

# THEM'S FIGHTING WORDS

BY JOSEPH GOODMAN

## HOW TO WRITE ADVENTURES *that don't suck*

**T**he curse of the RPG publisher is crappy submissions. For every polished gem by the likes of Harley Stroh or Chris Doyle, dozens of malnourished proposals fall dead by the wayside. My company, Goodman Games, primarily publishes adventure modules, so most of the rejection letters I write are for crappy adventures. When Steve Chenault said I should write a column for *Crusader*, I immediately knew what the subject should be: *How to Write Adventures That Don't Suck*.

Consider this a public service. By spreading my purported wisdom on the subject of adventures, I hope to improve the prevailing quality of submitted material – increasing the yield for Goodman Games, Troll Lord Games, and other fine publishers. There are many mediocre adventures just a few edits away from being great, and perhaps this column will push a few over the cusp.

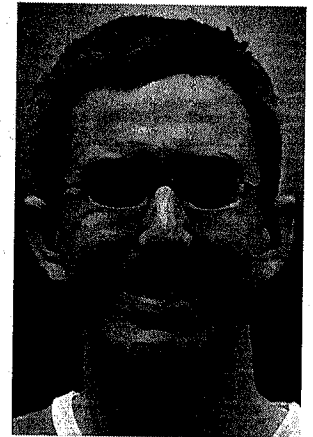
If you're wondering what qualifies me to give my opinion on this, I can only offer one qualification: The *Dungeon Crawl Classics* line is still going strong, and I think that's testament to my ability to pick good authors and good adventures. I've published more than 50 adventure modules, and I've read (and rejected) a lot more than that.

This, then, is a few things you can do to ensure that you write adventures that don't suck. A good adventure doesn't need to have all of these items. But most good adventures do have many of them. This list is focused on fantasy adventures, by the way.

- Convey a sense of the fantastic. Convey this through encounters, descriptions, and most importantly, magic. The fantastic is what makes D&D so much fun, and that has to come across in the adventure.
- Create memorable encounters. Avoid repetition. Consider all aspects of an encounter: tim-

ing, environment, opponents, hazards, battle conditions and so on. Think about templates, feats, equipment, magic items and spells as ways to make opponents interesting. Try to come up with ideas for rooms that players will still be talking about 20 years from now.

- Work hard. Dungeons with stirges, dark-mantles, chokers, rust monsters, orcs and other no-brainer monsters strike me as lazy. The job of a published author is to produce material that the typical Dungeon Master at home could not produce. Don't submit derivative dungeons.
- Think of new twists on old classics. Don't throw in a rust monster. Instead, make it a rust spider that climbs walls. Players will never suspect that the reddish-brown spider attacking them actually has the same stats as a rust monster. Surprise the players!
- Include "easter eggs" – at least one well-hidden room with a cool treasure of some kind, accessible only to very diligent or very lucky PCs.
- Give intelligent treasure. Why give gold when you can give art objects? The treasure should match the villains and location. Sometimes the best treasure is information, because information leads to more adventures. The classic example is a treasure map; other options include blackmail lists, diaries and journals, or spell books with new spells requiring rare adventure-worthy components.
- Include a good villain. Not every dungeon crawl needs one, but the best ones often have them. The adventure has to establish a strong emotional framework for the villain, too; it's not enough for him to just be "another evil necromancer."
- Allow sequel potential. The Dungeon Master should be able to continue the plot threads begun in this adventure to create future adventures for his campaign.



**JOSEPH  
GOODMAN**

*has been a gaming professional since 1994, when he self-published *The Dark Library*. During college, he served as Editor-in-Chief of *Heartbreaker's Forge Magazine*, Editor of the English edition of *Target Games' Chronicles from the Warzone*, and Staff Writer for *Alternative Armies*, all the while doing freelance writing on the side.*

*He's done other exciting stuff, too, like get deported from Scotland, visit the town with the longest name in the world, encounter three dead bodies on a trip to Gen Con, get elected on a platform of "I don't want to change anything; I just want power," and manage multi-million dollar receipt budgets for several major retailers. His amateur boxing record is 1-0.*

## THEM'S FIGHTING WORDS

- Make the levels distinctive. Each level of the dungeon should feel distinct from the ones before and after it. They shouldn't blend together.
- Create a strong narrative feel. Usually this is a buildup with a climax in a big encounter at the end, but that formula can be varied. Regardless, focus on an encounter list that forms a storyline that reads like a great adventure novel.
- Secret doors. Lots of secret doors! Every dungeon needs at least one secret door, preferably hidden in a place the PCs won't think to look. Secret doors at the bottom of pit traps, secret trap doors mounted in the ceiling above normal doors... think of ways to fool the players.
- Require thought. There should be at least one puzzle. That doesn't necessarily mean a riddle. It could be a room that's hard to figure out, or a strange new monster that can only be defeated in a special way that's alluded to elsewhere in the dungeon.
- Pace it well. Long, tiresome combats should be followed by quick rooms. Thought-provoking puzzles should be followed by bloodbaths. Slow, trap-filled hallways should be followed by a rousing fight.
- Involve the group. Meter the action so there's an even mix of involvement by all character classes.
- Include a twist, preferably at the end. Note that read-aloud text can be used against the players, primarily for this purpose. Establish PC expectations through read-aloud text, and then use those expectations against them to create plot twists.
- Subplots. Subplots vary widely, but the best ones have a few things in common. First, they involve several PCs in an ongoing drama of some kind. Second, they create mystery or intrigue. Third, they lead to potential future adventures.
- Include new monsters. A new monster that throws off the characters is good (as opposed to simply duplicating the role of an existing monster, which is a waste of space).
- But don't include too many new monsters. Players get frustrated if everything is unfamiliar. And an adventure should stand on its own two legs as an adventure, not simply as a vehicle for new crunchy bits.
- Maintain a "cut to the chase" feeling - start with a bang and get to the action fast. Don't waste time on empty rooms unless they really add something.
- Use intelligent ecology. Most monsters need to eat, sleep and drink. Dungeons should allow for this fact.
- Give a strong atmosphere. The dungeon should have a strong, cohesive vibe of some kind, whether dangerous, or evil, or disturbing, or reptilian, or whatever.

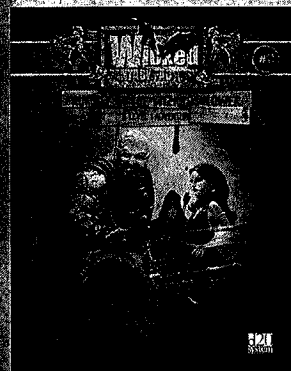
Why is this column called "Them's Fighting Words?" Because as I'd say down in Georgia, my hobbies (outside of gaming) are "reading and writing, feeding and fighting" - the latter being, more specifically, boxing. This column is my chance to match my physical sparring with some verbal sparring. Tell me what you think of the above - and next issue, I'll tell you more about great adventures.

## TRY SOMETHING A LITTLE WICKED



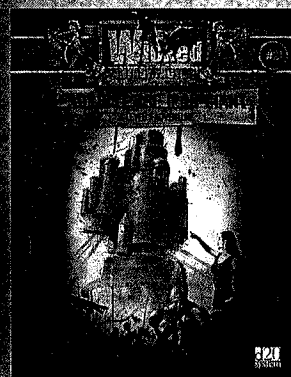
### WFF #0: TEMPLE OF BLOOD

*A level 1 adventure.  
Available on Free RPG  
Day from your favorite  
game store! Visit  
[www.freeRPGday.com](http://www.freeRPGday.com)  
for more info.*



### WFF #1: RUMBLE IN THE WIZARD'S TOWER

*A level 1 adventure.  
An evil warlord plots  
conquest from a fortress  
of dark and magical  
secrets. Can your heroes  
stop him - in TIME?*



### WFF #2: AGAINST THE IRON GIANT

*A level 3 adventure.  
Can your heroes put the  
hurt on a gigantic,  
iron-shod, town-  
crushing, monster-  
smashing war machine?*

## Wicked Fantasy Factory

Learn more at  
[www.goodman-games.com](http://www.goodman-games.com)

