# DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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## Making the Trains Run on Time
By Ed Greenwood

*How and where and when did the **Forgotten Realms** start? What's at the heart of Ed Greenwood's creation, and how does the Grand Master of the Realms use his own world when he runs **D&D** adventures for the players in his campaign? "Forging the Forgotten Realms" is a weekly feature wherein Ed answers all those questions and more.*

s a young boy, I was both a bookworm and an avid model railroader—largely of the armchair variety, which meant I didn't have a layout most of the time (though my dad did construct a massive 4-by-8-foot plywood "bed" that could be winched up to the basement ceiling and back down again). So I spent a lot of time devouring the latest issues of model railroading magazines, and doodling track plans—that is, how the tracks would be arranged, when I got around to properly setting up my layout (something I still haven't done). My dad advised me to make sure I included lots of sidings for switching and what he called "realistic operation," because "you'll quickly get tired of just running trains around and around a loop." He feared I would soon lose interest because my railroad would be like what bored teenagers do in a small rural town, driving their cars around without really going anywhere. As the saying goes, "You can only drive up and down Main Street so many times."

So just what does this have to do with the **Forgotten Realms?**

Well, that advice to provide for "realistic operation" caused me to create in my head a host of sites along the railway where imaginary boxcars were loaded, shipped to their destination, and emptied for another trip—moving things around from place to place in an effective manner. And that way of thinking was what inspired me to design the Sword Coast the way it looks on the maps of the Realms. South of the resource-rich northern coastal ports, there's this gulf (the Shining Sea) with a strategic trading island (Tharsult) spang in the middle of it, and lots of prosperous cities all around the gulf coasts (Calimshan, the Lake of Steam cities and Border Kingdoms, Sheirtalar, Lapaliiya, the Tashalar, largely untapped Chult—and beyond that, Lantan with its ongoing flood of inventions and devices).

Winds, currents, and obstacles such as dangerous shoals or pirates will affect trade routes, but those trade routes happen in the first place because there's a want for or a shortage of a particular good (lumber, metal, meat) in Place A, and a surplus of the same thing in Place B, so quantities can be shipped from A to B. The most practical way of doing that (overland or by sea or a combination, in the cheapest and usually fastest and generally shortest route) will over time become the preferred trade flow, which traders will use, and parasites (those who want to benefit from such trade flows without actually doing the work of gleaning, packaging, shipping, and selling) will seek to control. Sometimes such parasites are strategically located entities who levy tolls (the ferryman, the armed band that controls a bridge or ford), and sometimes they're governments that tax (and have patrols, guard posts, and navies to enforce blockades, prohibitions on certain goods, and high duties on others).

With Tharsult being "the" strategic point for all southern Sword Coast naval shipping trade, it's inevitable that some parasite would seek to control it. And slam full-tilt into some *other* parasite who was already controlling it.

Although the published Realms hasn't yet focused on the Shining Sea region much, the behind-the-scenes political and front-of-scenes open warfare to control Tharsult (and therefore dominate trade in the entire region) is a fascinating—and long—struggle, full of great adventuring possibilities. I set just one of my campaigns at the library down there, and its thirteen sessions were enough to uncover the fact that Calimshan had covertly tried to seize Tharsult no less than twenty-six times during the 1200s and 1300s, yet had failed every time, followed by commando-like reprisal raids emerging out of Tharsult and reaching deep into Calimshan to personally slay the Calishites responsible.

That campaign ended with the PCs reaching and taking down one crime lord who might have been behind the Calishite failures (or Tharsult's successful defenses, if you prefer): a mind flayer of unusual size and strength.

Some of the players in that campaign guessed at what I'll here reveal at last: Mind flayers control Tharsult. They don't rule it like others rule a realm, however. Tharsult's own trading councils keep law and order by hiring adventurers and running a small force of James Bond-like secret agents, rather than having a standing army that might get ideas about staging a coup. Tharsult's awesomely rich moneylenders make the place too vital to disrupt in the view of, say, an ambitious Tashlutan or a not-quite-retired adventurer ruling a small vest-pocket duchy in the Border Kingdoms.

The mind flayers don't believe in open tyranny. They believe in what my father would have called "keeping the trains running on time." They keep the trade routes open and busy, and unbridled trade proceeds apace (with Lantanna wonderworks flowing into mainland Faerûn constantly, providing "new toys for all," as Mirt once put it), because the illithids like it that way. Busy trade brings many new minds for them to feed on into their reach without effort, and enables them to operate almost unnoticed amid all the bustling greed of daily commerce.

That doesn't mean they operate unopposed. There are some rogue, outcast mind flayers based in the Lake of Steam, the Border Kingdoms, and even infiltrating Calimshan that want revenge on those that cast them out, and are continually sending raiding parties (hired adventurers) into Tharsult posing as legitimate traders (a deception that requires the hirelings to first make several runs over a season or so acting just as legitimate traders, and nothing else) to try to kill one of the well-hidden illithids that populate Tharsult.

If mind flayers are at work somewhere in the Realms, beholders aren't far away—sometimes as allies, but more often as foes who despise the illithid interlopers that interfere with their cattle ("cattle" in this case meaning the humans and demi-humans of the civilized surface Realms).

In my home Realms campaign, Elminster once lectured a few of the Knights of Myth Drannor (the PCs' adventuring band) on Faerûnian geopolitics, and a few of his words are relevant to any adventurer in the Realms: "Wherever one sees realms side by side and there is the slightest reason to wonder why they've not risen in wrathful war to destroy each other, long ago, one might suspect unseen monstrous hands at work. Usually eye tyrants, but betimes illithids or even dragons. Rarely does such happen with cabals of human wizards or any other sort of human group—because power-seeking humans are so fickle, grasping, and generally unreliable."

So dragons are involved too, eh? Interesting . . .

Which means it's time to get back to model trains and moving stuff around, and leave you hanging a little bit. (Bwa-ha-hah, and so forth.)

Back about the time I asked if I could pen the books that became *Code of the Harpers* and *Secrets of the Magisters*, I suggested a "pullout" centerfold game for **Dragon** magazine (somewhat like Tom Wham's great fun series of games, from the *Snits* to *Elefant Hunt* to *Awful Green Things from Outer Space*). I wasn't thinking of a humorous game, however. I wanted to do a Sword Coast sea trading game.

It would have a long, four-panel cardboard foldout map of the Sword Coast from the Shining Sea to Fireshear, with the seas divided up into areas (somewhat as they are in the classic *Diplomacy* game) that vary in size with the ease of sailing them (large if it's usually clear water and fair winds, small in tricky shoals, straits, and notoriously stormy seas).

As a player, you sail your ships (start with one, and build a fleet) from port to port, and pick the top card on the deck of cargo cards at each one. You can reject that card and waste a turn waiting to pick the next card in the deck, or take the card aboard, plus a provisions card, and sail off on your next turn to try to deliver that cargo. You win the game by piling up the most points from successfully delivered cargoes over a set time of ten years or sailing seasons. In the course of the game you might deal with ship repairs, bad weather, and the disfavor of Umberlee. And you can lose cargoes to pirates—even desperate fellow players "turning pirate" near the end of the game to try to overhaul the points leader.

Behind the game action, the mix of cargo cards, how many should be placed at each port, and the prices they are valued at (printed on the cards) would "teach" everyone how trade normally flows up and down the Sword Coast. If PCs entered a warehouse, the cargo cards could suggest what was currently stored in it.

And at any time when sea travel is involved in your campaign, you could haul out the board and "play the voyage," to see how many days it takes, if pirates attack or the ship founders, and so on.

For various reasons, that little game never saw the light of day. Yet the lesson it was intended to drive home remains important to succeeding as a merchant, an adventurer, or a ruler in the Realms: Money and power struggles follow the flow of trade. Therefore, so do business deals, and opportunities for employment as a guard or a spy or an extralegal strike force.

Not to mention James Bond-style "fixer" government agents. This king or that Grand Sceptanar may well be looking for a few good adventurers (because the mortality rate is so high). There are always agents of enemy lands to be eliminated or foiled, crime lords and overly ambitious nobles to be frustrated or intimidated, and formidable monsters and magical threats to be co-opted or destroyed. Because for rulers, a big part of staying on a throne is—yes—making the trains run on time.

## About the Author

**Ed Greenwood** is the man who unleashed the *Forgotten Realms* setting on an unsuspecting world. He works in libraries, and he writes fantasy, science fiction, horror, mystery, and romance stories (sometimes all in the same novel), but he is happiest when churning out Realmslore, Realmslore, and more Realmslore. He still has a few rooms in his house in which he has space left to pile up papers.