

The Hunt for Merzototh – A Dungeon World Batrep

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There has been lots of questioning since the Pendraken's Dungeon Pack came out. If the quality of the miniatures cannot be questioned, my guess is lots of doubts remain for people keeping an eye on this pack: can it be considered as standalone ? How does the game flow ? Can it be played in a reasonable time / space frame ?

Plus, other nasty issues have to be answered: how does the pack compare to other “heavyweights” dungeon crawlers ? What could/should be improved ? How much pre-work is needed to play a game ?

This is the first game of Dungeon World for me and my friends. We really wanted to see what guts this game really has so we went for a honest-to-god homemade scenario involving a bunch of heroes hunting for an ancient wizard who turned himself to the Lord of the Flies...

The story so far...

It's been fifty years since the end of the War of the Six, fifty years since Merzototh betrayed good king Eldritch, costing the kingdom one of its finest knights legion. As the years passed, the kingdom healed its wounds, burying Merzototh's treachery beneath the sands of time.

But the peace did not last long and darkness started to engulf the old kingdom once again. First it was rumors, then rumors became incidents, incidents turned into skirmishes... Seeing the situation was about to get out of hand, wise king Eldritch called for help, promising gold and honor to the ones who could defeat Merzototh for good.

Four heroes answered this call, four bold and fearless heroes who started their journey toward the lair of Merzototh where death and glory patiently waited for them.

The heroes

Four heroes were to enter the dungeon and defy mighty Merzototh:

Name	Mov	Attack	Armor	Wounds	Special
Fergus the barbarian	4	8	6	7	Berserk (+1A/foe in KZ)
Conrad the fighter	5	7 (3-4)	5	6	Stealth (doesn't stop in foes' KZ) Charge (free attack during move)
Sciath the witch	5	4 (7-8)	4	5	Dedicated shot (can move and shoot) Multishot (assign hits freely)
Findtan the healer	4	5	5	5	Field healing (+D3Wd for 2 heroes in KZ OR D3+1 for 1 hero) Stealth Poison attack (works on living creatures)

The quest

The heroes entered the dungeon crawling down a hole, letting the front line warriors go first.



The main entrance

The heroes boldly were advancing in the dungeon when they met the first sign of resistance: two stinking orcs and two ugly goblins were well decided not to let them pass!

Without any hesitation, the fighter performed a charge move toward the nearest orc, hoping to kill it in order to engage the second during the melee phase.



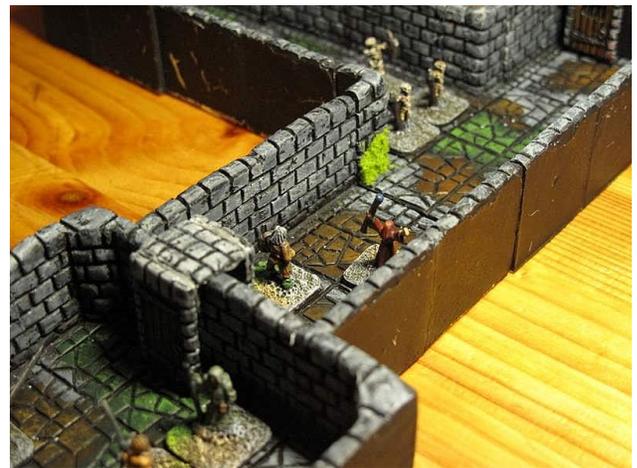
The gods of war were looking upon the fighter as both orcs were dispatched in a same turn!

The charge skill is indeed really powerful: you can get a free kill before joining a more important melee. However I would advise to use it wisely as some monsters might not be as weak as one could expect.

Meanwhile, the two goblins were no match for both the witch's multi-shot and barbarian's powerful attack.

The dormitory

Once taken care of the monsters, the barbarian did not want to waste more time and rushed into the west room, closely followed by the healer as a back up. Unfortunately, as those two were occupied with a bunch of smelly creatures, a sudden silence fell on the corridor, letting three undead ambush the fighter and the witch.



Thanks to both his powerful attack and berserk rage, the barbarian smashed two orcs to pieces in a single blow (rolling no less than 9 dice), soaking these cold and dusty walls with foul blood.

Here, we had to admit the mover/non-mover mechanism was quite confusing as we were all used to the usual IGO-UGO system. We then switched to a compromise involving the initiative roll to decide which side gets to move first (i.e. the loser also gets to move) and fight first during the melee phase.

The next turn was spent separately by the two halves of the team. The barbarian did not have any problem against its enemies attacking him as he was equipped with a strong armor (6). Needless to say the remaining orc and goblin did not last long. Meanwhile, the battle raged on against the undead. Even though having medium armors, the skeletons remain die hard foes (3 Wds) and managed to hurt the fighter (1 wound) before the witch's multi-shot annihilated both skeletons.



We actually forgot the distance attacks hit on 5+ instead of 4+ in the case of hand to hand combat. This mistake was fixed in the subsequent turns.

Being of curious nature, the barbarian got close to the bed, surprised to find this piece of furniture in such a dark dungeon. But as curiosity killed the cat, a vile deadly pudding appeared just behind the barbarian, looking for a proper meal (scoring a single wound). But the barbarian ain't no cat and, on the next turn (initiative: heroes), the pudding had to face an angry barbarian, frustrated by such a coward attack. This counter-attack made short work of the creature as the barbarian scored a deadly strike, turning the deadly pudding into a dead pudding.



On second thoughts, this kind of “ambush attacks” should lower the armor of the target. Especially when the target has a value of 6. Also, an attack from behind should lower the armor (and thus would increase the value of the Stealth ability).

Meanwhile, the fighter finally dispatched both skeleton warriors, giving a clear line of sight to the witch so she could fire her multi-shot to the skeleton archer, melting it with the floor.

The guard room

As the silence returned to the dungeon, the heroes gathered around the door leading to the guard room.

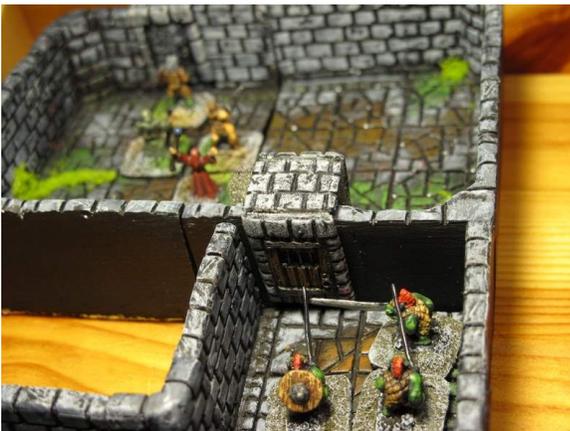
Eager not to take any risk, the healer managed to get all heroes' life back to full before entering the room.

The barbarian was the first to storm the room, discovering three orcs guarding a heavy door. The fighter followed closely and joined the fight.



Without much surprise, the two orcs inside the barbarian's killzone were killed. The third one got a direct hit from the witch's multi-shot, disappearing in a purple mist. As no more foes were present in the room, the fighter tried to open the door but to no avail as it was blocked from the other side!

After looking for secret passages, the fighter figured he could use some ancient wisdom he owns from his father who owned it from its father... well.. he kicked the door. Hard. But the door hold good, worse, it attracted some visitors, coming from the corridor.



As the orcs gathered around the door, the team knew the fighter had to smash the blocked door as quickly as possible before they are overrun. Being undoubtedly the second wisest element of the team, the barbarian rushed at the door screaming in its berserk rage, wielding its broadsword. It only took one more turn for both the barbarian and the fighter to take care of their respective job. Having been wounded in the middle of its fury, the barbarian had to be healed before carrying on.

I had the "blocked door" idea thinking about how I could slow down the heroes a little bit and make them feel they were actually trapped. This was done by giving the door 6 wounds and an Armor of 6. Each blow attracting a couple of orcs. However, one DM should take care to not to

build a door too solid as spending more than 2 turns becomes boring.

The unholy gap

Once “opened”, the door revealed a junction, itself revealing a large room. In its center, a foul-smelling floor grill started to shake when several skeletal shadows pulled themselves out of the gap. Boldly, the heroes rushed into the fray!



The fight began fiercely, but, as the skeletons kept rising out of the grid, wounds started to accumulate and a decision had to be taken before the worst happens. Having the ability to sneak between monsters (stealth), the fighter rushed alone into the room behind the pile of rubble and started to push the rocks into the grid...



More skeletons kept rushing out of the grid and, even though being an effective fighter, the barbarian had troubles to cleanse the small entrance in order to back the fighter up, who began to feel pretty lonely among its undead companions. Still, he kept fighting and pushing the rubble pile whenever he had the opportunity to do so.



Finally, the fighter succeeded: the pile of rocks fell onto the grid in a deafening noise, crushing both bones and iron bars. Meanwhile, the barbarian and the witch managed to make their way in the room, cutting the undead horrors to pieces. Again, the silence fell on the dungeon, for now.

But there was no time to rest as the fighter could barely stand up. The healer then treated the most critical wounds, allowing him to raise his sword and his shield once again to continue the quest.

The cursed well

Back to the junction, the heroes took the north corridor toward the water well. The barbarian, still felling invincible after the last fight, rushed alone toward the well. But as he got closer, a gurgling sound echoed and a vicious grub suddenly appeared, bursting out of the well!

The whole team reacted fast but unfortunately, two slimes fell from the ceiling, preventing any back-up to reach the barbarian. Even worse, a slime engaged the witch in hand to hand combat, scoring a couple of wounds on her!



Thanks to its massive defense, the barbarian resisted long enough to let the rest of the team handle the two slimes and come to help him.

It is difficult to handle characters with an armor value of 6. Launching lots of monsters to challenge a “6 armored” character might make short work of any “non 6 armored” character standing in their way. Think well your scenario before playing.

The fight was not easy as the fighter suffered a nasty burn due to the green slime spitting acid to his

face! Having been wounded by the witch, the red slime died to the fighter's charge (free) attack which allowed this proud warrior to finish his move and engage the green one in a melee fight. Despite the smell of its own burnt flesh overwhelming him, the fighter managed to fight back, finally killing the last slimy monster.

The “Acid Spit” special ability lowers armor value by one, this is a very effective weapon that I’ll later give to some “elite archers”. Yes, I’m that bad.

The lair of Merzototh

Next to the well stood a huge and sturdy door around which the heroes gathered. Once healed, the front line warriors slammed the door open, discovering the lair of old Merzototh. At first, the room seemed quiet, only disturbed by the flickering light of a lone candle, throwing a humanoid shadow in the corner of the room: Merzototh. Slightly waving its hand, Merzototh muttered some words using the language of the ancients. Suddenly the heroes witnessed a horde of skeletons, rising from the ground, each of them encircled with a cold blue halo.

The “cold blue halo” was in fact a special Undying ability on a 5 and 6 unless the fireplace is lit. Unfortunately, I was pretty unlucky and my super skeletons never “undied”.



The skeletons rushed toward the heroes, attacking them with a unearthly rage. Merzototh took cover behind its minions, just next to an unlit fireplace. The healer boldly chose to back the fighters to heal them in the midst of the fight. Heavy blows were dealt and skeletons were shredded to pieces as the heroes advanced toward Merzototh.



The barbarian being engaged with a couple of skeletons, the fighter took the opportunity to rush toward Merzototh, hitting him with a nasty blow. The answer of Merzototh was a simple evil grin, backed by a solid hit, almost breaking the fighter's shield. Worse than that, Merzototh's wounds healed almost instantly, much to the heroes' discomfort.



But the bad news (let's call it like that..) really started to pile up as a bunch of skeletons appeared in the corridor guarded by the lone witch. Shouting words of power, she focused her shot on a skeleton, literally burning it to the ground.

Unfortunately the skeletons kept appearing as if drawn by ancient forces while the fight against Merzototh carried on. It seemed impossible to kill Merzototh as his wounds kept healing at an astonishing rate. Suddenly, the healer disengaged from the fight with Merzototh (sustaining two wounds) and tried to light the fire, which seemed to irritate the necromancer !



But the fire was really hard to light up, especially as the fight against the old wizard was raging on nearby and the barbarian joined the healer to light the fireplace. Meanwhile, the skeletons in the corridor got close to the witch, engaging her in a vicious hand to hand combat. And the final move came, marked by both a fortunate and unfortunate turn of events: as the witch died under the grim and relentless assault of the skeletons, Merzototh became distracted for a couple of seconds which sealed his fate as the fighter managed to strike a deadly blow, straight into its black heart.



A bitter victory...

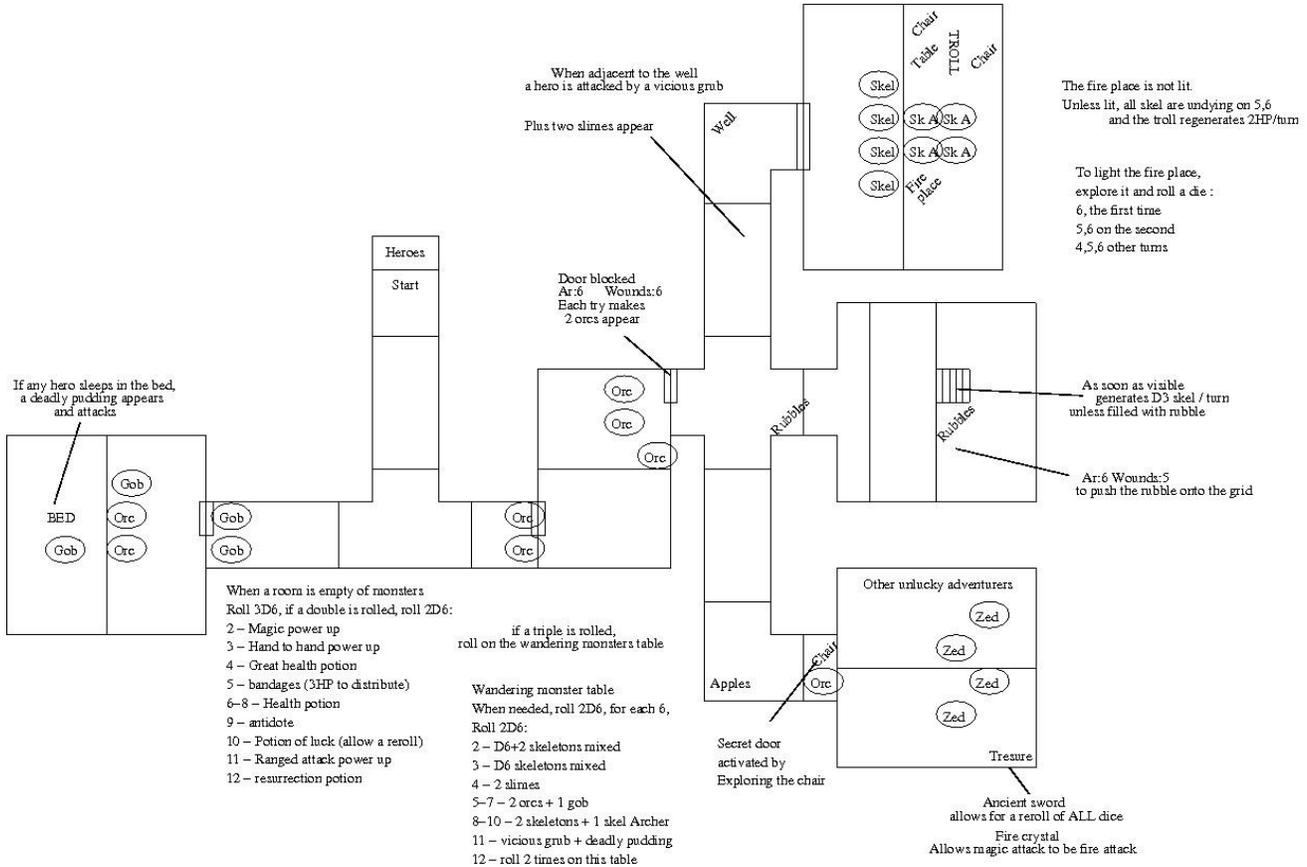
As Merzototh exhaled its last foul breath all skeletons turned to dust, finally able to rest in peace and avenging the death of the lost knights legion. The heroes then returned to king Eldritch's castle to claim their reward. But this victory and all this gold had a bitter taste as only three heroes were able to leave the dungeon.

Being a wise man, the king noticed the grief of the heroes. As they were leaving the castle, Eldritch gave them an old dusty map, giving the location of the cloister where an old sage lives on mount Orrath, keeping secrets that could help the witch to return back to life.

To be continued...

Behind the scenes

This scenario was built in a hurry and I had to find some decent ideas to provide both a challenging and an enjoyable game to my four players. Here is the map you can reuse for your own games if you want:



Note the (secret) south east room contained some gear for the heroes to help them fighting Merzotth.



These are just some more pictures to show you how we did the pictures. Don't be afraid, the heroes were not attacked by a giant spider (The shiny thing is a "back up light").

Feedbacks

This marks the end of the battle report. Being the first game for us five, there was a lot of feedback which I tried to summarize here.

On the rules...

I personally love the 2nd edition of Dungeon World rules. The grain is fine enough to build almost every dungeon you can think of, plus, each furniture/monster/hero in the Pendraken range gets its rules, thanks to a prolific rule master living somewhere in the nebulous lands of the Celts. However, like good researchers in theoretical physics, he tends to propose powerful solutions which need an introduction speech in order to be easily understood and played.

First, here are the things that might disturb both you and your players:

- combat is **not** an action: what I mean is, in usual games, melee attacks and other actions tend to be mixed as you usually get “X movement points plus 1 action”. DW rules roughly follow the same idea except combat only occurs in the melee phase, after all movers ended their move. I.e. performing a hand to hand attack is not a decision a player has to do after finishing its movement: he “just” has to end its movement in an enemy's kill zone so he can fight in the melee phase alongside his fellow comrades. Note a hero **must** end its movement when entering a KZ unless stealthy.
- You get 1 action per turn: moving and shooting are both actions (yep, you either move **or** shoot, unless stated otherwise by a special ability).
- Special abilities are not considered as actions.

When past these details, truth to be told, there is no mistake in the rules. I would even risk myself saying that everything you need to know is in the book and, if something is not explicitly forbidden, then you can do it. Of course, complex combinations of actions will inevitably raise issues but, except from a chaotic beginning in the application of the rules, we did not encounter any kind of “deadlock”.

Suggestions

The rules are complete, seriously. However, when new players learn a game, an issue arises, known as the “learning curve problem”. The steepest the curve, the highest the chances casual players might give up. It is a difficult matter to be able to provide both riches and easily learned rules. These rules are currently rich and only need to be a little more fluent in my opinion.

This matter is in fact far easier than writing the rules but it needs people feedbacks, and the more the better. So here is my contribution.

Homogenization of the rules

Minimizing the number of core concepts a player has to remember seems to be one of the keys toward a nice learning curve. Sometimes, this number can be reduced by simply homogenizing a bunch of similar concepts.

Here is a non exhaustive list of the concepts that could be homogenized without any loss:

- Melee and Shooting “to hit” rolls: both should succeed on the same threshold, say 4+ (instead of 5+ for the shooting and 4+ for melee). Actually, a good solution seems to take a die type (D6) plus a threshold (4+) and keep this couple for all rolls of the game, keeping the number of dice to be rolled as the only variable. Of course, all wizards and archers would get a lower number of dice (except for the master shooters).
- Mover/non mover concept: let's make things clear, I love this concept since I like asymmetric rules. However, most players are used to usual IGO/UGO mechanisms and that's clearly not the case here. Plus, when players don't get the initiative, they tend to be... mmm... how to say it... “disappointed”. So, without much harm on the initial philosophy, I propose the loser (i.e. non mover) to also get to move after the winner ends its moves (taking into account its engaged mini).
- To Hit/To Kill rolls: a really simple one here. If the attacker rolls the “to hit” dice, I would let the defender the kill roll as a “save roll”. Like in the good old days: the last rolls deciding the fate of your character should be yours !
- Spec. Abilities: these abilities are usually not considered as actions. However, some of them are said to replace the use of an action, like.. well.. any other action (control enemy, healing, regenerate, listen, checking). I guess the abilities should be partitioned in two categories: active and passive. The active being considered as an honest-to-god action and the other as actual Special Abilities.

Balancing powers

The balance is an utterly complex matter to reach. This part of the feedback does not have to be seen as firm assertions, only some “feelings” we had during play:

- Healing is too powerful in my opinion, the heroes can do “full refill” on a few turns. Making tons of wandering monsters appear won't do the trick as it may get out of hand and may show the players you are a bad loser. Many ways are possible to balance things out: the easy way would be to lower the number of wounds one can recover in a turn. Another possibility is to forbid one or both the healer and the “healed” to move. Also, there could be no real healing but a kind of protection field, allowing the heroes to force the DM to re-roll some “hit results”...
- The back-up fighter profile feels a bit too close to the one of the front line warrior, I removed a die from its attacks so the barbarian does not feel scammed.
- Not really a balance issue but I think the wizards should have access to one more power. As they need a 5+ to hit, they are seldom really effective. For example, something like a “power ray”, hitting all miniatures (friend or foe) on a straight line (either vertical, horizontal or diagonal) starting from the wizard (6 - 8).

An “accumulating threat system” (ATSys)

This one is a pure suggestion (already introduced in the rules by the way): testing for wandering monsters could be extended so that the threat they pose becomes more “volatile”.

First fact: the dungeon parts are “well defined”. If you look at the sheet of paper summarizing the dungeon pack you see: 'A' is for small rooms, 'B' for medium rooms, etc. Second fact, according to the wandering monster rules, the wandering monsters appear when rolling sixes on 2 (or 3) D6 each turn.

The core of the ATSys would be to “accumulate dices” on the different parts of the dungeon until an

event “triggers” the rolling of some (or all) of these accumulated dices. We may imagine a deck of cards the DM may draw from each turn. Among other things, each card could contain:

- a number of dice to accumulate/remove on one or more parts of the dungeon
- instruction on “moving” dices (that may merge with dices on adjacent dungeon parts)
- events triggering the rolling of dice

This way, “unrolled dice” stacked on each part could be seen as moving shadows, creepy noises, i.e. potential monsters wandering into the dungeon. In futuristic games, one could see them as “radar blips”... well you get me.

Also when the heroes get in a room containing a stack of dice, the DM would roll them and see if some monsters appear. Note this could be used for solo/coop play to generate monsters on each part of the dungeon.

On the dungeon pack

Clearly, the dungeon pack **is** a standalone game.

Get a bit creative and the (under)world is yours! (I copyright that one!)

There are enough scenery, doors, monsters and heroes to build a cool scenario. The only pieces I would add would be:

- A couple more “dead ends” (Pendracken DM6) as it would allow for more stable “corridor to room” doors. Indeed, putting a door on a single wall is a bit unsteady, but it is nothing critical be assured.
- Some more dungeon furniture, but that one's because I am a Feng Shui freak, I love stuffing my dungeons. Note, these elements come with the first addon pack.

Companion material

An other thing would be to give access to some “companion material” both the DM and players could use during play. This is actually a “small price / very high added value” material for Dungeon World in my opinion. For instance:

- Move phases summary sheets: to distribute to each player, stating what you can do within a turn. Players can refer to these anytime when they're suddenly wondering about how to be able to sneak behind this giant ogre to strike him. In such situation, the players don't want to ask you any question: they hate you (as the Draken Master) and want to take rapid decisions.
- For **each** hero/monster/ “explorable” piece of furnitures, summary cards with a little picture and characteristics. Same thing with special abilities / power up cards and counters. These could be quickly exchanged while talking the best strategies to adopt.

Considering these complementary elements as optionals is a mistake in my opinion. Players love to have cards in their hands, counters, actual stuff they can touch, defining what their hero is made of. Giving them a simple sheet of paper is just less fulfilling. If I get the time and motivation, I'll try to design something...