

Example Big Events: The temple starts collapsing when the party picks up the amulet, every full moon the cultists sacrifice a prisoner, one of the two orc clans of the dungeon tries to hire the adventurers to attack the other clan.

Logical, Basic Needs. The dungeon is an ecosystem, and it must sustain itself. What do monsters do when there is no adventurer poking his nose around? What do they eat? How can natural enemies live near each other? Even evil mages need to go to the bathroom and sleep in a bed.

First Abstract Design, then Maps. Before drawing a map, write down the important locations/events you want in the dungeon. Only after you have listed all of them should you start drawing the map.

Locations and Situations. The theme of the dungeon should guide you in designing well-characterized locations. In addition, remember that locations aren't empty; they are populated by beings living their lives, independently from the adventurers. Try to create situations that the heroes can alter with their actions.

Example Locations: A broken bridge to be fixed, a library containing a book with a clue, a sewer passage full of flammable gas.

Example Situations: Two goblins constantly quarrel over food, the animated stone guardian always follows the same path, there is a traitor among the evil cultists. Reward Exploration and Ingenuity. If the players show interest in the dungeon, exploring it and finding non-linear solutions to problems, they should be rewarded.

Examples: A secret passage leads to treasure or avoids danger, fast-talking a monster can persuade him to reveal information or to join the party against the Villain.

4 – Abstract Dungeon Design

Making maps isn't the only way to design dungeons. If you don't want to waste time you can use an abstract system. It is simple, just follow these steps.

DECIDE LEVELS

The first step is deciding how many levels the dungeon has and the general theme. A level is a group of locations interconnected and sharing a common theme.

Examples:

Goblin Warren. Hosts the den of the Red Tusk Goblins.

Tomb of the Old Knight. This part of the dungeon hosts the burial chambers of a famous paladin and his followers.

NAVIGATION SYSTEMS

Locations. Every level is made of several locations. Note that “location” is a wide term: it can be an actual place or situation or encounter.

One or more locations must be marked as the ENTRANCE from the previous level, and one or more must be the EXIT to the next level.

There are basically two ways to navigate an abstract dungeon.

Linear Exploration. The GM creates a list of locations for each level, which the heroes explore one after the other. This technique can be made more interactive by introducing crossroads, like choose-your-adventure books, each path leading to a different place.

Advancing System Exploration. First arrange the locations of each level in a Level Table.

Several types of tables can be made, depending on the number of locations you want for each level. Some examples are found in the Mapless Dungeon Table Examples.

Each Exploration Round (usually 30 minutes) the party rolls on the Level Table and explores the relevant location.

Going Back on Your Tracks. The group can usually return back to any previously explored location safely, unless you decide differently (maybe some locations can trigger different events if visited multiple times).

Managing Rerolls. If the location has already shown up, there are two options. First, ignore the roll, nothing happens (and the party can rest). Otherwise you can decide to make them stumble into the encounter immediately before or after on the table.

Going Deeper. With this system it is possible to find the “final” room of the level at the first roll. There are two ways to avoid this.

The first is placing “final” rooms in the highest-numbered part of the table, and placing a die result maximum cap for the first Exploration Rounds (e.g. the first two rounds consider every roll of 4+ as a 4, from the third to the fourth consider 5+ as a 5).

The second is placing “final” rooms outside the Level Table. The party can reach it only by Looking for a Specific Place (see below).

Exploring. If there is a character with the Stealth Skill in the group and the party is advancing cautiously, the GM can allow him an Agi (-4, Stealth) roll to bypass the Location found and reroll for another one. The first location is considered explored (so you can go back to it).

Looking for a Specific Place. If the heroes are looking for a specific place, treat this as a Long Task (4 Tokens, Survival applies), which can be done by teamwork. When the group completes the Long Task, they automatically find the location they are looking for.

5 – Traps

Traps should be a puzzle to solve, not a way to kill the heroes, and can add a lot to a dungeon experience. There should be a way for the party to defuse a trap with just their wits.

Trap Type	Found with	Disabled with...
Magical (Mag)	Power (Investigation)	Power roll (GM's call)
Physical (Phy)	Mnd (Perception)	Agi (Stealth)

Traps are simple (for example a falling rock) or complex (like a pressure plate which causes a room to lock and fill with lethal gas).

Simple traps (Sim) are disabled with a roll, **complex traps** (Com) with a Long Task.

Trap (Type/Complexity, X,Y). A trap has X modifier to be found, Y modifier to be defused, and a description with the trigger and the effect.

Examples:

Dart Shooter (Phy/Sim, -1, +1). Stumbling on the pressure plate activating it causes 3 Atk (Att: 3, Range (10)). It can be overcome by making it fire from a safe position.

Drowning Room (Phy/Com, -2, 0). Removing an item from a pedestal causes the door of the room to seal and water to pour down from a hole in the ceiling. The water fills the room in 4 rounds after which Drowning rules apply. There are four buttons hidden in the walls to be found and pressed (Long Task: 4 Tokens, each Token is a button) to unlock the door and stop the water.

Guarding Glyph (Mag/Sim, 0, -1). A runic inscription carved on a door emits a terrible howl (causes Fear) when someone opens it. Reading the inscription, with a Mnd (-2) roll, Learning applies, reveals that it is an invocation to a dark god. Saying the god's name aloud (Mnd (-4) roll to know it) before opening the door defuses the trap.