SCRIPT – ADVANCED GAMEMASTERY: SPEAK WITH DEAD MYSTERIES

by Justin Alexander – March 10th, 2021

The PCs are members of Dweredell's Guard. They've been called in to investigate the scene of a bloody murder: A maester of the Guild has been killed in his counting house and a large sum of gold and dwarf-etched rubies have gone missing.

You've concocted a truly devilish mystery which will slowly draw the party into the darkest depths of the corruption which clutches at the heart of the city. But just a couple of minutes after the PCs show up, they cast a *speak with dead* spell and the victim quickly explains the whole scheme to them.

A murder mystery in D&D? It's impossible. The PCs will just cast a divination spell!

… but don't crumple up your campaign notes just yet.

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So you want to run a murder mystery in D&D, but you're frustrated because the *speak with dead* spell makes the whole thing pointless.

I've seen this sentiment a lot, but it's never really made any sense to me: The act of investigating a mystery is one by which you reveal that which is unknown. When we talk about a PC casting a *speak with dead* spell, we're describing a situation in which the players reveal that which is unknown – i.e., they investigate the mystery.

But then, oddly, we're supposed to conclude that they can't investigate the mystery because they've investigated the mystery.

Part of the problem here is something I talked about in my video on Mysteries in RPGs: There is a natural impulse when designing a mystery to hold back information. This makes sense because a mystery seems to be defined by a lack of information – the detective *doesn't* know who the murderer is. But in reality, a mystery is not about the PCs missing information; it's about the PCs *acquiring* information.

Let me put this another way.

Strip the magic out of this scenario. Imagine that you've designed a mystery scenario in which there's a witness to the crime. The PCs turn to this witness and say, "Who killed him?" and the witness says, "It was Bob."

And it turns out Bob is standing right there, so the PCs arrest him. End of mystery.

You wouldn't conclude from this that you can't do mystery scenarios just because people can talk to each other, right?

Is it just the fantastical nature of the *speak with dead* spell that causes the problem?

Well, imagine yourself as a Game Master in 1858 running a science fiction game with security cameras. You might say to yourself, "How am I supposed to a design a mystery scenario when there are cameras everywhere?! They can just see who did the crime!"

But modern criminals, of course, simply design their crimes to bypass or deceive the security cameras.

To this end, you may see people suggesting that you nerf the spell to one degree or another. (Corpses that arbitrarily refuse to answer questions, for example.) But nothing is more frustrating to a player than to have their abilities and their smart choices blocked because the GM has some preconceived notion of how they're *supposed* to be investigating the crime.

So your first and best answer is to simply reward the use of the spell: Casting *speak with dead* on the corpse should give the PCs a meaningful clue. The clue, of course, does not have to be – and almost certainly shouldn't be – the whole solution to the mystery.

It's likely to be a lead: The victim didn't know the killer, but he recognized the badge they were wearing or the weapon they used. Or they didn't see the killer at all, but they do have a list of people they're pretty sure wanted to kill them and they'd love to share that with the investigators from beyond the grave.

People in the game world know that *speak with dead* spells exist, so it makes sense that they'll plan their murders to take those spells into account: They'll find ways to conceal their identity. They'll strike from a distance. Or use poison. They may even find ways to *use* the spell to frame other people. For example, imagine a murder scenario where the victim thinks one of the PCs actually IS the murderer because the perpetrator used a *polymorph* spell!

But the precautions the bad guys take to thwart the spell can become clues in and of themselves. For example, who has access to a *polymorph* spell? What poison was used and where could it have been acquired? And those clues are the reward that the PCs receive for using their ability.

If you do decide to nerf the spell, though, try to do so in a way that makes the scenario more interesting: For example, the spell doesn't work on corpses that have been made undead, so the killer turned the victim into a wight. The PCs will have to kill the wight before they can investigate the crime scene. Or the killers have hidden the corpse's head and part of the investigation becomes finding it so that they can cast the spell.

These approaches often turn the use of the spell itself into the reward: You killed the wight, and that gives you the opportunity to cast your spell and have a moment of awesome. Rather than being told that they can't use their cool ability, the player is instead having a spotlight shone on how important it is.

This same basic advice can generally be applied to other divination spells, too.

You can cast a divination spell yourself by hitting the Subscribe button: It will magically alert you every time a new video is posted. Your sixth sense is probably also telling you that I'm about to say you should like the video and leave a comment, too.

If you haven't seen it already, check out my video about running mystery scenarios in RPGs for more information about designing clues, building revelation lists, and the secrets of the Three Clue Rule. You can also check out the Font of All-Knowledge down below, where you'll find some links to other tips for designing mystery scenarios. There'll also be a link to my Patreon, where you can help support new videos in the future!

Good gaming! This is Justin Alexander, and I hope to see you at the table!