

The Dark Forest

World Building Example



in which we use Issue 3 of the Session Zero zine to build a new world!

Special thanks to my amazing players:

Sean Hanes
Dave Jensen
Amber Jensen

SESSION ZERO

Built for Dungeon World,
useful for
ANY Roleplaying game!

and to Ray Otus and Logan Howard, for allowing me to reprint portions of their zines Plundergrounds and Sword Breaker!

Play tested on Saturday, May 27th, 2017

Dungeon World employs collaborative world building. The GM asks questions and uses the answers to build the world right along with the players. This isn't to everyone's taste, because both the GM and the players have to buy in to the concept! Regardless, the process of collaborative world building can apply to any role playing game out there! Just think about the questions you want to ask, and then use the answers to create a whole new world!

Session Zero takes that concept and applies it to a source of inspiration from pop culture. Issue 3 - The Dark Forest, finds that inspiration in the Harry Potter universe. You'll immediately see that the questions can be answered in a way that recreates the Harry Potter world. The fun, though, is when your players give answers that are COMPLETELY unlike the source material!

Cast

Dave: Pendrell, Elf Bard

Sean: Mithralan, Elf Druid (**Lands:** Dark Forest, Smoldering Swamp)

Amber: Lanethe, Elf Ranger (**Companion:** Owl named "Talon")



One of the principles of Dungeon World is **Ask questions and use the answers**, and what follows is an example of that!

Ask questions...

Questions - From page 23 of Session Zero, Issue 3 - The Dark Forest

Note: These are the "final" answers, after all the questions had been asked. A question later in the process often causes my players to change their answers to previous questions, and I'm totally fine with that. It is generally always much better for the story. Also, I haven't presented some of the questions asked here, but weaved the answers together in an organic way.



Which of you is an orphan?

Lanethe: I'm an orphan. It's the main reason I became a ranger. I've been alone most of my life and I'm used to it. My only friend is my faithful owl Talon, but I felt a kinship with Mithralan and Pendrell when I helped them out of the Smoldering Swamp, so I've been with them ever since.

How old were you when you learned your parents were killed by The Dark Lord?

Lanethe: I saw it happen when I was 10 or 11. I was hiding under a secret floor panel and wasn't noticed, but I saw him almost right above me cast a spell that killed them both. I squeezed my eyes shut and sobbed myself to sleep, and when I awoke my parent's bodies were gone.



What is the Dark Lord's name?

Pendrell: His real name was Milthrandir, but his followers called him Lorellen Altari (*Rough* Elvish translation: Highest Lord)

Which of you has several siblings?

(This is a prime example of answers being changed. The answer to a question near the end of the process changed quite a bit of what we'd already established).

Mithralan: Pendrell and I aren't blood brothers, but we were both captured and sold into slavery at the same time, with 4 other Elves. We're not "siblings" but we'll always be "brothers".

Pendrell: Yeah, and we'd probably still be slaves if Mithralan hadn't discovered his ability to shapeshift. We escaped when he shifted into a horse and I rode his back into the Smoldering Swamp.

Mithralan: And we would have died there if Talon hadn't noticed us overrun by that rat swarm and brought Lanethe to us! (This is my primary play group, and they helped me playtest Issue 1: The Smoldering Swamp. Swamp Rats were creatures from that issue).

Have any of them been killed by Lorellen Altari (The Dark Lord)?

Pendrell: Not directly, but Hallimar died in the Dunhaven mines. We were mining silver for our master, but we all knew it was going straight to Lorellen for his war against the werewolves.

What faction actively fought against Lorellen?

Lanethe: The werewolves were always at war with him, but the Death Hunters actively sought him out. If Lorellen could be slain, all of his vampire spawn would begin to wither and die as well.

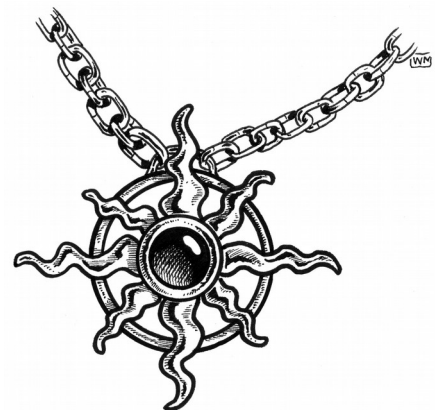
(Death Hunters are a faction from Issue 2: The Barrow, which my playgroup also helped me play test. They hunt Vampires!

Were any of you or your parents ever members of the Death Hunters?

Mithralan & Pendrell: I don't know, we were taken when we were very young.

Lanethe: I think my parents were. I vaguely remember the starburst symbol (the Death Hunters symbol; a carryover from our SZ2 play test) on father's sword, and on a necklace mother wore.

We went on to define vampirism as a disease which werewolves are immune to, and of the nobility in the world are werewolves.



Dark Horses remain invisible to which of you?

Mithralan: Dark Horses are invisible to anyone who has never seen through another's eyes. I have shifted into many different animals before and seen through their eyes, so I can definitely see them.

Lanethe & Pendrell: Never done that before, so we can't see them.

What prominent town or establishment is right next to the Dark Forest?

This one took some time, because they didn't want it to be Hogwarts or The Wizard's College from SZ2.

Pendrell: The Human sky-city Highwind hangs just off the south-west border.

Who is/was the greatest Wizard that ever lived?

Group effort: We're obviously biased because we're elves, but Glorfindel of Stonepass was the greatest ever! He died of old age (782!) about a century ago. A human wizard is making waves now (literally, he's crafting some strong magic that allows the caster to control waves) for single-handedly revolutionizing sea travel!

Me: That's Tolfdur Cosine, right? Inventor of the Cosine Wave?

All: YES!!!! (We're all math geeks... I couldn't pass up some math-related humor)

Which of you is most afraid of the Dark Forest?

Mithralan: I'm from around here, so while it is a bit scary, I'm not any more affected by it than any other.

Pendrell & Lanethe: We don't really understand what makes it more fearful than any other place. Maybe that's just its myth. We don't understand it. And you always fear what you don't understand! (Dave said that last line with the same cadence and nearly the same voice as actor Tom Wilkinson did in Batman Begins, which I thought was AMAZINGLY coincidental because when we played this session none of my players knew that Issue 4 of Session Zero will be based on Batman: Arkham Asylum. They all got a good laugh when I told them!)

Who typically walks in and out of the forest unharmed?

Mithralan: We've heard of a human from Highwind named Cid Shipton that enters and exits as he pleases.

Lanethe: Yeah, which of course makes me wonder what he's doing in there.

Pendrell: I once heard that he's the Aquisition Manager for that big alchemy school up in Highwind... but I also heard that he's a demon in human form, so I don't know what to believe.



...and use the answers!

In a about an hour of back-and-forth I have gleaned the following:

NPCs / Villains / Groups

Mithrandir, AKA Lorellen Altari, a Vampire Lord with a bunch of followers

A (yet unnamed) slaver

A friend of two of the characters who has died (or has he???)

Three other (yet unnamed) elf slaves

Werewolves

A faction of vampire killers called Death Hunters, of which the deceased (or are they???) parents of one of the characters may have been members

A famous, dead (or is he???) elven wizard named Glorfindel

A human wizard named Tolfdur Cosine, who has created a powerful wave-control spell

A human named Cid Shipton who may work for an alchemy school, or may be a demon

Places

The Smoldering Swamp (which you can see in Session Zero 1 - The Smoldering Swamp)

A silver mine in Dunhaven

Highwind, a human sky-city

An alchemy school in Highwind

Stonepass



“Globals”

A nearly constant war between the werewolves and vampires

The reason Dark Horses are invisible to most people



That is a world completely unlike Harry Potter!



And that's not all! A single roll of all six dice (d4 - d20) created a map, established the time of day and weather when the characters began the adventure, two aspects of the forest that made this trip in a little bit different, and generated a short list of additional questions to further customize our world.

I'll share the answers here, but not the questions, which you can see on pages 27 & 28 of Session Zero, Issue 3 – The Dark Forest

Tolen Trentmier was sent by Jaden Gormung (who is the slaver who captured Pendrell and Mithralan when they were younger, and the reason a lot of what we had originally established was changed to the form you see above) to capture a Centrinel, because Jaden thinks its heart can be used in a ritual that will heal his own failing heart. Jaden is much too wealthy and powerful to attack directly, so upon hearing of Tolen's mission the characters decided to follow him in and prevent him from capturing the beast.

There is a Bard named Flanvil who lives in the forest. None of the characters know him personally, but they've heard that he's leaving the forest because it's getting "darker" because the Highest Lord (Lorellen Altari) is growing in strength there. If the characters get a chance to speak with Flanvil while they're in the forest, they will.

Finally, the last question I asked, based on the roll of those dice, was "Which of you sees someone reaching for a Mandragora fruit?"

Lanthe: Just within range of my crappy torchlight I see a creepy looking elf reaching for the fruit...

Me: Everyone, hold 3 Courage.

[I then place a sheet describing Miasma of Fear on the table for everyone to see (The Dark Forest, page 8) and they read it]

You see the creepy elf bend lower and attempt to grasp at the Mandragora fruit. Immediately the fruit bobs upward, and the large leaves along the ground flutter. What you soon realize must be the root of the funny looking plant has squirted out of the ground and begins to emit a loud, teeth grinding screech, and the elf next to it scrunches up his face reaches up to cover his ears, but too late. He falls to the ground.

What do you do?

A couple of interesting items that made their way into our game were a tiny, bone whistle and a weapon called Sword Breaker.

The tiny, bone whistle can be found in Plundergrounds #1 - Ape City by Ray Otus

You can find his Patreon here: <https://www.patreon.com/rayotus/posts>

Tiny, bone whistle: It emits an unpleasant, ear-piercing sound that everyone but the blower can hear. The sound can be heard a mile away.

We found a cool way to use it in our game. It was particularly effective against Mandragora Traps. But it DID draw unwelcome attention occasionally...

Sword Breaker is a weapon that can be found in Logan Howard's

Sword Breaker #1 - The Tyrant Machine.

You can find all of Logan's Sword Breaker issues here:

<http://www.drivethrurpg.com/browse/pub/11205/Sword-Breaker>

Sword Breaker - 15 Coins, close, reach

A notched sword used in the off-hand. This handy parrying weapon can be used to capture a blade and, if done skillfully, can disarm an opponent. If you are using the sword breaker in partnership with another one handed weapon, add the following to the normal Hack & Slash move:

On a 12+, you deal your damage to the enemy, disarm them and avoid their attack.

On a 10+, you may choose not to deal your damage but disarm them instead.

I introduced this to my friend Dave when The Tyrant Machine first came out and he loved it. I've pretty much been forced to give it to him in every game we've played since!

You can get issues 1 and 2 of Session Zero for PWYW on DriveThruRPG

<http://www.drivethrurpg.com/browse/pub/11364/Brian-Holland>

Issue 3 will be there for \$2.99 soon as well, or you can pledge \$2 or \$4 on my Patreon to get it now, plus get all future issues as soon as they come out: <https://www.patreon.com/user?u=5996619>

Here's a (very early) draft of something that will be in Session Zero, Issue 4 - The Island Prison: Professor Herron is 1 of 14 NPCs listed in a way for you to use as a villain or hireling!

Professor Herron - Alchemist 6

Once a respected professor of alchemy at a prestigious school of magic, Professor Herron was removed from the academic world when he was found experimenting on unwitting students. While perfecting a fear-inducing toxin, several of his students went irrevocably insane. Now he gets a thrill from watching his enemies choke on their own fear. It would appear that the Professor is immune to his own toxin, but that may just be a result of his own advanced insanity.

Instinct / Cost: To witness fear

Debilitate with fear toxin (see items: Fear Toxin on page ##)

Cackle and run away

Concoctions - with time, materials and a safe place to brew, an alchemist can create a number of uses spread among up to three different poisons or potions equal to his *skill*.



Art by Claudio Casini