

# To make a Monster, Monstrous...

First things first...

Put down the Monster Manual...

You've all been there before, get down the dungeon, hack your way through a few hundred creatures, return with all their treasure. Find another dungeon where another hundred creatures wait for you, kill them all, return with their treasure. It's the classic dungeon crawl, and its spawned hundreds of games off the idea of doing just that. Most of the video game staples such as Torchlight and Diablo make a game out of going around hacking and collecting, but they ignore the basic principle of what a monster should be...

Monstrous...

I've been hunting monsters in games for many many years, and I've come to realise that there are two types of creatures that adventurers come up against, the ones that are just a danger and the ones that the adventurers are *actually* scared of.

The Monsters, and the Monstrous...

Anything from garden variety dogs to land sharks, anything with a chance to hit the adventurers can be a threat, and that's enough to make them dangerous, but not really enough to make them monstrous. It doesn't matter how big the creature is, how many attacks it has, how many special abilities it has, if you know its stats you can kill it, and so it is with anything in a game, every death star has its exhaust port, and so it is with monsters.

An example of this is the Tarrasque.

The Tarrasque (Barring some Huge Ancient dragons and the Gods) is the most dangerous thing in the D&D world, but it's got nothing in common with any adventurers that come up against it. It's just an engine of destruction, and while that's a fearsome thing, you either kill it or it kills you, and either way, that's not scary, it's an on/off switch and we as adventurers can deal with that. You're beneath its notice, if you're in its way, that's your problem, not its.

It's not scary, it's a numerical challenge that most people avoid.

Contrast that with the presentation of the Xenomorph from the film *Alien*.

Put an Alien against a Tarrasque and the Tarrasque wouldn't even break stride, but ask which one makes for a more interesting encounter and almost certainly it'll be the Alien.

But why is that?

Because on some level, we understand the Alien, it's not just looking to rampage, it's not mindless (in fact, much is made of how intelligent it *actually* is, and we'll come to that in a while)

it's doing what we do, only it's not us and it never will be, and that's where the best monsters come from.

Inside us...

No doubt many will have heard of Tuckers Kobolds, wherein a group of low level kobolds with nothing but cunning and tactics took down a group of level twelve characters. Each one of the player characters individually was more than a match for the whole kobold tribe if fought on a level playing field. These kobolds were playing smart though, they led characters into traps where they could pour oil in and set it alight, or drop the characters in deep water still wearing their armour, lure them into areas where they couldn't move because they were too big, but the kobolds had no such restriction, and as a result, the characters got butchered wholesale and that's where the real monsters lie, not in the appearance or their special abilities but how you play them.

Back to the example of the Alien...

In the first film, it was invulnerable, unstoppable, everything the crew tried didn't make any difference to it. They fought against what it was the *last* time they encountered it, but by then it had moved on, it saw what they'd brought last time and upped its game to match. If the crew had managed to get it in a place where numbers or weapons could be brought to bear, then they might have had a chance, but it didn't let them have that chance.

In this film, the GM was playing smart...

Move on to Aliens, in this one, the Aliens had already wiped out the colony when the marines got there, so there were hundreds of them to contend with.

*Hundreds*

Just like the one in the first film, hundreds more eggs just waiting, and above them all, the Queen, just like a regular Alien except built like a dinosaur... If the GM had played smart with this one, there was no way the players were going home with the win from this. But in this game, one of the players had got a copy of the Monster Manual and checked the entry for the Alien, where in small letters at the bottom was written the words, "Vulnerable to 10mm caseless ammunition." Characters immediately went to the weapons locker, got a few backpacks full of 10mm and went a hunting...

And this is why we should put the monster manual away, or at least not let players have access to it...

So what's the difference between the two?

Alien is a horror film, it has a single monster that's truly monstrous, Aliens is an action film with hundreds of monsters that are little more than cannon fodder. The only times when you were concerned about the enemy in the second film is when you didn't know what they were doing. The second they showed up, they were no longer something to be worried about, just point and fire, so it is with monsters. When you present a monster to the world, don't give the players chance to look it up, or all you'll get is "It's one of those, this is what we do about it." Use several versions, change the potential for the creatures so that the GM can use the base stats if they wish or change fundamentals about them. If it only has one set of statistics, and they've

seen what it looks like in full colour, no character will fear it, no player will respect it. If it's something they don't know about, you'll see a different side to the players in short order.

And why is this?

One of the things that most adventurers fear is something that can hunt them back. In the quiet words of Hemingway, there is no hunting like the hunting of a man, and those who have hunted armed men long enough and liked it, never care for anything else thereafter. So it is with the best monsters, they don't wait for the adventurers to come to their home and raid for treasure, they go out looking, and the people they're most likely to encounter are the ones that are on the raid...

A good monster has motivation, it has ideas, it's not waiting for something to happen, and when something does happen, it doesn't go back to its lair and wait for it to happen again, that's something that happened in the early days of playing. When the players go out and kill monsters, have those monsters retaliate. Play the monsters as if they were players themselves, make the most insignificant of challenges memorable ones, have the players think twice before taking on anything, and if they do take something on, be damn sure they finished it off.

Because those who have hunted smart monsters and won, never care for anything else thereafter...

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