



Forging the Realms Archive | 1/11/2013



When Stuff Happens, What's a DM to Do?

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.*

In a tournament roleplaying situation, there's an unwritten but understood agreement that a prepared, preordained adventure must be undertaken. The player characters have a mission to accomplish or a problem to solve, in a limited time. It's not the occasion for wandering about casually, exploring the world in any and every direction with an eye out for things that look interesting and that could be investigated later. There won't be any "later."

In a campaign, however, players sometimes want to just wander about. Perhaps the real world has handed them enough stress and we-have-to-fix-this-right-now crises for the day, and they want to relax with the fame or riches or security they've earned in previous adventuring and just enjoy the scenery. They'd like to have some fun, dally, spend an evening talking with interesting NPCs, or catch up on their characters' day jobs or training or even investments.

If the characters are situated in one of the better-detailed locales in the Realms when they do this, you can easily indulge this. But what if play isn't unfolding in a spot where you're prepared to describe every window plant and chamber pot when the players turn whimsical?

And what about the times when players—not to be difficult or for a prank but as an unintentional result of the way events unfold—won't stick to expected patterns? I don't mean they are chafing at the restrictions of a linear plot, but rather that they are reacting unexpectedly, or their dice go ice cold, and the action takes a wildly unforeseen turn.

What doth a poor DM do?

There's always the time-honored surprise attack/unexpected challenge from out of nowhere ("*No one* expects the Spanish *Inquisition!*"), but if that sort of device is not handled carefully, you run the risk of doing unforeseen damage to prepared adventure hooks. Worse, it can make the players view the DM as a foe who punishes them for upsetting the game plan.

Alternatively, you might have a range of backup encounters that you always bring to the table, in case of just such an emergency. There's a lot to be said for having a Plan B. Not to mention a Plan C, a Plan D, and so on. Yet these alternatives too can appear arbitrary, even desperate, unless something relates them to previous events in the campaign.

The best stratagem in such situations is to have several subplots going on at all times. These existing elements furnish you with built-in backup plans. A hastily improvised adventure or encounter can be hung on one of them, and it will seem to the players to be part of something they've already become involved in—because it is.

Of course, "existing subplots" can't be whipped up on the spur of the moment; they need to already be part of the world to some extent. But that doesn't mean they need to be well developed, fully under way, or even completely thought out. If the characters battled Zhentarim during the last few play sessions, and now someone who looks like a Zhent or a Zhent ally is seen spying on the heroes, the players are apt to think the spying is related to their recent experiences.

This kind of speculation by players is easy for a Dungeon Master to reinforce on the fly. Just listen to the players, and they can unwittingly create much of a session's entertainment with their reactions and their theories about what's really going on. Nothing's wrong with letting players believe that they've cracked a nefarious plot by the

DM, when in fact the plot was their idea all along, and all you did was assess their fears and suspicions and put them into play.

All of this is a lot easier for the players to believe and accept if the DM has established a style in the campaign that involves frequent small mysteries and always has three or more subplots simmering on the stove. When an NPC has been noticed following the adventurers for a few days, will the players wonder if that character is romantically attracted to one of the heroes, or being paid to spy on them? Could it be both?

You do need to be careful with subplots. No one likes being pounced on constantly. And the special kind I call the inherited subplot ("You must be the son of Uther Pendragon, and we Lakeswords have always hated all Pendragons!") gets old fast. It's been overused, and it tends to leave players feeling trapped and at the mercy of fate. Subplots that they've expressed some sort of interest in during their travels are always better.

As one of the Knights once caustically told Vangerdahast, the Royal Magician of Cormyr, "Back off. We're heroes—we oppress the Realms, and we *don't* appreciate it when we feel the Realms are oppressing us."

(Vangey's cold reply was, "Oh? Grow used to not appreciating much while you stand in Cormyr, then," but otherwise he let the remark pass.)

I've noticed, over some thirty-seven years of using plans B and C in this way, that they always feel more realistic and acceptable when they involve something going wrong. The wheel of a merchant's wagon breaking, or a horse bolting with something vital in its saddlebags, or a key disappearing are events just as believable to player characters as they are in real life, because they're groaningly familiar. We're not surprised when a knight forgets or loses an important piece of his armor, or when an envoy gets lost and blunders into someplace private where he shouldn't be. We have no trouble believing it when ink is spilled on an important document, or the queen's grand entrance is spoiled when she slips and falls down the staircase. Such a happening can be particularly enjoyable and memorable if the players find it amusing or see it as fitting comeuppance. Players like this sort of plot twist more than running into orcs where orcs have never been before, or a surprise drow raid in the heart of a human city in full daylight, or *anything* flying unexpectedly down out of the sky.

Long, long ago, I advised game designers and writers working in the Realms that for every loose end (adventure hook, mystery, or unresolved conflict or simmering trouble) I had left that they tied off or took care of in a Realms product, they should introduce three new loose ends. This adds to the tapestry of the world thread by thread, keeping the Realms feeling "alive" rather than static and preventing characters from ever exhausting the most exciting play possibilities.

An existing loose end that players have previously been made aware of can provide a dandy rationale for whatever you throw into play to take care of the situation when characters ride west instead of east as you expected. If an old sage warned the characters two months ago that an orc horde is on the move, it won't seem as farfetched if one thunders into view as the characters head west than it would have seemed if the horde appeared without warning. If the characters already know that outlaws are marauding in the area, it will seem natural when they blunder into the aftermath of a massacre and see a dying wizard trying to use a spell to save herself, and having it go wrong and *teleport* a surprised beholder to where she lies wounded instead (even if all this is really your way of using a beholder encounter you had already prepared).

And so on. My father once told me about one of his less pleasant days in NATO service, learning to be an officer for a mixed-forces unit. The lesson that the military exercise for that day was meant to drive home to my dad and his colleagues, without any warning, was to expect the unexpected, to never let your veteran status lead you into oh-yes-this-again overconfidence—and to realize that any snafu, if you didn't step lively, could quickly turn into a *real* challenge.

As my father put it: "It was a training exercise for officers who thought they'd seen it all before. It took everything they *had* seen before, turned it backward and upside down, and threw the results at the officers, all at once. Oh, it was utter, hard-swearing confusion. We laughed like banshees." (Afterward, of course.)

Which (of course) gives me an idea about laughing banshees . . .

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.