

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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Ends Better Left Loose

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 new weekly feature wherein Ed answers all those questions and more.

"Ends Are Sometimes Better Left Loose"

o, ahem, just what the Asmodeus does that title mean?

Well, that statement has been one of my Realms design principles from the outset (yes, it very much applies to roleplaying, not just fiction writing). Here 'tis in more explicit form:

For every mystery, conflict, or other "loose end" that gets explained or resolved, make sure you build in three more.

In other words, make sure your players never run out of challenges, and your world never stops seeming "alive," by continuously generating fresh "loose ends" (or mysteries, or conflicts).

Let the players solve mysteries and end wars and accomplish things, by all means. They need such satisfactions for a campaign to seem fulfilling. Yet make sure there are always new problems. And I'm not talking about problems worse than what the heroes just solved, because the game *is* supposed to be more rewarding than real everyday life.

As we are all too well aware, real life can at times seem very far from being enjoyable and entertaining. In part this happens because we can't choose the problems that are served up to us, and we might not be able to solve them (and might even know that, from early on). In a fantasy campaign, however, heroes can pick and choose among problems, decide which one to tackle—and then triumph over it. The DM's job is not to "let" them (because then the achievement is hollow), but to give them a stiff challenge to overcome—and if it starts to seem too stiff, provide that "slim way out," that unlikely but achieved arrow shot or dagger throw, that success through ingenuity, that makes the victory hard and exciting work, but not impossible.

Not impossible, but not always achieved, either.

The DM who takes sadistic delight in killing off player characters again and again ruins the enjoyment for everyone . . . that individual included. A good campaign has a flow, a sense of direction, even if not much is truly achieved. It's that feeling of progress, of accomplishment, of being able to do things that *matter*, that stokes player satisfaction.

And for that feeling to continue, there have to be endless challenges. Large and small, long-term and largely hidden, as well as the sort that pop up to alarm or test players immediately.

I usually have about a dozen active "challenge the characters" subplots on the go at any one time in my Realms campaign, in addition to those my players generate by having their characters investigate things or take a hand in a feud or an unsolved local murder or a brewing struggle between guilds. However, my players usually become aware of only eight or so, and follow up on only six or so.

And that's what works for me and with them, but not every other group of players I've DM'd. Your mileage *should* vary. Do what works for you, not me.

And, crucially, "endless challenges" doesn't mean "a single challenge that never goes away." No one wants to finally take down the Dread Tyrant, only to have three instant replacements taunt the weary heroes—one snatching the princess while another smashes the bright castle and the third seizes the treasure—then flee in

three different directions as the assembled commoners look to the exhausted, blood-spattered adventurers and demand irritably, "Well?"

Let players enjoy their triumphs, let them have the additional satisfaction of choosing what to tackle next—and then sail in with the nasty surprise that wreaks havoc with such plans. Let that foreground surprise prance around as a distraction from a slower and more gradual evil or foe that's plainly visible in the background. Reward players who notice and recognize that evilness and do something about it—and wallop their characters hard if they ignore it or "leave it for another day" for too long.

Do this over some years, and you just might transform your players into captains of real-life industry or at least capable and calmly coping individuals—as well as crafting thoroughly enjoyable games.

The type and array of loose ends should be tailored to what your players enjoy. Some people love the air of menace that arises when mysteries are heaped atop mysteries, on all sides. Others like to experience that feeling sparingly. Still others hate it, preferring their challenges clear-cut and simple.

Nor will the tastes of any player necessarily stay the same as time goes on and roleplaying experience deepens.

As my grandmother once said, "Satisfaction is very much a moving target."

What thrills you the first time you experience it might never come close to doing so again, and what you loved as a novice player ("Take down that orc! Yeaaaah!") could be, well, boring ten years later.

In a D&D campaign, as in real life, challenges are a lot more fun if they're different from those that immediately preceded them, and those that follow. We humans like variety, so long as we can carve out some measure of control and don't feel overwhelmed.

We also crave the need to speculate. Any fiction, from Zelazny's *Amber* series to television soap operas and character-driven dramas, gains popularity when those who experience it have both opportunity and stimulus to mull over future possibilities. What if X marries Y? Who is going around murdering people? Who will the childless king/CEO/dying leader of the rebels choose as his/her/its heir? Who should they choose instead, and why?

Fans of a fictional setting or a serialized epic enjoy identifying with the characters in that setting, playing "what if?" games with them, and trying to deduce more about them from hints in dialogue and scraps of backstory. Give your players a chance to do that with their own characters (and your NPCs) in a D&D campaign, and you'll give them a too-often-unfulfilled side of enjoyment that helps them learn to love the setting and makes their "willing suspension of disbelief" easier because they will have trained themselves to look for in-game reasons and justifications, rather than being left only with "Oh, the DM bought the new adventure, so . . ." or "There's a rules change, so . . ." metagame moments.

Whew. All that from a few loose ends.

And I didn't even get to the side topic of tripping over loose ends, or "For the want of a nail . . ."

Enough. Time to get gaming!



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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