy or clever answer. There really isn't one. After the tree falls, its height (assuming it falls flat on the ground) is simply its diameter. To find it from the circumference (being four feet) you divide it by pi. So $4/\pi \approx 1.3$ and the tree is now around 1.3 feet high. If your players moan about using pi tell them that pi was used 4000 years ago on our world and there is no way it hasn't already been discovered in yours. Still, one could argue that in a campaign made up of stupid warriors (or players) this is a little much to ask. If that is the case, just replace the "four feet around part" with "two feet wide." This makes the answer much simpler: 2 feet.

Answers to Riddles
(from page 46)

R-1 The key here is that the player must change his mind and "choose with the odds." So if he instead chooses gate three after learning that gate two holds evil, his odds will then jump from 1 in 3 to 2 in 3! The sign stipulates that if he plays the odds he will pick the right door. So in our example gate number three is the right one. When doing this in your game, just be sure to let the group know which of the two gates they didn't choose holds evil. Then if they change their minds and choose the other non-evil gate, reward them. If they keep their gate then have something attack them. If for some reason, they pick the gate that is exhibiting all signs that the very mouth of hell is just inside, really let them have it. (By the way, this is why on "Let's Make a Deal" they stopped giving people the option of changing their minds after learning what's behind one of the doors they didn't choose. Their odds not only went up, but were actually in their favor if they did. If you find it hard to wrap your head around this don't worry, most people don't believe it the first time they hear it either. I would explain it to you but I really don't want to, so just trust me.)

R-2 If you're numbering the doors from left to right, starting with one then the answer to this question is door number 20. It is the door to the right of the other 19 . . . or the "right" door.

R-3 The odds are one out of three, not 50-50 as some are inclined to say. If they got it right, have the old man toss them the coin and totter off. If they get it wrong have the old man take something of value that they have.

Your adventures may not believe you. If so explain it as follows: When tossing a coin twice there are only four possibilities:

1. Heads, Tails
2. Tails, Heads
3. Heads, Heads
4. Tails, Tails

The riddle eliminates option number four by telling you that one of them is heads. This leaves the first three options, only one of which is "heads, heads", thus making your odds one in three.

R-4 Both "yes" and "no" answers will force you to lose. In this case it's better just not to play. What is written in the folded up paper is this:

"You will write no."

In a game write this in a piece of folded parchment beforehand and give it to someone, just as the riddle specifies. Then have them physically write "yes" or "no" on it. Again, trying to get rid of the talky talky.

R-5 The ruby is in the first chest.

If the ruby was in the third chest, then both of the other two inscriptions would have to be false, but this cannot be since the chest that holds the disease has a true inscription. If the ruby was in the second chest then one of the other two chests would have a true inscription. Again, this is not possible. The only way it works is if the ruby is in the first chest.

R-6 Answers that work include the following:

A Will you either answer no to this question or release the sword?

B Will you answer no and keep the sword?

C Will you either answer yes and drop the sword or no and keep it?

Simple logic explains why the above questions work. In A if the statue were to answer "yes," then the it would have to release the sword as is stated. If it were to answer "no" then it would have to answer no to the second part of the question, as the first part (will you answer no to this question) would be false i.e. "No I will not answer this question no" is a false statement that the statue cannot make. Therefore, it would have to be referring to the second part of the question and in order to make its answer true it must release the sword.

The other answers follow similar forms of logic. Feel free to explore the 'why' on your own.

GLOSSARY

Black Art When a magician uses combinations of black cloth and bright light to perform illusions.

Campaign A common name for a large scale role playing adventure where players can go in any direction they choose. (see Linear Design)

Campbellian Monomyth The basic structure for epic story as quantified by Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. We tell you all about it starting on page 30.

Closed Matrix The recommended form of game design for all XDMs. Players are allowed free choice within a range of directed events.

Clown Shoes Ridiculous This is our XDM code for something so pointlessly ridiculous that even bringing it up is laughable.

Codex The latin word for book. In current usage it implies either age or importance. We just think it sounds cool. That's why we put one in our book. It is full of creatures.

Crazy Old Man What? Him again? We thought we had him trapped in chapter six. Who left the gate open?

Cut Scenes Short segments of story where the players have no control over events. Commonly found in video games.

DM (See Dungeon Master)

Dungeon Master (Also called DM, GM, Game Master, Game Referee) This is the person who is in charge of organizing and directing a role playing game. The traditional Dungeon Master relies heavily on charts, tables, and piles of books to run the game. If you know a Dungeon Master, you should run out and buy him a copy of this book right away.

Expositional prop Any object that assists the XDM in conveying information about the game.

Force A magician's technique to get a spectator to "randomly" select exactly the card the magician wishes her to pick.

Game Master (see Dungeon Master)

Game Referee (see Dungeon Master) It's right up there in the D section.

GM (see Dungeon Master) No, D comes *before* G.

Hickman, Curtis A Grand Mega-lord Taloned Griffin XDM and co-author of this book. You can look him up in the introduction.

Hickman, Laura A Grand Lady Pegasus XDM and wife of Tracy Hickman. She's mentioned in the introduction too.

Hickman, Tracy A Grand Paladin-lord Horned Dragon XDM and co-author of this book. Did you not read the introduction?

Implied Story When the description or objects in an adventure location cause the players to create stories in their minds about what might have occurred.

Killer Breakfast Just find out where the nearest one is to your location and go to it. That will work far better than any explanation we can give. Or you could just go read the *whole chapter* we devoted to talking about it. We are starting to suspect that perhaps you are just flipping through the book at a store and haven't read it at all.

Laura Quest You still haven't read the Killer Breakfast chapter? Honestly.

Linear Design A form of game design where the players are led from event to event without being able to deviate from the set path.

Magic Is never to be used by XDMs as an excuse to plaster over shoddy game design; Prestidigitation, illusion, legerdemain, and black art used by an XDM to draw attention away from shoddy game design.

Offloading When an XDM assigns a game task to someone other than himself.

Open Matrix A form of game design where the players can venture in any direction they choose and the GM must work to stay ahead of them. Also known as a campaign.

Option Lock An adventure design where the options available to the players diminish over time until they are left with only a single course to follow.

Picture A flight school term where pilots are instructed to keep a mental picture of the space around their aircraft at all times. In role playing the GM is expected to do this for the adventuring characters so that she can plan ahead for the next encounter.

Polling ~~When an electronic recording calls you during dinner to ask you questions about~~ When an XDM looks around the table to see if the player's needs are being met. (see page 27)

Purple prose A literary term used to describe passages, or sometimes entire books, written in words so overly extravagant, ornate, or flowery as to break the flow and draw attention to itself. Adventure modules are full of this stuff. We tell you how to deal with it on page 63.

Role Playing Game The premiere form of entertainment in the world, where a group of people gather to create a shared imaginative adventure story.

Selddir Go back and read chapter six again. We already told you what selddir means at the end of the second paragraph.

Societe de l' Ultime Maitres The Society of the Ultimate Masters of the Game. We talk about them on page 9.

Storything The amazing XDM system for creating story or adventure ideas in a matter of moments. You can find it on pages 38-41.

Time misdirection A magician's technique using a delay to cause the spectators to forget part of what went before, thus allowing the magician to fool them.

Tayler, Howard An up-and-coming Wet Archduke Kobold XDM who drew the pictures for this book. Why did we write that introduction if you're not even going to read it?

Time Lock A form of adventure design where the players are limited by the amount of time available before a large event occurs.

[redacted]

XD20 Role Playing System This is the hottest thing to hit gaming since gaming. It is so hot, it is cool; and so cool, it is hot. We wrote several chapters devoted entirely to XD20. Go read them now.

X-treme Dungeon Mastery This is the book that you just read. On the other hand, if you had actually read the book you would not need to be looking it up in the glossary. If you have not read the book, go back to page one and start over.

Here is your overly complicated and elaborate table. We even put it on a separate page, therefore requiring you to flip from the page you were reading in order to find it. Never mind that this act required us to add a whole page to the book. Are you happy now?

XD20 Results Table

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
4	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	4
6	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	5	5	5	6	6	6	6
8	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	4	4	5	5	6	6	7	7	7	8	8	8
10	1	1	2	2	3	3	4	4	5	5	6	6	7	7	8	8	9	9	10	10
12	1	2	3	3	4	4	5	5	6	6	7	7	8	8	9	9	10	10	11	12
20	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
100	1	5	10	15	20	25	30	35	40	45	50	55	60	65	70	75	80	85	90	100


TIME TO POP CHUTES, EVERYBODY!
I TOLD YOU WE SHOULD HAVE ROLLED UP CHARACTERS BEFORE JUMPING.

AFTERWORD
WAITING FOR GYGAX

Do you remember your first role playing game? You didn't know which of those strange dice were used for what, your character sheet was largely a mystery to you, rules were something that your game referee took care of, and there was a cold core of fear somewhere down in the pit of your stomach that whatever was lurking behind the next turn in the corridor, or behind the next door, would suddenly leap at you, be too much for you to handle, and bring the curtain down on your character in the game.

And it was wonderful. It was exciting, and unknown, and you felt it more than knew it.

The early role playing games by E. Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson were fusions of traditional tabletop miniature war-games and play pretend. They were simple in their basic form and nearly opaque in their advanced stages. You really felt you had accomplished something if you slogged your way through the original Dungeon Master's Guide and made any sense of it. It was a frontier and we were all pioneers, blazing new trails and discovering new ways to play games.

That was then. But something happened to our wildly exciting and almost rebellious role playing experience. It became "tamed" as wildernesses often do. The thrill of the unknown became replaced with formalized rules sets, complex simulations, and exacting procedures. In some ways games became easier to learn, but also less challenging, and less unexpected. Everyone knew the precise statistics for every possible monster or nemesis they might encounter–the rest came down to the mathematics of probability. Somewhere along this smoothed, paved road, role playing games no longer dealt so much with roles. They became more like processes than games, and completely lost sight of the true meaning of the word "play."

Like Godot, we began waiting for another Gygax, but that good man was sadly gone from us and our radical games had transformed into a business.

It's time to take back our play, time to rediscover, once more, *why* we played these games in the first place. They were once thrilling, exciting, and fun. They could be again.

That's why we are game players who still believe there are frontiers to be won in role playing games. That's why we are XDMs.

Tracy Hickman
Curtis Hickman

This page has been intentionally left blank. It is possible that someone has scribbled a picture on your nice blank page. If this is the case, we're sorry. We do that sometimes. If you paid extra to have your book scribbled in, Congratulations! You go up a level!

This page is also intentionally blank. We're not sure which side of the page you'll want scribbled on. Besides, sometimes pens bleed through, and that can get messy.

"If I could go back in time and rewrite Dragonlance It would be this book... only with more dragons in it."
-Tracy Hickman

"I can say without any shame or bias, that this is one of the best books ever written and should be in every hotel room next to the bible."
-Curtis Hickman

"Possessed by the spirits of Da Vinci, Van Gogh, and Jack Fred, I illustrated a book that you should buy two of... one to read and one to hang on your wall."
-Howard Tayler

The Cure for the Common Game

Throw off your chains! Too long have your role playing games been held in the bonds of substandard gamemasters, bound in needlessly complicated rules sets, and enslaved by players who will avoid doing anything unless it counts toward leveling up! It is time to take a stand!

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- Officially become an XDM and impress dates* (Do-it-yourself-secret initiation rites included.)
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- Create magic illusions that can even make your players disappear**!
- Use actual FIRE in your game properly.
- Hijack the game as a player , and how to deal with a player revolution as an XDM!

Plus loads more!

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*** ISBN 978-0-9779074-6-5 $29.95 U.S.



* Such as April 24th, August 13th, or even November 10th.
** True. Although they may already have been disappearing from your game if you haven't been using this book!