Rulings in Practice: Traps
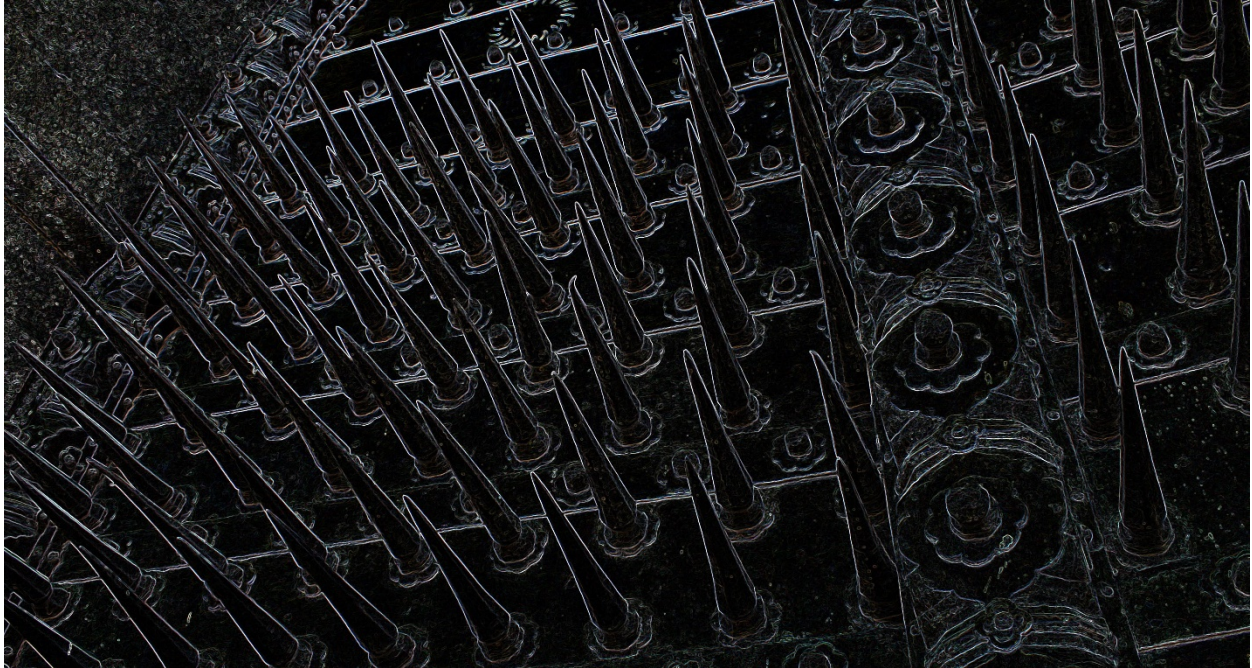
by Justin Alexander – August 12th, 2020

People have a problem with traps: They're boring.

Not only are they boring when they're triggered — with the DM arbitrarily telling you to make a saving throw at the penalty of suffering some minor amount of damage — they engender boring play by encouraging players to turtle up and methodically, laboriously, and excruciatingly examine every square inch of the dungeon in torrid bouts of pace-murdering paranoia.

And if you feel this way, you're in illustrious company. Here's Gary Gygax giving some of the worst GMing advice you'll hopefully ever read (*Dungeon Master's Guide*, 1979):

> *Assume your players are continually wasting time (thus making the so-called adventure drag out into a boring session of dice rolling and delay) if they are checking endlessly for traps and listening at every door. If this persists, despite the obvious displeasure you express, the requirement that helmets be doffed and mail coifs removed to listen at a door, and then be carefully replaced, the warnings about ear seekers, and frequent checks for wandering monsters (q.v.), then you will have to take more direct part in things. Mocking their over-cautious behavior as near cowardice, rolling huge handfuls of dice and then telling them the results are negative, and statements to the effect that: "You detect nothing, and nothing has detected YOU so far—" might suffice. If the problem should continue, then rooms full of silent monsters will turn the tide, but that is the stuff of later adventures.*

Uh… yeah. Do literally none of that. But you can feel Gygax's palpable frustration with the style of play his own killer dungeons had created boiling off the page.

Despite this, traps are a staple of *Dungeons & Dragons*. They date back to the earliest days of the hobby and they remain a prominent part of the game's culture and its adventures. In fact, if you go back to the '70s and '80s you'll find that traps weren't just tolerated, they were gleefully celebrated.

Is that because people were clueless back then? They were just fooling themselves into thinking they liked traps?

No, in fact. It turns out that traps used to be different.

We'll start by looking at *how* they were different, and then we'll talk about why that's important.

QUICK HISTORICAL SURVEY

If you look all the way back to the original edition of D&D in 1974, there are three things to note:

1. Thieves didn't exist yet, and there were no skills (or other checks) that could be used to find or disable traps.
2. Traps did not automatically trigger. Instead, they triggered on a roll of 1 or 2 on a d6. (In other words, any time someone walked down a hallway with a trap in it, there was only a 1 in 3 chance the trap would actually go off.)
3. Carefully searching an area for a trap took 1 turn. This was a *substantial* systemic cost, because the DM made a wandering monster check (with a 1 in 6 chance) every single turn.

In *Supplement 1: Greyhawk* (1975), the thief class was added. There was now a skill check that could be made to find and disable traps.

AD&D (1977-79) dropped the 1 in 3 chance of a trap triggering. This mechanic was still commonly found in published modules of the era, however, and, therefore, remained part of the meme-sphere for a time. However, as play moved away from open table megadungeons and DMs increasingly ran disposable dungeons designed for a single traverse, the 1 in 3 chance meant that some traps would never be encountered. The idea of PCs not seeing every single scrap of material in a scenario became a sort of heresy, and this mechanic phased out.

The use of wandering monster checks also became deprecated. First by significantly reducing the frequency of checks and, later, often eliminating the wandering monster check entirely. This eliminated the system costs associated with searching anywhere and everywhere.

Over the course of 2nd Edition, modules slowly standardized trap stat blocks. 3rd Edition then incorporated these into the DMG (actually presenting the most extensive resource of pre-built traps seen in a core rulebook up to that point). Whereas previously the presentation of traps had been organic and narrative, it was now largely formalized into a check-or-damage mechanical format.

3rd Edition also substantially reduced the amount of time required to search an area for traps from 1 turn (10 minutes) to, generally, 1 round.

Jumping to 5th Edition, we discover both the worst advice and some good advice for running traps jammed together on the same page.

The worst advice is the mechanical structure: Passive Wisdom (Perception) checks determine whether anyone notices the trap. If they do, an Intelligence (Investigation) allows the character to figure out how to disable it. And then a Dexterity (Thieves' Tools) check determines whether they can actually disable it.

In other words, by 5th Edition the mechanical resolution of a trap has devolved into an entirely automatic sequence of mechanical interactions which the players neither initiate nor make meaningful choices during.

No wonder people think traps are boring! You could do this with ANY element of the game and it would be boring! Imagine if every social interaction was resolved with a passive Charisma check to initiate the conversation, a Wisdom (Insight) check to determine what you should say to them, and a Charisma (Persuasion) check to see if you say it successfully.

Both the fiction and the mechanics have atrophied, and the fiction-mechanics cycle has broken down.

The good advice is this bit:

> *Foiling traps can be a little more complicated. Consider a trapped treasure chest. If the chest is opened without first pulling on the two handles set in it sides, a mechanism inside fires a hail of poison needles toward anyone in front of it. After inspecting the chest and making a few checks, the characters are still unsure if it's trapped. Rather than simply open the chest, they prop a shield in front of it and push the chest open at a distance with an iron rod. In this case, the trap still triggers, but the hail of needles fires harmlessly into the shield.*

Why is this good advice? And what does it mean to actually put this advice into practice?

HOW TRAPS WORK

Let's briefly sum up how traps used to work:

1. There was a cost associated with initiating a search, so players had to make deliberate and specific choices about when and where to look for traps.
2. The 1 in 3 mechanic made the outcome of even identical traps less predictable: It wasn't always the guy in front who triggered the trap. Sometimes it would be the last person in line. Or maybe the trap would go off in the middle of the group. Or you might walk past it safely on your way into the dungeon only to trigger it as you were desperately trying to run back out again. Completely different dynamics (and experiences) in each case.
3. There were no mechanics, so players *had* to creatively interact with a trap in order to both find and deal with it. And, on the flip-side, this also forced DMs to creatively define the nature of the trap beyond skill check DCs.

Let's start with the **cost**. If you want to avoid every expedition being slowed to a snail's crawl by paranoia (or players simply feeling resentful that they have to choose between having fun and avoiding an intermittent damage tax), then there needs to be a cost associated with searching so that the players need to strategically decide when it's worthwhile to pay that cost. In other words, the cost forces the players to make meaningful (and interesting) choices.

This cost will usually take the form of time: Time wasted searching for traps makes you vulnerable to other threats. Wandering monster checks are one way of modeling an environment filled with active threats that can find the PCs. Adversary rosters are another. Any form of time limit can be effective, however, as long as the searching chews up meaningful chunks of that time.

Alternatively, recognize that there is **no cost** in the current situation and, therefore, no reason for the PCs to *not* laboriously search every inch and be as safe as possible. This usually means that no meaningful choices are being made during these searches, which is what *The Art of Pacing* describes as **empty time**. You want to skip past that empty time and get to the next meaningful choice. I recommend using Let It Ride techniques here.

> *Note: This may not always be the right call. If the players are having fun making those meticulous decisions, then those ARE meaningful choices and it's OK to live in that moment. Similarly, these choices can also be used to effect. I've run horror scenarios, for example, where the fact that the PCs have been reduced to terrified paranoia is 100% the desired emotional space, and cutting past those moments of paranoia wouldn't be the right call. The thing you're trying to avoid here is boredom.*

Next let's talk about the **trigger uncertainty**. I don't think it's universally true that traps should have unreliable triggers, but it's a concept that's worth playing around with if you haven't tried it. There's a lot of fun stuff to be discovered in play here. To a large extent, you can just graft the old 1 in 3 mechanic back in. (Or slightly different odds, like a coin-flip.) Alternatively, you might have a trap trigger 100% of the time, but randomly determine which party member or rank in the marching order it afflicts.

Finally, there's **creative engagement** with the players. This is vital. If all you can do with a trap is make a skill check to Search for it, make a skill check to Disable it, and/or make a saving throw to avoid taking damage from it, then the trap will be boring. The players *have* to be able to creatively engage with traps the same way they can creatively engage other aspects of the game world.

However, achieving this does NOT require you to simply throw out the mechanics.

PLAYER EXPERTISE

In *The Art of Rulings*, I actually use the example of a trapped chest to demonstrate the fundamental principles of making a ruling in an RPG because properly adjudicating a trap is an almost perfect example of how a GM can use the mechanics of an RPG effectively. To briefly review:

- Passive observation is automatically triggered.
- Player expertise activates character expertise.
- Player expertise can trump character expertise.

If we look at 5th Edition's mechanical method for traps, it exists entirely in the first two categories: Traps are detected through passive Wisdom (Perception) checks that do not require a declaration from the players (i.e., passive observation is automatically triggered). Analyzing the trap and then disabling it presumably require player declarations, but the rote formulation is the most basic example of player expertise activating character expertise. It requires no meaningful decision-making on their part: You detect a trap, you say you're analyzing it, and then you say you're disabling it.

To make traps more interesting, what we want to do is push that entire interaction up the hierarchy: Instead of starting with passive observation and ending with shallow declarations of player expertise, we want to start with the players making meaningful choices and end by opening the door to players creatively figuring out how to trump the basic skill check.

Start by **requiring player expertise** to search for traps. You can use 5th Edition's rules for passive checks if you want (I'm not a fan), but it should still require the players to say, "I'm going to check for traps." As we've discussed, of course, there has to be a **cost** to this declaration for it to be meaningful. Otherwise it's just a rote catechism of dungeoncrawling (make sure you say it or the DM will getcha!). What you want is for the characters to be making broad strategic choices about when and where and why they're choosing to search (and, conversely, when and why and where they choose NOT to search).

In order for this to be effective, the placement of traps has to *make sense*. As the 3rd Edition *Dungeon Master's Guide* says:

The solution is to place traps only when appropriate. Characters and creatures put traps on tombs and vaults to keep out intruders, but traps can be annoying an inappropriate in well-traveled areas. An intelligent creature is never going to build a trap that it might fall victim to itself.

If the placement of traps is random or capricious, there's nothing for the players to base their decisions on. The result will be either frustration or resignation.

As a rule of thumb, you'll know you've gotten the balance right if the players start actively trying to collect intel on traps. (They might question prisoners, check blueprints, cast auguries, etc.) If they're doing that, then they both value those strategic decisions AND have faith in the logic and consistency of the game world.

Design Note: You can also explore – possibly at the prompting of your players – resolution options somewhere between not searching and detailed searching. An old school example is tapping a ten foot pole in front of you while walking down a dungeon corridor. This standard operating procedure probably doesn't reduce the party's speed, but still has a chance of prematurely triggering a trap before someone walks into it. This synced well with the old 1 in 3 chance of triggering a trap: The GM could simply add such a check for the pole-tapping (or perhaps a 1 in 6 chance to reflect the pole was less likely than a full-grown person to effect certain triggers).

The method thus had a significantly reduced cost (in gold and encumbrance costs for the pole itself, plus a penalty to stealth tests from the tap-tap-tapping), but a similarly reduced efficiency in terms of actually detecting the trap.

If the players are expressing a desire for some sort of "extra caution, but not so extra that we have to pay the normal cost for a detailed search," ask them what that looks like. Maybe they'll come up with pole-tapping. Maybe they'll come up with something completely different! Then see if there's a way you can model that with a minor cost and/or minor benefit.

Another option is [Matryoshka search techniques](#) coupled to passive observation. Rather than saying "you found a trap," you can instead use 3rd Edition-style Spot checks or 5th Edition-style passive Perception checks to incorporate details into your description of the dungeon which, if investigated in more detail, would revel the trap. (For example, you might mention the line of decorative holes running down the length of the hall… which turn out to be the firing tubes for an arrow trap.)

PLAYER CREATIVITY

When it comes to the trap itself, the description of the trap should not be limited to a mechanical effect. Understand how the trap works and communicate that to the players (either in response to their search efforts or when the trap is triggered). It is these details which allow the players to engage the trap creatively – to "get their Indiana Jones on." This is what begins to move a trap away from being a rote mechanical interaction and turns it into an interesting and interactive experience.

There's no hard-and-fast rule for this, but if the PCs start doing stuff like scavenging the tension ropes that reset a spike trap in order to tie up a kobold prisoner or draining the alchemist's fire through the nozzles of a flame trap to pour down the arrow holes of another, then you've nailed it.

You'll also start seeing the PCs thinking about ways to bypass the trap, often in ways that also bypass the mechanical resolution of disabling the trap. (This is where player expertise trumps character expertise!) For example, they might use chalk to outline a pit trap so that everyone can walk safely around it. Or put a board in front of the arrow holes in the wall. Alternatively, some of these solutions might simply shift the mechanical resolution: Placing a board across a pit, but for example, might require Dexterity (Acrobatics) checks for everyone to walk across instead of Dexterity (Thieves' Tools) to disable.

And if the PCs *do* disable the trap, I recommend asking them how they actually do it. (Or, at the very least, describe it specifically when narrating resolution.) When they disable the pit trap so they wedge it open? Do they nail a board over the top of it? Do they wedge it with spikes so that it can support their weight one at a time? The difference will matter if they end up getting chased back down that hall by ogres!

Getting this type of specificity can sometimes be challenging with magical traps. Check out *Random GM Tips: Disarming Magical Traps* for some thoughts on how you can make these more interesting than just saying, "It's magic!"

ADVANCED TECHNIQUE: LOCAL THEMES

The traps in a particular complex (or in one section of a larger environment, like a megadungeon) should follow certain patterns/themes/principles: The kobolds cover their pit traps with woven grass mats. The archmage painted rooms in his sanctum containing magical traps purple so that his servants would know to avoid them. Traps throughout the Storm Lord's stronghold can be bypassed using the current passphrase. The smell of gas warns of the risk of explosion.

In terms of the game world, this obviously makes sense: The kobold use the materials they have available. The archmage and the Storm Lord have practical considerations. The threat of gas usually threatens an entire mine or cave complex.

In terms of game design, these patterns allow the players to learn from their experiences. As they learn the patterns, the players are gaining expertise which they can then *use* (either to activate their character's expertise or to trump it). "Do I see any black rubies inset into the walls? No? Okay, we're probably fine."

When executed well, this technique can shape the entire experience of a dungeon, creating interest even in areas WITHOUT traps. For example, I had a dungeon filled with sideways-gravity pit traps (that looked just like side corridors until you walked in front of them and then--- Ahhh!). Once the PCs knew they existed, they had to (a) figure out how to get people out of them, (b) figure out how to get across them safely, and (c) spent the rest of the dungeon paranoid about every side corridor they came to. This particular group figured out that they could tie a weight to a rope and throw it into an intersection to see what would happen. Later, when they were running from a monster, they saw an unexplored side corridor up ahead and suddenly had a unique dilemma to grapple with.

Once you set these patterns, you can also play with them through variations and red herrings: We know that rooms with black rubies set into the walls are dangerous, but now there's a room with red rubies. Is it safe? Will the red rubies have some different effect?

ADVANCED TECHNIQUE: FORTUNE-IN-THE-MIDDLE

We've spent a lot of time talking about how traps can be detected and disabled, but what happens when they actually get triggered?

Design traps that are more interesting than "single mechanical interaction = damage or no damage."

Framing trap interactions using fortune-in-the-middle techniques can be useful here:

- "You hear the click of a pressure plate under your boot, what do you do?"
- "Suddenly arrows start shooting out of the walls! What do you do?"
- "There's a sharp hiss and green gas begins shooting out of nozzles in the ceiling. What do you do?"

Even if the ultimate outcome is still damage-or-no-damage (as with the arrow trap), giving the players a chance to actively react to the trap as it's being triggered makes the trap more interesting and engaging.

I find this to be true even when 95% of the possible reactions are likely to end up being mechanically modeled the same way: Drop to the floor, dive for cover, raise your shield, try to grab the arrow out of the air… It probably all boils down to a Dodge action that gives me disadvantage when making the attack roll for the arrows, right? Despite this, the player is actively engaged with the game world and a vivid picture is being collaboratively painted.

> *Random Tip: In situations like this, have the player roll the disadvantage d20. I'm indifferent to doing this in actual combat and it's statistically irrelevant, of course, but it's another way of getting the player engaged in the trap's resolution.*

This technique can often be particularly effective if the player has incomplete information on what they're reacting to: They hear a click or a hiss; or there's a sudden change in air pressure; or the sound of clockworks ticking down behind the wall. Do they freeze? Do they turtle? Do they run? Which way?

You might notice that *any* trap is resolved using a fortune-in-the-middle technique when it's found before triggering: You've found a pressure plate in the floor… how do you disable it or bypass it?

Fortune-in-the-middle is also one of the reasons why the classic pit trap remains so popular: If you trigger the trap and fall into the pit, you are immediately faced with the question of how you're going to get *out* of the pit. (And this can range from a relatively simple solution to a fiendishly difficult one depending on the nature of the pit.)

ADVANCED TECHNIQUE: DYNAMIC TRAPS

Any trap that presents the PCs with a new situation or dilemma is gold, and you can extend that response/problem-solving interaction beyond a single resolution point with dynamic traps.

Pay particular attention to traps that create or change the environment. Classic examples include flooding rooms (which you can extend to flooding an entire dungeon), confusion gas that turns friend against friend, or a trap that releases monsters that the PCs now have to fight. The trap is merely the instigation for a larger and more involved interaction.

Another example are the old school traps that teleport the entire group (or a single PC) to a different location: Not only do they create the immediate, ongoing, short-term complication of needing to figure out where you are (and how to get out!), but in the long-term such a trap can actually turn into a *resource* (with the PCs using it to quickly move around the dungeon).

Also: Traps that result in one of the PCs getting stuck immediately compel the group to figure out how to solve the problem. Consider a trap that causes anyone walking within a 10-foot square to fall into a magical coma. Somebody walks in and falls unconscious. Somebody goes to help them: BAM! Also unconscious. Can the rest of the group figure out how to get them out of there without succumbing themselves?

A variant of this is the trap wall that slides down and seals off a room or corridor. This one is interesting because its effect can vary greatly depending on *how* the PCs trigger it (and combines well with trigger uncertainty): If the scout triggers it, they're now trapped on the far side. Or it might split the group in half. Or the whole group might get through and the net effect is that they can no longer backtrack (unless they reverse the trap or tear down the wall).

On that note, clearly triggering something *and then not knowing what the trigger did* is a great away to get the players engaged in paranoid speculation and anxiety. Maybe it's just a broken trap. Maybe it caused walls to shift positions throughout the dungeon. Maybe it was an alarm summoning monsters from afar.

On the other hand, a non-obvious trigger with a non-local effect can create satisfying puzzles for the PCs. It may take them a long time to figure out that the walls are shifting every time they walk across the cartouche of the Grey Emperor.

So, to briefly sum up, think about traps that:

- Create new situations/dilemmas.
- Change the environment or create a new environment.
- Can also be a resource for the PCs once they figure it out.
- Endanger or imprison the victim of the trap.
- Have varied effect depending on position/circumstance.
- Have non-local (possibly wide-ranging) effects when triggered.

ADVANCED TECHNIQUE: ONGOING EFFECTS

GMs often fall into thinking of traps as bang-bang interactions. (Pun intended.) You hit the tripwire, an arrow fires from the wall, and the trap is done.

But it's also possible for a trap to pose an ongoing threat or hazard. For example, if a non-drow enters the sacred hall, the statues of Lloth in the entryway activate and begin filling with the entrance webs while an alarm sounds. Or the turret of spinning blades that rises up into the room, once activated, continues spinning for an hour.

Obviously such traps are often dynamic ones, with the ongoing effect creating the new situation or dilemma for the PCs to solve.

This can also include traps that reset. Traps that instantly reset (and can trigger every time someone walks over the pressure plate, for example) are fun, but traps that take 2-3 rounds to reset (so that you might think it was a one-shot trap only for it to reactivate and zap you again) can be devilish puzzles for the players to figure out.

Longer reset intervals are also possible, but are generally only meaningful in jaquayed dungeons where the PCs are likely to come back to the trap later. Longer intervals might also mean a trap that needs to be manually reset (i.e., the monsters have to come by and do it), and this can even include traps that have been disabled by the PCs (i.e., the monsters find their sabotage and repair it).

ADVANCED TECHNIQUE: TRAPS AS COMPLICATION

Traps don't have to be isolated encounters. They can be incorporated into larger, move diverse encounters to add interest and complexity. For example, fighting an ogre chieftain in a big room is fine. Fighting an ogre chieftain in a big room filled with pit traps (that the chieftain knows the location of, but the PCs don't!) is a very different and very memorable encounter!

This can be particularly true with dynamic traps and traps with ongoing effects. A trap that can be triggered halfway through an encounter and completely changes the character or tactical situation of that encounter is a great way to spice up a battle. Such trap-like effects can also be deliberately triggered by the bad guys (they don't have to wait for the PCs to trigger them accidentally!).

Running the dungeon as a theater of operations is great for this technique because *any* trap can dynamically become part of the tactical situation. Plus, once the *players* have learned to think of the dungeon like this, they'll start using the traps they find to their advantage! "Let's lure them back to the hall of alchemist's fire and then pull the pin Diego used to jam the triggering mechanism!"

We've been talking about traps being integrated into combat encounters, but that's not the only option. For example, traps can be combined with other traps to create cool, combinatory effects. A simple example I'm particularly fond of are pressure plates on the opposite sides of pit traps: You jump over the pit trap or climb out of it or disable it and walk across it… and then immediately trigger a trap on the far side.

(A *Bigby's hand* that shoves them back into the trap they just avoided is always hilarious if used sparingly.)

Keep in mind that such interactions can be themes in a particular dungeon: The players can learn to be cautious of the far side of pits in Leopold's Lair.

And what about other types of encounters? Could a nobleman lure victims into a *charm person* effect when negotiating? What about trying to solve a puzzle while an ongoing trap spits fire at you?

ADVANCED TECHNIQUE: NATURALLY OCCURRING "TRAPS"

We have a tendency to think of traps as designed mechanisms: Someone intentionally made the trap as a security measure.

But trap-like interactions can also be naturally occurring. Quicksand is the pulp classic, along with giant entangling lianas, spouts of lava, and icy crevasses covered by thin layers of snow.

If you're having difficulty getting into this mindset, think about how the effect of a designed trap could naturally occur:

- A pit trap might be floor or rock ledge that has become unstable.
- A *sleep* spell that targets everyone in a room might be a cavern filled with soporific fungus.
- A *fireball* trap can be a cavern filled with explosive gas

A related technique are dungeon features that were designed for a practical purpose, but which can be traps for the unwitting or unwary. ("What this lever in the old dwarven forge do? Ahhhhhh! Fire!") You can also have features that have been broken down and become hazards due to neglect and the passage of time.

ADVANCED TECHNIQUE: BROKEN AND SPENT TRAPS

Traps themselves can break down over time. The PCs can find their shattered and spent remnants as they explore the dungeon.

If you're running an open table, this sort of thing is happening organically all the time, with groups coming across the wreckage left by previous expeditions. In any case, these scenes often paint a story of what came before: The skeleton at the bottom of the open pit. The flame spout hacked apart by a magical blade. The arrow hole with a piton spiked through it.

As such, these cool dungeon details. But more than that, they are also an opportunity for the PCs to learn about the types of traps that might be found in the dungeon. They're an opportunity to gain expertise.

In many cases, traps don't actually need to be broken in order to contain (or be surrounded with) evidence of the carnage they've wrought in the past. (Or, conversely, the absence of any signs of activity in an otherwise busy complex can itself be a clue.)

TRAPS IN PRACTICE: RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK

Almost certainly the most famous sequence featuring traps is the beginning of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. So, bearing in mind *The Principle of Using Linear Mediums as RPG Examples*, let's take a look at what makes the sequence work.

TRAP 1 – COBWEBS. The first trap we see are actually the cobwebs filling the entrance. This an example of a naturally occurring trap (as opposed to one that was built). It's also, perhaps surprisingly, a dynamic trap. Rather than simply dealing damage, it instead releases monsters for Indy to deal with. In this case, the monsters are spiders:

In D&D we might imagine swapping these out for giant spiders, but it's really not necessary: What you have here are a bunch of spiders crawling over the PCs and they need to figure out how to get them off before getting bitten and poisoned.

TRAP 2 – SPIKE TRAP. Next up is a spike trap that shoots out from the wall to impale its unlucky victims. Somehow triggered by interrupting a beam of sunlight, this is clearly a magic trap and you'll need to use your Intelligence (Arcana) skill to detect it.

Indy "disables" this trap by triggering it in a controlled way. (Player expertise trumps character expertise and bypasses the normal mechanic.)

The spikes contain the corpse of a former explorer, telling the story of what has happened in this dungeon before.

The spike trap also has an ongoing effect: We know it has a delayed reset because Satipo, Indy's companion, triggers it while running back down the corridor later.

TRAP 3 – PIT TRAP. Next up we have a classic pit trap. This is actually an open pit, demonstrating that a trap doesn't necessarily need to be hidden in order to pose a dilemma for the PCs to overcome. (This conceit is probably underused in D&D.)

Instead of somehow disabling the pit, of course, Indy solves the problem by using his whip to swing across it. He easily makes his Dexterity (Acrobatics) check, but Satipo flubs his. Rather than immediately dropping him in the pit, however, the hypothetical GM uses fortune-in-the-middle to leave him dangling helplessly. Indy has to leap in with a Strength (Athletics) check to haul him in.

TRAP 4 – DART TRAP. Next we have the (probably poison) dart trap. Indiana Jones succeeds on his Intelligence (Investigation) check to find the trigger. Once he's identified one trigger (camouflaged with a covering of dirt), he can easily recognize the other triggers in the room. This is somewhat compressed, but is still demonstrates a local theme.

Jones once again decides not to disable the trap and instead makes a Dexterity (Acrobatics) check to make his across the room.

TRAP 5 – THE IDOL'S PEDESTAL. Everyone knows this one, right? Even if you haven't actually seen the movie, I feel like you already know this one: Indiana Jones tries to replace the idol with a sand-filled bag of equal weight to avoid triggering the trap.

(And if you haven't seen *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, I really can't emphasize enough how you should immediately stop reading this article and go do that. Not because of spoilers – we're just discussing the first scene here – but because you're missing out on something awesome.)

Something to note here is that Indiana Jones very specifically filled the bag with sand outside the temple. He *knew* this trap would be here. Remember when I said that you'll know you've gotten the balance right when the PCs start actively trying to collect intel on the traps they might encounter? And the pay-off will be memorable problem-solving (that, in this case, will resonate through a bajillion homages)?

Yeah. Like that.

This is also the first trap-related skill check Indiana Jones has failed. Notice that the failure doesn't zap him for damage!

Instead, we then have one of the greatest dynamic traps of all time as the entire temple begins to collapse! A whole new problem that prompts both Satipo and Indy to flee back out of the temple, retracing their steps through the same traps they came through to get here.

This is where the specificity with which the previous traps were detected and dealt with pays off a second time. This is why you want to avoid the simplicity of "a successful Disable check = the trap no longer exists." For example, if Jones had taken the time to disable the dart triggers as he entered the temple, he'd now have a clear path to exit. But he didn't, and now he doesn't have time to carefully pick his way through the traps.

His only option is to try to run out of the room so quickly that the darts can't hit him. We might model this as a Jones taking a Dodge action (so that the darts make attack rolls at disadvantage). Or maybe it makes more sense for Jones to make a Dexterity (Acrobatics) check at disadvantage to see if he can move fast enough.

(Notice how the same trap can be dealt with in different ways – both in the fiction and in the mechanics – because, once again, the nature of the trap is specific.)

We return to the pit. Because Jones specifically left his whip *in situ*, Satipo can use it to swing across. This time he makes his Dexterity (Acrobatics) check, but pulls the whip after him.

Now things get interesting, as Satipo demands that Indy throw him the idol before he'll throw him the whip. This is an example of how traps can be incorporated into non-combat scenes: This is a social dilemma and negotiation which is entirely predicated on the presence of the trap!

(We might ask ourselves how often this sort of thing *really* happens. But in pulp fiction? It happens *all the time*. When in doubt, dangle a loved one over a cauldron of boiling oil. Or negotiate a terrible price for the antidote to a poison dart.)

Satipo reneges on the deal, drops the whip, and leaves. "Adios, señor."

Indy takes a running start and makes a Strength (Athletics) check to just leap across it.

(What's that? 5th Edition uses flat jump distances instead of making you roll a check for it? Well, that would certainly make this moment incredibly boring. But it's not like D&D is based on pulp adventure

stories, so I'm sure perilous leaps won't come up that often and it therefore makes perfect sense for that to be the rule… Anyway, I digress.)

Indy fails his check, but the GM once again uses a fortune-in-the-middle technique (possibly prompted by a [partial failure](#)) and has him land on the far edge of the pit. He's going to have to try to climb up by grabbing a vine.

Another partial failure on the Strength (Athletics) check! He manages to grab the vine, but it's not secure and he nearly slides back into the pit before catching himself!

Here we see multiple traps being brought together for a combinatory effect: Not only is Jones trying to get past the pit trap, but there's a wall descending that will cut him off from the exit. He's only got 3 rounds before his exit is cut off, and he's burning through them with these failed checks!

Indy, of course, finally makes his Strength (Athletics) check and scrambles under the door, managing to grab his whip at the last minute. Running down the corridor he discovers that Satipo has, as we mentioned before, (a) made the strategic decision not to search for traps because the temple was collapsing around him and (b) failed to remember (via player expertise) that the spike trap was there.

(Once again, if they had disabled this trap instead of simply bypassing it on their way in, this would have played out very differently.)

This, of course, brings us to the other great iconic trap from this sequence:

TRAP 6 – BIG-ASS BOULDER. This may or may not be a new trap, actually. It's actually quite likely that the boulder is actually triggered by the idol's pedestal, being an example of a trap having a non-local effect in the dungeon and just one more step in the trap's wide-ranging "seal the temple" schtick.

Alternatively, it's possible the Indy did something to trigger the boulder as he was exiting. If so, this trigger probably only becomes active as a result of the trap on the idol's pedestal being triggered. (We didn't specifically discuss triggers that are only conditionally active, but it's a subset of trigger uncertainty.)

Indy then leaps through the spider webs (which have apparently not reset with more spiders) and hurtles out of the temple.

End of sequence.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Is this an example of a good D&D dungeon?

Probably not. It's too linear even for a short dungeon, in my opinion. (Although if you do have a relatively linear sequence with a lot of traps that you're going to force the players through, the fact that so many of the traps are immediately obvious or already known to Jones before he enters the dungeon – the webs, the pit, the idol's pedestal – may be a good tip: Put the interest on what the PCs *do* about the traps instead of whether or not they *find* the traps; and if there's no interest to be found there, then you probably need to fix that.)

But the point of the exercise, of course, is not the totality of dungeon design. It's about how we can bring cool traps to our tables.