

HOW A RAILROAD WORKS

by [Justin Alexander](#) – May 23rd, 2021



Here's how the [Tyranny of Dragons](#) campaign begins:

For the past several days, you have been traveling a road that winds lazily across the rolling grasslands of the Greenfields. Sundown is approaching when you top a rise and see the town of Greenest just a few short miles away. But instead of the pleasant, welcoming town you expected, you see columns of black smoke rising from burning buildings, running figures that are little more than dots at this distance, and a dark, winged shape wheeling low over the keep that rises above the center of the town. Greenest is being attacked by a dragon!

Although the boxed text doesn't mention this, the dragon is accompanied by an entire army. Greenest isn't just being attacked by a dragon; it is under siege.

So... what happens next?

The adventure assumes that the 1st level PCs will head straight into Greenest.

Which... well... It doesn't really make sense, does it?

It's not just that it's difficult for me to imagine any player responding to that scene by saying, "Guess, we head into town then..." It's that, for whatever reason, the adventure just assumes that this won't be a problem. It skips directly from "there's an army and a dragon attacking that town!" to "okay, now that you're in the town."

This is bad design.

And the problem here is not just that *Tyranny of Dragons* is a railroad. I mean, yes, that's a problem. I've told you that [prepping plots is a bad idea](#). And I've given a detailed breakdown of [why railroads are terrible](#).

But let's lay all that aside.

Let's talk a little bit about what makes a *good* railroad. Or, more accurately, what makes a railroad work.

THE TRICK OF THE RAILROAD

A good railroad, at a certain level, is like a good magic trick: The players won't really believe that magic is real, but a good magic trick will let them suspend disbelief just long enough to be amazed.

Players in a railroad scenario will almost certainly know that they're being fed a predetermined sequence of events over which they have no meaningful control. (Players are not, by and large, stupid. Even if they're polite enough not to tell you that they can see you behind the curtain.) But a good railroad will disguise this; it will allow them to suspend their disbelief and get lost in the wonder.

There are a lot of different tricks the railroad scenario will use to do this: It will use illusionism to make meaningless choices look meaningful. It will give the PCs a lot of control over stuff that is meaningless, but which is nevertheless given the appearance of meaning.

(Illusionism is a technique in which the players only have the *illusion* of choice. Regardless of which choice they make, they outcome will be the same. A simple example has the PCs come to a fork in the road: If they go left, they end up at the vampire's castle. If they go right? They end up the vampire's castle. Because they were always going to go to the vampire's castle.)

But the most important technique for the railroad scenario is to frame the meaningful choices in such a way that the players legitimately WANT to make the predetermined choice.

The GM never forces a card on them. In the end, they do the magic trick to themselves.

When a railroad scenario pulls this off, the suspension of disbelief is perfect: Players never feel as if they were forced to do something. They're able to remain completely immersed in their characters, feeling as if the world is unfolding in direct response to their actions.

And this is why the opening scene of *Tyranny of Dragons* is hot garbage.

BREAKING THE ILLUSION

When you show a group of 1st level characters that a town is being simultaneously ravaged by a dragon and besieged by an army, the choice you are signaling is, "Don't go there. Stay away."

This is true not only logically in the context of real people looking at that situation. It's also true in the specific context of the entire D&D rule set, which is built around the clear expectation that 1st level characters DO NOT FIGHT dragons nor armies.

Every rational signified is saying, "Don't go there."

And this would actually be double true in a well-designed railroad scenario, because the well-designed railroad would be using those signifiers – BIG DRAGON, YOU CAN'T SURVIVE THIS – to force the logical choice, not its opposite.

The only context in which running into that town makes sense is, in fact, the one where a DM says, "This is a railroad. Get on the fucking train."

And even if the DM doesn't have to literally say that, the implication is absolutely crystal clear to everyone sitting at the table.

The illusion has been broken. The suspension of disbelief has collapsed.

It's the very first moment of the campaign and the book has already set you up to fail. They have dug a hole and now you're going to have to dig yourself out of it.

Now, the reality of a railroaded scenario is it's quite likely you will be forced into this situation at some point. The complex web of choices and relationships and emotions of your PCs will eventually force you to push them back onto the tracks. That's just the nature of a railroaded scenario. (And it's one of the many reasons why it's not a good way to prep or run an RPG.)

But this is, in fact, the very first scene of the campaign. There is no baggage. No complex continuity that needs to be impossibly accounted for. Avoiding this moment would be trivial: Just put the PCs in the town before the dragon and the army show up.

A good railroad designer will recognize when a mandatory choice doesn't make sense and they will restructure the scenario TO REMOVE THAT CHOICE.

That's not always possible in the convoluted middle of a scenario after the PCs have begun stewing chaos. But in the very first chunk of boxed text?

That's bad design.

Even if you're OK designing a railroad.

Which you shouldn't.