How to Write Adventure Modules that Don't Suck

By The Team at Goodman Games

Essays written by Chris Doyle, Mike Ferguson, Joseph Goodman, Ken Hart, Andrew Hind, Brendan LaSalle, Rick Maffei, Adrian Pommier, and Jeremy Simmons

Edited by Joseph Goodman

www.goodman-games.com

Introduction

For nearly a decade, Goodman Games has been publishing adventure modules generally considered to be among the best in the industry. With more than 100 adventures in print and the single longest-running adventure module brand on the market, Goodman Games has established a track record for writing adventures that don't suck.

At Gen Con 2007 we ran a seminar called "How To Write Adventure Modules That Don't Suck," which was packed to standing room only. This has quickly become one of our most popular Gen Con events. This year, we've expanded our offerings to include this book of essays. Compiled from experienced adventure writers with multiple published adventure credits, these essays should provide tips to improve your adventure-writing skills. We hope you benefit from improved home games and perhaps drive some quality submissions in our direction.

Regardless of the advice offered here or elsewhere, remember that the primary definition of an adventure that doesn't suck is one that your players enjoy. If your gaming group walks away happy and has stories to tell for years to come, it was a great adventure. I hope this booklet provides you with some more of those adventures.

– Joseph Goodman, Publisher, Goodman Games

Additional Resources

Our forums are a great place to discuss our published adventures and your own ideas. If you enjoyed this product, please tell us more at the "Adventure Design" sub-forum. Visit the forums at www.goodman-games.com/forums.

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Things I Look For In A Submission

By Joseph Goodman

When the Dungeon Crawl Classics line starting picking up steam several years ago, I began receiving a steady stream of new submissions. To help provide guidance to authors, I created the following list of things I look for in an adventure submission. The list hasn't changed much over the years.

Looking back on the list, it could be also be construed as a list of suggestions for writing adventure modules that don't suck. A good adventure doesn't need to have *all* of these items. But most good adventures do have many of them.

Without further ado, here are the things I look for in a Dungeon Crawl Classics adventure submission.

- A sense of the fantastic. Convey this through encounters, descriptions, and most importantly, magic. The fantastic is what makes D&D so much fun, and that has to come across in the adventure.
- Memorable encounters. Avoid repetition. Consider all aspects of an encounter: timing, environment, opponents, hazards, and battle conditions. Think about templates, feats, equipment, magic items, and spells as ways to make opponents interesting. Come up with rooms that players will fondly remember about 20 years from now.
- Hard work on thinking out great encounters. Dungeons with stirges, darkmantles, chokers, rust monsters, orcs, and other no-brainer monsters strike me as lazy. The job of a *published author* is to produce material that the typical DM at home *could not produce*. Don't submit derivative dungeons.
- New twists on old classics. Don't throw in a rust monster. Instead, make it a rust spider that climbs walls. Players will never suspect that the reddish-brown spider attacking them actually has the same stats as a rust monster. Surprise the players!
- "Easter eggs." Every adventure should have at least one well-hidden room with a cool treasure of some kind, accessible only to very diligent or very lucky PCs.
- Intelligent treasure. Why give gold when you can give art objects? The treasure should match the villains and location. Sometimes the best treasure is information, because information leads to more adventures. The classic example is a treasure map; other options include blackmail lists, diaries and journals, or spell books with new spells requiring rare adventure-worthy components.
- A good villain. Not every dungeon crawl needs one, but the best ones often have them. The adventure has to establish a strong emotional framework for the villain, too; it's not enough for him to just be "another evil necromancer."
- Sequel potential. The DM should be able to continue the plot threads begun in this adventure to create future adventures for his campaign.
- Distinctive levels. Each level of the dungeon should feel distinct from the ones before and after it. They shouldn't blend together. The players should remember that level three was "the water level" and level four was "the giants level."
- A strong narrative feel. Usually this is a buildup with a climax in a big encounter at the end, but that formula can be varied. Regardless, focus on an encounter list that forms a storyline that reads like a great adventure novel.
- Secret doors. Every dungeon needs at least one secret door, preferably hidden in a place the PCs won't think to look. Secret doors at the bottom of pit traps, secret trap doors mounted in the ceiling above normal doors... think of ways to fool the players.

About the Author

Joseph Goodman wrote his first RPG at the age of 10, and has been professionally involved in the industry since the age of 17. He currently owns Goodman Games, where he created the Dungeon Crawl Classics line of adventure module. Goodman Games has published an awful lot of adventures, so many that Joseph has lost track.

- Thought requirements. There should be at least one puzzle. That doesn't necessarily mean a riddle. It could be a room that's hard to figure out, or a strange new monster that can only be defeated in a special way that's alluded to elsewhere in the dungeon.
- Good pacing. Long, tiresome combats should be followed by quick rooms. Thought-provoking puzzles should be followed by bloodbaths. Slow, trap-filled hallways should be followed by a rousing fight.
- Group involvement. Meter the action so there's an even mix of involvement by all character classes.
- A twist, preferably at the end. Establish PC expectations through read-aloud text, then use those expectations against them to create plot twists.
- Subplots. Subplots vary widely, but the best ones have a few things in common. First, they involve several PCs in an ongoing drama of some kind. Second, they create mystery or intrigue. Third, they lead to potential future adventures.
- New monsters. A new monster that throws off the characters is good (as opposed to simply duplicating the role of an existing monster, which is a waste of space).
- A "cut to the chase" feeling – start with a bang and get to the action fast. Don't waste time on empty rooms unless they really add something.
- Intelligent ecology. Most monsters need to eat, sleep, and drink. Dungeons should allow for this fact.
- Atmosphere. The dungeon should have a strong, cohesive vibe of some kind, whether dangerous, or evil, or disturbing, or reptilian, or whatever.

From Concept to Outline to Design

By Chris Doyle

How does a game designer go about writing an adventure? There is no simple answer. Just as there are many types of orcs or lizardfolk, there are many writers with many approaches to the design of a solid, enjoyable adventure. The following essay is a glimpse into the method I employ to craft a challenging set of encounters tied together with a cohesive plot and back story. Throughout this essay, I shall provide numerous examples from Goodman Games products to back up my points, but specifically I shall rely on *DCC #11: The Dragonfiend Pact*, an ENnie-nominated adventure module I authored. Having a copy of *DCC #11* might be handy.

The Concept

It all starts with the plot, or an interesting back story. Even if your adventure is a collection of deathtrap rooms designed to rack up TPKs (see *DCC #13: Crypt of the Devil Lich*), having a solid back story is an important part of an enjoyable adventure. I have a huge collection of adventure modules dating all the way back to the 70's, but also including those released last month. I've read them all, but I've played only 5-10% of them. I'm guessing if you polled many game masters (the ones who usually purchase the adventures), you will discover a similar percentage of played versus read. The point is: an adventure module should be just as interesting to read as to play. And that is the crux of having a solid back story and plot. Designing interesting, challenging encounters inside the framework of a rules set is the tricky part.

Ideas and concepts for role playing game adventures are everywhere around us. They can be gleaned from novels, movies, TV, other role playing systems, video games, atlases (more on that later), and comic books. The problem is, one never knows when you are going to stumble on an idea. My solution: an idea notebook that I carry when I travel. Alternatively, I jot ideas down on scrap paper for transferring at a more convenient time. This notebook is filled with notes randomly scattered about. Most are just a few word passages, perhaps a concept for a new spell or magic item, or perhaps an encounter set-up or tactics featuring an item, spell or ability. The following two blurbs are examples pulled from my notebook:

"Exiled remnants of a drow noble House. Hidden in dungeon, gathering slaves. Attempting to return House to former glory."

"Wizard tower, carved inside a huge stalactite. Inverted layout with one room at bottom and 4-6 rooms at top. Wizard uses flight, and is still present."

These two entries were eventually used in *DCC #51: Castle Whiterock*, as The Inverted Tower, sub-level 9B. The remnants of the drow house were hidden in the huge stalactite, which was situated on the ceiling in an immense cavern. The slave-gathering angle was dropped, but making the drow from House Forlorna (a tie-in with *DCC #13: The Crypt of the Devil-Lich*) was a stroke of brilliance by Mr. Pommier.

This notebook also contains entire adventure outlines and notes assembled in one location while I actually work on a specific project. A featured section of the notebook is reserved for lists of names, both for characters and places. Nothing slows down the writing process more than needing a name for an NPC or a place in a pinch. For the former, I rely on names from actual people I've met with a slight alteration or two to give it a fantasy feel. For example, a co-worker named Cathy was morphed into Cathra, a troublesome gnome bard. Investing $15-$20 on a good book of baby names is a good idea too (not to mention the priceless feeling when the store clerk throws a wry glance at the thought of us geeks actually reproducing). As for geographic names, nothing beats an atlas. In addition to fascinating geographic locales to set your story in, an atlas is literally a huge list of names. And since many places are named after people, it's also an excellent source for NPC names.

The Outline

After I have the concept of the adventure and plot line (or lines) nailed down, I move into the outline phase. The outline process encompasses several steps: challenge selection, monster/NPC statistics generation, and drafting maps. Although I can work on some of these tasks concurrently, I usually tackle them in the order presented. During the challenge generation, I choose the monsters and NPC for the adventure, and monsters/NPCs selected in turn dictate the maps. During this process, I also create one or more spreadsheets to facilitate the planning of the project. Believe it or not, this phase usually takes the longest, typically several weeks of on-again, off-again work. (Keep in mind I'm a freelance writer, and

must balance project demands with real-life demands on a daily basis.)

Outline Step One: Selecting Challenges

The first part of outlining is selecting challenges. I usually start with the climax first, since it almost always features the big bad guy. Next I start listing the other encounters, including any pertinent notes such as plot point tie-ins, statistics needed (with special notes for any new designs), and geographic needs. I use two methods to generate the challenges. The first is a review of my idea notebook. Often a sentence or two can spur a concept with the appropriate plot point tie-in, or in the case of *Castle Whiterock*, it can generate an entire dungeon level (see the above example). Next I review and read monster books. For some reason, when I read a monster stat box and notes on its ecology, it naturally spurs the creative process.

While designing challenges, it's useful to consider the different PC roles and make sure there is an even balance of challenges for each of the four specific roles (fighter, rogue, cleric, and wizard).

Fighters crave combats, so make sure you have enough challenging battles, featuring both melee and ranged attacks in your adventure. Most adventures have plenty of combats, but keep in mind that too many are just as much a problem as not enough. In *DCC #11*, the monstrous spider (area 1-2), the dire badger (area 1-6), and the showdown with Malchor (area 2-8) serve to satisfy the need for combats.

The rogue excels at finding and disarming traps, so make sure there is a good mix of traps as compared to straight fights. Puzzles, especially if they feature a physical component, also qualify as traps. Rogues also tend to be highly maneuverable in combat, so make sure the terrain grants them some advantages and, above all else, options. In *DCC #11*, the portcullis trap (area 1-3) and the trapped corridor (area 1-5) serve to test the chops of the rogue PC. Encounters to test the mobility of the rogue include descending the well (area 1-1), crossing the river (area 2-3), and crossing the rope bridge (area 2-5).

Clerics have an array of defensive spells at their disposal, in addition to an advantage against undead, with their turn undead ability. An often-overlooked challenge is having a cleric use a turn undead attempt to channel positive energy to open a portal, or bypass a trap. Adding a few undead to an adventure is usually easy to accomplish, especially when the main villain is an evil cleric. In *DCC #11*, by making the zombies in area 1-4 dwarven trap makers, there was a natural plot point tie-in. Adding the skeletons in area 2-7 was a blatant attempt to add another undead encounter. Other opportunities for clerics to shine in *DCC #11* include role-playing with Tarn (and possibly cutting a deal with him to find a cure for his lycanthropy), and finding the prayer books (and identifying them) in area 2-7.

It can be tricky designing challenges for wizards and sorcerers. Many wizard spells are useful to target numerous enemies on the battlefield, and this fact should not be overlooked. I always try to add at least a few combats with more foes than the PCs, plus I'm a big fan of swarms. Swarms can be deadly at low levels, but spells such as *burning hands* and *flaming sphere* allow wizard types to shine. In *DCC #11*, the fight with the skeletons (area 2-7), the rat swarms from the *pipes* (area 1-8), and the hordes of normal rats in the warrens (area 2-2) give plenty of targets to be on the receiving end of these spells. Wizards also tend to have superior knowledge skills and of course Decipher Script. Giving wizard PCs ample opportunities to use these skills is an excellent method to impart background information on your plot. In *DCC #11*, Player's Handout A (in area 1-4) represents a puzzle challenge that requires using Decipher Script.

Spreadsheets are a valuable tool in real life. Not only are they useful for taxes, personal finances, and organizing and graphically displaying scientific data, but they can ease some of the burden of adventure design. This is especially the case when outlining the challenges, determining encounter levels quickly and accurately, and tracking rewards such as experience and treasure allotment. When designing *Castle Whiterock*, we used spreadsheets extensively to organize the individual level challenges and rewards, compute the level

About the Author

Chris Doyle has been a professional freelance writer for the RPG industry since 1991. He has been published in several magazines, including *Polyhedron*, *Inquest*, and *Dungeon*. He has worked for West End Games, TSR, Atlas Games, Wizards of the Coast, and more recently with Goodman Games. For Goodman Games, his publications include *DCC #0: Legends are Made, Not Born, DCC #7: The Secret of Smuggler's Cove, DCC #11: The Dragonfiend Pact, DCC #13: The Crypt of the Devil Lich* (author and project manager), *DCC #15: The Lost Tomb of the Sphinx Queen* (with Joe Crow), and *DCC #51: Castle Whiterock* (with Adrian Pommier). *DCC #11* and *DCC #51* were nominated for ENnie Awards for Best Adventure, and *DCC #13* won the Pen and Paper Award for Best Adventure. Chris's fourth edition publications for Goodman Games include *DCC #56: The Scions of Punjar, DCC #58: The Forgotten Portal, DCC #63: The Warbringer's Son,* and two other as-yet-unannounced publications. Chris enjoys reading dusty tomes of previous (unsupported) editions of role playing games, long walks in the Copse of Dead Jenys, and overshooting his word count.