

## *Immersion Encounters*

We have all heard of the three pillars of role-playing games: Exploration, Role Play, and Combat. But what sets apart your campaign from the other games and game-masters in your area? In many cases, it is the level of immersion the players get from being at your table. In this Post-Geek-and-Sundry era of TTRPGs, players often come to the table expecting a “Critical Role” experience. If you do not have those kinds of voice-acting skills, or detailed miniature models of the dungeon you are exploring, or encyclopedic knowledge of the rules, monsters, and magical abilities that can make the game more fun...how do you keep your players engaged?

In many cases, what I have seen is the simple act of immersion. Players stay at your table because they feel immersed in the setting and the story you have given them. They tell jokes about NPCs after the game. They bring up that one heroic deed or that devastating defeat over and over again as though it still means something to them in real life...because it does.

There is a way to purposefully insert this kind of immersion into a game (in a way that does not feel forced). This can be done by using immersion encounters.

What, then, is an immersion encounter?

An immersion encounter is an encounter that helps the players feel like they are in a world they can care about. A world with realistic settings, realistic NPCs and realistic events happening all around them. This does not require guild-worthy voice acting, realistic miniatures, or detailed color maps to achieve. Here are a few simple suggestions and a sample map for players to explore that can help with immersion in the game.

### 1) Immersive loot.

We’ve all rolled for loot from those redundant treasure tables. My players

often joked about creative ways to use the large collection of bone dice and velvet masks in their bag of holding. It gets old, and it often pulls players from the immersion when the expansive world they are playing in is limited to only a handful of objects. But what if your treasure told a story of its own. What if that corpse in the spider webs was wearing a noble tunic and carried a masterwork-level dagger instead of an art piece worth 25g? Who was this guy, and what was he doing down here in the troglodyte warren?

### 2) Immersive side quests.

Probably the best example of an immersion encounter was the old, haunted well outside of town. Using this simple plot hook dropped from a local resident at the tavern, the adventurers would be led to explore the history of “Old Town” as well as gain insight into the nature of some of the local creatures and magical lore.

### 3) Rival NPC adventurers.

Rival adventurer parties have been an official suggestion for a long time, but have you ever used them to advance a plot hook that your players didn’t seem interested in? What if it wasn’t your party that recovered that artifact from the tomb and resurrected the mummy king and his curse? Well, now it’s your players’ problem, because only half of that rival adventurer party made it back to town to interrupt your feast. Unfortunately, among the survivors is that bard your party’s ranger finds obnoxious, as well as that rogue who stole the gem-encrusted necklace from your sorcerer that one time...

### 4) Immersive puzzles.

Why is there a secret wall or a trap in this room? Could it be that the original designers of this castle needed a secret chamber or an escape route in case the minions ran amok? Before throwing a

meaningless riddle onto the map, think about ways it can tell a story of its own. A story that the players may unravel as they search the room for traps and treasure.

#### 5) Immersive Social Encounters.

Who says all social encounters need to be a roll to seduce or persuade? Besides, this is a ghost you're talking to, and it doesn't really care what you look like or think. All it wants is to have a specific task fulfilled so it can rest in peace. Of course, finding that locket is going to allow the party some chances to learn a bit of lore behind this dungeon. Or they can just kill the ghost for the XP. It's the party's choice, really.

Here is a map of the "Old Town" mentioned previously in this article. Following are two separate immersion quests that can be used with this map to present players with an immersive adventure.

#### Quest 1) The Haunted Well.

The well in this old, ruined town is rumored to be haunted. Locals tell of strange lights at night, as well as eerie voices spoken in whispers to those who venture too close. Some suspect a treasure is guarded by a vengeful wraith. Others tell a tale of a ghostly woman mourning the loss of her lover during the war that caused the old town's downfall several hundred years ago.

Exploring the ruined town reveals nothing until the party ventures too close to the well or the lone house that has managed to avoid decaying like the others around it. The party will be met with non-violent illusions meant to lead them away. If they press further they may have a sleep spell cast on them. Those who remain awake will be approached by a small female figure, a nixie, who has guarded the well and the nearby house since the town was abandoned.

The nixie is more willing to ask your party for help than to harm them. She explains that she is bound to the fountain by a fairie promise—to

wait until one of the children she befriended from the village returns. He was a lonely child, and she had shown pity on him and became his lone confidant during his formative years. Then the troubles came. As his family prepared their cart with what belongings they could carry, the boy promised his fairie friend that he would return to her one day. She made a fey promise herself, to wait beside the well for his return.

Alas, as your party will discover in their explorations, this boy was but a mere human, and though his life was long, it has long since ended. How, then, to break the fey promise and free this nixie from her well?

In the library or book store of a nearby town is a small bestiary listing various monsters encountered by a great adventurer from several hundred years ago. The party will recognize the name of its author as that boy who left so long ago and never returned. They need not read the entire book; on the very first page is an introduction dedicated to his childhood friend, the nixie who guarded the well outside his home. The rest of the passage is a message to her, apologizing for not being able to keep his promise and asking her to accept in his place the bestiary now in the party's hands.

Delivering the bestiary to the nixie completes the quest, removes the "curse" from the Old Town, and allows the party to search the old house for what treasures that family once left behind as they fled (to be determined by the GM).

#### Quest 2) The Lost Lullaby

Taking shelter from the rain in an old, abandoned farmhouse, the party hopes to set out bright and early the next morning for the lost mines rumored to be not much further along this old, abandoned road. But as the sun rises, they discover that their sleep was much deeper than they had intended. And in the dark of night, all their equipment but for the clothes on their backs (and perhaps a few daggers on their belts) has been stolen.

Emerging from the farmhouse, they discover themselves to be on the edge of an abandoned village, much of it run down beyond recognition. As they discuss what to do next, a small dragon (or other winged dragon-like creature the size of a large bird) alights on a tree above them and begins regaling them in their language for “stealing her babies”.

Conversing with the dragon reveals that she has also just chosen this village as a perfect location to lay her clutch of eggs. Unfortunately, during that terrible storm last night, something managed to steal all of her eggs from her nest. She offers to help the party search for their equipment if they help her recover her eggs.

Exploring the town will reveal that it was hastily abandoned, with many household objects left behind as though the owners simply walked away. There does not appear to be any signs of violence—only that time has not been kind to the houses along this narrow stretch of road.

At various points of interest of the GM’s choosing, the party will encounter sudden illusionary images of the way the village once looked. These illusions express themselves like memories of someone who once lived in this village. Variations to this phenomenon can involve hearing lute music coming from the tavern or a soft lullaby coming from the window of an old house where a family once lived.

If players are familiar enough with the house you are playing in, take photos of items or places in your house/yard for them to see as “illusions” from the game. Examples of this include:

- Shattered shards of pottery suddenly coalesce into the image of a cookie jar upon the counter. (Use a photo of your cookie jar)
- The remains of a wooden fence post suddenly regrow into a tall, strong fence along the edge of this yard. A festive wreath/banner hangs from the post. (Use

a photo of a decorative item in your home/yard)

- A tattered fragment of faded parchment in the remains of an ornate frame on the wall changes back to the lovely painting/portrait it had once been. (Use one of your own wall decorations)
- An empty indentation on the ground changes into a lush, flowing fountain or fish pond. (Use a water feature from your own yard)
- A shelf full of moth-eaten tomes returns to the grand collection of tomes and manuscripts that once sat upon this shelf. (Use your own bookshelves)
- A carved figurine lies in pieces on the floor. As the party watches, it transforms back into the lovely doll it had once been. (Use a child’s toy or a decorative figurine of your own)

(Note: This adventure was first presented as a special “Easter” edition, with candy and eggs being the real-world prize for locating the objects in the photos.)

When the players identify the object from the photo and locate it in the real world, reward them by returning a portion of their equipment in the game. Eventually the entire party will have most of their gear back (save for their gold), and the dragon will have found some but not all of her eggs. At this point, they will also find a key with the last illusory clue. That key will unlock the old cellar door in the large house at the end of the street. When the party ventures inside, they will find a passage covered in cobwebs and stinking of rotting flesh. Venturing deeper, they will discover the cause of their troubles, a mischievous pixie now trapped in the webs of a large, hungry spider.

Defeating the spider and freeing the pixie from the webs will allow her to lead you to the rest of the stolen equipment (and the dragon’s eggs). She will also explain that she has served as the “imaginary friend” to the children of this town for hundreds of years, but when the town

departed, she was left with nothing but memories, which she implanted in objects around town as an attempt to restore what she had lost. The dragon can then explain that, when her clutch begins to hatch, perhaps they will provide this lonely pixie with new memories.

And so the party departs with all of their equipment recovered, XP from the encounter, and a small collection of loot representative of the old memories the pixie was holding on to.

Or they can just burn the village down and kill the NPCs for the XP. It's the players' choice, really.