

ASK THE ALEXANDRIAN #7: CLASSIC QUESTS ARE RAILROADS?

[by Justin Alexander - March 30th, 2022](#)



João writes:

I don't want to railroad my players. But how can I create a classic quest to destroy the Evil Thing™ without railroading?

The principle of “don't prep plots, prep situations” can also be thought of as prepping toys and then letting the players either (a) figure out how they want to play with them and/or (b) how they're going to react to you actively playing them.

So if you're prepping an RPG version of *The Lord of the Rings*, don't prep the journey to Mt. Doom. Instead, prep:

- the One Ring
- the villains interested in the Ring (Sauron & Saruman)
- the tools those villains can use against the PCs (Nazgul, crebain, orcs)

And so forth.

Let's say that we're in Rivendell and Elrond, et. al. have just explained the history of the Ring, that Sauron is seeking it, and that the only way to destroy it is by throwing it into Mt. Doom.

(You could also design this scenario without proscribing one method for destroying the Ring: It could be Mt. Doom or the fire of an Elder Dragon or the sunken forges of Beleriand. Or could also take one step further back and not make Sauron's defeat or destruction dependent on the One Ring. But, for the sake of argument, let's just focus on the McGuffin Delivery concept.)

So you're in Rivendell. You have the One Ring. And the know the Ring has to go to Mt. Doom.

Add a map of Middle Earth showing where Rivendell and Mt. Doom are.

Now, let the players decide how they want to get to Mt. Doom.

And... that's it.

Railroad averted.

ACROSS THE MAP

The players now have a vast array of options open to them: Go through Moria? Over Caradhras? Through the Gap of Rohan? Head straight down the coast and sail to Gondor? Escort Bilbo to the Lonely Mountain, call in old favors owed, and taken army of dwarves south?

This, of course, makes a "here's a map of the whole world, plot a course for yourself" campaign like this incredibly daunting to prep in advance and basically impossible to do so without wasting a bunch of time prepping stuff that will never be used.

If this is for your home campaign, though, you *don't* need to prep everything in advance. You can figure out what your players are planning to do and then prep specifically for that.

They're heading over the mountains? Prep Caradhras.

They're heading to the coast? Prep the Corsairs of Umbar.

So what DO you need to prep for the map?

You need a broad patina of the world so that the players have enough contact to make their decisions regarding route. The map provides the structure here, and so your prep mostly boils down to being able to answer the question, "What's here?" when the players point at the map and ask.

You don't need a lot of detail for this. Just one to three sentences for each broad region.

"What's here?"

"That's the Lonely Mountain, a dwarven kingdom ruled by King Dain."

Just drawing the map will honestly do 90% of the work here. (There's mountains here, a kingdom called Rohan there, etc.)

DEFAULT TO YES, FLESH OUT THE WORLD

As the players begin making their plans, they're going to propose routes you never even considered. When this happens, default to yes and flesh out the world.

Player 1: There are mountains here. Should we go around them to the north or south?

Player 2: What about climbing straight over them?

Player 3: What about *under* the mountains? Are there any dungeons we could go through?

DM: (thinking fast) There are two, actually. A system of caves in the north near Mirkwood, infested with goblins. And an abandoned dwarven city to the south.

The players decide that sounds too dangerous and they decide to head south instead.

But now, of course, we've established that the Mines of Moria exist...

PLAYING WITH YOUR TOYS

The other thing you've prepped, of course, are those toys we mentioned earlier. With the planning session complete, you can use these tools to flesh out your prep for the players' intended route. For example, they're heading towards the Gap of Rohan, so you pull out some crebain spies dispatched by Saruman and plan to have those followed up by Uruk-Hai patrols if the PCs get spotted.

But these toys are also designed for active play. When the players do something unexpected that you weren't prepared for, the first thing to ask your self is: How can I use my scenario toys to respond to that?

The second thing is to see if you have any generic toys that can be plugged in. (The PCs have gotten spooked by the crebain and are heading to Caradhras now? Well, it's a good thing you've got this Living Mountain write-up from the bestiary.)

And the third thing is to say (when the players fail the extended skill check on Caradhras and are forced to turn aside to Moria), "Reaching the top of the stone steps, you look down upon the Walls of Moria. There the Gate stood once upon a time, the Elven Door at the end of the road from Hollin by which you have come... Okay, well this seems like a good place to wrap things up for this week."

That should give you plenty of time to [prep a legendary dungeon](#).

(Double check your challenge ratings, though. Otherwise someone might die in there.)