

Using Random Tables to Write an Adventure

by loottheroom - Wednesday, August 23, 2017

<http://loottheroom.uk/using-random-tables-to-write-an-adventure/>

Right up front I'm going to say this: this post got much bigger than I intended, so I'm splitting it up and shunting aside my regular content over the next few days to make use of it. Today I'm talking about how I use random tables to generate ideas. On Friday we'll be putting those ideas together into notes for an adventure. And on Monday, I'll show you the finished map from this adventure, as well as talking you through how I prepare an adventure for publication and release it on DMs Guild.

Let's get in to it.

It's no secret that I like random tables. I publish quite a lot of them here, and a number of my better-selling products on DMs Guild are random tables. Today I want to talk a little about how I actually use these tables in my own games, and to provide you with something of a case study of how I use various random tables to design adventures when I'm short on either ideas or time.

One thing I see a lot of people mention when it comes to random tables is that they often roll results that they can't use. The problem seems to be that once they roll something, they feel like they're somehow forced to use it. This applies to DMs generating random dungeons or rolling for random encounters just as much as it applies to players rolling on tables of trinkets or trying to generate their character's background.

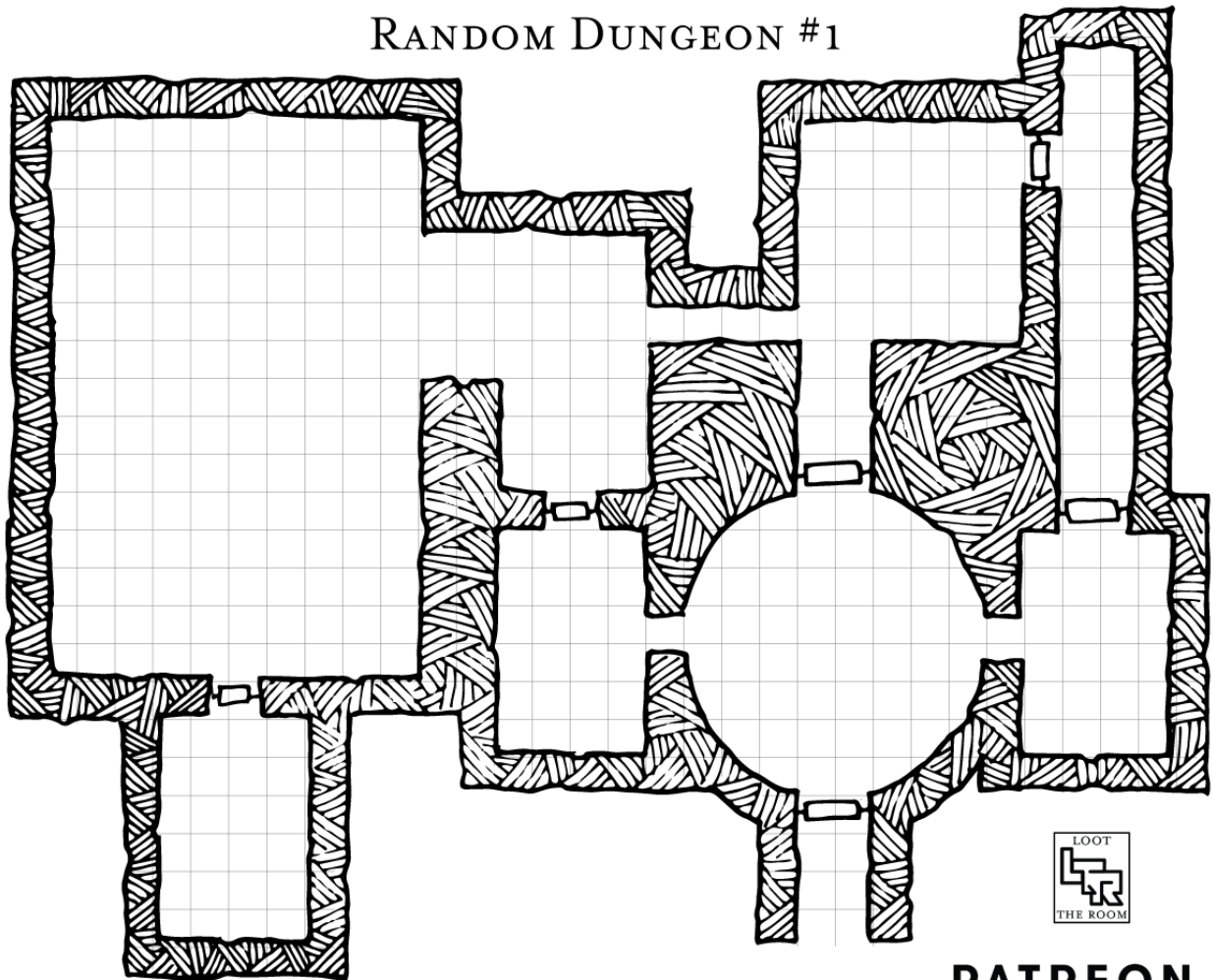
I'm not going to belabour this point. I'm simply going to say this; as somebody who writes a lot of random tables, I never intend for people to slavishly follow the first result they roll. Instead, what I hope for my tables to do is to spark ideas for the person who uses them, to help unblock you when you're feeling stuck. I can only assume that that's how other people who write random tables view them, and so that's how I use them; I prune and twist the results I roll to fit my purposes, rather than adjusting my aims to fit the results (though I do sometimes do that, too, if it feels right).

Basically, when you're using random tables, just remember this; it's your game, and you're the boss. If you're rolling things and suddenly have a great idea of your own, go with that instead. If you roll an 82 and hate the result, but the thing written in 81 looks really cool, take 81 instead.

That's how I use tables, every time I use them. And now I'm going to spend a couple of thousand words letting you watch while I do it.

On Monday I posted this map:

MONDAY MAP
RANDOM DUNGEON #1



ONE SQUARE = FIVE FEET



PATREON |

I used the random tables in the Dungeon Master's Guide to generate it, and I said when I posted it that I intended to flesh it out using some of my favourite random tables from DMs Guild. And that's exactly what I've been doing.

I generate a lot of adventures using tables for my own group. The process I use is fairly straightforward. First, I draw the map. We did that on Monday. But you know that, because I literally just said that 100 words ago, and you're paying attention. Plus the map is right above this paragraph. Really, a good editor would drop this paragraph entirely - but I don't have an editor, so here it is.

After I generate the map, I need to know what kind of adventure might take place there. That's when I generate...

The Hook

Sometimes, of course, the hook comes first. But usually, if I already have an adventure hook, then I can draw map to suit it and design an adventure the traditional way. When I have nothing, though, I start with the map. I can't say why, other than to say that it works for me.

Since I'm using DMs Guild products, I thought I'd start with one of my own: [Strange Tidings](#). It's a rumour generator in the form of four 1d12 tables that will generate *a person* who is rumoured to be *doing a thing, with a thing, in a place*. I rolled some dice, and generated this:

An adventurer's ghost has awakened with an insatiable hunger that has lain dormant for ages.

At this stage, I don't make any real decisions about what the adventure will be. I'm going to let the results on the rest of the tables guide the design, rather than settling on something concrete now and trying to force things to fit later. This is where I find random roll tables to be the most valuable; even though I'm writing this, and therefore I can do whatever I want with it, I find that once I have an idea I like I tend to cling to it. This is where I often get stuck on larger projects; if I commit too early then I get frustrated because for some reason I can't allow myself to be flexible later in the process when things aren't working. The flipside, of course, is that it's easy to simply never nail any specifics down. This is how projects end up fizzling out and never being completed, lost forever in a sea of vague ideas.

Incidentally, this is what I'm trying to avoid with the campaign setting posts, which is why I'm not forcing myself to knock out an article per week when I haven't done enough work to justify a post. I don't want to lock myself into something that I'll struggle to bring myself to change later - but having the vague structure (mostly) of weekly posts underpinning the project forces me to keep working and keep progressing, rather than running out of steam. Or at least that's the theory.

Anyway. All I know at this stage of the process is that this is probably going to be some kind of horror adventure. There are other directions to go with a ghost possessed of an insatiable hunger, of course, but it's prime horror material and I don't want to overcomplicate things. The aim is to turn out a quick and easy adventure, so we'll settle on what immediately feels right and worry about ridding it of horrendous cliches later.

So, for now, this one sentence is all we need. We'll come back to it later, once we populate this structure. And the first thing I'm going to decide on are...

The Doors

Set dressing in dungeons is one of the best ways to sell your theme, and there's no item of set dressing that players interact with more than doors. There's a perfectly functional table of random doors in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, of course, but they're just that - functional. They're not interesting. And since we're using this to help us develop the theme and story of the adventure, we want them to be interesting.

With that in mind, we turn to DMs Guild and the only book of random doors you'll ever need - Glen Cooper's [*Deadly Dungeon Doors*](#). There are plenty of ways to use this book, and Glen spells out quite a few of them in the introduction. You can't go far wrong buy using one of the pre-generated sets of dungeon doors at the end of the book, but that's not what I'm going to do.

The first thing I like to do is to generate the final door of the dungeon - the door behind which the boss fight or the loot haul or whatever lurks. Looking at my map, there's one small final chamber - but that also branches off of the much larger chamber above it, which is accessible via either one door off the entrance rooms or by the narrow passage off of the central room at the top of the map (which I've decided, just now, is a hidden passage). I don't know yet which room the final battle will take place in, so I don't really know where that final door is going to go, but that's fine. We'll get to that.

So, I roll on the tables, and I generate a strong platinum door with an arcane lock and multiple sliding bars with padlocks on it. My mind immediately says "make this a Zelda-style key hunt". I don't know if I'll do that yet, but the idea is there.

The next thing to do is to generate the rest of the doors in the dungeon. In a big dungeon I'd probably use one of the themed sets of pregenerated doors, but since I only need to make 5 more doors, I'm happy to generate them all individually.

The first thing I did was to roll on the door materials table for each door - and I rolled 'iron' every single time (which means I rolled between 16 and 18 five times in a row, which will probably never happen again in my life). So now I know that, besides the final platinum door, every door in this complex is iron. I like the idea of covering the whole place with a patina of rust; I also like the idea of making the entire building, walls and all, iron. I don't know what I'll do yet, but again I jot those ideas down.

Then I roll up some doors, and I end up with this selection:

1. A locked iron door with 6 magnetic studs embedded in it, surrounded by 4 lit torches.
2. A normal iron door, though the lip is slightly higher than normal and may trip people stepping through it incautiously.
3. A regular iron door.
4. A regular iron door with a handle made of bone.
5. A barred iron door, trapped with a magic missile trap.

My immediate thought with the bone door handle is that the original handle has been snapped off -

possibly rusted away? - and that a shard of human bone has been used to force it open. Possibly this is something the dead adventurer did before he, well, died.

So now I have my doors, and a vague theme of iron, rust, and bone. The next thing to is to figure out where those doors lead. That brings us to...

The Rooms

My go-to book for constructing interesting rooms on the fly is Kent Kelly's [Random Dungeon Room Generator](#). Some of the results from this book can be *unusual*, to say the least, but there's a whole chapter devoted to making use of seemingly nonsensical results. Still, part of using random tables is knowing when to stick with what you've rolled and knowing when not to be a slave to the dice.

In this case, I've only got 7 (or 8, depending on how we divide that strange shaped room on the left of the map) rooms to generate, plus a long corridor that we could possibly also consider a room. With so few, I want them all to be unique and interesting in some way - with such a small map, there's no need for filler. I already know that I want to emphasise the image/theme of iron, rust, the vengeful dead, and - possibly - bone, so I'm going to keep an eye out for anything that seems to fit when I start rolling.

The first thing I need to do is to figure out what size rooms I'm looking for. There's one that's obviously larger than the others, but the rest are all roughly evenly sized. I'm fairly happy to call it one large room and have the rest be medium.

The book's method begins with generating room names, so we'll do that. I'm going to generate 20 names - more than twice the number I actually need - and see if anything seems to fit our existing theme. The first thing the book asks you to do is to generate the naming conventions to be used for each room - which take a form similar to (Adjective 1) and (Adjective 2) + (Locale) - and to then roll 1d1000 for each Adjective or Locale and plug in the results. Here's what I ended up with:

1. Insect/Inset Men's & Roost
2. Crooked/The Crooked One+Trophy/Trophy Taker's & Dead End
3. Vengeance/Vengeful+Beastmen's & Trap
4. Maelstrom/Whirling & Chimney
5. The Stricture of Inquisition/Inquisitor's
6. Shrine & Door/Doorway
7. Grisly+Unearthly & Mausoleum
8. Nepenthe/Forgetfulness+Echo/Echoing & Ogre Cave
9. Lemure/Lemurian+Hell Hound & Workshop
10. Mist/Mist-Filled & Gauntlet
11. Hewn/Hewn Stone+Stinking/The Stench & Cinerarium
12. Healer's/Healing+Maggot/Maggot Infested & Priest Hole
13. Gilded/Gilt+Raided & Underworld
14. Winter/Wintery+Abreuvoir (watering place/trough)
15. Offering/Offerings + Theater
16. Green/Emerald+Oblivion & Guard Post
17. The Deep/Deeping Oubliette of Behir
18. The Weretiger Study of Aboleth
19. Nefarious/Nefariousness+Headman's/Execution & Well
20. Drake/The Drake's & Trash Heap

Now, there's clearly a lot of rubbish there, but that's to be expected when dealing with random roll tables. As I've said, the art is in sifting through the chaff and cleaning things up in such a way that you end up with a coherent finished product. So let's do some cleaning.

1. The Insect Men's Roost
2. The Crooked One's Trophy
3. The Crooked Trophy Taker
4. The Vengeful Beastman
5. The Beastman's Trap
6. The Whirling Maelstrom
7. The Whirling Chimney
8. The Inquisition
9. The Inquisitor's Stricture
10. The Door of Shrines
11. The Shrine Door
12. The Shrine of Doors
13. The Mausoleum
14. The Cave of Forgetfulness
15. The Forgetful Ogre
16. The Forgotten Echo
17. The Mist
18. The Misty Gauntlet
19. The Stinking Cinerarium

20. The Hewn Cinerarium
21. The Hewn Stone Stench
22. The Healer's Hole
23. The Healing Hole
24. The Maggot Hole
25. The Healing Maggot
26. The Gilded Underworld
27. The Winter Abrevoir
28. The Abrevoir
29. Emerald Oblivion
30. The Green Guard Post
31. The Oubliette
32. The Oubliette of the Behir
33. The Deep Behir
34. The Study of the Aboleth
35. The Headman's Well
36. The Nefarious Well
37. Drake
38. The Drake's Trash Heap

I've expanded some of the options out into multiple possibilities, pruned incoherent words from the options, and in a couple of cases - where I couldn't see any interesting use, or I had utter nonsense - I've pruned entries completely. Some of them still don't make much sense (The Hewn Stone Stench, anyone?) but they're evocative enough - to me at least - that I left them in for the time being.

There's still some rubbish there, but I now have nearly twice as many ideas as I started with - and some of them I like. Bear in mind, these aren't necessarily going to be the names of the rooms in the dungeon. Instead, I'm treating these as prompts for deciding what each room contains.

A few things that I like immediately: that long corridor on the right of the map could be referred to as the Chimney, and have some kind of elemental, wind-based encounter in it; similarly, I love the word 'abrevoir' (which is a watering basin or trough) and that corridor could also function as some kind of water feature; I also love the word 'oubliette', and I love big pits in dungeons, so maybe there's one of those here in the main central chamber; Emerald Oblivion is cool as hell, and if the whole dungeon is iron and one room is, for some reason, entirely green, that could be very interesting - especially if that room is green because it's not iron but copper or bronze, and it's covered in verdigris, and the fact that it isn't iron is related to the room's purpose; I like the idea of forgetfulness, and of tying that into the theme of the adventure somehow, but at this point I don't quite know how to do that.

As I was putting this list together, my subconscious was also beginning to put things together while the rest of my brain was distracted. One of my favourite monsters - and something I don't get to use very often - are Kytons, or chain devils. I like the idea of this dungeon being a prison for one such beast. They exist to do nothing other than to cause and receive pain, and they're the closest thing to *Hellraiser's* Cenobites that D&D has to offer. If I want to go full horror, I could do worse than to channel Clive Barker, and I'd love to write a Kyton-themed adventure.

At this point, we've pretty much got enough to go on. Once I piece these things together I'll make use of random treasure tables, trinkets tables, and the like to fill the dungeon with appropriate loot, but I won't be using any random encounter tables or other random means with which to populate the dungeon. Personally, I like to build encounters specifically for my party, and I always do that manually. As I said, I use these tables more to get the juices flowing than anything else; once that happens, the rest of the adventure falls into place easily, and that's the point where you transcend the tables and create something that's truly yours.

Soon on Friday I'll show you how these elements - a map, some doors, and some rooms - come together into a cohesive whole. In the meantime, I'd like to hear from you; how would you put together the elements I've generated here into an adventure for your group?



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