

Move it!

a time-keeping module for D&D 5e

Your players are looting everything in the dungeon -- maybe they came back to exploit something from the description to harvest infinite salt, or perhaps they're spending three extra days to loot the eyes out of every statue because you'd mentioned they were gemstones. Meanwhile, the adventure's villain is either tapping his foot in the background or advancing a plot that your players don't seem to like as much as farming loot.

There are many ways to mitigate this behavior (if you want to) and if you're interested in a mechanical solution, this is your document. These are not my original ideas; credit goes to friends I've long fallen out of touch with, and to the Angry GM, who (as far as I know) invented the "Time Pool."

Event Pool

Create a set of cards that represent negative events that could happen to your players while they're exploring or investigating. Create a number of them roughly equal to the number of players at your table. When one of your timer methods causes Bad Stuff, draw a card from this pool.

Player Generated Events

Whenever your players enter a new area, have them each create a good and a bad card. Tell them to keep the language vague, and to be realistic for the area and setting. It's not important that the events each player creates be realistic. The conversation they have creating these cards (with your moderating) helps them flesh out their understanding of the campaign setting, which in turn promotes active RP. If players aren't familiar with an area, call on them to create event cards after you've burned through a few of your own

Add these player generated events to the Event Pool. Shuffle them, or number them. If

you shuffle them, you can simply draw one at random. If you number them, roll on a dice and when there are too few cards for a dice type, weight one of your favorite cards a bit more.

Inspiration

Instead of awarding inspiration, allow players to create a good event card without creating a bad one, whenever they are called on to create event cards. You can also mix this with the standard inspiration system to create an easier setting: for instance, you can award event card creation to players who already have inspiration, or you can let them choose if they're rather create an event card or have the inspiration point.

Tie inspiration to events that are motivated by the timer (which we'll discuss in a moment.) For instance, if a player decides to rush through a hallway that's probably trapped because they've been down in the dungeon for three hours and they want to reach a new area before they draw event cards that they know could be devastating -- that's a good time to award inspiration. The motivation may have been meta, but the execution is identical to an impatient adventurer who is worried about being too long in the dark and muck.

When it's not appropriate for players to make good events for an area, allow them to use inspiration to reroll a time dice (see next page) whenever it lands on a 1.



Bad Things

Do not limit your bad things to ambushes and patrols of monsters. Use them to remind players that time crumbles mountains. Bad event: you're hungry again and need to eat. Bad event: the moisture of this wretched cave has caused your torches to extinguish early. Bad event: an intelligence save to not lose track of time (and then you can hide the timer and change it to your liking.) Bad event: the air in this place is stale and suffocating - constitution save or suffer a point of exhaustion. Use the timer and the event pool to make exploring more engaging, more dangerous, and to add a cost element to digging around for more loot.

Timer Method 1:

Angry GM's Time Pool (mostly)

Decide on a threat level for the dungeon. This level corresponds to dice types. Most dungeons are D6s. Safer places can be D8s or D10s. Dangerous places are D4s or even D2s.

Keep track of the characters as they take actions, and call on people if they aren't taking actions. Remind them that keeping an eye open over their shoulder is valuable. Use this to help include players who may be more timid or are easily spoken over. Whenever the entire party has stated what they're doing - when everyone has taken one or two actions, at your discretion - add a dice of the dungeon's dice pool to the Time Pool for all to see.

Whenever the time pool has a number of dice equal to its dice type -- six D6 for instance -- empty the dice pool and roll them all. If any dice show a one, draw from the event pool.

If the players have done something especially clumsy or dangerous -- caving in a chest they can't unlock or rapping loudly on bricks as they search for secret rooms -- roll whatever dice happen to be in the time pool. Do not empty the time pool. You might create a special set of event cards that players can't add to for these occasions.

Timer Method 2:

Microwaving Your Players

Set a D6 with the 1 showing and keep it visible (unless the party loses track of time, right?). Whenever each player has taken about 1 to 2 actions, at your discretion, declare that about ten minutes have passed, move the dice to the next number up, and set an event card down for the players to see. Narrate why this card is visible to them.

This makes them aware of a threat that's looming and lets them decide whether to risk it or to hurry. It also lets them grotesquely underestimate the threat or overestimate themselves, both of which are great fun.

Every time you advance the timer after placing a card, roll a D6. On a 1, the card happens and you display another card immediately. For added suspense, you can leave part of the card blank for your players to guess at, or you can flip it over to its backside, where you might have hints written out indicating what type of thing will happen. For instance, a bad event that causes players to lose track of time might have the category "labyrinth." The slime on the walls coming to life and attacking might be labeled "ambush."

Having at least a vague idea of what sort of threat is headed their way also allows more actions in the dungeon to be spent preparing for the dungeon, and for roleplay about feeling nervous or wanting to leave quickly. This also helps alleviate random and odious knowledge checks about the area, since the cards are at least partially written by the players.

Credits

I want to shout out to The Angry GM again, whose Time Pool system inspired this article.

The hourglass art is by Zachary Stoppel.

The prose and layout are by Bartholomew Klick. Check out Zach and Bart's comics out our comics at www.yesthievescan.com, and help them make more content over at patreon.com/thievescant.