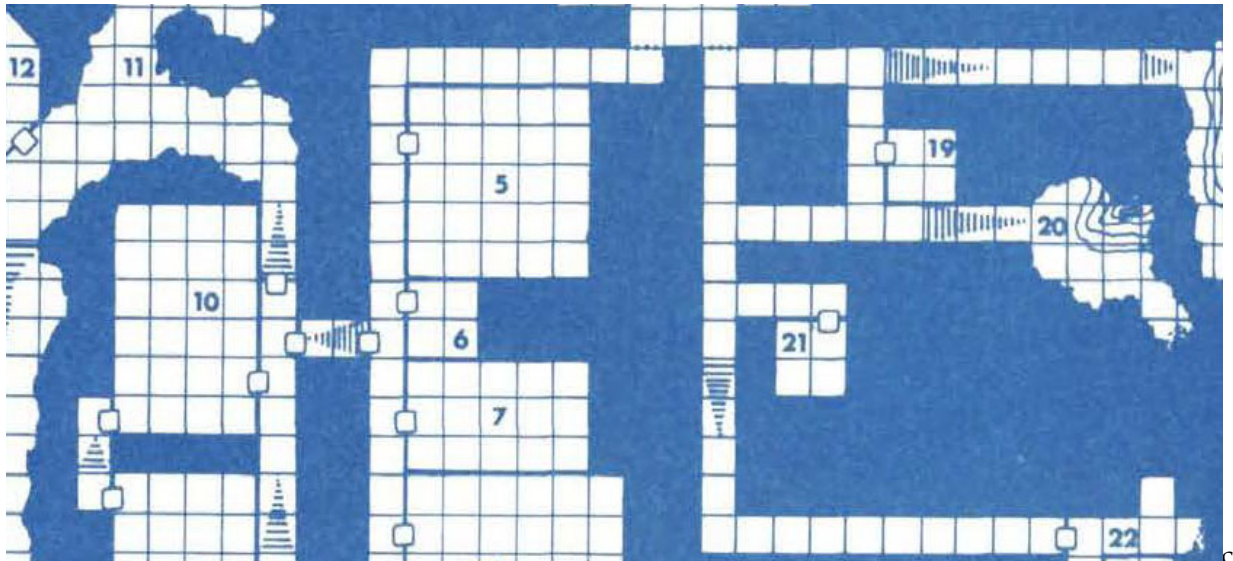


PTOLUS: RUNNING THE CAMPAIGN DUNGEON AS A THEATER OF OPERATIONS

[by Justin Alexander - October 25th, 2019](#)



DISCUSSING:

[In the Shadow of the Spire – Session 22A: Return to Pythoness House](#)

Arrows suddenly fell among them. One of them clipped Elestra's shoulder. All of them were suddenly in motion – diving for cover in different directions. Somehow six skeletal women – most clad in the tattered remnants of their brothel fineries – had crept onto the upper terrace and were now firing arrows down into the ruined garden at them.

A novice GM looks at the map of the dungeon. The PCs are about to open the door to Area 5, so he checks the key (in this case from [B3 Palace of the Silver Princess](#)) and sees that (a) it's a library and (b) there are five kobolds in the room.

A fight breaks out. If the novice GM is talented, then the events of that fight will be influenced by the details of Area 5: Maybe the bookshelves topple over on top of people and the kobolds are throwing books. But the kobolds are keyed to Area 5, and so that's where the kobolds are met and where the fight happens.

Time passes and our novice GM has gotten more experience under his belt. This time, when the PCs get ready to open the door to Area 5, he doesn't just look at the description of Area 5. He looks around the map and checks nearby areas, too, to see if there are other monsters who might come to join the fight. He looks at Area 7, for example, and sees that it's a barracks for five goblins.

A fight breaks out. The GM makes a check for the goblins in Area 7. He determines that they DO hear the fight, and a couple rounds later they come rushing over and join the melee in the library.

What the experienced GM is doing can be made a lot easier by using [adversary rosters](#) in addition to a basic map key. But there are other methods that can be used to achieve similar results. For example, the sounds of combat might increase the frequency of random encounter checks.

Random encounter mechanics might also lead this GM to another revelation: Combat encounters can happen in areas where they weren't keyed. For example, maybe the PCs are poking around at the sulfur pool in Area 20 when a random encounter check indicates the arrival of a warband of kobolds.

At this point, our more experienced GM has accomplished a lot: Their dungeons are no longer static complexes filled with monsters who patiently wait for the PCs to show up and slaughter them. They feel like living, dynamic spaces that respond to what the PCs are doing.

THE THEATER OF OPERATIONS

There's still one preconception that our GM is clinging to. He's likely unaware of it; a subconscious habit that's been built up over hundreds of combats and possibly reinforced through [dozens of modules relying on preprogrammed encounters](#) (even as he's moved beyond such encounters).

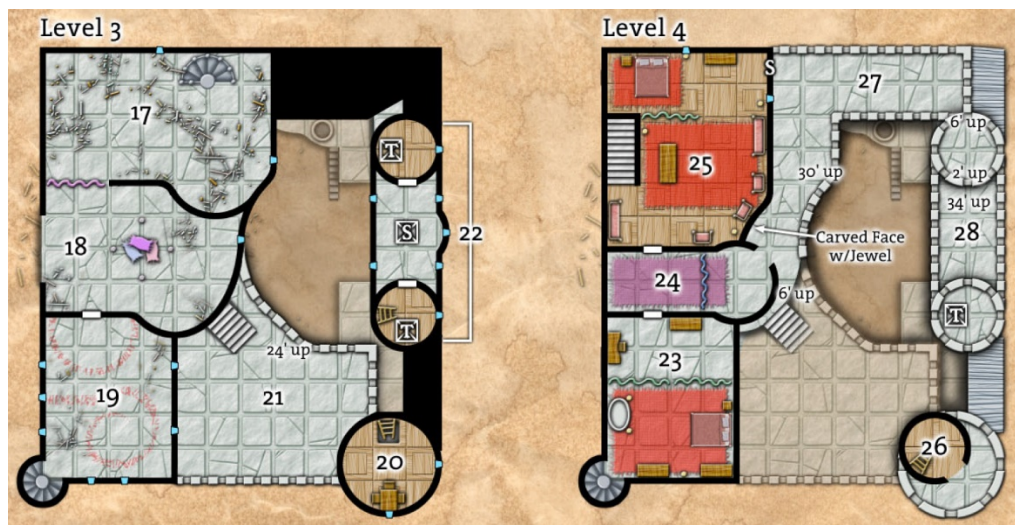
When the goblins came rushing over to join the fight in the library? It was still *the fight in the library*. When the kobolds ambushed the PCs by the sulfur pools? The GM still thought of that fight as somehow "belonging" to Area 20.

One of the reasons this happens is because our method of mapping and keying a dungeon is *designed* to do it: We conceptually break the map into discrete chunks and then number each chunk specifically to "firewall" each section of the dungeon. It makes it easier to describe the dungeon and it makes it easier to run the dungeon, allowing the GM to focus on the current "chunk" without being overwhelmed by the totality.

But the next step is to go through that abstraction and come out the other side. We don't want to abandon the advantages of conceptually "chunking" the dungeon, but we also don't want to be *constrained* by that useful convention, either.

When combat breaks out, for example, we don't want to be artificially limited to a single, arbitrarily defined "room." Instead, I try to think of the dungeon as a theater of operations – I look not just at the current room, but at the entire area in which the PCs currently find themselves.

You can see a very basic version of this in the current campaign journal:



While the PCs are in Area 21: Rooftop Garden, I'm aware that the skeletal warriors in Area 25: Radanna's Chamber have become aware of them. They sneak out onto Area 27: Battlements and fire down at the PCs, initiating combat across multiple rooms (and, in fact, multiple levels).

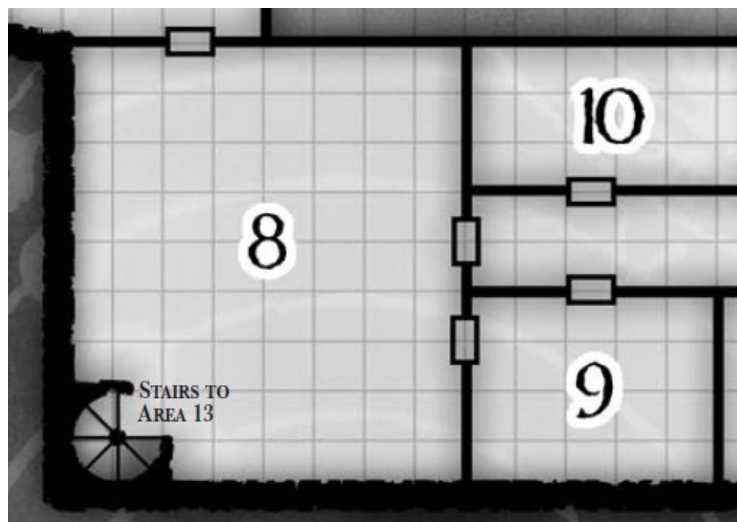
Another simple example would be [the hallway fight from *Daredevil*](#). This is basically just two rooms with a hallway between them. But note how even this simple theater of operations creates a more interesting fight than if it had been conceptually locked to just one of the small 10' x 10' rooms individually.

Also note how the encounter actually starts *before* he even enters the first room. This way of thinking about dungeons goes beyond combat: What's on the other side of the door they're approaching? What do they hear? What do they see through the open archways?

LEARNING THROUGH ZONES

Awhile back, [I wrote about how abstract distance systems in RPGs](#) mimic the way that GMs think about and make rulings about distance and relative position. Zones — like those used in Fate or the [Infinity RPG](#) — are a common example of such a system, and using a zone-based system can also be a great set of training wheels for breaking away from the idea that combat takes place in a single keyed location, because zones naturally invite the GM to think of neighboring rooms as being a cluster of zones.

For example, I have Monte Cook's [Beyond the Veil](#) sitting on my desk here. Here's a chunk of the map from that scenario:



And Area 8 on that map is described like this

8. DRAGONPODS

This large chamber was once a gathering hall with tables and benches, and trophies on the wall. There are only vague remnants of those now. Instead, the room has a large number of strange brown and yellow pods on the floor, and clinging to the walls and ceiling, each about three to four feet across. Six of them remain unopened, while at least a dozen have burst from the inside. A few smaller dragonpods lie cracked and brittle on the ground, unopened but obviously long-dead. All of the pods are of some hard organic matter covered in a thick, sticky mucus. They smell of sour fruit.

Storamerere's mating with a carrion crawler produced some strange results. Carrion crawlers normally lay hundreds of eggs at a time. But Storamerere's crawler mate produced dozens of strange, egg-like pods. Some of them hatched, and produced half-dragon carrion crawlers. Others never produced anything viable. Still others have yet to hatch, even though their parents are long dead.

Strangely enough, the union of dragon and carrion crawler seems to have spawned a creature with entirely new abilities. These half-breeds thrive for a time and then curl up and die, producing yet another dragonpod. Even if slain conventionally, the body of the dead dragon crawler will create a new pod and thus a new creature. Only destruction by fire prevents a dead specimen from forming into a pod.

As soon as anyone without dragon blood enters the chamber, four dragon crawlers scuttle out from behind the pods and attack. The round after combat starts, another one drops down from the ceiling to attack a random character. These creatures are covered in black scales and have green, dragon-like eyes on their stalks. Each has dragon wings but they are too small and ill-fitting to allow them to fly. Instead, they flutter and flap their wings to distract opponents.

The room is large enough to comfortably run the entire melee against the four dragon crawlers in there. A neophyte GM might even treat the whole room as kind of being a big square, featureless space.

What an experienced GM will do (and what zones basically formalize) is break that whole region of dungeon map up into zones:

- Hallway
- Kitchen (Area 9)
- Gaulmeth's Chamber (Area 10)

And then do the same in Area 8, too:

- North entrance
- Eastern doors
- Bottom of the stairs
- Dragonpod muck
- Ceiling pods

The result will be their theater of operations. (Which could expand even further into the dungeon depending on how the encounter proceeds.) Thinking in terms of zones will naturally invite you not only to conceptually break up large spaces, but to group spaces together. And once you've done this a few times, you'll realize that you don't need the specific mechanical structure of zones in order to do this.

OTHER THEATERS OF OPERATION

Thinking in terms of a theater of operations shouldn't be limited to the dungeon. In fact, it often comes easier in other contexts (in which we haven't taught ourselves to think in terms of keyed areas), and meditating on how we think about these other examples can often be reflected back into how we think about the dungeon.

For example, one place where GMs often easily think in terms of a theater of operations, even if they don't in other contexts, is a house. I suspect it's due to our intimate familiarity with how these spaces

work. Think about your own house: Imagine standing in the kitchen and talking to someone in the living room. Or shouting something down the stairs. Or looking up from the couch and seeing what's happening in the adjacent room.

When we're talking about the totality of the environment, that's all we're talking about. It's that simple.

At the other end of the scale, there are wilderness environments.

What happens here is that the sheer scale of the wilderness can, paradoxically, cause the theater of operations to similarly collapse into a one-dimensional scope: The forest is vast and, therefore, the entire fight just happens generically "in the forest." There's no place for the reinforcements to come from and no capacity of strategic decisions because everything is, conceptually, in a single place — the forest.

The modern over-reliance on battlemaps (particularly battlemaps all locked to a 5-foot scale) tends to exacerbate this problem, limiting the field of battle to a scale that tends to blot out the true theater of operations in the wilderness.

The solution, of course, is to instead *embrace* the scale of the wilderness. You're traveling across the plains, but there's a tree line a few hundred yards away to the north. There's a family of deer grazing fifty feet over there. There's a ravine off to your right perhaps a quarter of a mile away that you've been paralleling for awhile now. And the goblin warg riders just cleared the horizon behind you. What do you do?

FINAL THOUGHTS

Something I'll immediately caution against here is getting fooled into making this more formal than it is. If you find yourself trying to prep the "theaters of operation" in your dungeons, then you've probably just created another inflexible preconception of the environment. (You're probably also [wasting a lot of prep](#).) Theaters of operation generally arise out of and are defined by the circumstances of play: What do the PCs know? Where do they go? How have they tipped off the NPCs? What decisions do the NPCs make (often based on imperfect information)?

The point isn't to try to anticipate all of those things. The point is to learn how to actively play the campaign world; to let the campaign world live in the moment.

The cool thing is that, as you think of the dungeon as a theater of operations and play it as such, you will be implicitly encouraging the players to *also* think of the dungeon as a totality rather than as a string of disconnected encounters. They'll start engaging in strategic decision-making not only in combat ("let's fall back into the hallway!"), but for the exploration of the dungeon as a whole ("can we draw them back into the room with the poison traps and use those to our advantage? can we circle around them? can we split them up?"). And getting the players into this mindset is instrumental in unlocking more complicated scenario structures like [heists](#).

And remember that, as you've seen with our examples above, you don't have to leap straight into juggling massively complicated strategic arenas: Two rooms and a hallway. That's all it takes to break out of the box.

PTOLUS: RUNNING THE CAMPAIGN IN-JOKES

[by Justin Alexander – November 1st, 2019](#)



DISCUSSING:

[In the Shadow of the Spire – Session 22B: At the Top of Pythoness House](#)

The door was locked, so Tee kneeled next to it and got to work. Agnarr, standing nearby, decided to start oiling the hinges. Tee, remembering the last time Agnarr had decided some hinges needed oiling, began grinding her teeth, but managed to ignore him... mostly.

This session contains a callback to [Session 10A: The Labyrinths of Ghul](#). In that session, I described the ancient hinges of a door in the dungeon as squealing loudly. While Tee explored the room beyond:

Agnarr, meanwhile, started playing with the iron door – moving it back and forth and causing the ancient hinges to squeal horribly. Tee was visibly annoyed. “Stop it. We don’t know what’s down here.”

First, I’d like to take a moment and acknowledge what a great roleplaying moment this is. We often think of great roleplaying as being exemplified in big dramatic or emotional scenes, but this simple little interaction actually demonstrates the heart of all great roleplaying. It’s a player being fully immersed in a moment and simply asking themselves (almost unconsciously), “What would my character do?”

And in this particular moment of boredom the answer was, “Play with this squeaky door.”

Now, at the table, this action is not actually annoying. There is no actual door squeaking. But Tee’s player becomes visibly annoyed because she, too, is immersed in the moment and is fully imagining the sound

of this bloody door echoing through the room *while she is trying to concentrate*. So she tells him to cut it out. And then:

Tee went back to searching. Agnarr shrugged and pulled some oil out of his bag, spreading it liberally over the hinges of the door. That did the trick and the door stopped squeaking. Agnarr grinned, swinging the door back and forth, and called out: "Tee! Look!"

Tee whirled around: "What?!"

As she turned, the mound of rubble behind her exploded. A foul and terrible creature rose up amorphously behind her – its forms constantly shifting through virulent shades of purplish-blackish horror. Agnarr's eyes widened and the smile fell from his face as two muscular extrusions slashed vicious claws across Tee's back, ripping open vicious wounds.

Tee screamed in pain. "I hate you Agnarr! I hate you!"

Agnarr sees that Tee is upset and wants to help, so he figures the best way he can do that is by fixing the squeaky hinge that's upsetting her. Having fixed the "problem," he just wants to share his happiness with Tee and let her know that he's solved it!

From Tee's perspective, of course, the problem is not the squeaky hinge, it's that Agnarr keeps distracting her. And now he's distracting her again! There's a complete mismatch of expectation and emotion as she whirls around.

And then shit goes bad.

In terms of actually "running the campaign," per se, I contributed virtually nothing to this moment:

- I randomly described a door hinge as being squeaky.
- When Agnarr wanted to fix the hinge with some oil, I called for a check to see if he did that. (He made it.)
- I called for a Spot test to see if Tee noticed the chaos beast lurking in the rubble. (She failed it.)

I mostly just got out of the way, which is often the best thing you can do as a GM.

What makes this moment special?

Hard to say, honestly. There's an emotional truth here which seems to capture an essential element of the relationship between Tee and Agnarr. The simplicity of the actual interaction coupled with a near-catastrophic outcome creates strong dramatic contrast.

Because I'm talking about this in the context of the long-term legacy of the moment – as demonstrated in this journal entry, it becomes a running joke for Agnarr to oil hinges while Tee grits her teeth – it's tempting to sight the replicability of the moment (there are lots of opportunities for dungeon adventurers to oil hinges). But the truth is that this had become an in-joke for the group long before Agnarr did it again. The players would bring it up during sessions. They'd also joke about it in other social contexts. Ten years later, in fact, they're still doing so (much to the bewilderment of many an out-group listening to these conversations).

In sharing these campaign journals I've occasionally wondered about the degree to which these in-jokes translate to people who weren't "there" when it happened. But it's not unusual for long-term campaigns to develop these in-jokes. Like any in-joke, they build a sense of community and common purpose. They become both shibboleths and fond memorials of shared joy.

PTOLUS: RUNNING THE CAMPAIGN USING LORE BOOKS

[by Justin Alexander - October 30th, 2020](#)



DISCUSSING:

[*In the Shadow of the Spire – Session 22C: Workings of the Chaos Cult*](#)

Tee, meanwhile, had discovered that one of the wood panels on the floor was loose. Prying it up revealed a small cache containing two books and a gold ring bearing the device of a broken square. Ranthir was immediately distracted by the books. Eagerly taking them from Tee's hands he began flipping through them.

In this session we see a couple examples of what I refer to as **lore books**. These are generally one page handouts (although it's fine if they end up being longer) that are given to the players when the PCs discover a book with significant information:

If you want to see a particularly large number of examples, check out the [Books of the Los Angeles Cult](#) and [Savitree's Research](#) from the [Alexandrian Remix of Eternal Lies](#). (I produced a, frankly speaking, ludicrous number of these for that campaign. To rather good effect in actual play, but I wouldn't recommend it as an example of my standard practice.)

In practice, these handouts more or less serve as an executive summary for a book that doesn't actually exist. (If you're not familiar with these, they really do exist: People pay services to read books – usually business-related books – and produce brief summaries that can be quickly digested without reading the full book. This didn't make a lot of sense to me until I realized just how much endless, repetitive blather can be found in these books. Although I'm always curious if this is *because* the authors of these books know that they're just going to get boiled down to a set of highlights... But I digress. The nice advantage to this is that you can find any number of resources on line about how to write effective executive summaries.)

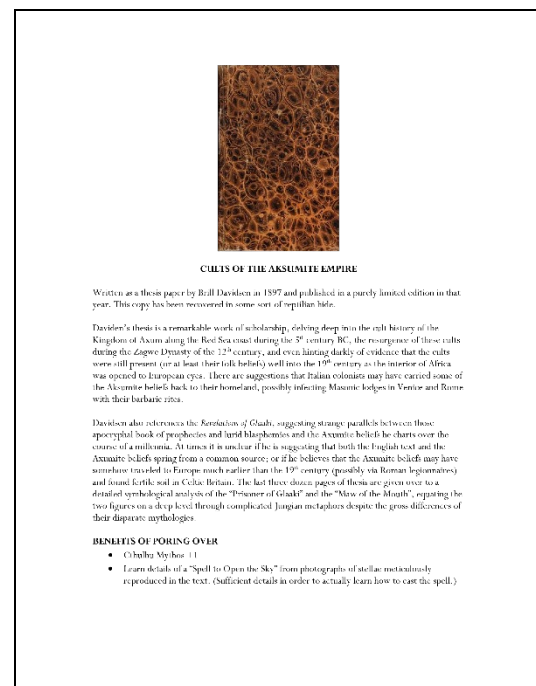
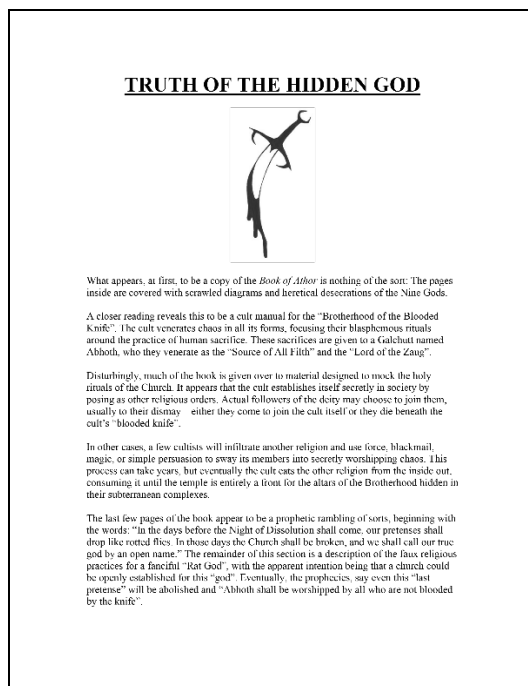
One significant divergence between my technique and the writing of an executive summary is that I will usually also discuss the actual physical interaction with the book. For example:

This slim, peculiar volume purports to be “a dream woven from the true and factual accounts of many diverse peoples of the world,” but it is rather difficult to separate what is meant to be scholarship from fancy. It is perhaps notable that the author’s name has been savagely crossed out on every page on which it would normally appear with a thick, dark ink, making its recovery utterly impossible. The volume’s only other distinguishing mark is an imprimatur placing its publication in Shanghai.

Or:

This slim folder of supple hide, clasped shut with a length of emerald green ribbon, contains a dozen or so individual sheets of parchment. Written in an archaic – almost alien – form of the common tongue, they tell a sad and cautionary tale.

The idea, of course, is to communicate the sensation of actually reading the book to the player.



“Why not just write the entire book and give it to them as a handout?” ...you’re adorable. But, seriously, I get asked this with surprising frequency, despite the answer seeming to be blindingly obvious: Writing a 50,000 or 100,000 word book as a handout is not necessarily out of the question (if it were to be a centerpiece of an entire campaign, for example), but is certainly not an endeavor to be undertaken trivially. And even if I were to write such a thing, pausing the campaign to allow the player(s) to read book-length confabulism would be to change on recreational activity into a fundamentally different one.

Conversely, though, why not forego the entire exercise and simply give the players the pertinent clue?

First, this is a variation of the [Matryoshka search technique](#): Simply telling the players what they find is a less engaging and less entertaining experience than the players actually plucking the information out of the “book” (even if it is just a summary).

Second, these lore books can be densely packed with information: Not just the clue (or clues) that can lead the PCs to a new revelation, but also deeper lore about the game world that can provide a broader context for the merely procedural action. (It's significant that a lore book inherently hits on several of the techniques discussed in [Random GM Tips: Getting the Players to Care.](#))

Third, it's easier to *hide* clues in the full text of a lore book. It's deeply unsatisfying for the players when the GM says something like, "Oh my gosh! You remember reading something about this in the *Unaussprechlichen Kulturen!*" Conversely, it's VERY satisfying when a player suddenly shouts out, "Oh my god! We read about this! Hang on, let me grab the book!"

(In a similar fashion, lore books also offer the opportunity to present puzzles which must be solved. Sometimes this "puzzle" is cross-referencing information across several lorebooks obtained over time.)

Fourth, the physical handout makes it easier for players to reference the key information from the book and to refresh their memory whenever they choose. (This goes beyond merely lore books, but if there's particularly crucial information – or information that will be relevant across many different sessions – putting it in the form of a handout is a very good idea.)

Fifth, it's frankly just a more immersive experience for the players. They may not *actually* be reading the book, but it *feels* like it. Plus, a book that you just describe verbally is a transient experience. But a book that's physically *at the table* – even if it's just in the form of a piece of paper – really and truly *exists*. Just the act of players saying things like, "Who has the *Fragments of Bal-Sagoth*? I want to check what it has to say about Gol-Goroth," or "Remember when we read *The Book of Mrathrach*?" is significant.

TIPS & TRICKS

Writing a lore book is more art than science, but here are a few things to keep in mind.

I almost always try to **include a picture**. In the case of the chaos lorebooks from *In the Shadow of the Spire*, that was frequently a cult sigil or the image of a chaos creature that was the subject of the book. In the case of *Eternal Lies* this was almost always the cover of the book. (These days it's trivial to find scanned images of antique books online that can be repurposed with little or not image manipulation.) Visuals are nice in any case, but there's also a base utility here: The image makes the handout distinct, not only in the players' memories, but also when they need to find it again among their various notes and handouts in the future.

To establish the style of the book or to capture the enigmatical nature of the "source" text, include **quotations**. These can be short fragments or lengthy passages, depending on both your inspiration and need. For example:

The last few pages of the book appear to be a prophetic rambling of sorts, beginning with the words, "In the days before the Night of Dissolution shall come, our pretenses shall drop like rotted flies. In those days the Church shall be broken, and we shall call our true god by an open name."

Here the lengthier passage captures the unique quality (and also vaguery) of the religious imagery. Conversely:

A closer reading quickly reveals that these deformities – referred to as "the touch of the ebon hand" – are venerated by the writers as the living personification of chaos incarnate.

In this case, I could have just as easily dropped the quotation marks. But including them presents a little "window" into the full text through which the player can project themselves.

As I mentioned before, describe **the experience of reading the book**. This can be the physicality of the book itself, but you can also relate the sequencing or revelation of knowledge (e.g., “a closer reading quickly reveals” or “on the final pages”).

You can prepare **multiple versions of the text**, with different versions being “unlocked” under certain circumstances. For example, you might have one handout that describes the physical characteristics of a drow lore book, and another which only becomes available once the PCs are able to read the drow language. A particular insight might require the character to have a particular skill, or a skill of a high enough level. Or there might be a hidden puzzle in the initial handout which, if the player can solve it, will allow them to discover additional layers of meaning in the text (provided in an additional or expanded handout).

You can combine (and expand) these last two ideas by presenting **different editions** of the same book. This is a common conceit with Mythos texts, for example. Thus the players can find an expurgated or damaged copy of a book early in the campaign, and then find a more complete copy (or one with an alternate ending) later. **Marginalia** can also be used to distinguish individual copies of a book.

Books can also **cross-reference** other books. Usually these cross-references don’t really “exist” (there’s not a lore book prepped for them), but in other cases these additional sources (often ripe with deeper information) will crop up later in the campaign. If you’re running a game in the real world, it can sometimes be fun to cross-reference real books.

WRITING THE BOOK

In terms of figuring out what information should be in a lore book, the process is basically part and parcel with plotting out the revelations of a scenario or campaign.

A key insight, however, is that the book should generally not just blandly state the conclusion you want the PCs to make. Instead of writing the conclusion, you are writing the *clue* which will let the players figure out the conclusion. It’s a subtle difference, but a meaningful one. Often I achieve this effect by presenting the information in an oblique or mythic manner. (For an example of how complicated and interwoven this can be, you might trace the references – both direct and oblique – to Azathoth in the *Eternal Lies* lore books.)

Along the same lines, it is often useful if the key information is *not what the book is primarily about*. Or, to think of it in a different way, the primary goal of the fictional author of the book is not to communicate the key information. Write the lore book as a description of what the book is – a scholastic study of Byzantine emperors, a 19th century poetry collection, a manual describing elven funeral practices – and then drop the campaign-relevant information as an aside or one detail among many or an example serving a purpose in the text distinct from that to which the PCs will put it (or interpret it).

(This is not universally true. It can often be just fine to have a book whose primary function is to tell people about the very thing that the PCs need to know. This is particularly true if the lore book is being used to convey a great deal of pertinent information. I often think of these as a “briefing documents,” and the two lore books in the current session – *Truth of the Hidden God* and *Touch of the Ebon Hand* – are of this nature.)

Lore books don’t have to be just about clues, either. I often build mechanical benefits or character advancement opportunities into lore books.

- GUMSHOE games have a great mechanic for this in the form of dedicated pool points, so that if a player has the book with them it can mechanically benefit their investigations. This also has the nice effect of procedurally adding additional content to the book beyond the initial summary in response to player-initiated actions.)

- D&D spell books are an easy example. Relatively simple handouts containing the spell lists from captured spell books can offer a surprisingly rich amount of game play.

This is a great way to introduce homebrew or supplementary content into a campaign, particularly for players who aren't typically interested in that sort of thing. I've used lore books to introduce new feats, new spells, new class features, and even whole new mechanical sub-systems.

My last piece of advice is this: **Get specific**. Lore books with a narrow focus are often more interesting than general cyclopedias. But even as you're writing out a broad summary of what the book is about, pepper it with specific examples. Instead of having a book that's "about haunted houses," give examples of specific haunted houses. That specificity is what will make the lore book come alive.