How to Make a Great Dungeon

Avalon Games

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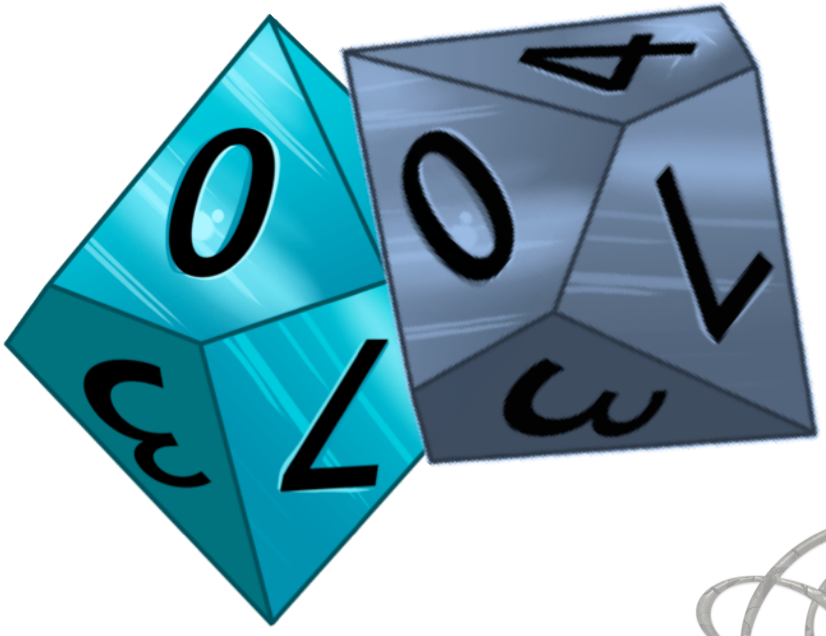

"The crumbling ancient stones protrude from the side of the rocky hillside like a cavernous maw. A hint that something lies buried from the view of the sunlit world. Yet there is clear evidence that not everyone is afraid of the blackness. The earth around the entrance is packed down, showing the passage of many feet; the outlines in the dirt show that some of those feet have been here recently.

The ranger looks to his companions, he has led them to the cursed site. The scout takes a few careful glances around the site, checking for ancient traps. The wizard pulls a few scrolls from his pack, hoping he has packed the right ones for the dangers they may face. The fighter simply sits to one side, sharpening his sword…he knows they'll need him soon enough."

In many people's minds, dungeons are synonymous with roleplaying. The most successful game of all time includes the word in its title. But what is it about dungeons that really make them special, and how can you make a dungeon into a rich memorable environment rather than just a hole in the ground?

The tradition of the dungeon in storytelling echoes back to the myths of ancient Greece, and the stories of heroes traveling to the underworld to reclaim forgotten secrets, hidden treasures or captured maidens. The dungeon in a roleplaying game follows the same patterns.

A dungeon is a place where adventurers find hidden truths, they may be locations where ancient treasures have been set aside and forgotten, or they may be carefully guarded strongholds where the treasures are not only remembered but they are feared and worshipped. The thing to always remember about a dungeon is that it is a place set apart from the rest of the world, it might be riddled with traps, it might be filled with nightmarish creatures, or it might be something else entirely. Dungeons need not be purely fantastic; there are numerous environments similar to the traditional dungeon setting in the real world, but even these real world dungeons have secrets and mystery shrouding them.

The use of dungeons in roleplaying games can vary dramatically. Some game masters use dungeons as focal points for a series of stories, others use some kind of underground setting in ever session they run; there are even campaigns where every game is played out in a single unimaginably vast labyrinth. None of these options is more correct when it comes to dungeons, and each has a chance to be truly great.

What is a Dungeon?

At the simplest level, a dungeon is an underground environment.

Underground environments have been built for as long as there has been recorded history, it could even be argued that the underground environment stretches even further into the past with the primordial connections to cavemen. But unlike caves, the dungeon is a deliberate construct.

Such underground environments still exist in the world. Each was designed for a specific purpose, and in every case, the purpose was to keep something hidden from the outside world. Some of the most famous underground environments include the tombs of the Pharaohs in the Egypt's Valley of the Kings, each a storehouse of priceless treasures, and possessing the traditional roleplaying clichés of hidden doors, false walls, rumors of unholy immortal curses.

The labyrinth of Crete is another fine example of an underground environment, once a palace for the Minoan kings, it was lost except to the stories of Greek legend. Yet millennia later, archaeologists uncovered the truth of the story, gradually exploring and excavating the ruins.

This isn't to say that all underground environments are lost. Hidden under the cities of Paris and Rome are vast catacombs, where the dead have been stored for centuries. In these huge underground mazes, there are said to be communities of society's outcastes, and there are just as many rumors of lost treasures and hidden secrets.

Inhabited underground environments may be far less common, but there is still precedent for them in the real world; consider the towns carved from rock in the Cappadocian region of Turkey, or the orthodox churches said to be carved by the angels themselves in the heart of Ethiopia.

Numerous other examples of real world underground environments exist, but in the worlds of roleplaying, the imagination is captured by the great fantasy classics. The Mines of Moria have evoked decades of copies in dozens of settings, the very concept of a dwarven miner has become so much a part of modern fantasy that it is considered a stereotype.

Another common stereotype is the underground lair of a villain; this is seen in numerous examples through films and novels. In better examples, the underground setting is link into a plot or finds grounding in the context of the story's setting, while in poorer examples an underground setting has simply been used "because that's what is done." The aim of this guide is to help you create underground environments that are well thought out and memorable, not just dungeons that are like the majority that have come before. (and the majority that will come after)

With that in mind, remember that every dungeon should have a purpose and a place. The original purpose might have been forgotten, and the truth might remain concealed, but the characters exploring it might find clues along the way. Each clue helps to enhance the "realism" of the dungeon and helps to turn it from stone corridors with traps and monsters into a living, breathing nocturnal ecosystem.

Placing a Dungeon in Context

The first key point when making a great dungeon is to consider the various reasons "why" (Why was it built? Why was it forgotten? Or, Why is it shunned?), then you can start looking at the "who" (Who built it? Who prevents people from visiting it?) and the "how." (How was it built? How is it hidden?)

Grounding a dungeon in its environment is important, while a dungeon stands separate from the ecosystems around it, a well conceived example will provide hints in the world outside, and conversely the world outside will flow into the dungeon.

It doesn't take much to place a dungeon in context, and a little bit of thought at this stage will help immensely when filling in the dungeon details later. The dungeon mouth is an opening between the sunlit world and the darkness within, but what does it look like? Think about whether people regularly visit the dungeon; if not, consider if has it become the den to a pack of wild animals or has it become completely overgrown. If people do use the dungeon, how much of it sees regular use.

Three examples of dungeons will be used through the booklet.

Example 1: The monks of a local order have long considered a certain waterfall and its surrounding grove of trees to be sacred. The action of the water has carved a cave in the rock wall behind it, and the monks have elaborately dug deeper into the hillside in the belief that there is something holy within. How long have the monks been doing this? How far have they dug? How often do they do this, only on ritual days? How well do the monks signify their sacred place to outsiders?

Example 2: A lost bandit hideout is said to be hidden in the nearby forest. When the bandits were at their strongest, they raided dozens of towns and claimed enough treasure to make an entire town wealthy. But they disappeared mysteriously, their hideout abandoned except for a pack of wolves who use the first chamber as a den. What happened to the bandits? How many potential dungeoneers have been scared off by the wolves? Why are people suddenly interested in the location again now?

Example 3: A once thriving underground city might has been lost to the ravages of time, but now a new village has sprung up using the first few dozen passages and chambers. What do the people think about the remaining passages? Have they explored them? Do they trade artifacts from the forgotten city to passing travelers? Are they scared of monsters further in the dark? Does the village advertise it's presence to outsiders or are they careful to conceal themselves? Why?

The Fallen Cthonian Metropolis Map

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Sets 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 are all ready for download, so go get 'em.

Mini-Games
Avalon Games is happy to offer tons of little games, that we like to call Mini-Games, and with over 30 titles, you are sure to find one or more games that will blow your mind. Little, however, does not mean lame. No, these are great gaming gems, just in small bite sized forms. Fun, fast and cheap, they are a great way to get some gaming fun into a short block of time. Have a look, you might be surprised at what you find.

Worlds of Wonder
Worlds of Wonder is a fast, simple to play RPG system designed for use by advanced players who wish to create detailed characters without having to roll on endless charts and deal with endless rules.

After 30+ years of playing, running and designing games, be they RPG's or board games, we at Avalon have come to one conclusion. Its not the game's rules that make it enjoyable, but the people you play with. With that in mind, Worlds of Wonder takes the most important aspect of any RPG, the character creation, and tries to offer players, and their GM, the tools needed to make the time spent playing together well worth the time spent creating the characters.

Worlds of Wonder Expansions
Want more Worlds of Wonder? Try one of the many expansions for the system. More monsters, foes, magic, skill sets and gaming stuff to keep you occupied for weeks, months, hell maybe for a lifetime. Ever expanding, the WoW system is made for gaming fun, so don't wait, have an adventure and enter Worlds of Wonder.

Arcana
Arcana is generic world, designed for use with any Fantasy RPG System, and so the information presented here and in other Arcana expansions will of course be a bit vague as to stats, levels and powers. The intention is to give the GM and players a world rich in personality, history and depth, one where they can seek adventure, but use any RPG system they feel most conferrable with.

The basics of the game world are presented here in the core book, but as expansions are released, the complexity of the world will grow as more and more of its history, dangers and wonders are explored. When it is all said and done, Arcana will become a vast world of detailed and expansive depth, one where that you and your friends can full explore.

Game Geek
Avalon's Monthly game magazine, inside you will find tons of gaming goodness, free games, add on materials for many of Avalon's titles, and a monthly sections dedicated to S&G, Battle Axe and Arcana. Great game stuff each and every month.

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S & G Battle System

Avalon's premier game system the S&G battle system allows you to play skirmish level engagements, and do so with a fast, easy to learn system that also allows for endless expansions and genres. With S&G you can fight battles between fantasy based elves and orcs, or blast off into the cold hard future with space marines and aliens.

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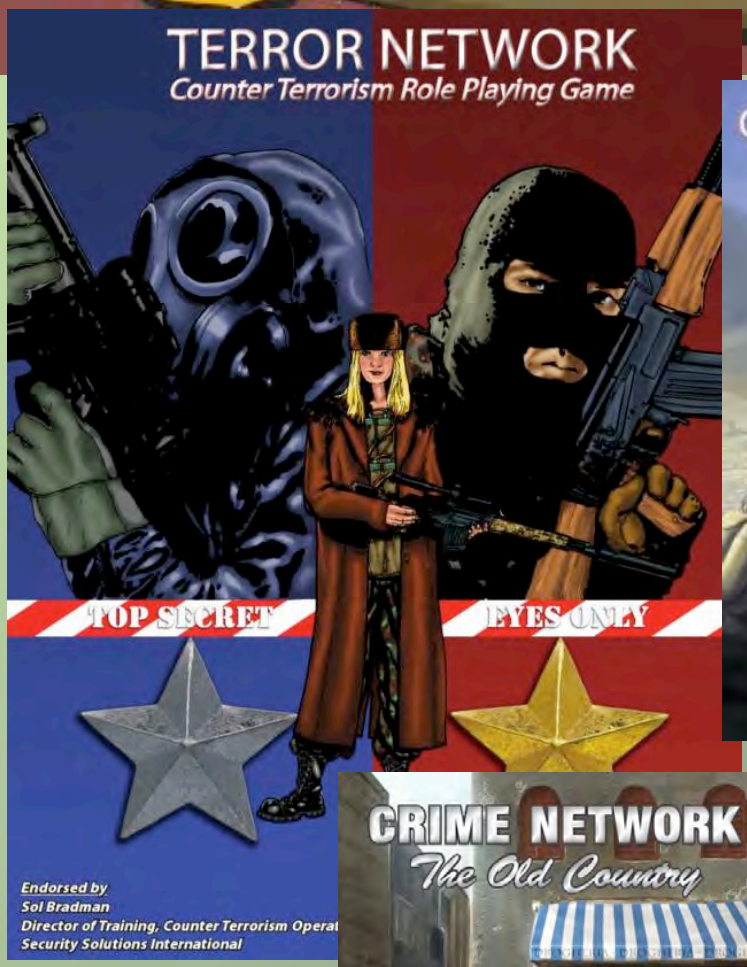
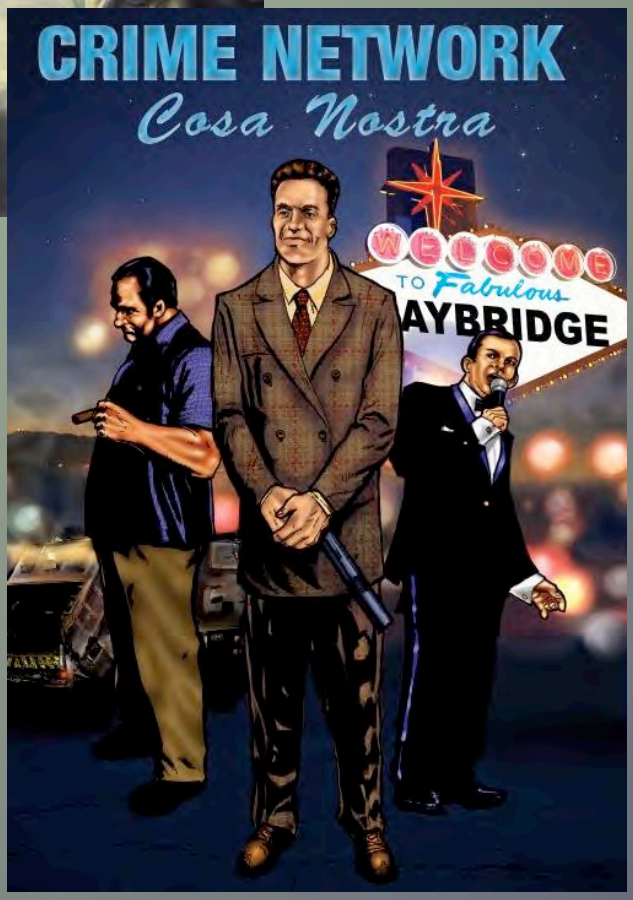




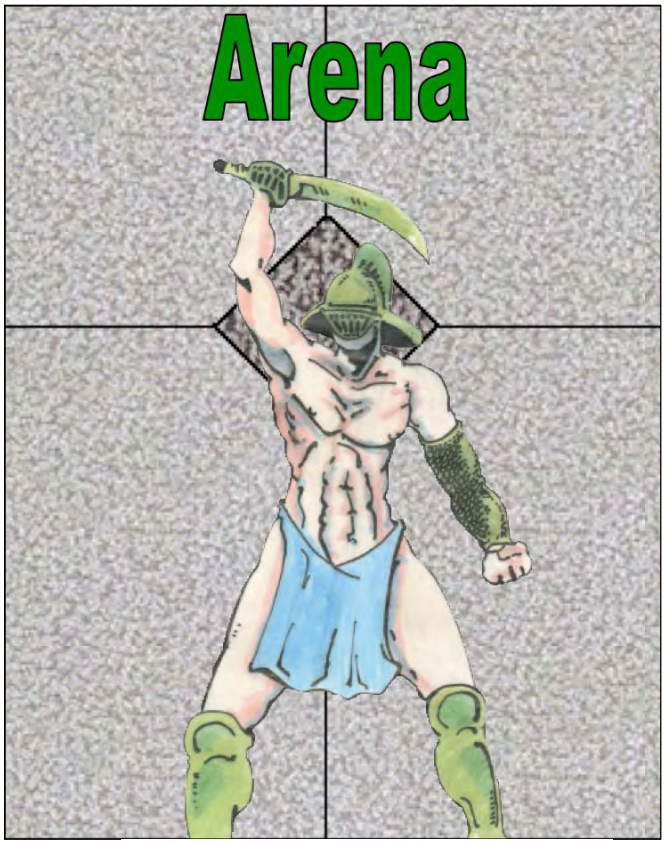
Battle Axe is a simple to play tabletop system for skirmish level battles. Using cards instead of dice, you will find the game to be less luck based and much more tactical in nature. The rules and cards provide here will be enough to get you started, and new characters and rule expansions are on the way so you can continue to increase both the size and composition of your War Bands.

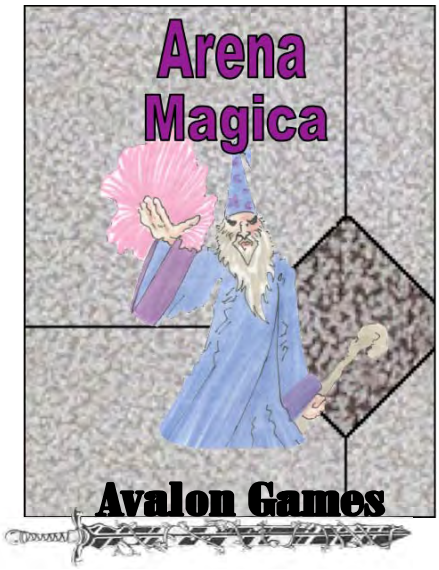
If you liked this game, try one of Avalon Game's many Mini-Games, such as Arena, a great game of man-to-man combat.

(Click here to visit this product's page at RPGNow)

As the Minotaur charged, Har gripped his battle axe tighter in his meaty hand. Swinging its club high into the air in anticipation of delivering a mighty blow, the mad half-man creature roared as it raced towards the small warrior standing his ground. With blinding speed, Har flipped his battle axe upwards and into the chest of the bull man. Staggering backwards, the great beast died as it spit blood and fell like a newly chopped tree. The crowds roared at the sudden defeat of the champion. No one had defeated the Minotaur before, but now there stood a new warrior for the fans to root for, a new lord of the bloody arena, a new master of the death sport.

This is Arena, another Mini-Game from Avalon Games. Create a gladiator, train him or her in the skills of killing and then equip them with the weapons and armor of your choice. Send them into the arena to battle other warriors and see who is the best… the toughest… the bravest warrior in the lands. Fully expandable, look for future expansions to the system, including a detailed magic system and more.





Add some magic to the system with this expansion and see you games expand.