

20 Dungeon Starters

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Sample file

*This book is dedicated to the memory of
C. E. Tygart*

Introduction

I read a blog about a *Dungeon World* session a few years ago that had really frustrated a newbie GM. The party entered a new city and went wild creating bizarre stores that sold cages full of giant talking mosquitoes.

This behavior may have seemed unruly, but it's hard to fault players that invent cages of talking mosquitoes. What the hell would anyone do with a bunch of talking mosquitoes? The ideal *Dungeon World* response would be to reshape the adventure so that it was *about* talking mosquitoes.

A *Dungeon World* adventure should be like a pitch session for a well-run television show. The GM is the executive in charge of production—the show runner—while the players fill in for the writing staff. The writers should know that playing a Gygaxian fantasy adventure invites certain tropes, conventions, and subject matter. If the characters decide that they want to have a pirate adventure instead of climbing Mount Icy Doom, the GM should be prepared to reconfigure the Ice Gnomes as Jungle Goblins and revamp the horrific Wendigo Mage as the equally disturbing Cannibal Wraith.

Marshall Miller invented “dungeon starters” to help in this process. He wrote and posted the first ones for free on the web, along with a blank template for others to use. He then encouraged others to go forth and create their own dungeon starters. The rest, as they say, is history.

These starters are like the notes you might bring to a *Dungeon World* session, with plenty of blanks left in for improvisation at the table. A GM can use a starter as a one-shot, fold it into an ongoing campaign, or even as a link in a chain of starters that lead from one to the another. Say you want to run “Castle Death” (page 12). The characters may decide that the dragon in the basement is too powerful to kill without special help, and look into other solutions; a clever GM might tell them rumors of a gorgon, the sight of whose severed head might petrify the dragon, and send them off to the lost “City of Pillars” (page 16) to find that horrible creature.

The key is the blank spaces. A thoughtful GM once suggested to me that the entirety of Castle Death should be decorated with draconic art, and that the former warlord loved dragons so much that he had transformed himself by some dark art into a dragon; another thought that the warlord could have been devoured by the dragon, and that his friendly ghost would be a good addition to the monster roster. Whether your dragon needs slaying or liberation, there's no right answer in *Dungeon World*. These starters were written in that spirit.

Now, if you excuse me, I've got to decide where exactly to put that pit trap.

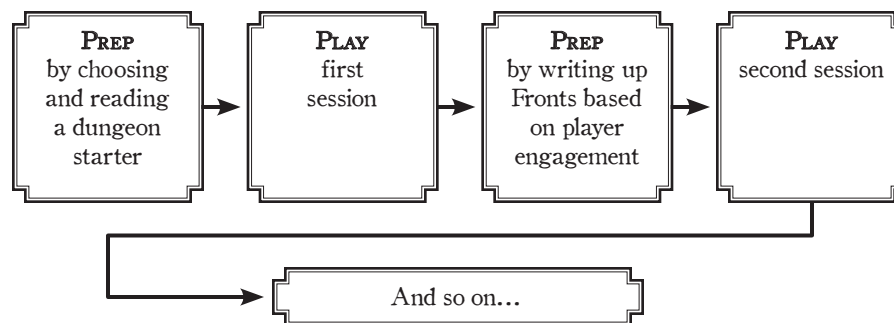
—Mark Tygart
2016

How to use a dungeon starter

A dungeon starter is a collection of themed prompts, mechanics, and monsters intended to help the GM get a game of *Dungeon World* rolling quickly. It's easy enough to play with no prepared material whatsoever, but sometimes it's nice to have someone else set the stage for you. To that end, this book is a collection of sets, props, special effects, and characters, but there's no set script.

To get started, just follow these steps:

- 1) Browse through this book and choose a starter that appeals to you.
- 2) Print out the two pages that comprise your chosen starter.
- 3) Read it through before you sit down to play, and keep it in front of you during play.
- 4) Start by asking the players some or all of the listed **Questions**, and take note of their answers. Their answers are more important than the text of the dungeon starter; if their answers contradict the content or point in a different direction, prioritize their answers!
- 5) Refer to the **Agenda**, **Goals**, and **Dungeon Moves** throughout play whenever you feel stuck.
- 6) Relay some or all of the **Impressions** to the players as you see fit (and not necessarily in the order listed).
- 7) Bring the written **Discoveries**, **Dangers**, and other elements into play when the opportunity arises, but remember that the things described are only part of the picture. They are like points on a map with blank space in between, ready to be filled by your imagination and the flow of the game.
- 8) After your first session with a dungeon starter, if the game is going to be continued, take a little time to prep before the next session. Reflecting on how the first session went, consider what the players did, what they didn't do, and what seemed to engage them the most. Use your prep time to write some Fronts based on that analysis.
- 9) Wait eagerly for the next session.
- 10) Play to find out what happens!



Black Oak Ridge

by Marshall Miller

Agenda

- * Make the world fantastic
- * Fill the characters' lives with adventure
- * Play to find out what happens

Goals

- * Establish details, describe
- * Use what they give you
- * Ask questions
- * Leave blanks
- * Look for interesting facts
- * Help the players understand the moves
- * Give each character a chance to shine
- * Introduce NPCs
- * Fill out your worksheet

Dungeon moves

- * Change the environment
- * Point to a looming threat
- * Introduce a new faction or type of creature
- * Use a threat from an existing faction or creature
- * Make them backtrack
- * Present riches at a price
- * Present a challenge to one of the characters

Questions

- * Why was your grandfather afraid of the faerie?
- * When did you realize you were lost?
- * What were the fair folk known for in your village?
- * What, if anything, do you have that is made of iron?
- * What did the fae do to you when you fell asleep, drunk, out on the moor?
- * What has been promised you for finding the child?

Impressions

- * A high ridge overlooking a wide valley
- * An unmarked fork in the path
- * A shallow brook lined with fern
- * A ring of TOADSTOOLS
- * A faerie road from which you dare not step
- * An empty village, save for one hut
- * An infant who knows far too much
- * A copse of bone-white birch
- * A sucking wind and the first traces of smoke
- * Three fat geese with pleading eyes
- * Stone seals embedded in the old oaks
- * A procession of fae courtesans
- * Bread and honey laid out on the ground
- * A faerie fort, whether they know it or not
- * A shallow, moss-ringed pool
- * An abandoned cart, laden with rotten fruit
- * A strand of blackened oaks
- * A flock of birds, suddenly taking flight
- * A mass grave in an open pit
- * The bleating of sheep in the mist
- * The sounds of a battle that cannot be seen
- * A steep wooded slope, barely scalable
- * A senile woman protected by her cats
- * A faerie door leading somewhere... unexpected
- * A field of standing stones in long rows
- * A lone fae soldier, fleeing for his life
- * The forest around you, awash with flames
- * A deep ford through unrelenting waters
- * A handful of families, secreted in a remote cellar

Custom Moves

When you **accept faerie gold**, roll +WIS: **on a 10+**, choose 1 from the list below; **on a 7-9**, each time you make Camp thereafter, roll a die—on a 1, the coins turn to leaves.

- * The gold is real
- * You know the gold's not real; it's just a matter of time

When you **are bitten by a faerie**, you have a moment of clarity before losing consciousness (as per the level 5 Cleric spell True Seeing).

When you **pry the seal from an oak**, a cloud of ash is expelled and the tree blackens and dies before your eyes.

When you **are exposed to the iron blight**, your veins run black as it spreads through you. You'll grow accustomed to the chill, but you'll never gaze upon a faerie again.

When you **are shown to have faerie blood**, choose 1:

- * A fae noble owed your true father a great debt, but your father was still his vassal
- * You're descended from fae nobility, but now you must notify your daughter before the wedding
- * You and your kith are bountied kinslayers, but your new power may yet save you

When you **step off of a faerie road**, roll +WIS: **on a 10+**, choose 1 from the list below; **on a 7-9**, choose 2.

- * You've not strayed far and can make your way back
- * They can smell you and are following you back to the road, stepping where you stepped
- * You can hear them calling to you from the treeline, mark 3 XP if you go to them now
- * It's been moments for you but hours for them
- * You can tell that the road is now just a road, where all of you are currently, however, is less clear

When you **drink fae food or drink**, you can see the fairies as they are until you next Make Camp.



Discoveries

FAEWOOD STAFF

Close, 2-handed, 1 weight

It would look entirely normal, if not for the small buds and roots emerging from the staff's bark.

When you *tap the staff against the ground*, it grows swiftly into a full-sized oak, and remains so until the bearer wishes otherwise.

CLAYMORE

Close, 2-handed, 2 weight, 9 coins

When you *wield a claymore against a Group*, take +2 to Hack and Slash.

FAEMARK

Touch, 0 weight

A faemark is transmitted through the transfusion of blood; what appears a faint florid tattoo is actually a vine growing just under the skin.

When you *are marked by the fae*, you may communicate wordlessly with anyone you touch, skin-to-skin.

FAERIE RING TOADSTOOL

0 weight

It is said that where you find a ring of toadstools, there the fair folk have danced on the full moon last; but consume at your own risk.

When you *eat a toadstool from a faerie ring*, it blows your mind (if only for a moment). Exchange one -1 forward for a +1 forward.

FAERIE COMPOSITION

0 weight

Penned in ages long past, the sheet music of the fair folk is as haunting as it is beautiful.

When you *are a Bard and play Arcane Music from a faerie composition*, you may add "You perform a legendary musical feat" to the list of options, but the notes disappear from the score as they are performed.

Dangers

ASHEN STALKER

Solitary, Stealthy, Magical

Damage Choke and bite 1d6 (close)

HP 15 **Armor** 3

Special Qualities None

When you *release a faerie's ash*, which holds the iron blight at bay, its soul becomes hungry for vengeance.

Instinct To kill those responsible

- * Stalk them, silently
- * Choke them with ash
- * Dissipate and reform

When you *Make Camp after awakening an ashen stalker*, roll +WIS: on a 10+, your vigilance keeps you safe, tonight; on a 7-9, your sleep is restless, and you gain nothing from it; on a 6-, mark XP, and awaken to its ashen hands, flooding your lungs.

CHANGELING BABE

Solitary, Small, Magical

Damage Bite 1 (hand)

HP 4 **Armor** 0

Special Qualities None

Swapped with human babes to keep tabs on the big folk.

Instinct To pass as human

- * Wait and watch, play dumb
- * Bite unexpectedly
- * Run with surprising speed

FAE HOST

Horde, Tiny, Intelligent, Organized, Devious, Magical

Damage Miniscule swords & bows 1d6 (close, near)

HP 10 **Armor** 1

Special Qualities Flying

Of this world and the world behind; they make their home in faerie forts and among the hidden hills.

Instinct To serve their liege first; then themselves

- * Appear and disappear
- * Sparkle in a disorienting manner
- * Issue an ultimatum

SPRITE

Group, Tiny, Intelligent, Devious

Damage Bite 1 (hand)

HP 1 **Armor** 0

Special Qualities Flying

Finger-tall with wings like dragonflies, these tiny fae are a menace to outsiders. Good thing they're easily bribed.

Instinct To bedevil the big folk

- * Swarm about their heads
- * Steal their smallest possessions
- * Betray their position to others

URISK

Solitary, Magical

Damage Hooves and horns 1d6 (close)

HP 10 **Armor** 2

Special Qualities None

Sad and solitary, the urisk are hard workers and faithful friends to those who can look past their gnarled and mangy appearance.

Instinct To do what is asked

- * Work diligently
- * Ruminant mournfully
- * Hide when things go sideways

WILL-O-THE-WISP

Group, Small

Damage Electrical discharge 1d8 (close, reach)

HP 8 **Armor** 0

Special Qualities Flying

Stranded visitors from another plane, wills-o-the-wisp are motes of light floating several feet in the air. They meander at will through swamps and marshes, often leading to secret paths and places that only they know.

Instinct To lead astray

- * Blind them with a sudden flash of light
- * Speak the mad logic of their native plane
- * Mimic the thoughts of a camp, settlement, or safe haven

The Goblin Hole

by Marshall Miller

Agenda

- * Make the world fantastic
- * Fill the characters' lives with adventure
- * Play to find out what happens

Goals

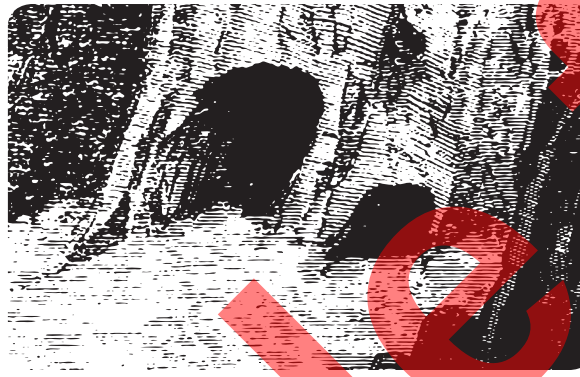
- * Establish details, describe
- * Use what they give you
- * Ask questions
- * Leave blanks
- * Look for interesting facts
- * Help the players understand the moves
- * Give each character a chance to shine
- * Introduce NPCs
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Dungeon moves

- * Change the environment
- * Point to a looming threat
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- * Make them backtrack
- * Present riches at a price
- * Present a challenge to one of the characters

Questions

- * Whose idea was it to come here?
- * How long will the ponies be OK without you?
- * This far from civilization, what was the last thing you saw as you entered the cavern?
- * You weren't sure before but what is the smell that keeps getting stronger as the cave's entrance disappears from view?
- * What have you sworn to do here?
- * What scares you the most as darkness looms closer?



Impressions

- * A hole in the dirt just big enough for a man to squeeze through
- * A GOBLIN's corpse, hand stretched toward the well
- * A GOBLIN with his hand tied to a ring in the ceiling
- * Thick smoke, sweet-smelling, filling the air
- * A vertical shaft filled with debris
- * A series of shallow algae-filled pools
- * A talking bird skull on a string
- * A pack of slumbering FERAL DOGS
- * A chattering of starlings, desperate to reach the surface
- * Hairless, blind rabbits in hutches
- * A weeping willow whose tendrils extend into the depths below
- * A tunnel to somewhere else entirely
- * The throne-ridden patriarch of the GOBLINS, slumped and staring
- * Two hollow-eyed children in a cage
- * A heavy, antler-covered log swinging in from above
- * A well-covered pit where you might not expect
- * Five fish on a spit over coals
- * Black land-nettles that sting like crazy
- * A narrow ledge along a roughly carved canal
- * A flight of arrows in mid arc

Custom Moves

When you *are hit by a swinging log*, roll +DEX: on a 10+, choose 1 from the list below; on a 7-9, choose 2:

- * You're gored by an antler and take 1d6 damage
- * You're knocked back a ways and land on your back
- * You knock over the nearest ally but keep your footing

When you *are in the midst of a chattering of starlings*, all torches are extinguished as the birds flood the area. Take -1 forward until their chattering passes.

When you *sneak past the slumbering FERAL DOGS*, roll +party (number of PCs + NPCs): on a 10+, the pack leaps upon you—take -1 forward; on a 7-9, choose 1 from the list below; on a 6-, let sleeping dogs lie and creep on by.

- * Your approaching footsteps awake the pack and they bark and snarl, blocking your path; take +1 forward
- * As you congratulate yourselves on bypassing the pack, they awake and give chase

When you *traverse the debris-filled shaft*, roll +weight carried: on a 10+, choose 3 from the list below; on a 7-9, choose 2.

- * The debris gives way and disappears down the shaft
- * You plummet to a yet deeper part of the cavern
- * You suffer harm
- * You make a terrible clatter

On a 6-, choose 1 of the following:

- * Take +2 forward to Aid others negotiating the debris
- * Collect enough debris to gain 1 use of adventuring gear

When you *brush up against the black land-nettles*, roll +weight carried: on a 10+, your gear shields you from their stinging toxin; on a 7-9, take 3 stun damage.

When you *consume a cavern rabbit*, you know what they know, as per the Wizard spell Revelation.

Discoveries

TALKING BIRD SKULL

0 weight

Strange things happen when a familiar dies. When not covered or contained, the skull mercilessly heckles those nearby.

When you *witness an NPC being heckled by a talking bird skull*, take +1 forward to Parley with them.

When you *roll a 6- in the presence of the skull*, you gain the bond, "The talking bird skull knows the extent of my failure and won't let me forget it."

RABBIT TOTEM

0 weight

A small rabbit figurine carved from white limestone.

When you *are Good and hold the totem in the presence of cavern rabbits*, a telepathic bond is created, as per the Wizard spell Telepathy.

GOBLIN INCENSE

0 weight, 3 uses, *slow*

When you *smell the surprisingly sweet smoke of goblin incense* (considering it's made from dung), take +2 forward to parley but also -1 forward to WIS and INT.

GOBLIN GROTESQUERY

4 weight, *clumsy*

When you *return to civilization with this monstrosity*, it's bound to cause a stir; when you Carouse, add "You draw quite the crowd" to your list of options as you display your grotesque trophy.

SLING

1 weight, *near, stunning*

CAVE FISH

1 weight, 2 uses, *ration*

Dangers

CAVE RAT

Horde, Small, Cautious, Stealthy

Damage Bite 1 (*hand*)

HP 6 **Armor** 0

Special Qualities None

Rats living in the same tunnels as goblins become decidedly more dangerous. Having bred to the size of house cats, they can chew through just about anything.

Instinct To devour and spawn

- * Overrun a person or place
- * Pierce leather armor with sharp incisors
- * Retreat into dark places

FERAL DOG

Group, Small

Damage Bite 1d4 (*hand*)

HP 6 **Armor** 0

Special Qualities None

Feral dogs assemble on the outskirts of civilization and in forgotten places; that is, assuming they aren't pushed out by wolves or wargs.

Instinct To protect the pack

- * Bark loudly
- * If it runs, chase it
- * Bring down the prey

ASSASSIN ROOT

Group, Large, Stealthy

Damage Constrict 1d6 (*close, reach*)

HP 1 **Armor** 0

Special Qualities Plant

The viney roots of this shrub-like specimen of subterranean flora extend deep underground.

Instinct To fertilize with flesh

- * Entangle someone in strangling roots
- * Attack from any crack or loose soil
- * Encapsulate unconscious creatures in root balls

INFECTED CHILD

Group, Small, Cautious

Damage Flailing arms and legs 1 (*close*)

HP 6 **Armor** 0

Special Qualities Infected

Scared, not feeling well, they just want to be held.

Instinct To be carried to safety

- * Hug with desperate arms
- * Whimper, babble, cry big wet tears
- * Infect them with Goblin Pox

GOBLIN

Horde, Small, Intelligent, Organized

Damage Small sword or jabby spear 1d6 (*close*)

HP 3 **Armor** 1

Special Qualities None

Slimy green creatures, filled with hatred.

Instinct To overwhelm greater creatures, civilizations

- * Sound the alarm
- * Attack with poisoned weapons
- * Learn from past encounters, prepare for the next

GOBLIN ORKASTER

Solitary, Small, Intelligent, Organized, Magical

Damage Acid orb 1d10+1 (*near, far, ignores armor*)

HP 12 **Armor** 0

Special Qualities Spellcaster

Oh lord, who taught them magic?

Instinct To prove goblin superiority

- * Unleash a poorly understood spell
- * Use underlings as shields
- * Cast Pox Upon Them, inflicting GOBLIN POX

GOBLIN POX

When you *go to sleep after contracting goblin Ppox*, roll +CON: on a 10+, no new sores break out; on a 7-9, a few more sores appear—take -1 ongoing to CHA rolls until cured, but +1 forward to your next Goblin Pox roll; on a 6-, just more stinking sores (-1 ongoing to CHA rolls until cured).