

Review of techniques and styles used in Dungeons and Dragons (fifth edition) adventures

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1 Introduction

The reason for this review is to compile a list of expected – or at least on trend – techniques that can be found in *Dungeons and Dragons* adventures, which can then be used by adventure writers to ensure they have all the elements of an adventure that players are expecting.

The scope of this review is limited to the following books:

- The Rising Knight, by Davis Chenault. 2015.
- Lost Mines of Phandelver, by Richard Baker and Chris Perkins. 2014.
- The Sunless Citadel, by Bruce R. Cordell. 2000.
- Beneath the Ruins of Firestone Keep. MT Black. 2017.
- Giantslayer. MT Black. 2016.
- Blood on the Trail. Jeff C Stevens. 2016.

The books selected are all from the 2010's, with the exception of *The Sunless Citadel*. The version of the adventure under review is within *Tales From The Yawning Portal*, a book which took older adventures and reformatted them. As these adventures were redesigned with modern techniques in mind, quite specifically, it arguably still falls within the time frame under concern.

Two of the books – *The Sunless Citadel* and *Lost Mines of Phandelver* – are official *Wizards of the Coast* published works. As such they can both be seen as their model form of adventure. A question to be posed is how well do others follow their lead?

Two of the books are from the same author – MT Black – which seems fair as the author is prolific in the community, having published 64 adventures since 2016 according to their DMs Guild listing. The interest here is if their style has changed between the two books, and if so, which aspects did not change, potentially highlighting important aspects to their work.

A bias that should be pointed out is that these are a selection of the books which I own. As such, these books are not randomly selected. This may limit the questions posed to “of the books which I like anyway...”, but that does not entirely remove the value of the answers; these are popular books.

The review below is grouped into the themes that have been emerged.

2 Covers

Due to the simple nature of these being books, often printed, and typically discovered based on their thumbnail, each of the books have an interesting cover.

These covers tend towards illustrations of heroic scenes; a dragon lurching after a group of adventurers, a lone soldier and his steed trotting through a falling down temple, or a goblin taking aim. All of the adventures have similar thematic scenes on their cover.

Contrasting this with other kinds of published books in the fantasy genre shows that this may well be a deliberate choice on the part of the authors. On Amazon’s Fantasy section at the time of writing, the book covers for newer novels typically include photo-realistic images, largely of the protagonist in sultry positions. Others include photo-realistic weapons, like the hammer on the front of Neil Gaiman’s *Norse Mythology*. Illustrations do occasionally show up these other books.

Although illustrated, heroic scenes aren’t exclusive to D&D adventures, it does seem to be their token cover.

An exception to this trend is *Blood on the Trail*, whose front cover is largely text when seen on the downloaded PDF. Even with this book though, the displayed thumbnail on the store page is a more typical looking fantasy image with the title.

The focus of the cover art differs between books. In *Phandelver* it’s reasonable to assume that we’re seeing the characters from the group following the adventure. This goes for *Sunless* too. These grand scenes are no doubt to provoke imagination whilst the players are finding themselves in the same scene in their game. It’s worth mentioning that the only adventures with more than one character on are the official books. This could be because art is expensive, and often costed by the number of people within the frame.

On the other adventures, there are only single characters in view. This makes it less likely that they are members of the play ground. Instead, they show characters within the book.

3 Summary for the Dungeon Master

Sunless begins with an adventure synopsis which outlines the four stages of the adventure. This gives the dungeon master a great deal of foresight into what will happen, meaning they’ve no need to read the entire adventure up front.

This is the first of many examples where adventures try to reduce the amount of preparation a DM is expected to do. Even in cases where the DM has read the entire adventure, it's possible that their group only meets every two weeks; having this kind of synopsis right on the first page is a useful memory aid.

Phandelver, the other official publication, does the same thing; the "Overview" breaks down the adventure into four parts letting the DM know what is upcoming, without the need to memorise a rather large adventure. An incredibly helpful technique used by this adventure (and is missing in *Sunless*) is that many of the names throughout the adventure are mentioned. Places and people are talked about, meaning this is a useful section to come back to (helpfully right at the front of the book) if the players ask a question or a name is needed quickly.

Firestone uses the same technique with similar results.

Knowing these details ahead of time helps reduce the amount of backtracking needed if an improvised ruling conflicts with a later story point.

In *Trail* an "introduction" is included on the first page. However, it is quite simple and gives the set up to the story and hints at the antagonist. This feels more like a movie synopsis which is scared of giving away too much information. The goblin ambush isn't mentioned. The reason for this section to be lacking or vague could be that the adventure is quite short; the shortest and most simple of those being looked at here. The adventure takes very little time to read and is quite predictable.

Giantslayer also decides against using an overview. This is interesting as the other MT Black adventurer *did* include it. The difference between the two adventures is that this is 14 pages in total length, whereas *Firestone* is 24 pages. A possible conclusion is that this choice was quite intentional, which would indicate that shorter adventures do not need a breakdown of the story beats. The DM *is* expected to read through shorter adventures.

4 Encounters

The Sunless Citadel has encounters in most zones and rooms, though they can be as small as a single giant rat. When combat is frequent, the characters' resources are used up quickly forcing them to be more creative and conservative. Although a giant rat is easy to polish off by using a few spell slots, if your spell slots are no longer a commodity then the combat becomes more difficult.

In *Sunless*, the opportunity to skip combat is often suggested. This is done with a number of methods which make the characters use mechanics (other than combat) to sneak past a fight. On one occasion, doing a quest for the kobolds on one floor causes them all to become neutral towards the group, or even allies. This is a real reward for trying to work without combat.

The Rising Knight suggests random encounters whilst travelling, the the likelihood of the random encounter happening varies based on where the characters are travelling. On the safer roads, the DM checks for combat twice a day. If they're travelling elsewhere, this check is also done once at night. The test to

see if a combat occurs is rolling a 1 on the d10. This is a storytelling mechanism showing that the players are on the outer reaches of civilisations, and the further they travel the more dangerous it will get. It's also a good reminder of the type of world the game is set in, by showing off the nearby life.

It's worth noting that these encounters are not avoidable, at least not without intervention on the DM's part.

Phandelver also uses this type of random encounter whilst travelling along the country roads; the Triboar Trail in particular. An additional aspect to this random table is that each of the combatants are given a reason that they'd be interested in attacking. For instance, motivations for the ogre are that it's looking for an easy kill, but is too stupid to flee once combat has started. So maybe the ogre would be watching from afar, and trying clumsily to hide. This extra bit of information gives the DM fuel to add colour to the encounter. *Firestone* frequently adds a paragraph or two with this information. *Giantslayer's* first combat encounter is one where the sayters aren't trying to murder anyone - they're just having fun bullying the passersby.

Later in *Phandelver* a random encounter table is given again, but this is for when the players are within the "dungeon", Wave Echo Cave. This isn't a table to roll on periodically, but instead it's explained to be a tool to use if the players seem to be idling in the area. The expectation is that the combat will drive the players forward or at least motivate them to keep moving.

Encounters in *Firestone* are never random, with many rooms of the dungeon having a potential encounter with either a trap or a monster. *Firestone* serves as a reminder that combat is not the only way to make scenarios come to life. In one of the rooms, a kobold alchemist can be found and bargained with (as he's rather interesting in just getting back on this his work).

A style could be assumed from *Firestone* and *Giantslayer* (both MT Black's) as *Giantslayer* handles encounters in the same way, usually giving characters the chance to avoid combat. In this adventure, successful skill checks can be used to avoid awaking the beasts lurking around the forest.

One encounter in *Firestone* is reminiscent of one in *Sunless*; the Weasel room holds some giant weasels kept within a fenced off area of the room. They are absolutely no risk to the characters (unless the DM decides otherwise), in *Sunless* there is a room with giant rats in a similar pen (ready for feeding to the dragon wyrmling). In this case too there's no immediate harm to the characters unless they excite the rats too much. Finally, in *Phandelver*, at the start of the game there are some wolves secured by iron pegs which will only come unleashed if goaded.

There is one combat encounter in *Giantslayer* where the premise of "leave it alone and you'll be okay" stands out too, with the pixie who plays pranks on them. Much like the sayters earlier, the death of the pixie needn't be the result of the combat. Simple swatting it away or maneuvering around the situation works well (and, like the DMG says, should still reward players the same XP as killing her).

Of note for *Trail* is that it gives information on how to increase the difficulty based on the level of the party; it does this by adding in more of the enemies.

Firestone does a similar thing. However, books like *Phandelver* make more of an assumption that if the group has reached a certain part of the adventure, then they are the correct level.

5 Politics

Whilst this section has been called "Politics", something along the lines of "interpersonal choices" may be a more accurate title.

In *Sunless* there isn't a great deal of politics. The villain is clearly the villain. By his side are two typically good people that have been tainted by the tree. However, who they are and what they stand for is not a particularly large part of this story. Likely, the players will kill them without realising they're available to be saved.

A point in *Sunless* where politics can change the course of the game (at least in the middle chapters) is the opportunity for the PCs to become allied with the kobolds. This only happens if the players attempt to rely on charismatic means of avoiding combat. If this road is taken, the goblin section of the citadel can be handled with the help of the kobolds.

Phandalin does attempt to bring in some politics to the game, with the introduction of the Harpers and Zhentarim. However, they're used largely to add motives to the NPCs (and the players, once recruited). There's no situation in the adventure when a choice of who to trust particularly matters.

Knight has a great deal of NPCs that live within the town and their motivations are well described. There are some politics based around many of the NPCs dislike the presence of the PCs as they believe they can handle the gnoll on their own. This gives some of the PCs a good reason to not want to share all the information they have with the PCs. This is especially the case as one member of the town is giving defensive information to the gnolls and hopes to hide this secret.

Firestone includes a twist at the end when the villain is revealed which shows literal politics, but none that would make the characters change their mind about completing their mission or changing the objectives.

Interestingly, *Firestone* does go into the politics of the land by telling us that Lord Blackmoor is a lord in name only. His only real asset is wealth and the land his manor is on. He has no legal rights to affect the surrounding lands. This backstory is given presumably just for the DM to answer the question if it comes up. It doesn't change the adventure very much at all.

Giantslayer is the only adventure where politics is an active part of the game. Once the players get to the main town, they see a divide between the townsfolk who are deliberating how to handle the approaching giant: run or give into the giant's demands for a bounty. One character offers another solution; stay and help with the fight. If the players can convince the townsfolk to stay, they the end battle with the giant will be made much easier, with the giant fumbling through many traps that can be laid out. This conversation boils down to a persuasion check.

It seems that politics are rarely mentioned in shorter adventures. When they are, they're a side story rather than the thrust. The impact on the current adventure is often limited, whereas it may spiral into future stories.

Having politics open in this way could be seen as setting up the world for future adventures. Whilst it has little impact on this game, the next game will be all that more colourful for it, giving the players new allies in a town they remember.

6 Magic items

Knight offers no magic armor or weapons, but it does give the opportunity to find a number of potions and even spell scrolls. The access to potions, especially potions of healing, is quite common amongst all of the adventures. It appears that this is an expected resource the players should come across. Although the DMG does not mention balancing adventures with the assumption that players will have additional healing, it does seem to be such a standard item to give out as a reward for quite simple investigations that expecting a group to have at least one would be reasonable.

In *Sunless*, there are no magic weapons given out until the end. This is a reward for killing the boss bad guy - too late to use in the adventure. In *Phandelver*, the two rather powerful magic weapons and armor are a reward for killing a rather mean Spectator. This seems to imply that powerful weapons are to be kept as a reward for defeating a key monster. (Whereas, once again, potions are given out frequently if the players are looking for them.)

A magic item in *Giantslayer* is given to the characters once they've defeated the giant, and even then only if they defeat the giant and keep an NPC alive.

Phandelver includes many magic items to find. One such item - *Boots of Striding and Springing* - are just on the floor for them to take. The only real challenge to take these boots is noticing that they're interesting at all; they appear to be a reward for being thorough. A rather specific magic item, an amulet of detection avoidance, is given in *Firestone* for a player being investigative enough to crack open some coffins and be able to survive the trap (or detect it).

An interesting choice in *Firestone* is the inclusion of a "broken" magic item, which functions like a lesser one but then breaks permanently. This shows again the rarity of magic items and how hard they should be to come by. This gives the DM the ability to offer a magic item - which are always fun - but gives a good story reason to take it away before it begins to exploit the game.

It's possible that this is a factor of lower level adventures, typically used as introductions. However, it could be unveiling the intent that adventures are supposed to be episodic - self contained and many. If this isn't the groups first adventure of this kind, they may already have magic items from previous runs.

7 Player motivation

A common feature in all the published *Wizards of the Coast* books is the "Adventure Hooks" section. In *Sunless*, three of them are given. In *Phandelver* there is just one. All four of them though give the characters immediate buy-in before the game even starts. They set out the situation that the characters have already agreed to. This could be seen as the DM interfering with the motivations and backstory of the characters, but it doesn't appear to be a concern for Wizards. The upside - being able to start an adventure and get right into it - apparently outweighs the cost of loss of player agency. From this, we can glean that even if we're not using the printed hooks, it is okay to tell your characters "you've heard that this village needs help, and you've decided to go to their aid."

This is similar in *Knight*, where the players are told their starting motivations; a town needs your help and there's honour and treasure up for grabs. These simple motivations appear to be all that's required. Each of the adventures use this technique.

Knight's starting motivations are self serving - offering a bounty for completion of the task. It's clear that this is only a suggested player involvement, and others could be used without affecting the story very much.

In *Sunless*, there are three distinct motivations. One of them is money. The other two are more story based; rescuing someone, and solving a mystery (along with the noble goal of finding a tree of healing).

Phandelver offers the players a job. In *Firestone* the players are answering the call of a Lord who's child has been kidnapped. On *Trail*, the players are hunting down some lost horses (and their potentially in danger riders).

It seems that the motivations are always somewhat financially motivated (a tangible reward) whilst reminding players that they are *heroes*, rather than villains. This motivation is either assumed or given to them.

8 Maps

Sunless, *Phandelver*, *Knight*, and *Firestone* each include (at least one) dungeon crawls and so each come with a grid based, top-down map with numbered rooms. The chapter that surrounds that map gives details about each part. In each of these maps a 5' grid is overlaid, making this the clear industry standard. The maps are not filled with a great many details, and it's likely the DM will need to rely on improvisation when a player asks what's in the room.

Sunless is the only adventure which gives an outside view of the dungeon; this could be because it details a rather tricky bit of narrow stairs that the PCs will need to navigate and maybe even shown. This view is a perspective view of a cut away of the location.

A town map features in *Phandelver* which serves two purposes; it lets the DM know at a glance what's in the town, and of course it lets the DM give directions.

Trail has a number of tactical maps - views of smaller areas where combat may break out. These maps are likely to be drawn out in preparation for minis to be used. However, it does not give a larger map of the forest. This is likely because the journey through the forest is a singular path. In contrast, *Giantslayer* does offer a forest map to track the PC's movement as that also keeps track of which encounters they're likely to trigger.

The map used in *Giantslayer* appears to be a custom made piece. The map used in *Firestone* is from Dyson Logos, who offers free maps for people to use. (Though, it's unclear if this is a licensed or custom map.) Maps used in *Trail* are custom made by an artist.

Maps appear to be important in published adventures, but only crucial when multiple paths could be taken or to aid with a combat encounter.

9 Player choices

None of the adventures as written tolerate the parties coming far from the expected path. This seems like the only possible option as the adventure has to end at some point; it can't possibly keep going on and on with possibilities. "In case your party decides to kill the quest giver immediately..." However, the illusion of choice is sometimes given.

In *Giantslayer*, travelling through the forest has some "left or right" choices which will change the encounters the players come across. However, since there's no forewarning of what they'll find, they cannot make an informed choice. To help make this a more informed choice, the book offers a "guide" who can lead the way and suggest which path to take. Nonetheless, this does not feel like an impacting choice. Either way, after a couple of encounters, the players end up at the same space.

The illusion of choice is similar in *Phandelver*, where the world is open to the players and many options are available in it. Nonetheless, each option predominantly aids in finding the location of Wave Echo Cave. The fact that the young dragon is dead now - or not - has no impact on what goes on inside the cave, except that the PCs may be an extra level higher.

Regardless of their impact, side quests do give the players more options to choose from. This is a part of what makes this adventure last a varying amount of time, from a couple of sessions to four or five. There's a lot to do in *Phandelver*.

Trail offers a choice at the end of the adventure which would change if the boy-heir lives or dies. This choice will only affect any games which follow on from the adventure.

The other adventures offer even less in the way of choices. It's possible that in the adventures under review there just isn't time to add in these sorts of potentialities; the adventure can't add that much depth in the few pages (and expected short playtime) that they have.

10 Art

Neither *Giantslayer* and *Knight* have a "fake paper" background to each of the pages, like the others do. This makes them much easier to print - something which may have been a consideration (for all of the publishers, both hoping to be printed and making illegal reprinting as difficult as possible). Whatever the reason, it appears there's no consensus even amongst the same authors one way or the other.

Sunless begins with a full page piece of art showing off the three villains the PCs will face at the end of the adventure. This piece of art is intricate and beautiful; clearly expensive. Throughout, there are two more half page illustrations of equal skill. These are always of non-playable characters in the story. Ignoring cover art, *Phandelver* is the only other adventure to have a full page piece of art, and even then it is just the one. Nonetheless, they are all equally pretty.

The two *Wizards* books have a number of smaller pieces scattered throughout, again bringing to life characters from the paragraphs near. They are quite useful as they display creatures and species that aren't often well known; a picture of the Nothic is very useful to be able to describe from or even hold up the book for players to see.

It's interesting to note that the images never offer more than descriptive information about the creatures. Not once do they reveal something about the creature that *is* required information for the players, but *not* in the text of the book.

Giantslayer's artwork is throughout the book in pencil art, displaying weapons or medallions. A picture of the giant or the lady the players are sent to find might be obvious pieces to add in, but they are not there. Art is expensive, which may explain why there are only generic drawings in the adventure, and not specific ones.

MT Black did purchase art for *Firestone*. These are used throughout the book much like *Wizards* use their smaller illustrations of creatures within the adventure. It is the same throughout all of the adventures that the style between the illustrations changes, but in *Firestone* it changes the most. This can tell us that drawing style does not need to be consistent throughout the book.

All the illustrations in *Trails* have a stylistic border around them, which may come from being drawn on paper and then scanned in.

11 Monsters

Sunless includes a "dragonpriest", a transformed troll. The book suggests to use the statistics of a troll but with less hit points and modifies a few of its abilities. It uses this technique again later on by adjusting simple kobolds to have extra health, describing them as "elite". In order to increase the difficulty of a fight with a Big Bad Bugbear, he's simply given an extra bit of armor. This mash up of MM creatures and additional tweaks infinitely extends how many

kinds of creatures, and their proficiencies, throughout an adventure.

This technique isn't just used to change the statistics of the monsters. Again, in *Sunless*, some skeletons are given shovels to attack with (giving the same damage dice as their standard weapons). This is done to increase the thematic gardening/tree pruning scene.

Phandelver is in the interesting position of being written for people who are just getting into the D&D with the starter pack, and don't yet have the Monster Manual. This means that all of the monsters within the book can be found in the appendix. *Trail* does the same thing, and lists its monster at the back of the book. These monsters match exactly with the MM.

Despite this ability to have custom monsters, *Phandelver* still tweaks some monsters inline, as with the *Ash Zombies*.

Knight shows its origins as a coming from outside of the *fifth edition* world when its monsters are considered. It includes "herd animals" and "mountain lions" which do not exist in the MM, additionally the statistics aren't given for them in the book. This isn't typically an issue as picking a similar animal from the MM is quite easy. It does show that adventures can be released for *fifth* and be successful without the need to worry about perfect alignment with the other core books.

Both MT Black's books refer only to MM monsters.

12 Environmental descriptors

In *Giantslayer* and *Firestone*, MT Black uses the age old method of "read this box aloud to your players"; these are given in most places the players come to and give a more formal narrative voice (as opposed to something being improvised). Whilst these boxes do give descriptions of the area, that purpose feels secondary. Typically these boxes give tactical information - there are some insects on that log, there's an icy pyramid. More than painting a picture of the environment, the boxes seem to setting the important details required for the combat or task to be done here. *Phandelver* uses these boxes in the same way; partially to give an area description, but its true intent seems to be tactical information.

The town in *Giantslayer* does not get a read aloud box. Instead, there is a short description follow by an info box giving population numbers and occupations and main trading goods. There's no need for tactical placement or interaction with the world here, which enforces the use suggested for 'read aloud' boxes.

Phandelver and *Sunless* begin some areas with "General Features", which give details like the lighting conditions, what cover is available (trees, etc), what the buildings are like. These don't use flowery language like the read aloud boxes do. Sentences are short and informative.

Knight is a wordy adventure, but little of it is describing the visual of an environment. There are no paragraphs dedicated to describing an area's visuals in depth. All of the adventures being reviewed share this trait. *Knight* does

mention items that are in the area: a tree used for hanging people, a large statue, the floor is five feet lower than the walkway. Again, a lot of this information seems to serve driving the story forward (by letting the players know what to pay attention to) and giving tactical information (there's something to hide behind here).

What's happening or what's around is often revealed to the DM in copy about investigation checks the players may make. *Phandelver* makes use of this. Even if the players do not make a check here, the information about what is in the room comes from this text.

Trail doesn't make much of an attempt at describing the forest you're travelling through. Its shape is conveyed with maps of small areas.

Flowery descriptions of items in rooms, the gardens outside of houses, and the colour of the NPC's eyes are rarely included in adventures. Descriptors like this appear to be reserved for giving the players useful information. In the adventures being reviewed, there is very little *fluff*.

12.1 A note on read aloud boxes

Before investigating closer, it appeared that the read aloud boxes were describing the environment. Indeed, that's why they're in this section. However, it now seems that they're a useful tool for giving tactical information under the guise of describing the area. *Firestone* uses these boxes descriptively, but always with the intent of pushing a player towards an action - or at least letting them know there's an interactable element of the room worth highlighting.

13 GM Help or Tips

Phandelver is designed as a starting adventure and as such contains many pieces of advice for dungeon masters, a lot of which is quite basic. It ranges from practical advice concerning adventure maps to performance advice like offering the players help if they're stuck. However, there's not quite as much as one might expect. The expectation that the DM is familiar - or at least able to refer to - the starting rules (at least) is clear.

Giantlayer also offers advice, but infrequently. These feels like wise bits of information from someone who has played many games before.

Another common sidebar in adventures which offer advice include reminders about relevant rules. *Trail* includes information about how a ranger's Favored Enemy works, something that is incredibly relevant to that adventure (and also that specific part of the adventure).

Sunless, *Firestone* and *Knight* give no advice about rules or running the game.