60 Second
Dungeon Design
Dice MonKeys™
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Introduction

As a Gamemaster, one of the biggest challenges you have to overcome is lack of preparation time. There are very few (if any) full-time professional Gamemasters, so in all likelihood you are trying to wedge your session preparation in between work, school and family obligations.

This is where *60 Second Dungeon Design* can pay off in spades. 60 Second Dungeon Design uses the 5 Room Dungeon method which has been around just about as long as RPGs themselves…but with some tweaks to make it even more versatile.

Before you dig in, there are a few basic concepts you need to understand. First of all, a "dungeon" does NOT literally have to be a classical fantasy dungeon. It can just as easily be a warehouse, a castle, a spaceship, or even a small town with several distinct areas (a gate, a tavern, an armory, etc.)

And in this model, you aren't limited to 5 specific rooms. What you are really looking for is to create 5 different types of encounter areas. Utilizing this type of structure will create a series of interesting encounters for your party…encounters that give each type of character a chance to shine.

Let's take a look at the 6 basic steps for a 60 Second Dungeon, along with some examples and tables you can use to prime the pump.

Step 1 - Determine Your Dungeon's Form

Your "dungeon" needs a form, and a reason for being. Maybe it was an abandoned mine now inhabited by Goblins, Orcs, and creatures from the deep. Or it could be the treasure tower of a mad wizard, filled with magical traps and animated suits of armor.

Re-skin your dungeon based on the genre you are playing. For example, If you are playing in a Sci-Fi world the fortress becomes a derelict space station filled with alien crustaceans bent on galactic domination.

Your "dungeon" is...

1. a former prison.
2. a fortress or castle.
3. a monster's lair.
4. a mountainside cave.
5. a secret hideout.
6. a subterranean cavern.
7. a tomb or crypt.
8. an abandoned mine.
9. an ancient temple.
10. an underground sewer.

Step 2 - Present a Guarded Entrance

You established your dungeon's format and reason to exist in Step 1. The question now is: why hasn't this dungeon already been plundered? Was the entrance hidden from sight by natural camouflage like a waterfall? Does it require a key, password or magic to open? Or is the entrance guarded guarded by several nasty creatures, preventing all but the bravest adventurers from entering.

Combine several elements to create a more challenging scenario. For instance, let's say the entrance to the cave is hidden by a waterfall. The PCs have a map, but another band of treasure hunters with access to the same information attacks the PCs in an attempt to jump their claim.

The entrance is...

1. a cave opening only accessible by water (ocean or lake).
2. a deep underground tunnel.
3. a mine shaft.
4. a natural staircase.
5. at the base of a giant tree.
6. at the bottom of a sinkhole.
7. cut into the side of a volcano.
8. hidden behind a waterfall.
9. in the basement of an ancient castle.
10. locked behind a magic door.

The dungeon is not easy to access because...

1. a creature outside the entrance ambushes the party.
2. a heavily reinforced and locked door prevents entrance.
3. an animated face in the door must be convinced to open up.
4. guards protect an entrance that has been sealed by order of local authorities.
5. rival treasure hunters attack the players.
6. several creatures guard the entrance to their lair/colony.
7. the entrance is hidden.
8. the entrance is trapped.
9. the entrance requires a special key or ceremony.
10. the magically sealed entrance requires a password or magic to open.

Step 3 - Introduce Further Complications

One of the goals of the 60 Second Dungeon is to give all types of players an opportunity to use their skills in the game. The player who invested hard won experience into building a powerful social character should have a chance to put their oratory abilities to use. This is the opportune time for the clever thief with expertise in avoiding traps and picking locks to ply his/her trade.

Step 3 is all about challenging your players to find other solutions to obstacles besides blunt force trauma. Puzzles, riddles, traps, social encounters and physical challenges are fair game in this section of your dungeon.

NOTE: If Step 2 featured a heavy roleplaying encounter or lots of skill use, feel free to throw a combat encounter at your party at this stage.

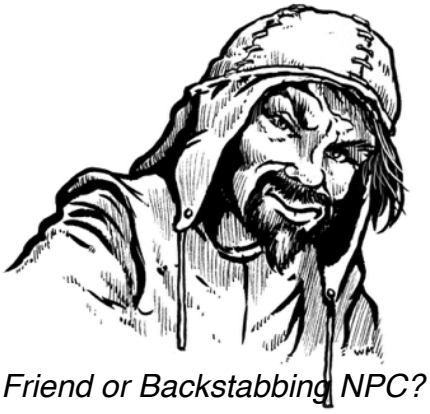
Advancing through the dungeon is further complicated by...

1. a dungeon inhabitant that requires persuasion or a bribe to allow passage.
2. a foe that must be defeated in combat (if Step 2 didn't involve combat).
3. a guide who will help the players find their way…for the right price.
4. a magic puzzle that prevents the party from moving forward.
5. a physical challenge that requires coordination, balance, strength or teamwork to overcome.
6. a riddle that must be solved to open the next door in the dungeon.
7. a small maze that must be navigated.
8. a trap that must be disabled.

Step 4 - Ramp up the Tension

The party is probably feeling pretty good about themselves at this point. They've earned entry into your dungeon either through cunning or feats of arms, and they've defeated the trap or roleplaying challenge you threw at them.

Now it's time to deal them a setback or throw a red herring their way. Step 4 can also be an opportunity to give the players either more of that they really like (more roleplaying, skill use, combat) or give the spotlight to a player who has not yet had a chance to shine.



Friend or Backstabbing NPC?

No matter what you do, you really want to increase the tension as they move toward the climax of the dungeon.

Backstabbing, betrayal, false clues, or a fierce combat encounter that depletes the party's resources (reducing their hit points through taking damage, or requiring them to use up some of their spell slots to defeat their foes) can make the final battle in Step 5 more dangerous and scary…and more satisfying if victory is achieved.

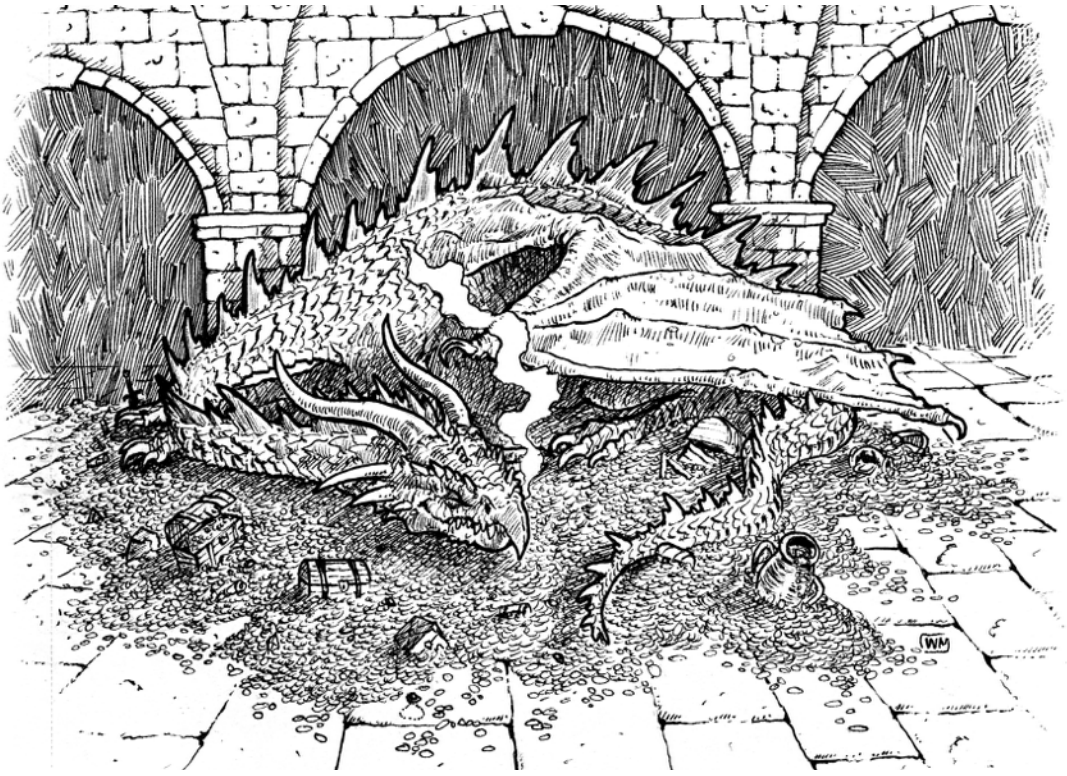
The tension increases because...

1. a challenging foe depletes the heroes' hit points, resources or spell slots leading up to the big battle.
2. a cunning trap must be avoided to proceed.
3. a desirable but non-essential treasure forces the PCs to decide whether to fight the guards or try to sneak past.
4. an environmental challenge requires the party to leave key gear behind (passages filled with water that cannot be swum in armor) .
5. the object of the quest is found damaged, but clues reveal a way to repair it by going deeper into the dungeon.
6. the party is betrayed by a "friendly" NPC.

Step 5 - Create a Climactic Battle

This is the big finish, the "Boss" fight...the climax.

Hopefully you provided your PCs with a purpose for entering the dungeon - now the Big Bad Evil Guy (BBEG) is standing in the way of accomplishing this goal.



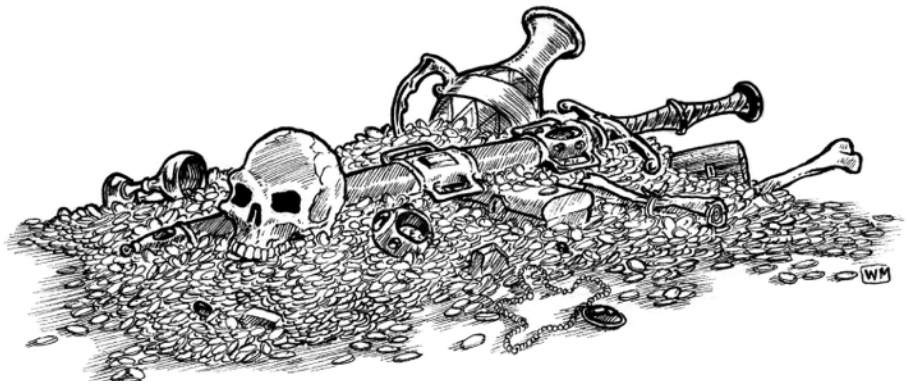
Pull out all the stops to make this encounter thrilling, dangerous, nerve-wracking, and fun! Pick several from the list below to create a battle that will live in long in legend.

The final battle is interesting, exciting and deadly because...

1. a large group of minions fight with ruthless abandon alongside the BBEG.
2. animated objects battle the PCs to protect the dungeon's secrets.
3. bridges, catwalks and ledges provide elevated terrain for tactical movement.
4. options exist for the party to use other skills besides fighting to influence the battle.
5. the BBEG has been observing the PCs progress, and is very prepared for their battle tactics.
6. the room is filled with hazards like lava, spiked pits, acid pools and broken flooring.
7. the room is large enough for ranged and melee combat.
8. there are other ways to ways to "win" the encounter besides just killing the BBEG.

Step 6 - Provide a Reward, Revelation or Twist

The PCs have navigated the dangers of the dungeon and defeated their final foe. Now is the time for the payoff. You can either reward the players with treasure, magic items or a key revelation…or you can twist the knife by turning the thrill of victory into the agony of defeat. As this is the final "scene" in the dungeon, it is often the most memorable.



The reason for the PCs entering the dungeon in the first place comes into play in this final piece of the 60 Second Dungeon.

At the end of their trial the players...

1. arrive too late to save the hostage, prisoner, or missing person.
2. discover a portal taking the players to another “dungeon” for further adventures.
3. discover they were betrayed by the quest giver, and have actually helped the campaign villain by clearing the dungeon.
4. find a powerful artifact that takes a toll on those that bear it (i.e. the One Ring).
5. find the means to repairing a powerful object in their possession.
6. find the object of their quest in the grasp of a large dormant creature…taking the prize could awaken it.
7. find the object of their quest is damaged and only partially salvageable.
8. find the object of their quest, chests of treasure or the sought after information they need to continue their adventures.
9. locate a small treasure along with clues leading to a larger treasure trove.
10. must flee from the dungeon as it begins to collapse.

Laying Out Your Dungeon

The 60 Second Dungeon works best if you have the party go through the encounters in a linear fashion. Step 2, Step 3, Step 4, Step 5, etc. You could certainly flip-flop Step 3 and Step 4 with few issues. Just because the encounters will take place in a linear fashion, that doesn’t mean that your dungeon has to be laid out in a straight line.

You can create forks, a central entrance with 4 “spokes”, or a series of vertically stacked rooms connected by stairs or ladders. You can add some dead ends, rooms where the party has to back track or serpentine corridors with wandering monsters to give each of your dungeons a different feel.

Remember, only you know what was designated to be in each room. If the PCs jump right to the room with the BBEG, there’s no reason you can’t shift

on the fly to make that room the “red herring” encounter instead. They’ll never know the difference.

Expanding on the 60 Second Dungeon

The 60 Second Dungeon creates a framework you can use to quickly build dungeons when your time is limited, or to kickstart a larger dungeon design when time is not an issue. If you need a bigger dungeon, simply add more rooms to meet your needs...remembering to always strike a balance between combat and roleplaying encounters.

You can also chain multiple 60 Second Dungeons together to create a large sprawling complex. Or make a multi-level dungeon where the payoff in Step 6 is a staircase down to the next level.

Again, don’t be limited by thinking that your “dungeon” has to be a classical fantasy dungeon. You can use this technique just as easily to create a modern day super-villain's hideout, or the ruins of a crashed spaceship on a distant planet.

Additional Resources

60 Second Dungeon Design was inspired by Johnn Four’s 5 Room Dungeon article. Check it for more tips and inspiration.

Gnome Stew has a fantastic article called The Nine Forms of the Five Room Dungeon that is also worth your time. Author Matthew Neagley details 9 different layouts you can use to create a variety of dungeons, each with a different look and feel.

Need help with coming up with puzzles and riddles? DM Johnny’s Puzzle Creation System is the gold standard for challenging your players to use their brains and not just their brawn to win the day.

Lastly, traps and trick inspiration, check out Tricks, Empty Rooms & Basic Trap Design by Courtney C. Campbell.

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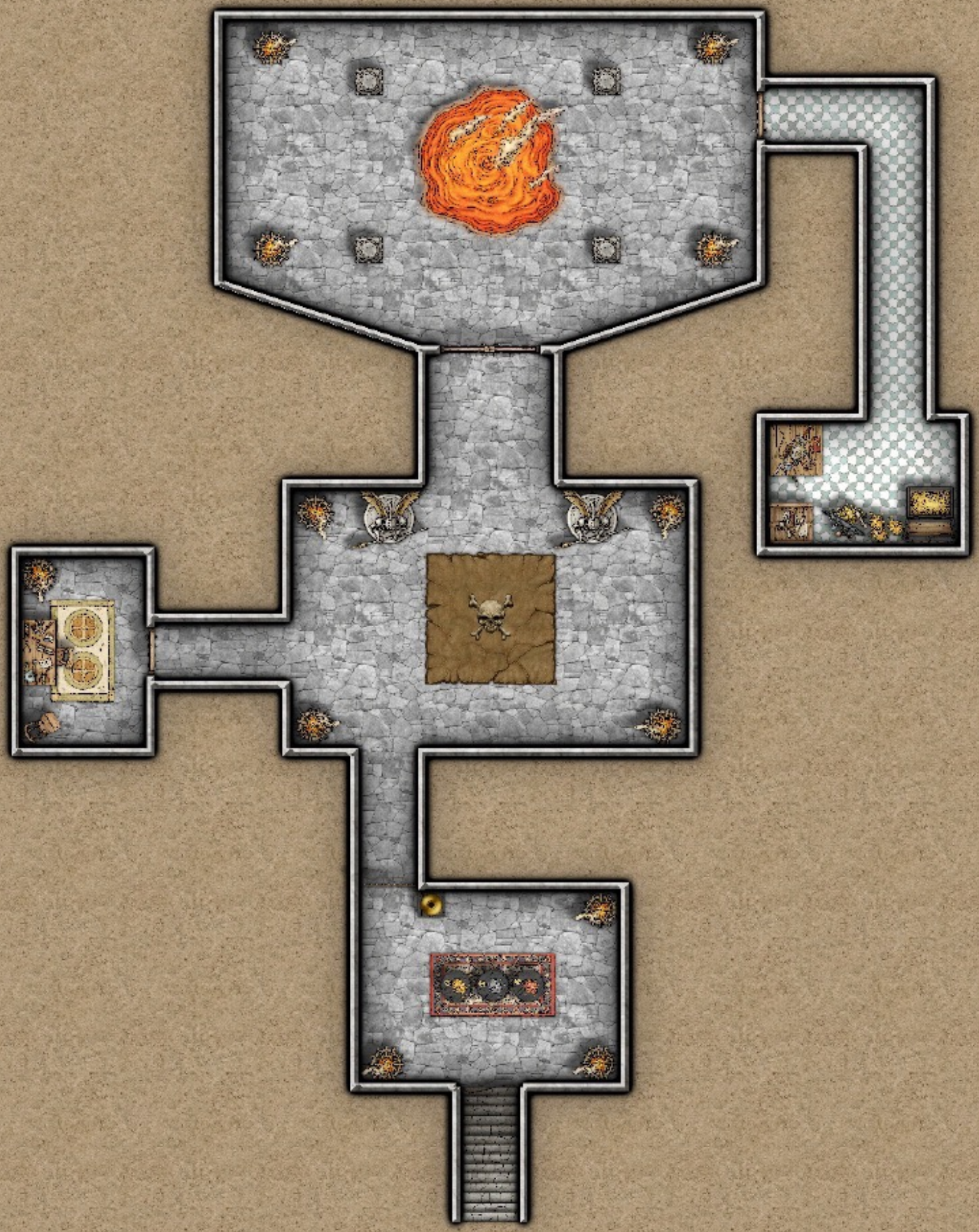
A Classic Fantasy 60 Second Dungeon



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