

DUNGEON SOLITAIRE  
LABYRINTH OF SOULS

DESIGNER'S NOTEBOOK

BY

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ILLUSTRATED WITH ORIGINAL NOTES

*Including a History and Commentary on  
the Design and Aesthetics of the Game.*

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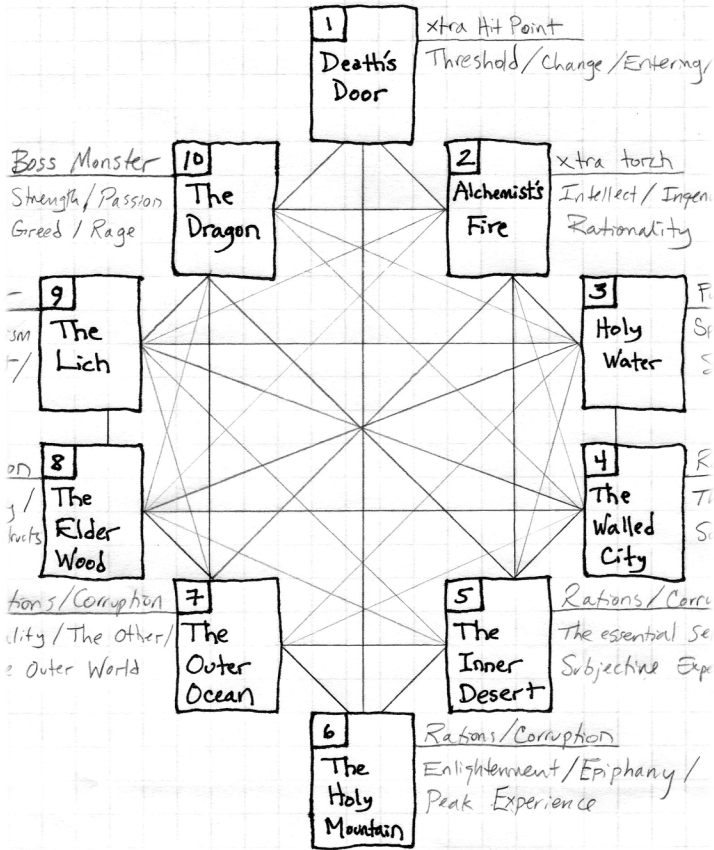
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# THE EXTRA ARCANANA



## INTRODUCTION

In the following pages I'll be discussing candidly my thoughts on the creation of the *Dungeon Solitaire* game, including its origins, my rationale for the aesthetics and structure of the game, and for its various mechanics. Along the way I'll be talking about some of my ideas about game design, and what I find fun and engaging about different types of games.

It's important to note this is a *reflection* on the process of creating the game. It doesn't necessarily represent the design process as a whole, which has an intuitive component that is difficult to represent here. Nevertheless, I'll be going through the game, making comments as I go. For those who are interested, I hope you'll find this informal discussion entertaining and insightful, whether you're just curious about the design process, or you're a game designer yourself.

## ORIGINS

I still remember vividly my first game of *Dungeons & Dragons*. It was 1981 and my dad had gotten a new game for me and my older brother. I was nine years old. Up until that point, my gaming experience consisted mostly of playing checkers, chess, hearts, Risk, and Monopoly with my dad, my mom, and my brother. At my grandparents' we played poker, blackjack, and solitaire with the extended family. It was pretty clear this new game was something different though. For one thing, there were dragons!

We played our first game of *D&D* as a family, sitting around the kitchen table. My dad was the dungeon master. My brother was a magic-user. My mom was a thief. And I played a fighter, who I think I named Perseus (I had recently seen *Clash of the Titans*). Our party set off to an ominous sounding "Keep on the Borderlands", and after some time equipping ourselves with gear,

we ventured into the wilderness to seek our fortune in the dungeons nearby.

That first foray into a dungeon is still as clear in my memory as if I had lived through it. We huddled together down stone lined corridors. Our flickering torches were barely enough to see by. The damp air and darkness closed in around us. We drew a map as we went, knowing full well we were doomed if we got lost down there. We forced one door open, picked the lock of another. And then we ran into a monster!

Our first encounter was a lone hobgoblin, and it was terrifying! One hit could have killed any one of us. Someone mentioned running, but it was too late. Battle ensued. Dice were rolled. Damage was suffered. A spell was cast. In the end we prevailed, but I still remember how relieved we were just to have survived. That was an accomplishment itself. We had faced a monster and lived! After finding a few gold pieces, we retreated out of the dungeon as fast as our leather boots would take us, happy to see the light of day and breathe the open air. And I knew without a doubt that was the most exciting game I had ever played.

Although my dad passed on the mantle of dungeon master, and my mom never reprised her role as thief, my brother and I went on to play many games of *D&D*, *AD&D*, *Gamma World*, *Top Secret*, and *Star Frontiers*. Around that same time we got an Apple II computer, and games like *Wizardry*, *Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord* only added to our thirst for dungeon crawling. In our seemingly endless spare time, I was drawing my own dungeons, coding simple adventure games in Basic, and typing stories on my mom's Smith Corona electric typewriter. *The Empire Strikes Back* was on at theaters, *Battlestar Galactica* was on TV, and *The Savage Sword of Conan* could be bought at the local drug store. It was a golden age!

I mention all this both because it's fun to think back on where all this started, and because in a very real way, *Dungeon Solitaire* is inspired by those old school roleplaying games. These days my

spare time isn't quite as endless, and I wanted a simple, fast solo game that would evoke a classic dungeon crawl. After searching around a bit and not finding anything I was satisfied with, I got it into my head to design my own using a standard deck of playing cards. Thus was born, *Tomb of Four Kings*, the original *Dungeon Solitaire* game, which you can still find for free on my website.

## TOMB OF FOUR KINGS

To talk about how I designed *Labyrinth of Souls*, I'll need to talk about how I designed *Tomb of Four Kings*. The game mechanics for *Tomb of Four Kings* are the same as for the *Labyrinth of Souls* Basic Rules. That's the essence of the game. Remove the major arcana, the pages, and the extra cards included with the *Labyrinth*



of *Souls* tarot deck, and what you have is a standard deck of playing cards.

I had checked out a few dungeon crawling games that used playing cards, and I liked the idea because they're portable and fairly common. But the games I had seen weren't exactly what I wanted. Some required dice or tokens, or only focused on combat, or didn't have the narrative component I was looking for. I wanted the game itself to generate a story as you played. And I wanted it to seem like a classic solitaire card game, even if it was also a dungeon crawling adventure.

This brings me to my first design principle: make the game you want to play. While it can be important to eventually get feedback from outside play testers, it makes sense to seek it from like-minded players. In the end, you'll never please everybody, so the most important thing is to believe in your vision, and figure out how to create the game you want to play.

As I saw it, the main problem I had was representational. How do you represent a dungeon crawl with a deck of cards? There are, of course, many solutions to this problem. But the right solution would have to be fun, evoke a sense the adventure, and have the narrative element I was looking for. I wanted a game that could be played again and again, and still create exciting situations and unexpected outcomes.

All games are abstractions in some way, but most have representational elements. And it is the balance between the abstract and the representational that engages the imagination. So my second design principle is this: leave space for the imagination of the players. Just as in literature and art, a game should balance clarity of expression with enough ambiguity to allow the audience to use their imagination, to participate in the creation of the game and its interpretation. Still, my basic problem remained. On the one hand I had a vision of dark dungeons and dangerous adventures, on the other hand, a deck of ordinary playing cards. How would I bridge that gap?



As I often do when I'm faced with a creative problem, I stared out the window for a long time. Then I took a hot bath and pondered what I had to work with: four suits, ace through ten, jacks, queens, kings, and two jokers. The suits could be different challenges with the numbers representing difficulty. The face cards could be something special. These things made sense. But I started by envisioning the cards as forming the layout of a dungeon map, and that was a problem.

The dungeon I envisioned was vast, labyrinthine, a sprawling mythic underworld. Not only could you never map such a dungeon, or even a significant portion of it with the 54 cards available, but seeing the map itself took much of the mystery out of the setting. Getting lost in the dark and never making it out had to feel like a real possibility. In short, the dungeon of your imagination is much scarier than the dungeon mapped out on the table before you. So how would I evoke this space, this setting for the adventure? It had to come from the player's imagination.

My real breakthrough in designing this game came when I realized the dungeon itself had to be an abstraction. The player would create the dungeon in their mind, and that would allow it to be as vast and deep as the imagination allowed. Time spent delving would also need to be abstract, to match the size of the dungeon the player imagined. The basic unit of the game would not be a room or a corridor, but rather an abstract turn, which could represent exploring multiple rooms and corridors, with a single significant encounter. Each turn would contain a challenge and the possibility of reward.

I worked out the rest of the game elements quickly after that, along with the basic mechanics for playing out turns and encounters. After about forty minutes in the bath, I was ready to dry off and play the first game. I think I died in the first delve, but it was fun, so I played another. On the second game I collected more treasure and barely got out alive. That was even more fun. It was so fun that I stayed up late into the night, playing game after game,

trying to survive and haul out treasure from the dreaded Tomb of Four Kings.

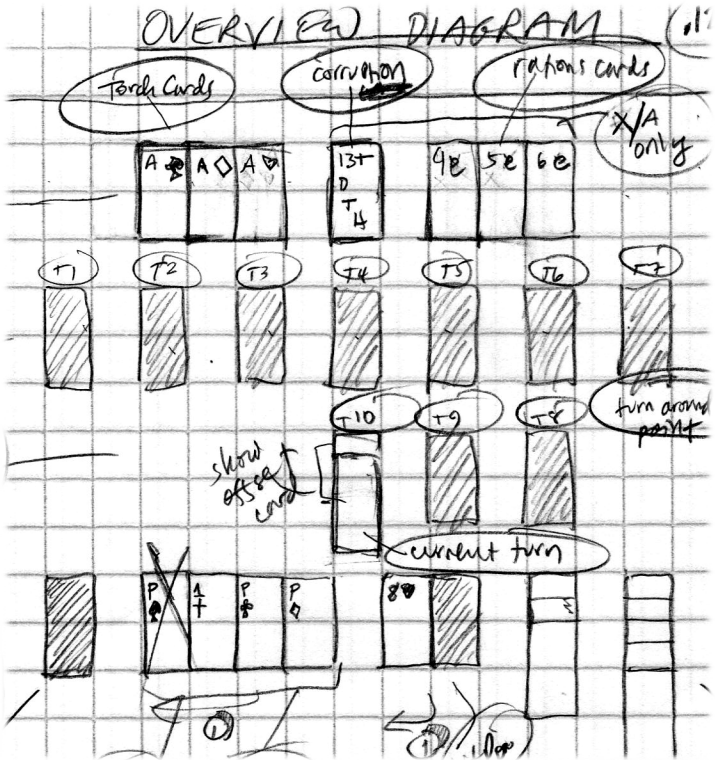
## INTO THE LABYRINTH

The rules for *Tomb of Four Kings* took about month to write up and illustrate in my spare time between my job and other writing projects. There were a few tweaks here and there as I nailed down the rules, but the final game was pretty close to my first games. In the summer of 2015 I released the rules packet for free on my website. A bunch of people downloaded it and pretty soon the game had a small following. It was great to hear from enthusiastic players. The game got a few good reviews, and I even got a bit of fan mail.

I was happy people were enjoying the game, and I saw a steady flow of new downloads from my website. In the back of my mind I knew I wanted to come back to it at some point and develop expanded rules for tarot cards, but for the most part, I put it on the back burner. I had a number of other fiction and game projects that were calling to me, and *Dungeon Solitaire* would have to wait until I had more time.

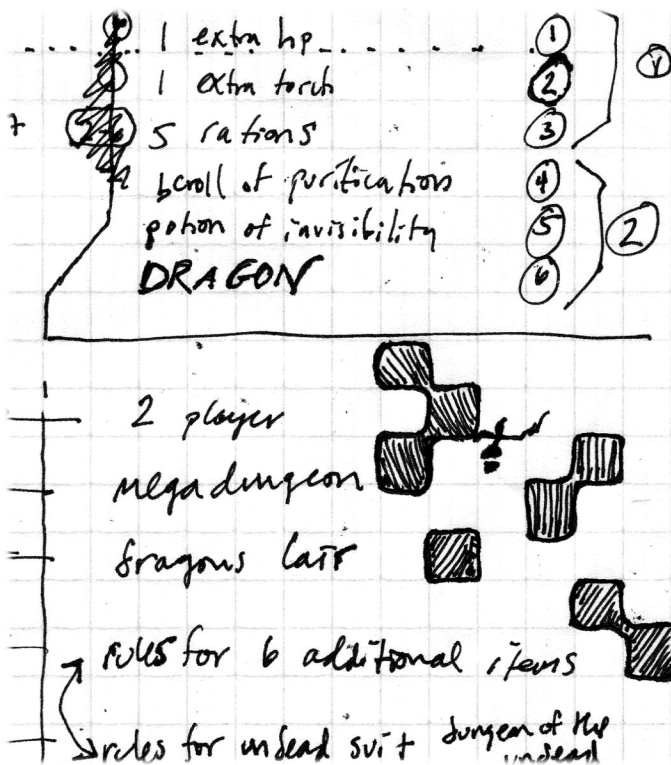
That's how things remained until Josephe Vandel contacted me about a possible collaboration. He had seen some of the game projects I was working on and thought a larger illustrated release would do well as a Kickstarter project. We discussed a few different possibilities before settling on an expanded tarot version of *Dungeon Solitaire*, perhaps because a rulebook and a custom card deck combined our skills so well. Josephe's dark fantasy artwork was well suited to the milieu of *Dungeon Solitaire*, and he already had an interest in tarot.

A friend of mine had recently given me some tarot cards as a gift, and I was already learning to read them. I had recently discovered the works of Alejandro Jodorowsky, the legendary filmmaker, writer, performer, teacher, and tarot reader, and I was enthusiastic about delving deeper into the symbology of the tarot.



Jodorowsky's vibrant passion, and his genius for combining art, entertainment, and mysticism was an inspiration for me, and I hoped to channel that inspiration into creating a new game for the tarot.

The basic mechanics of the game were already there with *Tomb of Four Kings*. I only had to figure out how to expand the game using the major arcana cards and the four pages. My first few experiments toyed with the idea of using the major arcana as events, treasure, magic items, and spells. But after a few attempts it became clear there were too many of them. The dungeon seemed too small to contain so many special cards. I had to find a way make this new dungeon, this Labyrinth of Souls, seem larger and more expansive than the *Tomb of Four Kings*.



The real breakthrough for this game was when I decided to split the major arcana in half, using the 2-10 as a new suit of encounters, and using the second half, 11-21 (and 0 & 1) for various special cards. The new encounters, in order to expand the size of the dungeon and the scope of the adventure, would be expansive maze-like sections of the dungeon. This was also fitting with my growing conception of the tarot, and by extension the Labyrinth of Souls, as a mirror that reflected the human experience.

When we decided upon a 90 card deck, the opportunity arose to expand the game even further with 10 additional cards. I had a working version of the basic, expert, and advanced games, along with a first draft of the rules written before launching the Kickstarter. Plus I had a number of rules variations worked out in my head that we could add in for various stretch goals. Joseph had

created the design for the card backs and a few cards as a preview for the funding campaign.

Anybody who followed our funding campaign pretty much knows the rest of the story. We funded within a week and proceeded to blow through all our initial stretch goals. We added more stretch goals, and blew through those as well. It was an insane, exciting, and exhilarating month. We expected to reach some kind lull in the middle, but we never lost steam. In the end we were funded well beyond our highest hopes. The expansive nature of the rules, the custom deck of cards, and all the beautiful artwork could not have happened without the support of our many backers. And for that we are hugely grateful to everyone who was willing to take a chance on this game.

## AT THE LIMIT

I want to talk about a few key overarching design decisions before I move on to a discussion of the game's mechanics. When I designed *Tomb of Four Kings* I used a standard deck of playing cards because I liked the idea of a game that could be played with something that's often readily at hand. When I was a kid, there were always cards around, and a lot of games to play with them. There was no internet, limited TV, and if you were bored, sometimes you just grabbed some cards and played solitaire. So I liked the idea of using a cards for a fantasy adventure.

Using playing cards already meant a certain level of abstraction. The 10 of spades is a horrible monster encounter, but it doesn't tell you what kind of monster, or whether it's one huge monster or a teeming horde of smaller monsters. You decide all that for yourself, as you play the game. And the way I see it, that turned out to be an advantage, because it's part of the narrative play. By not specifying or pre-imagining the monster, the widest range of interpretations is possible. In short, by limiting the representations within the game, vastly greater narrative possibilities are achieved.

There is a great potential that appears when you are at the limit of any system, a potential for beauty, for discovery, for transcendence, for miracles! And for this reason, limitations can be an engine for the creative imagination. It is possible that creativity itself evolved as way to overcome limitations, and without touching some limit, the imagination cannot properly engage.

When I set out to expand *Dungeon Solitaire* with the possibility of a custom deck of cards, I could have gone in any direction I wanted. I could have specific monsters and traps; I could have actual torch cards rather than aces; I could have hit point cards rather than the 2-10 of hearts. I could have liberated the game from a standard deck of cards all together. I could have a deck of 500 cards! Instead, I chose to stick to the idea that the core game can be played with a standard deck of cards, in this case a tarot deck. As for extra cards, I would limit myself to 10, as if they were an additional ten card suit. This way, not only would the game benefit from the deep historical and symbolic nature of the tarot, but I would have predetermined limits to work with.

This is my third design principle: work at the limits. Establish some limitations based on the kind of game you want to create. Don't work from an infinite palate. The limits are malleable, of course, but working with some limits will spark your imagination and ultimately the imagination of the players. Setting limits also helps maximize the potential of each game element, creating a kind of efficiency and elegance. Everybody's played games where there are just too many pieces and too many rules. It seems like the designers just tagged on rule after rule with no limits, no overall plan, and no regards for efficiency. The solution is not to add a new element every time you have an idea, but to find out how to express your ideas within a limited framework.



## PLAYING A ROLE

The player takes on the role of a dungeon delving adventurer, and thus becomes the protagonist of a narrative play. The antagonist, of course, is the dungeon itself. Through every aspect of the game I attempted to build and maintain a sense of character for these two roles. The conflict between them is the real game engine.

To evoke the physicality of the adventurer, the player has hit points and a hand where they collect their skills, treasure, blessings, and magic items. Movement through the dungeon is represented in turns, and the adventurer's actions and the events surrounding them are represented by playing encounter cards, action cards, the collection of treasure, the depletion of torches, et cetera.

The concept of hit points is taken directly from old school war games and roleplaying games. As an abstract measure of character vitality and survivability, they are easy to understand and create an intuitive sense of personal danger. I felt no need to reinvent the wheel here. When your hit points run out, you're dead! The stakes are high, and it's personal.

The concept of the hand is taken from card games in general. The hand is a place to collect cards, and from which one has the opportunity to play cards. Within the hand, I combined physical possessions like treasure and magic items with the skills to overcome obstacles within the dungeon. Both add to the sense of a protagonist adventurer.

Finally the concept of the spread, in which the narrative of the game unfolds, was inspired by tarot cards even in the original game. When reading tarot cards, one creates a "spread" of cards to interpret. From the beginning I had in mind that the game created a spread of cards that are interpreted as the game unfolds. With the Cartomancy rules in *Labyrinth of Souls* I was able to take this idea to its literal conclusion.

## THE TICKING CLOCK

Few things ratchet up story tension like a ticking clock, a time bomb set to go off if a situation isn't resolved in time. In *Labyrinth of Souls* everything in the doom track above the dungeon area is set up to work like ticking clocks. You never know quite how fast those clocks are ticking down, but you know bit by bit your torches will burn out and the corrupting forces of the dungeon will take hold of you. In the advanced version of the game, I've added an additional clock as well, which can be interpreted alternately as the depletion of rations or sanity. In any case, you're doomed if your time runs out.

The choice of the aces to represent torches was a natural fit. In the original game, they could represent the burning out of individual torches. However, to fit the much vaster feel of the *Labyrinth of Souls*, each ace had to be reinterpreted to represent a more abstract depletion of your torch supply. In the advanced game, I added an extra torch card to slightly increase survivability and to round out the extra arcana.

When developing *Labyrinth of Souls*, the rich symbolism of the major arcana suggested a wealth of possibilities for what these cards would represent in the game. It seemed pretty clear from the start that within the depths of the dungeon, Death and The Devil must represent something dark, dangerous, powerful. Inspired by the notion that the dungeon itself could be a malevolent, corrupting force, I included this two card clock as a critical factor in surviving the dungeon. Death would become Foul Rotting, a physical corruption that ends in death. The Devil would become Demonic Possession, a psychic or spiritual degradation. In this way, every moment within the dungeon one risks the corruption of both body and soul.

In the old school dungeon crawls I played when I was kid, keeping and tracking adequate resources was always a factor in dungeon exploration. There was always the danger of running out



of light, or running out of food and water. Being well stocked in standard and iron rations was always a consideration when preparing for an adventure. So when I had the opportunity to add new features to the game, tracking rations was an obvious choice, both to add another ticking clock, and to evoke the resource management of a long expedition.

As development progressed, we came up with the idea of illustrating the various ration cards with terrains and locations. In my playtest games, I started thinking about these as not just rations, but forgotten dreams, memories of the world left behind, and the dwindling sanity of the adventurer. At first I thought I would have to choose one interpretation or the other for the game. But the longer I played with both interpretations in effect, the less of a problem it seemed. Sometimes, dwindling rations was a good interpretation, at other times, loss of sanity. Since this was the advanced game, I figured more creative interpretation was a part of the advanced narrative play, and so I kept them both.

## ENCOUNTERING THE WORLD

*Labyrinth of Souls* incorporates four primary types of dungeon encounters: monsters, traps, doors, and mazes, plus illusions in the Cartomancy rules. All the encounter types have similarities based on a meet or beat mechanic and the notion that you must win the turn to collect treasure. The mechanics are differentiated based on hypothetical real world scenarios. That just means the mechanics for breaking down a door, for example, resemble the action in some way.

As I developed the various encounter types, I resolved a number of issues that came up regarding whether the rules should be this way or that way by referring back to these hypothetical scenarios in my search for definitive answers. Of course the rules couldn't become overly complex or unbalanced either, so my solutions had to be carefully bound by elegance and fun. But when

possible, I allowed the pseudo-realities of the setting to dictate game mechanics.

## MONSTERS OF THE ID

Monsters are arguably the quintessential dungeon encounter. When a monster appears combat is imminent, and once engaged in combat, one must often prevail or die. A fight isn't always finished with a single action though, and with each failed action, damage is taken and the battle continues. This makes any drawn out combat quite deadly and is in keeping with the feeling of old school dungeon crawls.

The opportunity to drop treasure and run away was something I added to the original game after the initial mechanics were in place, specifically because running away was an oft-used strategy in old school fantasy games, and dropping treasure could increase the chances of escape. I briefly toyed with the idea of allowing combined card treasure drops for all monsters, the way it is now for dragon encounters, but this ran up against game balance, made monsters feel less dangerous, and made survival by fleeing too easy. So when fleeing for your life, you reach for a single handful of treasure. There's no time for anything more.

## TRAPS OF THE MIND

Bypassing a trap is a one shot opportunity, because either you sneak by somehow, or the trap goes off, dealing damage. So unlike monster encounters, only one action card can be played against traps, after which the turn concludes, even in the case of failure. Still, the trap must be bypassed in order to get at any treasure. This is important for game balance, and presumably the diabolical minds who created these traps would not have it any other way. Perhaps the passage ahead collapses or is otherwise sealed off if the trap is not bypassed. Perhaps the trap is designed to destroy the treasure if not properly disarmed.

## DOORS OF PERCEPTION

Similar to traps, only one action card is allowed when attempting to force open a stuck door. Either one has the strength needed or not. Doors, of course, do not generally deal damage, so discarding as a consequence for failed actions was developed to represent the missed opportunities and dangers that were in the areas beyond that door.

With monsters and traps, once a failed action card is played the consequence is immediate. Go Berserk or Disarm Mechanism cannot be played to avoid damage. Interestingly, in the case of doors, you are still allowed to play Pick Lock to open the door and avoid discarding after a failed action. This may seem like an inconsistency, but it is precisely because of the real world logic at work in the encounter mechanics. Once wounded by a monster, going berserk won't erase existing wounds and naturally one cannot disarm an already sprung trap. If you try and fail to force open a door, however, there's no reason why you couldn't still open the door by picking the lock. So the rules reflect this, allowing the Pick Lock card to be played if played immediately following a failed action card.

## MAZES OF THE INTELLECT

When faced with the prospect of designing a new suit of encounters I brainstormed a number of possibilities, including malevolent spells, additional monsters and traps, undead monsters, and more. But there were a number of great things about the idea of mazes. They opened up the imagined space of the dungeon and made it seem even more vast and sprawling. They were entirely distinct from the other encounters. They gave a concrete expression to the possibility of getting lost in the dungeon, of the archetypal danger of losing your way in a labyrinth. And because of this, they were thematically perfect for a game called *Labyrinth of Souls*.



1.5 x 2.8  
Detail  
Size

I needed a way to differentiate this special type of encounter from the other encounter types, but it had to stay true to the feel of the existing game mechanics. The way I figured it, “winning” a maze encounter meant finding your way quickly through and having the opportunity and good fortune to collect treasure along the way. But you have only one chance to find this short-cut passage. Failing that, you are lost in the maze, and must continue to play for a card that would have won, thus finding your way out, but missing all the treasure hidden within.

That all worked fine, but the maze had to also pose a threat within the game, beyond just losing the opportunity for some treasure. And so within each maze encounter, time and space are compressed and further abstracted. If you are lost, you might wander for hours or days, encountering further monsters, traps,

and doors within that subsection of the dungeon. In this way, the maze encounter is a fractal-like expansion of the labyrinth itself.

These additional threats and their consequences had to be determined in some way. They weren't determined by the encounter itself, so they had to be determined by the suit of the action card. I quickly realized these sub-encounters couldn't deal full damage without severely degrading survivability, so within the maze, each monster or trap sub-encounter would deal a single point of damage, and each door would force a single discard.

## ILLUSIONS OF THE PSYCHE

I always thought, since the development of *Tomb of Four Kings*, that the hit point cards had the potential to be another suit of encounters. Although I still wanted the core game rules to use only the deck of cards, the truth was the task of hit point counter could easily be replaced by other means. And while they did ultimately take on the role of illusions for Cartomancy and the Halls of Illusion, that did not take shape until late in development.

When I first started working on the Cartomancy rules, I thought at first to develop a spread that read only major arcana cards, thinking this would be simpler and less intimidating for newcomers to reading tarot cards. However, it quickly became apparent that with all the other cards in the deck there were too few major arcana cards to create illuminating spreads within the game, or too much card flipping to get to them.

As a result I decided to give equal play to the minor and major arcana within the potential spread. That meant incorporating the 2-10 of cups into the deck, and tracking hit points by other means. Of course, the cups could have had null effect if they didn't appear as contested cards, but that would have been a wasted opportunity, and ultimately disappointing. Thus, the suit of illusions was born, which I developed to give the labyrinth an even more magical feel.

The mechanics for the illusions are based on the idea of having a chance to recognize the illusions for what they are, and the idea that illusions can have real consequences if you fail to recognize them as illusions.

## ALTERNATE RULES

The basic mechanics of *Dungeon Solitaire* make it easy to create alternate rules, house rules, and all kinds of variations. The larger deck size in *Labyrinth of Souls* provided a wealth of possibilities to explore during development. A lot of these alternate rules found their way into the core rulebook, thanks to our funding campaign. Even some ideas that were rejected for use in the core game found their way into the rules as extra items and events. Although they all drew off the basic, expert, and advanced games in various ways, each set of alternate rules presented its own design challenges.

## TAG-TEAM DELVING

*Labyrinth of Souls* is at its core a solitaire game, but like other solitaire games it's possible to develop two-player versions. I played around with some ideas for a competitive two-player version, even one where one player played the role of a dungeon master. But ultimately I felt a cooperative version was better suited to the narrative aspect of the game, and it was the version I most wanted to play. I've always liked the idea of cooperative games. The old school roleplaying games that inspired *Dungeon Solitaire* have a strong cooperative element, and I was excited about bringing that element into *Labyrinth of Souls*.

There were a number of things to consider: how doubling the number of cards would affect the game, turn ordering, keeping cards separate, pooling player resources, and so on. The most important consideration was ensuring that cooperation between the players would improve outcomes, while still maintaining the balance of the game.

To accomplish this, the cooperative elements hinge on shared skills, blessings, and magic items, as well as overall cards in the decks. To keep the combined power of the two players in check, their fates are tied together with regard to the doom cards. Torches, rations, and corruption cannot be pooled. They remain an abstract measure of impending doom, and either player's track can spell doom for the adventure. This encourages cooperation, and fits the feel of a dangerous environment, where partners rely on one another for survival.

## ON DRAGON SLAYING

In a lot of ways, dragons are the ultimate dungeon monster, and Dragon's Lair was the first rules variant I developed. I still felt strongly that the nature of regular monster encounters should be defined by the player's imagination, but The Dragon was different. It would be a special monster, with specific rules that would make it the most formidable encounter in the deck. The Dragon, like all the extra arcana cards, would be included in the advanced version of the game. But the mythology of dragon-battling adventurers seemed to demand a version of rules that focused on this card.

Fighting the dragon was the whole point of this variation, and every design decision was made to make that encounter the climactic event in the game. I had to make sure The Dragon didn't appear at the beginning of the game and I had to ensure that it would appear as an encounter. So as part of the setup I made sure The Dragon would be in the second half of the deck, and I made its appearance trump any other encounter.

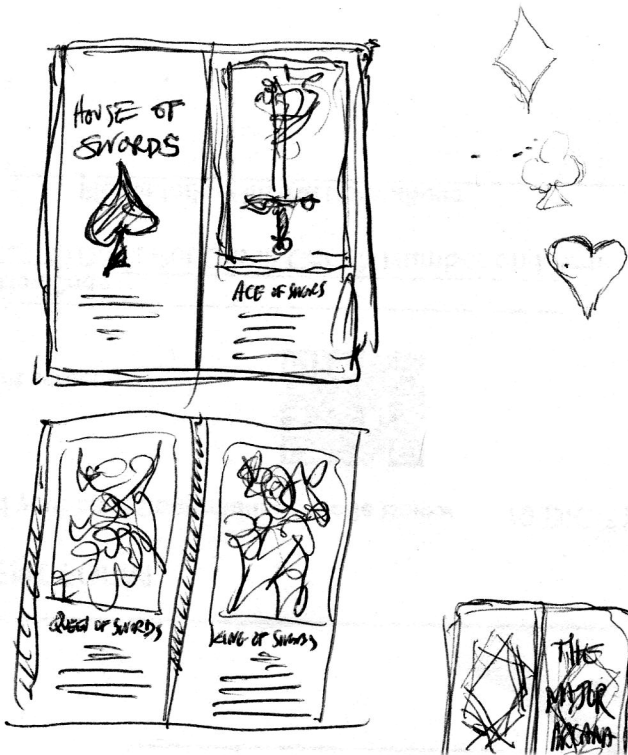
These rules worked, but they created other problems. The delve and return structure of the core game didn't fit the Dragon's Lair narrative. The dragon would often appear on the way out of the dungeon, which didn't seem climactic, or one could beat the dragon in the depths, and still die on the way out, which didn't seem climactic either. To solve this, I made the Dragon Battle the final encounter, and I developed the level structure which became

the basis for Dragon's Lair, as well as Undead Hordes, Megadungeon, and Cartomancy.

## SCOURGE OF THE UNDEAD

My original idea for the Undead Hordes was for a version of the game that delivered an unrelenting series of monster encounters, in a dungeon infested with zombies, ghouls, vampires, and other undead monstrosities. There would need to be a lot more monsters in the deck, so I took the mazes and turned them into another suit of monsters.

The addition of The Lich is directly attributable to the success of our funding campaign. Once all the initial stretch goals had cleared, Joseph and I were brainstorming for additional stretch goals, and the idea for another boss monster came up. We





discussed a number of possibilities, including a giant and a demon, but a lich had the right feeling for an iconic monster, and as a bonus, could be given a special role in the Undead Hordes rules.

Once The Lich had entered into the equation, the Undead Hordes had a boss monster, and it made sense to give it a narrative structure more akin to *Dragon's Lair*, with the idea of clearing out an infestation of the undead, and defeating the diabolical necromancer behind them.

## THE TENTH LEVEL

Very early on, even going back to *Tomb of Four Kings*, I'd been thinking about developing a version of the game that would overcome the limitations of a single deck of cards. Using a tarot deck expanded the size of the delve, but it was still limited by the number of cards in the deck. There had to be a way of recycling used cards to create the possibility for longer delves.

There were a number of different ways I thought about doing this, some of which I can't entirely remember at this point. Some of them involved a dungeon that would just go on indefinitely, allowing you to collect as much treasure as you could before you died. But that didn't make sense as a narrative and would have made a rather flat game. The dungeon had to feel riskier and more deadly the deeper one went, and part of that in the core game was that one had to get back out again.

My first version of Mega-Dungeon didn't recycle treasure cards, and the goal was to get them all. This didn't work for a number of reasons. With no treasure on the way out it felt like you had looted the whole dungeon, which didn't fit with the idea of a mega-dungeon. Furthermore, it was often possible to collect everything by the fourth level, making the deeper levels pointless. Once I started recycling treasure cards, put the three heavenly gems on the tenth level, and upped the difficulty with depth, it started to feel like a real mega-dungeon.

By extending the levels idea from Dragon's Lair to 8 turns, the doom track remains a danger, even while recycling cards each level. Now the player could go deeper and deeper, but I still wanted them to have to get back out. Initially there were twelve levels of the mega-dungeon, but in play-testing that got reduced to ten. I figured that was good number since the tarot itself has a number of patterns that go from one to ten. It was still big enough that many games wouldn't make it all the way, but not so big that it was impossible or would take multiple sessions to complete a delve.

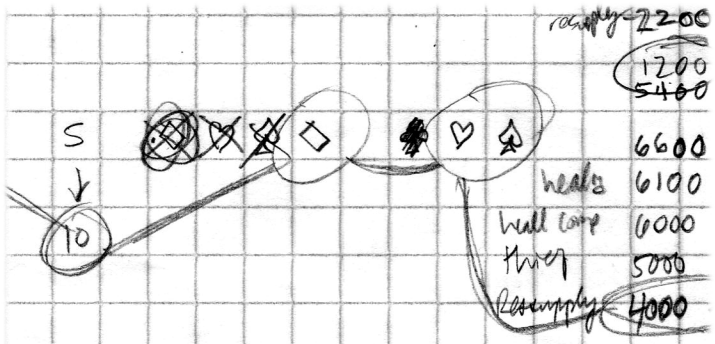
## A LIFE OF ADVENTURING

Creating Campaign Mode was a big undertaking, comparable to designing a whole new game. With the dungeon delving itself taken care of, I had to figure out how to link multiple delves together by tracking resources and creating gameable elements outside the dungeon. The goal was to turn *Dungeon Solitaire* into a more full fledged solo roleplaying game, allowing you to play a single adventurer over a series of expeditions and exploits.

I started by imaging the precarious life of the adventurer, risking life and limb in the dungeon for a chance at wealth and glory. One expedition might leave you flush with gold, but it's not enough, and the next expedition will cost money to launch. Life is a constant struggle, from delve to delve, but if you're lucky, if you can survive, maybe you can get ahead.

Going in I had a few ideas like using a draw from the deck as random events, staying at an inn to heal up, and paying expenses to launch a new expedition. I knew I had to drain players of some resources, but it would have to be carefully balanced to allow for the possibility of accumulating wealth. Then I brainstormed a list of other things adventurers might do between delves, from seeing a cleric to appraising an item, from partying to paying taxes.

Of course, I didn't want this time between delves to be tedious. There were going to be some book-keeping type tasks, so



LOS  
 Conquering / Wilderness Clear

10,000	1 Fool	6 Lord / Lady
Ranger	2 Robber	7 Baron / Baroness
Thief	3 Explorer	8 Duke / Duchess
Fighter	4 Captain	9 Prince / Princess
	5 Knight	10 King / Queen

Recovery	+1	2 10,000	✓
Curses	-1	3 30,000	2
Companions	+1	4 60,000	4
for Gems	Loyalty	5 100,000	7
companion's	payment offer	6 150,000	1
ply	Loyalty Draw	1200	
in Draw			

LOYALTY  
 100gp/step  
 1LV/step  
 @ 50% chance

the challenge was to make it evocative, but not too time consuming. The core of the game was still going to be the dungeon delves after all. The breakthrough concept for keeping that focus was the idea of a campaign turn. This consolidated all campaign management activities into one multi-phase turn.

From there, it was mainly a matter of figuring out what activities were essential, and how to create a feeling of life back in town from a few short tasks. The whole idea for Campaign Mode is inspired by the larger roleplaying campaigns that often surround old school dungeon crawls. As I got into it, my ambition grew to include gaining levels, choosing a class, and even gaining landed titles if you survived long enough.

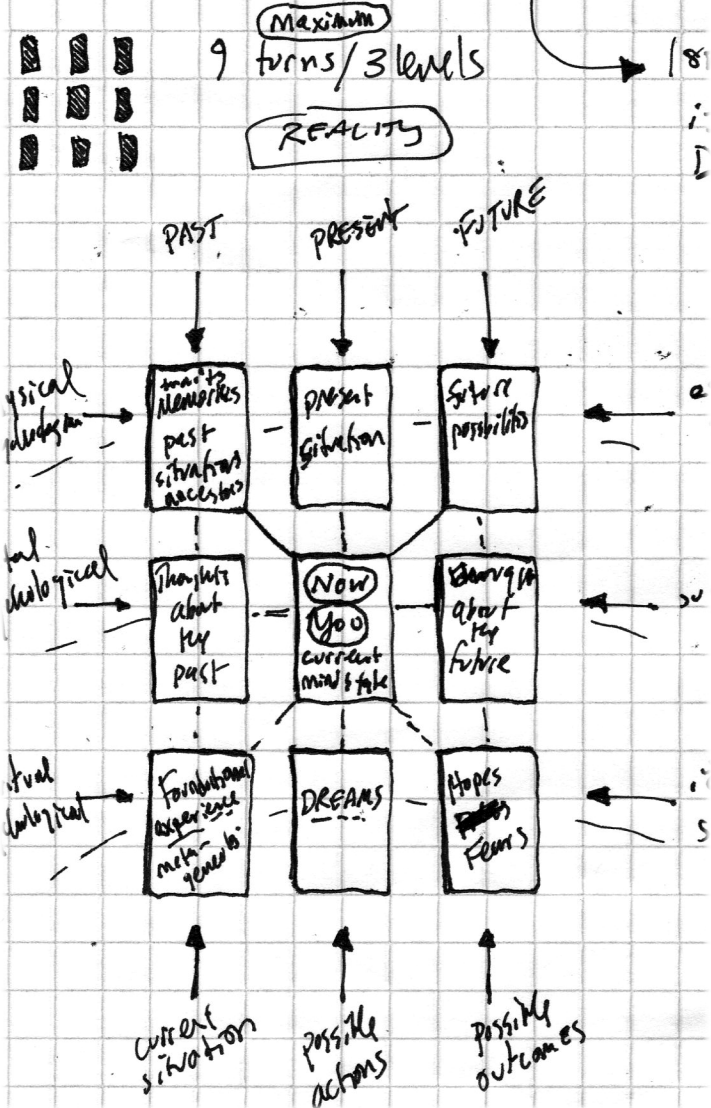
## IT'S IN THE CARDS

There were a lot of different directions the Cartomancy rules could have taken. It could have been guidelines for reading deeper meaning into existing games, based on what major arcana came up. That was one of my initial ideas, but it was fraught with problems. The biggest problem was that the first and second halves of the major arcana function differently in the game, and thus there was no good way to assure they had equal probability of inclusion in any given reading. Also, the game seemed too long if your main purpose was to do a reading. So I needed a quicker version of the game that would generate cards to read with equal probability.

Inspired by Jodorowsky's interpretations in *The Way of Tarot*, I felt the Cartomancy rules should create a card spread worthy of serious interpretation. I took as my model a simple three card spread, and used three short levels to generate up to nine cards for reading. As one descends into the dungeon, each level represents a journey deeper into the psyche. The contested cards mechanic allowed equal chance for cards to be selected, and by adding in the minor arcana, Cartomancy began to really take shape.

maybe: only reading the major arcana

Q: How to even out the probability of the readings →



The resulting card spreads proved quite interesting. When laid edge to edge, the 3x3 spread looks like a big tarot card itself. This lends even deeper symbolic meanings and further possibilities for reading. Furthermore, groups of three cards could be read not only on each horizontal level, but on the diagonals as well. All this meant the raw materials were there for both simple, introductory readings manageable by newcomers to the tarot, as well as more complex and subtle readings by knowledgeable tarot readers.

## EXTRA STUFF

During the course of designing a game, I go through many ideas in search of solutions that will work to produce the right combination of evocative narrative, balanced mechanics, and fun. Not every idea works. Those that don't work generally don't make it into the game. However, while writing *Labyrinth of Souls*, expansions to the rulebook allowed me to use some of those discarded ideas as alternate rules and to dream up new ideas to add more flavor and possibilities to the dungeon.

Of the included alternate items and events, Rizar's Ten Foot Pole and Mog's Sword of Monster Slaying were taken from early incarnations of the game that featured a magic sword and a ten-foot pole. They were eventually replaced by other items, either to fine tune the game balance or to make way for more suitable items or events. In the end it was fun to bring these items back and give them a little more character. The rest of the extra items and events came out of a big brainstorm, with some attempt to have a balance between fortunate and unfortunate events.

Finally, I needed a mechanic that would make these alternate events rare occurrences when put into the game. By allowing the card to come into the play only if it appears before an encounter card, the card would only occasionally take effect.



## THE HOUSE RULES

Halls of Illusion was the final version of the game I designed, after all the other rules were already written and play tested. With this version of the game, I wanted to create a ready made set of house rules, a version of the game that combined elements from all over the rulebook and would utilize a full 90 card deck. Essentially I took the advanced game rules, used a ten-sided die for hit points and added in the illusions encounters from *Cartomancy*. Then I added three things from the extra items and events. There wasn't much to do except put it all together, and take some care in how the three extras I chose might affect game balance. The resulting game takes the components of *Dungeon Solitaire* right to the limit.

### B/X & A

One of my goals when I was designing the original game was to keep the rules simple enough that after learning the game, looking up rules would be rarely, if ever, necessary. With 35 more cards in the advanced version of the game, *Labyrinth of Souls* expands the rules considerably. Once learned, the rules are still easy to remember, but the learning curve is steeper. I worried that newcomers to the game might be overwhelmed and discouraged before having a chance to really enjoy playing. So early on in designing the new game, I decided to take a modular approach to the rules, with three levels of complexity, each adding to the previous one. I called these versions Basic, Expert, and Advanced, which is an accurate description, but also an homage to old school *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Also, even though we were designing a custom tarot deck with some additional cards, I still felt strongly that the game should be playable with a standard tarot deck. Basic uses 53 cards and the same rules as *Tomb of Four Kings*, to give players a chance to learn the fundamental mechanics if they haven't already. Expert adds in the rest of the standard tarot cards, and serves as the core

*Labyrinth of Souls* game, playable with nothing more than a standard tarot deck. Advanced adds the extra arcana cards created for the custom card deck. I designed the extra arcana so the advanced game could still be played with a standard deck by substituting the 2-10 of cups for the extra arcana and using an alternate hit point counter. This way, all three versions are playable with any tarot deck.

## GAME BALANCE

In any game, it's important to consider the balance of play, the difficulty, and probabilities of success. That doesn't mean the game can't be brutal. Anybody who has drawn the ten of swords on the first turn knows *Dungeon Solitaire* can be brutal. But the chance of such merciless outcomes is part of the game's charm. Old school dungeon crawls and traditional solitaire games have the chance for such disastrous results. After playtesting, the original game had about a 50% survival rate and a 5% win rate, and I found such difficulty made my successes even sweeter.

This kind of balance goes back to my principle about working at the limits. The wider the range of possible outcomes, within the limits of the game, the more interesting the game becomes for the purposes of game play and narrative. The extremes must be possible, however rare, so the possibilities range from a Turn 1 disaster to a perfect game, but the vast majority of games will fall somewhere in between.

During the design process for *Labyrinth of Souls*, much care went into maintaining the balance of possibilities and the overall feel of the original game. If a card or mechanic was added that increased the chances of success, another was added to decrease the chances of success. Additionally, the mechanics for mazes and their potential to create epic long turns had to be carefully considered. In the end, *Labyrinth of Souls* has its own distinct flavor, but it still feels like *Dungeon Solitaire*. The overall balance is very similar, and the possible outcomes are even greater.



## CHANCE VS CHOICE

For logically minded players, games of pure chance are rarely very interesting beyond a gross calculation of odds. Most games balance chance and choice elements, but even among games with no chance element, the degree of logic involved determines the depth of the game. Chess, for example, is much more interesting than tic-tac-toe because of the range of possible outcomes and the level of logical thinking needed to generate good results against a competent player. Roulette may be exciting because of the stakes involved, but it can only be interesting, if it's interesting at all, by virtue of its complex betting system.

I love the logic puzzle aspect of games, and the opportunity for contemplation provided by games of great depth. That's one of the reasons I enjoy designing games, and in general I try to bring some aspect of that enjoyment into the games I make. Beyond the narrative elements, I think what makes many games interesting is the involvement of the decision making process. Even where chance is involved, the player must be required to make difficult decisions that will affect the outcome. To make those decisions difficult, the stakes must be high, the possibilities hard to calculate, and their effects on the outcome concrete. Some skill is then required to understand the overall and current game conditions, and to make good decisions.

As I worked on the original game and *Labyrinth of Souls*, I often thought about the decision making elements as a way to check my work. There's a danger when designing a game, particularly a solitaire card game, that the outcomes rely too much on chance and the game becomes shallow. There has to be something more to engage the logical mind. That's why *Dungeon Solitaire* requires key decisions like when to turn around, when to use your skills, blessing, and magic items, and when to make a treasure drop instead of fighting. These decisions will affect your outcomes, and to decide well you have to be able to estimate how many cards

it will take to get out, remember what cards have been played already, and plan to use your resources where they will have the most benefit.

## PLAY-TESTING

The importance of play-testing can't be overstated. On a design level it's fundamental to understanding, evaluating, and fine-tuning the fruits of your labors. It goes on forever though and finishing is important, especially with a deadline. The key to managing play-testing is to have some clarity and focus with regards to what you are testing. Going into *Labyrinth of Souls* I had the advantage of knowing that the core mechanics were good. However, each additional element had to be considered and tested for their effect on the game as a whole.

3	3	126	Good Draws, 10 HP, No L/D
∅	1	Corruption	5 turns in / fighting the Dragon 6
∅	∅	monster	Fled from Dragon w/ 60pt <del>HP</del> but still died
1	1	Lich	Killed Dragon but killed by Lich!
3	3	127	Epic Maze Finish! 10HP but down to 1!
1	∅	Dragon	Epic dragon battle
1	4	118	Unlucky Snow prevented Grand Slam!
∅	1	Corruption	3 turns in
∅	1	48	Killed the Dragon & escaped w/ 1 HP!
∅	∅	32	Killed the Dragon & escaped w/ 3 HP!
∅	1	Lich	Killed Dragon, killed by Lich!
∅	1	37	Epic (12) Dragon Battle - Had to do it to run to survive
3	3	105	Saved by The Tower
∅	1	Rations	Died of "Rations" while fighting Lich
∅	∅	Lich	Epic Lich Battle - Lonely died and
1	1	Rations	misplaced Holy Water so <small>would be</small>

Initial testing focused on figuring out which elements and combinations of elements worked well. My primary concerns were for maintaining the qualities that made *Tomb of Four Kings* so much fun, and more abstractly, for creating the feel of the Labyrinth, which was to be more expansive and mysterious than the original game.

Once I had narrowed down the rules for each version of the game, ongoing play-tests focused on fine tuning balance and finding any flaws in the game logic. Play-testing must also be done in conjunction with writing and editing to discover details and possibilities of play that need further explanation.

While play-testing I kept a record of each game, tracking scores and making some short notes on the outcomes, as well as notes on any rules or situations that needed further clarification. This allowed me to get a general idea of overall survival and win rates, and to ensure the rules would be as thorough as possible.

There does come a time to press forward though. There were times when I got very excited about some new rule possibilities late in the play-testing, and it was very tempting to follow those leads. But they weren't really improvements, and they didn't solve any existing problems. They were just variations, essentially house rules. And that's how I knew to just jot them down, stay true to the game I had created, and press forward to the end.

## WRITING RULES

Writing the rules for a game with a narrative component is an interesting exercise in balancing the logical and imaginative mind. The rules for a game should be concise and clear in their intent. For this, precise use of terms and simple declarative statements usually suffice. However, when a game is meant to engage the imagination in creating a narrative, such rules should also evoke a sense of the setting, themes, conflicts, and even characters. But without writing a story, how does one evoke these narrative elements?

Note: If you don't have the Labyrinth of Souls deck, it is still possible to play the adventure standard tarot deck by tracking hit points with a ten-sided die and using the 2-10 of c extra cards 2-10x.

*arcana*  
DEATH'S DOOR

*Death's Door (IX)*  
The extra arcana marked 1x is Death's Door, and is an extra hit point, placed on the hit point stack. This gives you a full ten hit points. The face value of your current hit points accurately reflects how many hit points remain. When you are at Death's Door, you have *exactly* *when Death's Door is turned* *dead at 0* hit points.

RATIONS & FORGOTTEN DREAMS

Food in the dungeon is scarce and tainted with poison and corruption. The extra arcana ~~3x~~ represents your supply of carried rations. Each one that appears marks the dwindling supply. When a rations card appears, play it immediately in the doom track above the dungeon. When a rations card is played, you are doomed to wander the dungeon until you starve or in the tainted food of the underworld. And thus, your game is over.

These cards are marked with various terrains: The Walled City, The Inner Desert, The Outer Ocean, and The Elder Wood. And thus, they might also represent the dwindling sanity in the over-world, and the forgotten dreams of a life *left behind* on the surface, as one delves deeper into the labyrinth. As such they are your rations of sanity, because once those memories and sanity are gone, insanity follows. You will live out what days are left to you in the madness of the underworld until your game is over.

HOLY WATER

*3 extra arcana*  
The extra card marked 3x is Holy Water. If it appears, *you choose to walk the recursive path of your game* *Choose one or the other, or interpret* the Holy Water can be collected *at the end of the turn* *bring in the end of* *end of the turn*. If your last rations card appears you may play the Holy Water card in the doom track and place the last rations card on the bottom of the deck. Your body becomes purified and you are able to survive on the food and water of the dungeon without harmful mushrooms, slime molds, and tainted corpses become a life sustaining feast. Your memories of the beautiful world that awaits you *outside* on the surface. Hopefully you can make it out of the dungeon while the effect lasts, for Holy Water can only be used once. *If the final*

THE LICH

*on run out of cards and the final rations*  
*again, it must be played and your game*  
*name* *one of the worst* *is a* *hell*  
The Labyrinth of Souls houses a dark secret, a necromancer from bygone ages who'death. The extra arcana marked 1x is The Lich, and one of the most formidable monsters. The Lich functions as a monster card with a 9 face value, but has +1 for any companion card it kills. Furthermore, no divine favor *its* *counter* can be used to counter it.

any damage from the Lich results in the death of a party member if any exist.

In my mind, the challenge is in balancing the logical and imaginative modes of writing, and finding a way to fulfill both with one style. Much of this comes down to word choice and the terminology of the game. Terms like “the delve”, “corruption”, and “encounter” already are creating a sense of the game world. The words themselves set the imagination into motion, and the mechanics of the game add to the world and its narrative elements. In this way, much of the game’s narrative elements are created without resorting to actual bits of story.

Purely narrative elements within a rulebook, in small amounts, can be interesting and evocative. But too much of this fluff can overwhelm the game itself and become a distraction. It also runs the risk of filling up the space where the imagination of the player is meant to occupy. Ultimately, the real narrative should happen at the table, in the mind of whoever is playing the game.

## FINAL REMARKS

It’s been an interesting process to write all this down in the midst of getting *Labyrinth of Souls* ready for release. It’s forced me to articulate many ideas at work in the game’s design and give voice to thoughts that otherwise would have remained silent. It’s also felt like a messy process. There are so many decisions made in the process of creating a game, and once I got writing, so many thoughts to be had about games in general. It’s not possible to set them all down here, and even what I have set down feels less organized than I would like.

Hopefully you have found something interesting and entertaining in these ramblings, and at least caught a good glimpse into the creative process for designing *Dungeon Solitaire*. In my mind the game is a balancing act, between the imaginative and logical mind, between the narrative, mechanical, and symbolic elements, between choice and chance, and ultimately between a deck of cards and the dream of a dungeon called the Labyrinth of Souls.

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