

## Stat Boost: Building Adventures For New Players

by loottheroom - Sunday, June 11, 2017

<http://loottheroom.uk/stat-boost-building-adventures-for-new-players/>

This is one of those posts that could be two things. On the one hand, it's a standard Wednesday Stat Boost article - advice you can use to hopefully improve your game. On the other hand, I'll be talking about stuff that is a) about the way I run my game specifically and b) very definitely relevant to Friday Fight Night. I'd be happy to put this post up on a Friday in lieu of a session journal (and I know we haven't had one of those in a while).

Luckily, what with this being the traditionally-late Friday post, it's now Sunday, so I guess it doesn't really matter what kind of post this is. It's either late, or it's early, or it's somewhere in between. Whatever. Let's get on with it.

There was a time in my life when I wanted to be a video game developer. Actually, that's a bit of a lie - it's still something I'd love to do, and still something I play around with from time to time, but it's not exactly a priority for me.

There's a quirk I have, which is that when I decide I'm interested in something, I devour as much information as I can about that thing. I keep learning and learning and learning until I either find I'm good at that thing and start doing it regularly, or else something new comes along to pique my interest and I move on to that thing.

I'm not going to give you a chequered history of my flirtations with game design, because it's irrelevant. I'm also not going to go into all the stuff I taught myself (or tried to teach myself), or name drop a ton of games that you may or may not have heard of in order to score some kind of invisible nerd points. Instead I'm going to cut straight to the useful stuff.

Today we'll be talking about *The Legend of Zelda's* Eagle dungeon, in-game tutorializing, and how we can use the techniques in that particular piece of level design to build adventures that will teach people how to play tabletop RPGs. We're going to look at it in the context of a dungeon that I actually built and actually ran new players through, one that you'll be familiar with if you've been reading Friday Fight Night from the beginning - the Temple of Leaves.

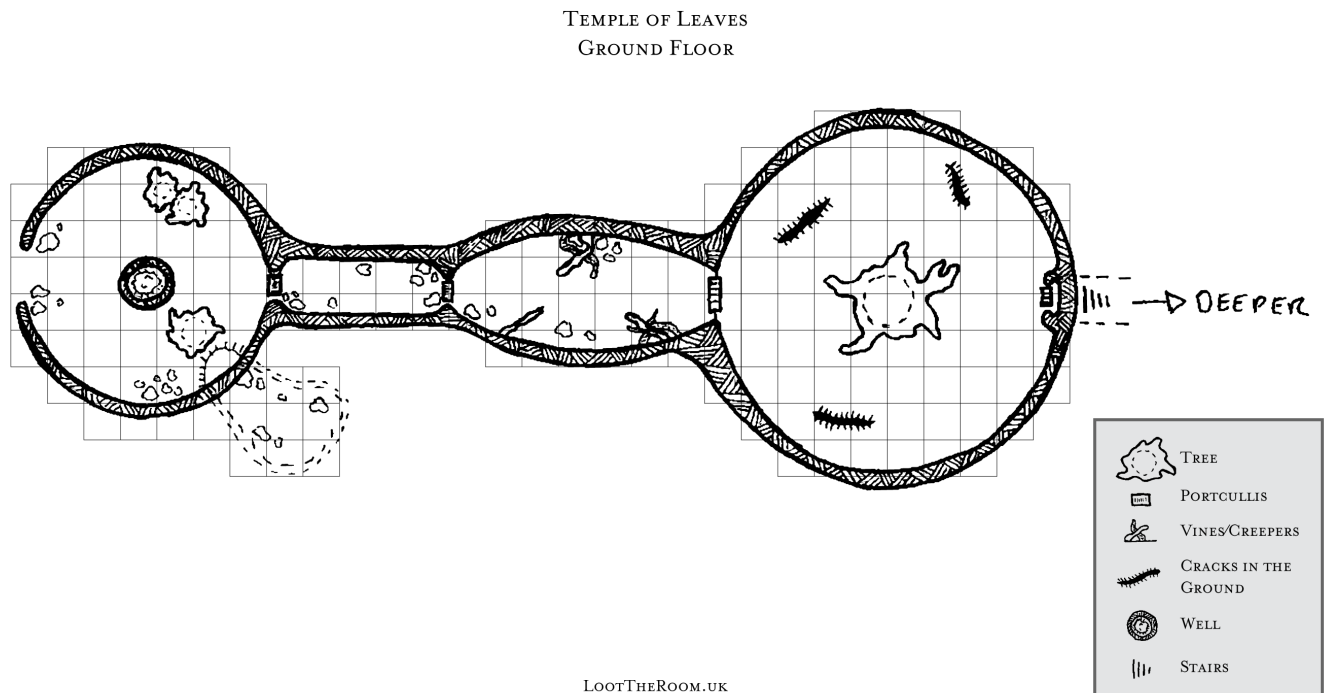
The first thing to say is that I'm not going to go into a big breakdown of what makes *Zelda's* Eagle dungeon so great. If you're after that article, I'd suggest you read [this great article](#) by Mike Stout on Gamasutra. He covers everything that is important about this dungeon with much more brevity than I could manage. I'd suggest you read that first, actually. Then come back here and we'll talk about how you can apply that information to your game.

Done? Good. Let's continue.

Even before reading that Gamasutra article, the Eagle dungeon was one of my favourite pieces of level

design in any game I've played because it's incredibly effective at teaching the player nearly everything they need to know about the game. I like it so much that, when I took part in a game jam back in November of 2015 and was tasked with designing the first level of the game we were making, I borrowed very heavily from it.

When I design an adventure for new players, I pretty much copy the flow of that dungeon. I do it every time, and it has never, ever failed me. Take a look at the first level of the Temple of Leaves:



Now, it's been a while since you saw that map.. You may not remember much about it, and that's fine. We'll get to that in a minute.

What you're probably thinking right now is that it doesn't look much like the Eagle dungeon, and you're right. For starters, it's small - it's 4 rooms (5 if you count the bear's lair attached to the first chamber). In comparison, the Eagle dungeon has 16 rooms. It's also really linear - there's the critical path, and nothing else. Let's start by talking about why that is.

I'm not a big proponent of so-called "Session 0" - that is, the session where you create characters and talk about what expectations people have for the game and lay down house rules and all that stuff. With more experienced groups, yeah, fine, go for it if you want (I still don't really do it), but with new groups? I hate it. Never, ever, ever have I run a D&D session for new players in which we didn't actually play the game. It may work for you, and that's fine. That's great, in fact. But I've been part of those sessions as a player, and for me there's nothing more disappointing than sitting down to play D&D - or any RPG, for that matter (and especially one that I've never had a chance to play before) - and not actually getting to play the game.

That sentence got a little out of hand, didn't it? Let's try to be a bit more clear with the next one.

When people sit down to play an RPG, they sit down to play a game. And time is a finite resource for literally everybody on the planet. When people are new to the game, they want to play it. So I make sure that the first session involves them, well, playing it.

I tend to keep my first games to around 4 hours. I spend about 2 hours on your “Session 0” stuff - building characters, explaining a bit about the world, etc. etc., then have a short break. Then we spend the next two hours actually playing the damn game. And I make sure that the players get a *complete* game - meaning that they have a solid goal, a mission of some sort, and are given the opportunity to complete it (whether by succeeding or failing). Under no circumstances do I let a first session finish halfway through the adventure. That simply isn't good enough.

This means that I'm running what is, for all intents and purposes, a 2 hour one-shot. That's a short game, and it involves me designing an adventure that's very tightly written. Some would probably call it railroading, and that's fine, because that's what you do with new groups who haven't played tabletop RPGs before. You hold their hand, guide them through the adventure, and then let them off the reins later.

I'm rambling. Let's get back to the point, shall we?

A 2 hour one-shot requires brevity. It requires a strong, simple goal with an easy solution. The challenge comes from the things that get in the way of the players reaching that solution. If they spend two hours wondering just what in the hell they're supposed to do next, you've failed.

A 2 hour one-shot for new players also requires that you teach the game. There are a lot of different systems in tabletop RPGs - there's the rules of combat, of course; there are skills and abilities, saving throws, conditions (like prone, grappled, etc.), the concept of traps and secrets, and - of course - you also have to teach the players that the world is going to react to their actions in predictable, consistent ways (assuming that's the kind of game you run; it's the kind of game I run, so it's the kind of game I'm going to talk about).

The size of the Temple of Leaves is, I think, self explanatory at this point. There's no divergence from the critical path because there isn't time in the game for the players to get themselves lost. The first level in a video game can be big, or hard to navigate, because combat doesn't take half an hour and players can't physically pick up and examine every little thing in the dungeon. And even if they *can* (and I'm looking at Bethesda RPGs here in particular), it doesn't take much more than a couple of button presses. That obviously isn't the case with a tabletop RPG. By condensing the dungeon to just the critical path, and by making that critical path short, you do away with all of those things.

Don't get me wrong - all of those things are great in a tabletop RPG. Just not in the first session, when people have never played before.

I'm actually done talking about the size of the level now, because that's not the important thing here. Just believe me when I say that the [five room dungeon](#) is your friend when it comes to building short, self-contained adventures - and even moreso when you have to contend with teaching the game.

Teaching the game is where the construction of the Eagle dungeon becomes relevant. Let's take a quick look at the flow of the rooms in that dungeon (which I'm shamelessly lifting from the Gamasutra article

you definitely read a little while ago). In particular, I want to look at the concept of intensity ramping. These are the rooms along the Eagle dungeon's critical path, and the enemies/hazards that they contain:

- Room 1 - nothing but a locked door that requires a key
- Room 2 - 3 bats
- Room 3 - 5 Stalfos with two large blockers
- Room 4 - 3 Stalfos with one large blocker
- Room 5 - 5 Stalfos with four single blocks
- Room 6 - 6 bats
- Room 7 - 3 gels
- Room 8 - 5 gels
- Room 9 - 3 Moblins
- Room 10 - 2 wall monsters
- Room 11 - Boss

There are a couple of things going on here. The first is that no encounter is ever repeated exactly - even with the same types of enemies, the number of combatants and the terrain encountered is different. And secondly, the difficulty and complexity of the encounters slowly ramps up.

Basically, the game introduces you to discrete elements of gameplay first and lets you get used to them before asking you to contend with them in more complicated settings. And I know this sounds very obvious, because it's been a facet of game design for the past 30 years. And it should be obvious, because it's a simple idea and it works well.

This is what I try to do with my 2 hour one-shots for new players. I introduce discrete elements of gameplay first, on their own, before asking the players to start juggling more balls. Here's a breakdown of what's in the 4 (or 5) rooms of the first level of the Temple of Leaves:

1. A brown bear resting in its den that becomes aggressive when disturbed. A heavy portcullis bars the way to the rest of the dungeon.
2. A corridor with blights and another portcullis at the end.
3. A room thickly choked with vines, where blights attack the players while the vines grapple them. After 6 rounds the vines begin releasing poison spores.
4. The final room, where the players fight the Hangman's Tree and retrieve the javelin of leaves - which was their goal.

Now, that seems really short and really boring, and I know it's not quite clear exactly how I'm following the sort of flow that I just talked about. So let's go into more detail with it.

The first room teaches two basic things. It teaches about Perception checks and passive Perception - for the players to spot the bear - and it teaches how combat works. Since Perception is usually the skill that gets used the most in the game, I make it the first thing the players learn. I set the DC to notice claw marks on the tree at 12, because you're almost guaranteed to have at least one player with a passive Perception of 12 in your party. This allows me to teach them early on that they don't always need to roll for these things - if something is obvious, they'll spot it. That nips the problem of "I open the door and roll Perception on the room" in the bud from the word go. Once the claw marks have been spotted, it's

ostensibly a DC 10 Survival check to identify that this is evidence of a bear. If any of the players are trained in Survival, I just impart this information to them - it doesn't need a roll, and it reinforces the point that they don't need to roll for everything all the time. It also teaches them that I won't withhold information from them that should be obvious to their character just because the dice went against them.

Then they get to roll Perception to spot the bear in its den, should they wish. Or, if you're playing with my group, the bard will cast *thunderclap* at the well in the middle of the chamber for no real reason, bringing the ancient, crumbling stone archway down around the party and waking the bear. Which is handy, because that teaches about consequences.

Then they get to fight. I throw this in early, because it's good to learn sooner rather than later what kind of combat encounters your players prefer - or if they even want to fight things. Sometimes new players will surprise you.

The next step on the critical path in this room after fighting the bear is the DC 20 Strength check to lift the portcullis to the next area. I set the DC high but not unattainable; with a good roll, a 1st level character can lift this thing. But if they don't manage it, I then have the opportunity to teach the players how assisting one another with checks works.

The next room features more combat, this time with multiple enemies who grapple the players. You already know what I'm teaching here.

Then there's another portcullis, but this one is stuck tight and can't be lifted. I actually didn't come up with a way around this. I wanted to give the party the chance to come up with ideas to get around it, and simply told myself that anything that sounded viable would work. If I remember rightly, Ha'an used another *thunderclap* to loosen up the masonry around the portcullis and allow them to force their way past it.

In the next chamber, things get more interesting. Here the players fight a familiar enemy, but now the environment itself is also a hazard. And, after 6 rounds, the players learn about saving throws and being poisoned.

I picked 6 rounds deliberately - and that's because, in my experience, most combats at early levels don't last much longer than that. This means that the players don't have to deal with the poison effects until the physical threat they're facing is either dispatched or mostly dispatched. First level characters die easily; we don't want a TPK when we're trying to teach the game.

From there, it's boss time. Here the players put together everything they've learned. The Hangman's Tree grappled while beating the players into the ground with its slam attack, and the corrupted vines and roots on the ground rose up against them as well. It's essentially more of the same, but the stakes are higher and the danger more real.

In just 4 rooms, the players have learned that that they don't have to roll to learn obvious information, they've learned how skills works, they've learned to fight, they've learned that not all problems can be solved by strength alone, they've learned about being grappled and restrained, they've learned about saving throws, and they've achieved their goal. We've also laid the groundwork for lair actions to show

up at higher levels without coming as a complete surprise, because they've learned that some creatures make use of the terrain surrounding them in unusual ways.

The Temple of Leaves was by no means a perfect first session one-shot, but it achieved everything I wanted it to. The players went away from the game eager to play again, and when they came back the next week and got into the temple proper they had a solid enough grasp of the rules and systems of the game that we got through a large chunk of what turned out to be an extended dungeon crawl with very little interruption needed to keep teaching them the rules. They also knew what their characters were capable of, because they hadn't spent a week wondering what all those numbers they'd written down during character creation meant before actually getting to play the game.

I don't have a nice little summary for this article. It's already two days late; it's now 10am on Sunday morning, I haven't slept since getting back from work, and I haven't had a chance to really edit this or give it the rewrite I know it almost definitely needs. I realise it's a little stream-of-consciousness. Hopefully, though, you can see what I'm getting at, and understand some of the principles I apply when I build an adventure for new players.

And, more than anything else, I hope this helps you introduce some new people to the game without overloading them with information. Get rid of Session 0, and get people actually playing the game asap.

That's all for now.



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