

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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All the News, and Then Some

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 all the Realms campaign sessions and almost all the one-shot convention adventures I've run, I throw a lot of information at the players. It's actually done as almost everything else is, the usual "ham-actor DM gabbing across the table," of course, but it's intended to simulate lore, gossip, rumor, and hard knowledge that the player characters pick up as the days of their lives unfold. The sort of stuff that can point to future adventures, make the setting seem very real, and provide players with crucial facts they can use to turn a tough fight into a great victory, or even outswindle a swindler.

If such information isn't provided constantly, its delivery can become a roleplaying tipoff that even the most inattentive player can't miss. It's a clue when the DM suddenly stops hurling orc hordes and evil cultists at the PCs and instead has them overhear a whispered conversation between furtive characters who conveniently drop a cryptic written note in their wake when they depart.

Such necessary dispensations of information and plot-starters don't have to be so obvious. Every traveling minstrel, peddler, and caravan brings news (and false rumors and overblown gossip) to town, its purveyors often trading their words for a drink or a meal at a wayside inn. Broadsheets (newspapers) exist in most of the larger cities in the Realms, and are sold by caravan merchants to innkeepers, sages, and just plain folks with coin enough, all along the routes those caravans take. (There are market stalls that sell both old and new newspapers in the Realms, all of them full of obituaries, tales of the "Jarrok saw a strange monster in the river last night" sort, and accounts like "Thorn the Miller has vanished, no one knows where, with all the coin his mill took in this last tending.")

If this sort of news becomes a constant in the lives of their characters, players begin to lose any feeling of "This is the DM's way of railroading us into the next preplanned adventure," and instead accept this flood of current events as part of the world, alive and bustling, unfolding around them.

And there is nothing more satisfying to a player—especially younger ones—than triumphantly remembering something that player's character overheard or read, and applying it at the right moment. It is a reward we all too rarely get in real life, and such a scene can "make" a session of roleplaying. ("Dad, wait a minute! There was something we heard back in Voonlar about a man named Jarth . . . I remember! Involved in kidnapping outside Mistedale but got away! *Don't trust him!*")

Most of the time, the news of the world will be low-key and not of immediate practical use, but its presence will add to the feel of realism—that sense that makes every achievement in a roleplaying campaign feel more significant to the players. For instance, if you hear scraps of information about, say, the Iron Throne (no, not the one kings sit upon in a certain television series; the Realms had a different sort of "Iron Throne" for a good twenty-five years before that one) for year after year of campaign play, you form an image of and an opinion about the Iron Throne, just as we do in real life about real-world organizations and places, that informs how you'll react when you do come into direct contact with it.

Of course, a DM can use rumor, gossip, and "hard" news (facts the PCs know to be real or that they see happen before their eyes, or glean or can verify from trusted, fairly neutral sources) to hint like crazy—and I always do just that. I tend to mitigate this very human tendency by sometimes using my hints to mislead, so when a particularly cynical player of mine rolls his eyes and murmurs, "It's drow again, is it?" I suppress a smile—because he has leaped to a metagaming conclusion that's wrong. Just because the villagers in Essembra think it's drow again, that doesn't mean it's so. It could really be Sembian brigands with crossbows again—or something far more dramatic. And when they capture one of those brigands and the grizzled man snarls, "No,

no, I'm one o' those fearsome drow, see?" that, too, is a hint worth more than the moment of mirth it brings around the gaming table. (As Elminster has said more than once, "Count not thy unhatched chickens. Just eat the eggs as they come.")

All too many **D&D** games turn into what I call survivalist hikes, because they become primarily concerned with getting healing, and food, and a place to rest where the PCs can defend against monsters. Though this grassroots grittiness is reasonable, even necessary, during an extended dungeon crawl, it's not much relief from real-life bill paying and scrabbling for funds and being unable to find something specific in any of the stores. And I find that sort of thing more frustrating than fun; don't you?

When information—good information, the sort that can benefit someone "in the know"—becomes as valuable in a campaign as a healing potion or clean drinking water, and players get the chance to speculate and try to put clues together into knowing more than is publicly available, the campaign becomes much richer.

Years ago, players in a 13-episode mini-campaign I ran at a public library portrayed members of the Cormyrean-chartered adventuring band the Company of the Basilisk. The conditions of their charter required them to eliminate some brigands who were harassing trade through the Thunder Gap with, apparently, a pet basilisk that petrified anyone who stood up to them. (It turned out that the brigands were shapeshifters pretending to be a basilisk and other wild creatures, and using a *flesh to stone*—by touch—magic item, but that's another story.)

As play began, they were granted their charter in an office in the Royal Palace in Suzail. There they wandered where they weren't supposed to, and overheard many interesting things—one of which was a court clerk excitedly telling a fellow courtier that his kin, the Roysil family of Hilp, had just been hired to build coaches for the new Sembian-founded Ethark Trading Coster, which would be making fast runs between Suzail, Marsember, and the southern Sembian ports. The Roysils had won an order for sixteen coaches thanks to secret compartments they had perfected (originally for the Crown of Cormyr) built around coach axles, for carrying sensitive documents in hiding.

Three play sessions later, the PCs were in a tavern when an excited man burst in with the news that the first Ethark coach to leave Suzail had gone missing.

In the next play session, the PCs were delayed in crossing a bridge (along with all the other road traffic) as that missing wagon was hauled out of the river, its drowned drovers and waterlogged cargo still slumped aboard. Remembering what they had heard earlier, the PCs thought to examine the axles, and were able to tell the local Purple Dragon commander that the splintering to be seen there hadn't been caused by any crash into the river, but rather by someone breaking into the secret compartments to pilfer documents carried there.

Which in turn caused the commander to report as much to the duty War Wizard, who was both grateful and very suspicious of the PCs. Whereupon the Company of the Basilisk unwittingly acquired some shadows: a Highknight of Cormyr following them to see what they were up to; a spy from Redfaern Hall (the Sembian trading cabal, bitter rivals of the Etharks, who had stolen the coach and swiped the documents from it) following the Highknight to see what he learned; and a Harper tailing the other two shadows, to learn what skulduggery was afoot.

Which meant that when the PCs ran into real trouble and fled, the brigands they were fleeing from ran into a Highknight, then a well-armed private spy, and then an even better armed Harper in succession—and emerged more than a little battered.

Which meant the PCs got away, but ended up being very firmly interviewed by several War Wizards. During this questioning, the Company of the Basilisk learned quite a bit about smuggling, brigandry, and covert activities along the border between Cormyr and Sembia. This knowledge served them in good stead when they began regularly hearing news brought by the traders moving back and forth between the two countries, and started to plan their own foray against Redfaern Hall.

Which the Highknight and War Wizards knew all about, but did nothing to hamper. Instead, they gleefully reported back to Royal Magician Vangerdahast that they had managed to manipulate an adventuring band into doing some of their cross-border dirty work for them.

Now, knowing how such reports were checked against reports from local duty War Wizards, the Company of the Basilisk thief managed to briefly intercept and read one such report, learning not only how he and his fellow PCs had been used (information they resolved to use in future bargaining with the Crown of Cormyr), but lots of other news useful in planning slightly illicit adventures.

As one member of the Company put it: "Why blunder around the countryside looking for danger in hopes of finding a few coins, when you can know where the treasure is, and go right after it?"

Handy thing, the passing parade of news, if you can glean the truth behind the rumor, mistakes, and deliberate misinformation.

The Knights of Myth Drannor once spent months, beneath and around their daily adventuring, slowly investigating a Cormyrean noble who had gone bad and was working with smugglers out of Westgate and Sembia. The glee they exhibited when they finally uncovered proof of the lord's perfidy was profound, and worth any number of documents pilfered from around wagon axles.

In fact, whenever a character learns a saying, name, or pass phrase, and literally years later the player realizes during play that *this* is finally the moment it can be used, the delight can be palpable.

Picture the PCs dragged in chains before a court to answer for being "dirty, lawless adventurers," confronted and accused by a vizier they know to be a traitor to the realm. One character facing the triumphant vizier sees a distinctive magic item the vizier is holding—and recalls, from news he heard years earlier of that item in use, by the vizier when he was plotting treason, the words that will activate it and reveal the truth about the vizier to everyone.

I guarantee that as that player leans forward eagerly to tell everyone else at the gaming table what the character says, that they all will be grinning.

And I'll be grinning with them.

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.

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