

GAMES IN FOCUS

Adventure module gold Build a profitable module market

by
**JOSEPH
GOODMAN**
President,
Goodman Games

Adventure modules add a steady stream of incremental sales to every role-playing game line in your store. Just as video game consoles drive sales of game cartridges, properly designed role-playing game lines use core rulebooks to drive sales of adventure modules. Every *Dungeon Master's Guide* that you sell today *should* mean a dozen adventure modules sold tomorrow.

Goodman Games was the first to demonstrate this with its *Dungeon Crawl Classics* line of adventure modules, which are "just d20 modules" but, nonetheless, consistently rank in the Top 10 role-playing game lines. Other publishers have followed suit, including **Green Ronin** with their **Bleeding Edge** adventure modules and the **Necromancer Games** modules released by **Troll Lord Games, Kenzer & Company**, and **White Wolf**. Market trendsetter **Wizards of the Coast** has ramped up its module output noticeably, and sister company **Paizo Publishing** is making a splash with its **Adventure Path** series drawn from the pages of *Dungeon* magazine. There are a lot of options for role-playing gamers these days — and a lot of follow-up options for your **DMG** sales.

*Joseph Goodman is the president of Goodman Games. His company publishes the best-selling line of **Dungeon Crawl Classics** adventure modules. For more information, visit www.goodman-games.com.*

Adventure modules are underrated. For years, some publishers have said "adventure modules don't sell." But a growing number of publishers are proving them wrong. Between **Paizo Publishing**, **Goodman Games**, **Green Ronin**, **Necromancer Games**, and of course **Wizards of the Coast**, your store has a wide assortment of adventure modules to offer your **d20 System** and *Dungeons & Dragons* customers — and you *should* be making money off them.

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Some might say role-playing games

are in a slump, but they're actually in a "back to basics" mode. The days of **d20 System** splat books are over, as every store with five elf sourcebooks on the shelf knows. The publishers that survived the d20 boom-and-bust cycle learned to provide what gamers really need — and what gamers really need on a regular basis are fantastic adventures.

Advantages of a strong modules category

When properly stocked, displayed, and promoted, adventure modules have several obvious advantages as a category.

Repeat Purchase Module:

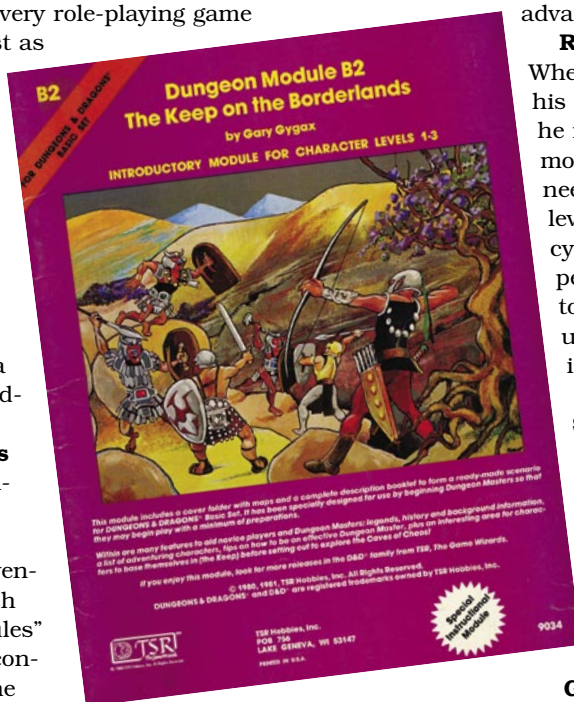
When a game master finishes his level 1 adventure module, he needs a level 2 adventure module. Two weeks later he'll need a level 3 module, then level 4, and from there the cycle continues. If you can persuade your local groups to rely on adventure modules, every sale today brings in another sale tomorrow.

Steady Release

Schedule: More **d20 System** and *Dungeons & Dragons* adventure modules are being released every month, giving customers a reason to check in regularly. Between **Dungeon Crawl Classics** from **Goodman Games**, the ramped-up

output from **Wizards of the Coast**, and other publishers, there are several new adventures available every month.

Shared Experiences: Adventure modules provide a common platform to experience a role-playing game. Peruse the message boards at **Wizards of the Coast's** web site to see just how many gamers are playing **Red Hand of Doom**. These shared experiences give your regulars something common to talk about, an important foundation to building a community at your store. "Every game shop owner probably played **Keep on the Borderlands** back in the day," said Rob Schwalb, line editor for **Green Ronin Publishing's Bleeding Edge** adventures. "Giving their customers the same experience unites the fan base."



New Customer Recruitment: “Adventures are great teaching tools. For the new game master, adventures act as a first-time guide to storytelling,” said Paul Bazakas, National Account Director, Publishing, for **Wizards of the Coast**. New players need the most help, and adventure modules show them how to play. The \$2 promotional adventures from **Goodman Games** are ideal for this; they’re so cheap they can literally be given away, and the company will provide complimentary copies for special events.

Up-sell Potential: The adventure module itself can be an up-sell from the **Dungeon Master’s Guide**. In turn, adventures often support sales of other rulebooks. “A **D&D** adventure may contain monsters with annotated rules featured in another book,” continued Bazakas. “For example, **Expedition to Castle Ravenloft** features rules from books including the **Fiend Folio** and **Book of Vile Darkness**. While these books are not required to play the adventure, DMs may end up picking them up to expand their play options.”

Plug-and-Play Utility:

Good adventures don’t require much prep work. They’re like “**D&D** in a bottle” — perfect for the harried gamer who just wants to play. “A player needs to roll up a new character to use the prestige classes and feats from a new sourcebook,” said James Jacobs, editor-in-chief of **Dungeon** maga-

zine. “But an adventure can be integrated into an ongoing campaign.”

Adventures that include pre-generated characters are even more versatile; the pre-gens allow the module to be used as a one-shot or break from a regular game.

Collectibility: Adventure modules are more likely to appreciate in value than any other role-playing game category. There might be gold in your backstock — more on that below.

Displaying adventure modules

Adventures are a challenge to display due to their narrow spines. Creative retailers have devised many good solutions, and publishers are there to help.

“We used to keep the modules in a magazine box sorted by level,” said Rick Tess, manager of **The Fantasy Shop** in Florissant, MO. “They

displayed like comics and were easy to sort through. But since we got a spinner rack they’ve been selling even better, and they’re easier to shop.”

The spinner rack in question was supplied by **Goodman Games**, which offers a spinner rack bundle with its **Dungeon Crawl Classics** modules.

“The spinner is great,” continued Tess, “because little kids can look at the lower tiers while adults shop the higher tiers.”

Whatever you do, make sure your adventures are shelved face-out. “Module art tells a story, like a movie poster,” said Jacobs. “It’s heroes doing heroic things. Third edition hardbacks tend to have stylized ‘magic tome’ type covers that aren’t as eye-catching as the art on modules.”

How you choose to sort modules can also make a difference. While publisher brands do matter,

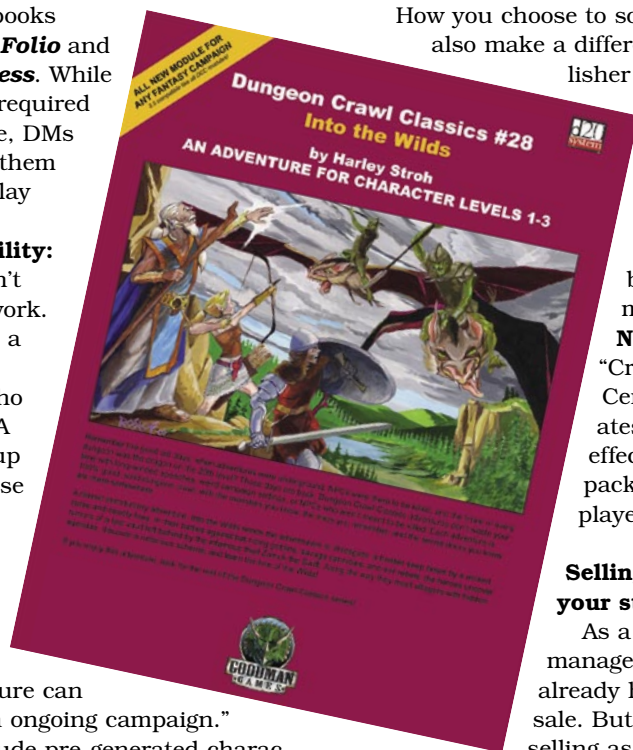
the first choice of most game masters is character level. “Shelve all the publishers together, sorted by level,” recommends Bill Webb of **Necromancer Games**. “Creating a ‘Modules Central’ area also creates a collectibility effect — it indulges the packrat aspect of the player.”

Selling more modules in your store

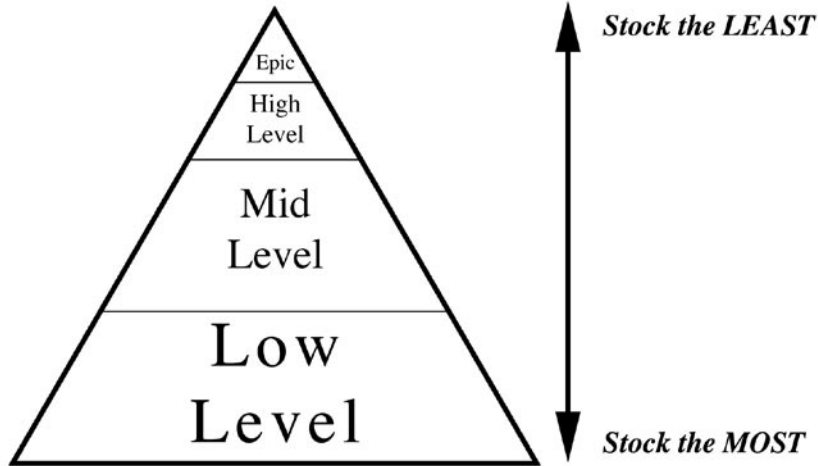
As a storeowner or manager you probably already have modules for sale. But you may not be selling as many as you could.

Understanding why customers buy adventure modules will help you sell more of them. Here are tips from some of the industry’s most experienced sellers.

Low-Level Sells Best: Every game starts at 1st level — but how many advance past 10th? Low-level adventure modules will always be your best sellers. They’re easy to play as pickup games, they appeal to new gamers, and many fans consider them more fun than the rules-heavy games that happen at high levels. This is true even with long campaigns. “The first issue of our **Dungeon** adventure paths always sell the best,” said Jacobs. “As the levels get higher, players migrate to other games — often to start a new adventure path.”



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Follow the Level Pyramid: Low-level adventures might sell best, but you need a full range to support every customer. What will a fan think when he finishes his 6th level adventure, only to find you have nothing for 7th level? At that moment you'll lose him. But at the same time, you don't need as many 7th level adventures as 1st level ones. You should stock adventures using a ratio called the "level pyramid." Roughly speaking, the level pyramid works like this: You should stock twice as many low-level adventures as mid-level adventures, and twice as many mid-levels as high-levels. Include a few epic level adventures to round it out. Experienced adventure publishers follow this ratio in their release schedule, so if you carry their complete line you'll naturally have the right proportions. The **Dungeon Crawl Classics** line is one example.

Know Your Customer: This goes without saying, but it's especially important with adventure modules for a couple reasons. First, your adventure selection must be as broad as your customer base. "Don't go with your personal likes or dislikes," said Curt Duval, co-owner of **Games Plus** in Mount Prospect, IL. "Just because you don't like urban adventures doesn't mean that your customers will dislike them also. You need an assortment of adventure types and levels to cover everybody's interests."

And the people buying modules today aren't the same as they were ten years ago. Many adventure modules are now purchased by experienced gamers with less time than they used to have. "Keep an eye out for parents running games for their kids," said Tess. "If you're missing them, you're missing a pretty big market."

I sell 20%-25% of my modules to them."

Finally, modules as a category offer a unique forecasting capability. Knowing your customers' campaigns will tell you what to stock. For example, if you're selling level 4 modules today, you'll be selling level 5 modules tomorrow. If the **Eberron** campaign in your back room just finished the level 2 Wizards' module **Shadows of the Last War**, odds are good they'll be ready for the level 4 Wizards adventure **Whispers of the Vampire's Blade**. Pay attention to the level range of your alpha gamers' campaigns, and stock modules of the appropriate character levels.

Ride the "Long Tail": Unlike almost every other role-playing game category, adventure modules have a "long tail" — that is, the backstock really sells. Along with core rulebooks, well-known adventure modules can continue selling for a long, long time. **Dungeon Crawl Classics #1: Idylls of the Rat King** has been selling steadily since February 2003, and is about to enter its fourth printing. Likewise, **The Lost City of Barakus**, a **Necromancer Games** adventure published by **Troll Lord Games**, is entering its third year of steady sales.

Low-level modules are most likely to experience a "long tail." Pay attention to your assumptions: you may *assume* that a module sold isn't worth restocking, but make sure you're not missing an evergreen.

The More You Have, The More You'll Sell: This is not as obvious as it sounds. A store manager with 20 sourcebooks on his shelf will think to himself, "I offer a good selection of sourcebooks." And he does. But a store manager with 20 adventure modules on his shelf does **not** offer a good selection of adventures — because each module is good for only a limited level range. Twenty adventures on a shelf means you offer, on average, one module for each character level — so a DM with level 4 characters has *one* option from your 20 modules. You need at least 30-40 modules, at a range of levels, before you're really getting close to a good selection.

There are facts behind this theory. **Goodman Games** inserts customer reply cards in their modules. Two of the questions they ask are: "How many other **DCC** adventures did the store have for sale?" and "How many other **DCC** modules do you own?"

The results are surprising. The response to the first question, how many modules were for sale, is evenly split: 35% said 1-4, 34% said 16+, with the rest in the middle. The response to the

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second question, how many other **DCC** modules does the customer own, is also split: 40% own 1-4, 31% own 16+, with the rest in the middle. But when the results are cross-referenced, there's an interesting result. Of customers who said they owned 1-4 modules, 61% said they shopped at a store that had 1-4 modules for sale. Only 22% of these customers shopped at a store that stocked 16+ modules. Of the customers who said they owned 16+ modules, 59% shopped at a store that had 16+ modules. Only 18% of these customers shopped at a store with 1-4 modules.

In other words: *if you stock it, they will buy it.* And if you don't stock it, they will go to another store where they can find it. Keep a wide variety of adventure modules in stock. It encourages impulse buys and repeat purchases, and helps build a steady market for modules. Your customers will agree!

Promotions with adventure modules

If razors are made to sell razor blades, then core rulebooks are made to sell adventure modules. Generate repeat purchases with

these strategies:

Create a Destination: Be THE place to go for adventure modules in your town. Mr. Duval of Games Plus carries such a broad inventory assortment that his store is a regional destination, not just for adventure modules but for other categories as well. If your selling zone doesn't have an adventure destination, make yourself one.

Get the Up-sell: Whenever someone buys a core **Dungeons & Dragons** book, up-sell them on a module. "If I were a retailer," said Schwalb of **Green Ronin**, "I would keep a couple modules right there on the counter, and up-sell on every **Dungeon Master's Guide** I ring up."

"The First Hit's Free": If someone's on the fence about using published adventure modules, give them a promotional module for free. **Goodman Games** publishes two separate **Dungeon Crawl Classics** modules priced at only \$2, perfect for this purpose. Good occasions for this sort of promotion include **Worldwide D&D Day** on November 4, **GM's Day** on March 4, and of course, **Free RPG Day** on June 23.

Cross-Merchandising: As Bazakus from **Wizards** mentioned, many modules tie back to other sourcebooks. Display these titles together – or, at the very least, use shelf tags to keep customers informed. See the sidebar for more information.

Themed Presentations: Some customers want to run a horror-themed campaign, while others like nautical adventures. Halloween is a great time to pull out all the horror adventures, and April Fool's Day is a good time to pull out humorous adventures. At the very least, provide "staff lists" of titles that support each theme, so a game master with a seafaring campaign can easily find the relevant adventures.

Build Your Own Adventure Path: This is a great idea for a promotion centered on adventure modules. Give a discount or freebie to customers who purchase modules that take their party from 1st to 20th levels. Allow some gaps (you might not have a 17th-level module in stock, for example), and make a minimum purchase of 4 titles. One good incentive is a "bounce-back" coupon good toward their next module purchase, or a free book of character sheets for starting their new campaign.

Trade-Ins: Some customers think modules aren't worth the price because "I can only use them once." If you face this attitude repeatedly, consider creating a trade-in section. Customers can trade in old adventures for credit equal to half the retail value. That credit can then be redeemed toward any new role-playing game purchase, but can't comprise more than half the sale value; the other half must be cash. You can sell the trade-ins at 25% off and still come out

Cross-Merchandising Modules

Here are some examples of modules that can sell other titles.

Wizards of the Coast: Expedition to Castle Ravenloft includes rules from **Fiend Folio** and **Book of Vile Darkness**. **Red Hand of Doom** utilizes NPCs with prestige classes from **Frostburn** and **Complete Arcane**.

Goodman Games: Dungeon Crawl Classics #18: Citadel of the Demon Prince includes rules from **The Demon Hunter's Handbook**, while **Dungeon Crawl Classics #34: Cage of Delirium** includes a soundtrack produced by **Midnight Syndicate**, whose gaming CDs are in many quality game stores.

Green Ronin Publishing: Green Ronin's Freeport franchise combines sourcebooks with adventures. The classic **Freeport** adventures (especially the **Freeport Trilogy**) support **Creatures of Freeport**, **Tales of Freeport**, and the many other **Freeport** titles.

ahead.

In-Store Reviews: Provide a simple form for customers to write a review. A 3x5 card with the store logo stamped on it works well. A customer who writes a review of their favorite module (which you then attach to the shelf by that module) gets \$1 off their next purchase.

Session Reports: Have the “alpha gamers” from your store write session reports for your newsletter, bulletin board, or web site. This is a great way to convey how much fun an adventure can be, and it also serves to create a sense of shared community as other players run through the same adventure.

Emphasize Quality: If you emphasize the quality adventures within your assortment, gamers will take notice. Game masters will steer their campaigns toward the adventure they want to play, and players will ask their game masters to take them through “that adventure that won the Gen Con gold medal award.” One suggestion is to print and laminate a small sign featuring award-nominated adventure modules from the last two years. Another idea is to assemble the award nominees together with a shelf talker indicating their status. See the sidebar for a list of recent nominees.

The Needle in the Haystack: Collectibility

“Never underestimate the collectibility aspect,” said Mr. Webb. “I have a complete set of *Forgotten Realms*. My book shelf actually collapsed a couple weeks ago when I added the latest book!”

Module fans are collectors, and it shows in eBay prices. As I type this, *Dungeon Crawl Classics #20.5: The Mask of Death* was just bid up to \$50.00 on eBay, and the auction still has two days to go. The ultra-rare *Dungeon Crawl Classics #3.5: The Haunted Lighthouse* has sold on eBay for more than \$200.00. These adventures are usually found in the hands of dedicated retailers who attend Gen Con to acquire such convention specials — but even the “common” adventure module can appreciate noticeably. A regular, no-frills copy of the first printing of *Dungeon Crawl Classics #10: The Sunless Garden*, which retails for \$10.99, fetched \$38.00 on eBay in mid-November, even after the reprint was already announced, and the rare *Necromancer Games* module *Tomb of Abysthor* has also sold at a premium.

Adventure modules are one of the few role-playing game categories to appreciate this much. It is quite possible that some of your “old backstock” is actually valuable collector’s items, especially if you buy up old collections. Certain retailers like **Titan Games**, **Hit Pointe**, and **Noble Knight Games** specialize in prized modules — and you can, too. Here are a couple tips from the experts for finding needles in your

Award-Nominated Modules

“Best Adventure,” Gen Con ENnie Awards, 2006

The *Shackled City* Adventure Path (Paizo Publishing)
Dungeon Crawl Classics #12.5: Iron Crypt of the Heretics (Goodman Games)

Dungeon Crawl Classics #20: Shadows in Freeport (Goodman Games)

Etherscope: The Lemurian Candidate (Goodman Games/Steampower Publishing)

1 on 1 Adventures #6.66 (Expeditious Retreat Press)

“Best Adventure,” Gen Con ENnie Awards, 2005

Maure Castle, Dungeon #112 (Paizo Publishing)

Dungeon Crawl Classics #11: The Dragonfiend Pact (Goodman Games)

Trouble at Durbenford (Necromancer Games/White Wolf Publishing)

Villainy Amok (Hero Games)

Slavelords of Cydonia (Bad Axe Games)

haystack.

“Look up modules as a competed auction on eBay,” said Marcus King of **Titan Games**. “That is an advanced search field. Look up the module by title, then by SKU code. Look for completed auctions only, which tells you how many have sold in the past 30 days, and what their value is. How many have sold is important — the fewer modules that have sold, the scarcer the module. If you find that one of your modules is not listed at all, then it may be pure gold!”

Michael Cox of **Centurion Distribution** recommends acaem.com as “the best reference site for real oddities.” His own collection of super-rare modules is extensive, and **Centurion Distribution** still does a fair volume in out-of-print role-playing game products. “In my opinion,” he says, “the most valuable modules are the original *Palace of the Vampire Queen*, the limited editions of *Lost Tamoachan* and *Ghost Tower of Inverness, ST1 Up the Garden Path*, and the fabled orange *B3 Palace of the Silver Princess*. I personally own the *B3* and the two limited editions, and I have owned a *Palace of the Vampire Queen*, but have never owned an *ST1* and I believe it is the rarest official module out there.”

Check your used games backstock. If you have *ST1 Up the Garden Path* from TSR, you have a golden needle in your haystack. Even if you don’t have that title, you can start building your business now by stocking a range of quality adventure modules. In the short term they’ll build your role-playing game business considerably — and in the long term, you may end up with even more golden needles! ❖