

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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Just in 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.*

nyone who has enjoyed one of Oscar Wilde's plays—or any one of the dozens of top-notch "bedroom farces" by other playwrights—wherein doors bang open and shut just in time for characters to miss running into, or even seeing, each other, knows that timing can be everything.

Even novice DMs are familiar with the old "hit the party with a nasty monster just after they've run out of hit points and spells while taking down a big bad foe" tactic. That, however, is what I call Sledgehammer Coincidence, meaning whether it's truly coincidental or the predetermined result of player character actions, it's very hard for players to see it as anything other than the DM personally coming at them with a sledgehammer, while they're weakened or down.

Yep, sometimes life is unfair—but fantasy gaming doesn't have to be.

Building Fun

So let's take a look at some ways to build anticipation—and so, fear and excitement. We'll learn to build a feeling that the fast-approaching train wreck we can foresee is realistic or grounded in setting-integral causes, therefore making it seem more fair to the players.

First of all, let's take a look at the inevitable (except out in the truly lawless wilderness) hard backbone of local law and its enforcement. They can provide the "if you do that, of course the authorities are going to show up, and in a state rather less than lightly amused" factor. Allow player characters to see lawkeepers, or be inspected by them or even warned by them "to behave, because we'll have our eyes on you," before the, er, fun starts. Then reward characters who take care to go looking covertly discern where lawkeepers have their bases, patrol routes, and responses to alarms. And finally, show the characters the level of competence and strength of the authorities by having them deal with nonplayer character troublemakers where and when the characters can watch. This latter element can remind the adventurers that they're not the only connivance-and-violence-amok roadshow in town—and they just might want to watch their backs, because other thieves and folk of violence might target their gear and loot whilst the adventurers have their collective hands full with a hungry critter. This element can also leave the lawkeepers both annoyed and alert for more trouble.

Second, we have local sentiment. What turmoil erupted in the days or months before the adventurers' arrival, and what mood is the populace in? Are the local bullies and drunkards likely to be left to their own sticky fates if they brawl with characters, or will everyone else in the tavern rush to their defense? And if an adventurer breaks a local rowdy's neck or defeats him or her in a fair duel (if such a thing is locally permissible), how likely is it that a mob lusting after adventurer blood—or the chitlins of all visiting strangers—forms? Do the locals hate or fear members of races that don't live locally, or that are thought to be in league with foes of the locals (such as the fell wizard who keeps inside his nearby tower and is shunned, or the robber baron who lives on the other side of a nearby border and raids across it all too often)? Or do they live in terror of a local gang or secret society given to murder and arson? DMs who portray locals well need not be heavy-handed or roleplay for long to impart local mood. And we, as DMs, can plant juicy local monster rumors, treasure tales, and "oh, that confrontation is gonna happen soon!" warnings for adventurer ears.

Third, let's explore the obvious disaster waiting to happen. We might have the beast tamer, who arrives in town with too few guards to safeguard his rusting and rickety cages. These cages are creaking under the testing-the-bars attempts of the growlingly hungry monsters he's captured. Then we might have the wedding feast where everyone comes armed and gets far too tipsy while in the company of glowering individuals who stood against

the wedding or stand to lose after the new union is consummated and firm. Maybe we have the annual arrival of a hated and unfair Crown tax collector who's made enemies and enjoyed doing so, but this time arrives ill or wounded, with too few or puny bodyguards. Perhaps there's an escaped criminal who vowed revenge and who has been seen lurking late by night—spying and obviously scheming. We could have a religious dispute between local temples over a boundary or holy site or recent portent. Another example could be the first few flights of hungry, fire-breathing red dragon hatchlings—three to six of them, at once, perhaps, swooping down from a nearby mountain . . . with a watchful mother gliding high and behind them, waiting to pounce on anyone who gives her young any trouble. In short, use the "uh oh" factor akin to the open flame on the gunpowder barrel-filling factory floor.



Veteran adventurers should weigh what the DM shows them of all of these factors. Any characters engaged in the pursuits of a rogue, or who feel their priestly vestments or use of arcane magic makes them a natural target, should do a little looking about in any unfamiliar locale to learn how powerful these factors are hereabouts.

Some of them remember to do so from time to time. Yet it's surprisingly rare for adventurers of any stripe, and player character adventurers in particular, to just turn and run (or slip away), when they see trouble coming. Adventure is, after all, what they do.

None of which means a DM needs to miss out on building tension. Sometimes the brawling can be almost anticlimactic, whereas the waiting, menace, and threats before the eruption (as in any good Western, either book—*Shane*, for example—or film) can be delicious.

I always picture spoiled young men from three Cormyrean noble families who loathe each other, traveling with older uncles or fathers, who wind up at the same wayside inn thanks to nasty weather. The inn does not have enough good wine or quality meat to satisfy all three parties, but it does feature some lasses pretty enough to catch noble eyes. The stopover for all three parties happens as they travel to some gathering where they'll end up in a dispute, or are returning home from it (a Court judgment over land or trade rights, for example). You just know bad things are going to happen. Yet at the same time—especially if any noble women are also at the inn, members of the three families or not—there's going to be a lot of icily polite preamble and verbal sparring before actual weapons come out, or fists are balled. And during that time, a DM can not only have much of fun, but can also impart a lot of adventure hooks for later ventures to players amid the repartee and brinksmanship.

Battlefield Timing

Whenever armies or even patrols clash, the timing of when someone charges in can be as important as how powerful the charging force is. Real-world wargamers and historians debate endlessly the arrival of the Prussians at Waterloo, or how the timing of this or that movement affected the Battle of the Bulge. Yet in the Realms, where air support is rare in battles, battle magic is always in too-short supply, and truly long-range bombardment almost unknown, the timing of attacks (and counter-attacks) is far more crucial. If a thunderous cavalry charge can hit home before a line of pikes can be formed or before archers have time to pepper the onrushing mounted warriors with volley after volley, the chargers will take far fewer casualties and will crash into and through warriors on foot with far more devastating force. A defender with a polearm or bow has a slim hope of dealing damage to a horse before being trampled; a defender lacking such weapons (or having the benefit of concealed pits in front of them) has almost no hope at all. Exhausted or asleep defenders fight far less well than alert, fresh troops ready for an attack, and so on.

There is one way in which real-world warfare and fantasy battles in the Realms are similar: proper timing and judgment are necessary to avoid "friendly fire" incidents. Badly aimed fireballs can be just as devastating to allies as an artillery barrage that lands in the wrong spot. So being an effective battle mage involves hurling lightning bolts, fireballs, and the like with full consideration for where and how they'll do the most harm to the foe, not friends. (Backlands militia units or local village mobs, for instance, might suffer great morale damage from miscast magic.)

Veteran player character adventurers in my home Realms campaign have learned that timing can make up for lack of numbers. On occasion, one or more Knights of Myth Drannor have faced large Zhentarim patrols or even armies. One against six hundred, or worse odds, these folk have seen. Yet by hiding and attacking the foe when they were lost, tired, or struggling against darkness, difficult terrain, or prowling monsters (often nothing more formidable than a pack of hungry wolves, or a lone foraging owlbear or hill giant), the Knights did considerable damage. Precision spell attacks against Zhent wizards, priests, and officers left soldiers leaderless and scared, booby traps near latrines created much wariness, faked hauntings and curses left the Zhents fearful, Zhent casualties arranged in certain ways suggested feuds and treachery among their own forces—and so on. Guerilla tactics can be very effective, but their damage is increased when someone who understands basic psychology times them just right.

The Knights have taken great satisfaction when overhearing a frightened Zhent soldier in unfamiliar and hostile terrain who has been stripped of leadership but fears reprisals if a mission isn't fulfilled asking a fellow Zhent anxiously, "Now? Is now the right time?"

As the noble and heroic John Hunter once said, while playing the even more noble and heroic Florin Falconhand: "It's always the right time to do the right thing—if you *make* it the right time."

Or as my father once commented, watching a real-world military training exercise go awry but then seeing it be rescued by some quick thinking at the last moment: "Defeat avoided by bringing the right stuff, just in time."

I remembered that, so as Dalefolk fought and died to defend their homes against a vast host of Zhentarim, and the Knights rushed here and there trying to bolster the defenders wherever they were most beset, they overheard one dying, agonized farmer gasp, "When will the God of Death get here?"

And his neighbor reply laconically, "Just in 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.