

RPG ADVENTURE DESIGN CHEAT SHEET

A reference guide for structuring and preparing tabletop roleplaying adventures

Principles

- † Be a fan of your players and their characters; [DW](#) empower PCs to do awesome things. [MC](#) [MS](#)
- † Prepare situations (the “what”), not plots (the “how”); [JA](#) [MC](#) [PA](#) play to find out what happens. [DW](#)
- † Prioritize high-value prep (i.e., flexible *tools*) and minimize low-value prep (i.e., excessive *plans*). [AG](#) [JA](#) [MS](#)
- † Seek continual feedback and engage in regular self-evaluation. [MS](#)

Structuring adventures

Adventures are single scenarios within the larger narrative of a campaign. Scenes (or nodes) are the basic building blocks of adventures.

[AG](#) An adventure’s structure determines how PCs advance from one scene (or node) to the next. [JA](#) A single adventure may include overlapping, nested or blended structures. [KO](#)

Procedural structures encourage *emergent* narratives; require prepared *tools*.

- † **Dungeon crawl:** Choose a doorway or room exit.
- † **Hex/grid crawl:** Choose an adjacent hex/square.
- † **Point crawl:** Choose a connected point of interest.
- † **Node-based:** Collect clues that reveal connected nodes. [JA](#)

Story-driven structures encourage *directed* narratives; require prepared *plans*.

- † **Linear:** Follow hooks to the next scene.
- † **Branching:** Follow hooks to one of several possible scenes (often progressing to a single climax).
- † **Mystery:** Collect clues that lead to the next scene.

Adventures should never have foregone conclusions. Even where the number of choices is limited, the players should still have *agency* (i.e., the feeling that their choices matter). [MC](#)

Making player choices *meaningful* requires sufficient context (information), viable alternatives (choice) and lasting consequences (impact). [CM](#)

Instigating adventures

Adventures are born from the movement of fronts (i.e., goal-oriented threats). [JA](#) [PA](#) The PCs are drawn into and through adventures with hooks. Dynamic and engaging adventures occur at the intersection of multiple fronts and hooks. [SR](#)

FRONTS

Dangers to the PCs and the things they care about; [DW](#) advance independently of the PCs. Fronts comprise:

- † **Linked threats:** Villains, hordes, organizations, cursed places, etc.
- † **Goals:** Motivations or drives associated with each threat.
- † **Timelines:** Sequences of consequences of each threat progressing toward its goal (i.e., countdown clocks); actions that trigger encounters. [JF](#)
- † **Stakes:** What we are playing to find out; open-ended questions about how the front will impact the PCs and/or the world.

Neutral or allied factions can function like fronts by replacing threats with *assets*. [KC](#) Simple threats require only a goal and a 3-step timeline. [MS](#)

HOOKS

Dramatic challenges that the PCs are motivated to take on; primary adventure objectives. [KC](#) [SR](#)

- † **Combat:** Defeat, assassinate, interrupt or protect someone. Cleanse or defend somewhere. Destroy, neutralize or secure something.
- † **Exploration:** Scout, navigate, infiltrate, escape, race or survive somewhere. Collect, steal, deliver, restore or activate something. Rescue, escort or track someone.
- † **Investigation:** Discover, decipher, solve or locate something.
- † **Social:** Persuade, deceive, intimidate or interrogate someone. Negotiate or administer something.

Proactive hooks come looking for the PCs; *reactive* hooks require proactive players to discover them. [JA](#)

ADVENTURE TEMPLATES

Generic structures for quickly outlining story-driven adventures.

The Five-Room Dungeon [JF](#)

1. **Entrance:** Guardian or secret; reason why the dungeon is unexplored/unresolved.
2. **Obstacle:** Puzzle or roleplaying challenge; closes off the climax and/or reward.
3. **Setback:** Trap, trick or other unforeseen complication; foreshadows climax.
4. **Climax:** Central challenge of the dungeon.
5. **Reward:** Treasure, information and/or twist.

The Five-Node Mystery [JA](#)

1. **Hook:** Introduction to the mystery; includes clues to each POI.
2. **POIs (x3):** People and/or places related to the mystery; each includes clues to the other POIs and to the reveal.
3. **Reveal:** Ultimate answer to the mystery; often a confrontation.

The Quest [LK](#)

1. **Hook:** Introduction to the situation; preparation for the journey.
2. **Acquisition:** Recovery of essential object or device.
3. **Challenges:** Beginning of journey; predictable perils.
4. **Complications:** Continuation of journey with twist on the challenges; fallout from new information.
5. **Closure:** Delivery of object to final destination; reveal and aftermath.

ELEVATING SCENES

Make scenes more complex and engaging by incorporating interesting and unexpected features.

Locations

Features of interesting dungeons, settlements and wilderness areas:[JA](#)

- † Looping and branching paths
- † Secret and unusual paths
- † Multiple and midpoint entries
- † Multiple and discontinuous connections between levels/areas
- † Divided and sub levels/areas
- † Elevation shifts
- † Navigational landmarks
- † Nested dungeons

Antagonists

Features of interesting enemies and threats:[CM](#)

- † Purpose beyond hostility
- † Signposted threat level
- † Connection to environment
- † Intelligence, planning and teamwork
- † Minions and swarms
- † Dynamic or phased abilities
- † Telegraphed abilities
- † Strong and weak spots
- † Potential to permanently change the PCs

Encounters

Features of interesting action scenes:[KO](#) [WS](#)

- † Non-combat objectives
- † Multiple objectives (competing or sequential)
- † Time limits
- † Wide open or tightly constrained spaces
- † Variable elevation
- † Terrain and cover
- † Traps and hazards
- † Dynamic or phased environments
- † Interactable devices or scenery
- † Waves of threats
- † Spawning threats
- † Allied reinforcements
- † Third (neutral) parties

Preparing adventures

Prepared materials facilitate gameplay within an adventure structure.

Tools are materials that support procedural and/or improvised gameplay.

- † **Maps:** Keyed,[JA](#) rostered,[JA](#) blank.
- † **Lists:** NPCs (names, descriptions, roles), locations (landmarks, settlements, taverns), etc.
- † **Random tables:** Encounters,[WS](#) reactions, treasures, events, etc.
- † **Stat blocks:** Monsters, NPCs, hazards, items, etc.
- † **Clues:** Rumours, secrets,[JA](#) etc.
- † **Timelines:** Calendars,[WS](#) countdown clocks, etc.

Plans are materials that support linear and/or directed gameplay.

- † **Outlines:** Quest logs, scene summaries,[AG](#) flowcharts, etc.
 - † **Scripts:** Dialogue, exposition, cut scenes, etc.
 - † **Set pieces:** Encounters, puzzles, etc.
- Flexible, reusable and/or impactful tools are more versatile and are often less work to prepare than unadaptable, excessive and/or redundant plans (i.e., scripted contingencies), even for story-driven adventures.[JA](#)

Preparing sessions

Review checklist before each session.[MS](#)
Skip steps addressed during adventure prep.[MS](#) Recycle unused prep.[JA](#) [PA](#)

1. **Review the characters:** What do the players care about? What is on the PCs' current to-do list?[AG](#)
2. **Create a strong start:** Set the stage with action, roleplay or mystery. Drive the adventure forward by advancing fronts.[DW](#)
3. **Outline potential scenes:** Anticipate next steps for the PCs (1-2 scenes per hour of play).
4. **Define secrets and clues:** Discrete pieces of information not tied to any one source (10 total). Consider fronts, hooks, lore and PC backstories. For essential secrets (i.e., narrative chokepoints), provide at least three different clues.[JA](#)

5. **Develop interesting locations:** Evocative titles each with three unique aspects (1-2 locations per hour of play).
6. **Outline important NPCs:** Description (name, appearance), personality (archetype or quirk) and connection to the adventure (motivation or hook).[JF](#)
7. **Choose relevant monsters:** Compile stat blocks and review abilities.
8. **Select rewards:** Treasure, magic items and/or secrets. Incorporate hooks for new adventures.

Where feasible, prepare high-impact extras (e.g., player-facing maps, handouts, images, music) for greater engagement.

Sources

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|---|---|
| AG <i>The Angry GM</i> | KO <i>A Knight at the Opera</i> |
| CM Chris McDowall of <i>Electric Bastionland</i> , etc. | LK Levi Kornelsen of <i>Situations for Tabletop Roleplaying</i> , etc. |
| DW <i>Dungeon World</i> by Sage LaTorra & Adam Koebel | MC Matt Colville of <i>MCDM</i> |
| JA Justin Alexander of <i>The Alexandrian</i> | MS Mike Shea of <i>Sly Flourish</i> |
| JF Johnn Four of <i>Roleplaying Tips</i> | PA <i>Principia Apocrypha</i> by David Perry, et al. |
| KC Kevin Crawford of <i>Worlds Without Number</i> , etc. | SR S. John Ross of <i>Cumberland Games</i> |
| | WS W.F. Smith of <i>Prismatic Wasteland</i> |