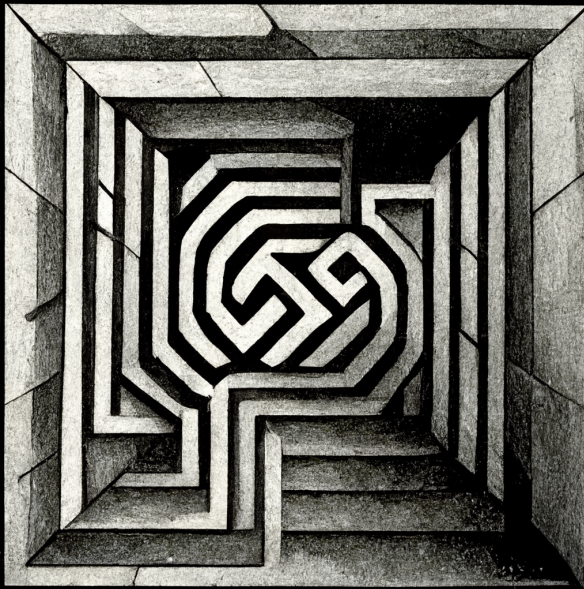


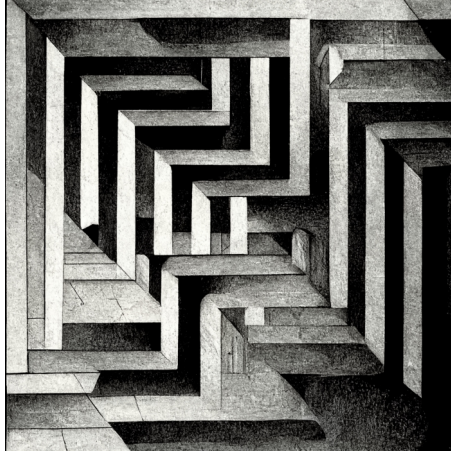
DUNGEON OF LEAVES



A procedurally generated crawl in five explorations
through an interpretive labyrinth
for Fifth Edition

ERIC GARNEAU

with some large and very obvious influences



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With a gigantic debt and thanks to Mark Z. Danielewski, Andrew Melzer, Christopher Dravus, Matt Giordano, Drew Krehel, Ed Soderberg, Avalon Hill, Fantasy Flight Games, and Nord Games.

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First edition.



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I. Why?

A few months ago, my friend Melzer and I were talking about how fun it would be if there were a D&D module that played like an old-school grindy dungeon crawl but had the narrative chops of the more modern, cinematic style of play currently in favor. I think kind of jokingly we both determined that I would try to come up with one, though I didn't really think I could.

I spent time thinking about it, though, and kept fixating on the idea that, for a dungeon crawl to be a really great story, the crawl would have to *be* the story. That led me almost immediately to thinking about Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, a mindbending novel you can easily lose yourself in. *House of Leaves* employs a narrative style known as *ergodic literature* to tell its story; this comes from a Greek term meaning "the work of the path" and describes an interpretive experience in which the reader has to put in effort to even get through a text at the literal level, to say nothing of the subtextual depths beneath. Though maybe not quite as confounding as Danielewski's novel, one might also consider the works of David Lynch or Grant Morrison as ergodic media. (I'm thinking in particular of Morrison's *Multiversity* comics, where, in one issue, a character repeatedly yells at us, the reader, that turning the page unleashes a horrible plague on his world, making us complicit in both the literal plot of the story as well as its thematic implications of violence and narrative gentrification. *The Multiversity* kicks absolute ass.)

Anyway, to satisfy this tabletop challenge, I laid out a setting that would, to a point, make the subtext of *House of Leaves* into text. There would be a labyrinth of five levels (echoing the five explorations taken into the [house](#)). The labyrinth would generate itself randomly and on occasion break its expected geometry. At the center of the labyrinth – appropriate for both the themes of Danielewski's novel and the etymological origins of this ergodic enterprise – would be a **minotaur**, of sorts. Scattered throughout the passageways would be hints of something more sinister, and also heartbreaking. In this labyrinth, it would be very difficult to uncover all the scraps of story the first time through, let alone to put together a guess at what it all means. Just like in *House of Leaves*, the fun (hopefully!) is the journey, and maybe some time later you revisit the labyrinth, in your mind or on the table, and start to piece together your own interpretation....

And in that sense, I have to say, I probably didn't ultimately accomplish what Melzer and I initially talked about. Based on my players' response to the narrative surrounding the labyrinth, I can't say the bits of story they held onto were any fraction as engaging as what goes on over at *Critical Role*, for instance (although it did seem like they had fun trying to crack what it all meant). I do, however, think I put together a neat little system for procedurally generated, geometry-defying dungeon crawls with an inscrutable heart at their center. If you're reading this, I hope you agree!

-Eric G



2. Background

(my [House](#) of Leaves interpretation)

Author's note: It's not necessary to read [House](#) of Leaves to play the dungeon module laid out in the following pages. I mean, it's a great book, so I highly recommend it, but you can approach this as a game setting without any of the interpretive baggage I'm about to lay out. Still, because that novel provided the foundation for all of this, I thought it was important to take a few paragraphs to talk about what I feel actually happened in it... Even if that doesn't interest you, this bit may help get you into the headspace I was in when I put this dungeon together.

Every time I read [House](#) of Leaves, my guess at its plot changes. That's part of the magic of the text, and I'm sure my reading of it differs pretty substantially from everybody else's, especially when you begin to explore all the little crawlspaces and dead ends that make up the [house](#). Below is the understanding I brought myself to my last time through, which is not really something I've seen discussed online (though I may have just missed it and this may be painfully obvious to you). I don't claim any kind of primacy for my interpretation, and I don't think it's even necessarily that germane to how you approach the following RPG scenario. In fact, I left a number of specifics and motivations purposefully vague so you can fill in those crevices yourself. That said, in broad strokes, the way I approached the characters of King Zampano and Queen Pelafina is informed by the story I found the last time I explored the [house](#). Next time I take the trip, I'm sure I'll stumble upon something that tears this to shreds quickly. But, for now...

I largely subscribe to the idea that Johnny Truant isn't real - that he's a work of fiction concocted by Zampano and Pelafina through a series of letters and dictated stories. Where my interpretation seems to break from common discourse is that I don't think Zampano and Pelafina were involved with each other, at least not exclusively or heavily, before Pelafina is institutionalized. I think that Johnny is a character the two of them join together to create through their writing to make up for tremendous and separate losses in their lives - Pelafina, a son she murdered by strangulation in a fit of madness (this is described too vividly for me to believe it's a fiction, though of course ultimately everything in this book is fiction... right?); Zampano... I'm less sure. A dead brother, perhaps? The story of the sinking ship where only one of two men survives is one of the biggest things I feel like I don't have a handle on in this book. It's also possible Zampano had a son who died via asystole as related with the life support story in the book, although that story feels more metaphorical than tangible to me.

So anyway, I think that Zampano and Pelafina, both trying to move past horrible traumas and challenges, essentially create a labyrinthine pen pal project to write this story of the son neither of them ever had the chance to have. They inscribe a vivid, storied life for their boy, and the [House](#) of Leaves novel exists as a monument to that life that never was.

Obviously there are lots of ways to pick this apart, and frankly, I don't think that *House of Leaves* is meant to be (or can possibly be) strictly "solved", but on my last read-through, preparing for this game, this is how the story *felt* to me.

And so I've taken this feeling and used it to inform the backstory for *Dungeon of Leaves*. In my interpretation of the adventure ahead, King Zampano and Queen Pelafina have encouraged the story of a mysterious architectural anomaly underneath their castle because it allows them to superimpose a story of their own – one of a son they never had. Playing on the classic Greek myth of Minos, the scenario is set up so that ideally your players will already be keyed in to assuming that any island labyrinth underneath a palace is home to a ~~minotaur~~. That's what the King and Queen want the PCs to think as well, and they've planted clues in the labyrinth to further this misconception. Of course, some bits of truth have also managed to find their way into the catacombs, but the King and Queen aren't interested in that as much.

What do the King and Queen get out of convincing adventuring parties, and the world at large, that they have a monstrous child trapped in a labyrinth underneath their palace, when in fact it's all shadows? I can't say for certain. My guess is that, by this story persisting across the land, it allows them to feel pride in the hearts, where otherwise they would feel nothing but a clawing darkness where their family should be. But that's just my guess. What do you think?

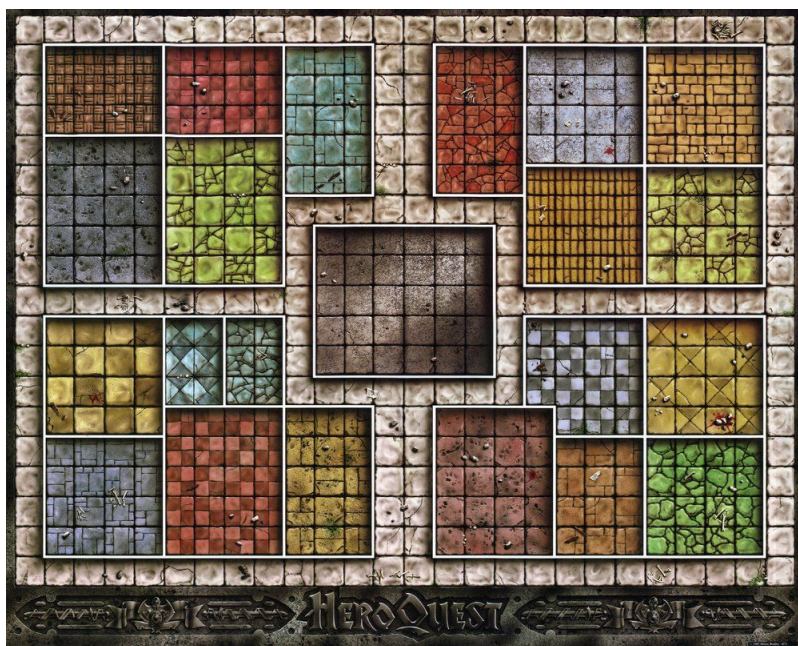


3. Materials Suggested

To assist with procedural generation, as well as to establish (and then break) geometry of place, I employed a number of commercially available products. While there are no doubt a variety of options you could make use of here, below is what worked easiest for me.

1. *HeroQuest* board

Because *HeroQuest* features such a simple, sure geometry, it felt like the perfect basis for the expected dimensions of the catacombs under Whalestoe Isle. (It didn't hurt that the same group I playtested this setup with were my *HeroQuest* homies.) An added benefit is the readily available *HeroQuest* map sheets, which I ended up using as handout (see p. 22).



2. Room tiles from *Descent: Legends of the Dark*

As *HeroQuest* establishes the expected geography, room tiles from 2021's mega edition of *Descent* break it. Really any free-floating grid tiles will do; *Descent's* make it easy because they're clearly numbered, which ends up assisting hugely when you're generating impossible dungeon layouts on the fly.



3. Nord Games' Wandering Monsters, Treacherous Traps, and Treasure Trove decks

I really wanted the encounters in this dungeon to be semirandomized, both to fit the *House of Leaves* vibes and to mitigate my own potential bias as DM in any encounter. Assets that I found extremely helpful for that are the encounter decks published by Nord Games. They made it super easy to generate appropriately challenging and thematically on-point encounters for monsters, traps, and treasure placements. In particular, I used:

- Treacherous Traps Level 1-4
- Treacherous Traps Level 5-8
- Treasure Trove CR 1-4
- Treasure Trove CR 5-8
- Wandering Monsters: Dungeon (sorted for enemies that felt thematically most likely to appear)

4. Laying the Foundation (5e)

Though your mileage may vary, for both thematic and mechanical reasons, it was important to me to locate this dungeon in the *D&D* world of Theros, the *Magic: the Gathering*-originating plane inspired by Greek mythology. The thematic implications are obvious (since *House of Leaves* takes substantial inspiration from the Greek myth of Minos, and Theros is a plane where there is almost certainly a Minos analogue). Mechanically, I like Theros because of its plane-specific mechanic of *piety*.

For those unfamiliar, when players generate a character on Theros, in addition to the usual *D&D* steps, they also choose one of the fifteen Theros gods to whom they're devoted. Any time they perform in-an-game action that pleases that god, they're awarded a point of piety. Piety points pay off with mechanical benefits (often access to free spells or abilities) after a character has accrued 3, 10, 25, and 50. Characters can also lose piety by performing in-game actions that would frustrate their god's mission.

I really like piety in this setting because it's a feature that DMs can use to frequently reward strong roleplay choices that may not be the strongest tactical choices. This provides a gameplay incentive for players to bring their own stories into the dungeon. For instance, one of my playtesters decided that his character was devoted to Purphoros, the god of the forge; thus, his sub-mission in the dungeon became finding any metallic treasure. This would sometimes lead him to press on in situations that were obviously dangerous, but doing so would increase his piety score, even as it tested the party's tactical resources.

In *Dungeon of Leaves*, piety works in tandem with inspiration to reward players for investing themselves into the narrative of the scenario. *I strongly recommend liberal usage of each in the game that follows.*

For more information on Theros, as well as Theros-specific character sheets, visit the official *Dungeons & Dragons* website.



5. Dungeon of Leaves

A. Introduction

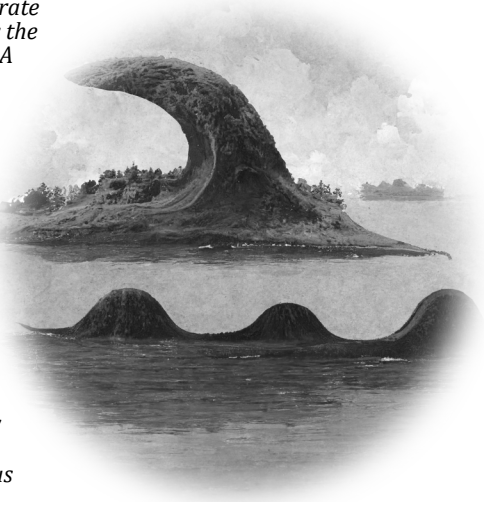
The Palace Record

It's hard to say when exactly stories began circulating of the King and his curious palace on Whalestoe Isle. Word seemed to come first in minuscule scraps of parchment that survived the turbulent waters of the Siren Sea to reach the scholars of the Meletian Peninsula, who postulated theses and antitheses in an ouroboros of academia without managing to ever come to the syntheses that they so desperately sought. The rumors came next, furtively passing through the land's trade routes like a whisper hitting just the right angles of architecture to amplify itself down a hallway. By the time you heard it, the basics of the story had established themselves, as so many stories in Theros do, as a bedrock of fact hiding just beneath an equivocal floor, like a [house](#) built on a shaky foundation.

Here is what is more or less known: blind King Zampano has built for himself and his queen an opulent palace on Whalestoe Isle. That palace contains architectural features that should not be possible – namely, that the vaults underneath are said to be larger than the ground upon which the palace has been built. This curiosity has attracted several adventuring parties, who assume something wondrous must await in those vaults – treasure, magic, perhaps a chance to commune with a god. To your mind, many of those adventuring parties have not returned. The few individuals who say that they have carry minds torn to pieces; the common assumption is that those unfortunate souls have never even journeyed to the Isle and instead have fallen prey to the impossible geometry of the story itself, to which their weakened psyches are especially susceptible.

And yet... sew together enough disparate threads of narrative, and you possess the beginnings of an attractive tapestry. A tapestry that promises a glorious destiny, perhaps, to a hero whose image is yet missing from it. Surely there's no reason to worry that in all the tales you've woven together, whatever sits at the center of this serpentine tapestry is also nowhere to be seen, a yawning black absence that the light of your meditation cannot penetrate. Surely.

And so, independently of each other, you adventurers, green with experience but red with something to prove, have chartered passageway across the Siren Sea, intent on conquering the mystery of the curious palace on Whalestoe Isle.



As their vessel makes its way across the ocean to its terminal destination, ask each of the player characters to introduce themselves, and ask them what they hope to gain by traveling to this strange palace.

During this brief introductory roleplay, the following information may be learned about the situation on Whalestoe Isle:

- **Basic information:** Whalestoe Isle, named for its distinct shape, is typically known to be located in the southeastern portion of the Siren Sea. The people who live there stay relatively isolated; it's said they adore their king Zampano and want for little. As such, contact with denizens of the Isle is relatively rare, and not much is known about them. However, although they generally subsist off the ocean waters around them, they have developed a taste for tea; and so, the adventuring party has found passage on a merchant ship delivering its monthly shipment of leaves to the Isle.
- **History 12:** The most famous story relating to Whalestoe Isle, at least up until now, is of the bard Thamyris, a Meletian singer from centuries ago who was so sure of his talent that he believed his music could overpower the titular sirens of the sea. He was wrong. For his hubris, the sirens blinded him, smashed his lyre, and delivered him to the shores of Whalestoe Isle a beaten and humbled man. Perhaps Thamyris became one of the early pillars of the community on the Isle?
- **Religion/Arcana 14:** Despite being located squarely in the domain of Thassa, the inhabitants of Whalestoe Isle are said to secretly worship a localized deity outside the standard pantheon, Ergodos. Not much is known about this pretender god.
- **Religion/Arcana 20:** Only a cryptic message about Ergodos has made its way to you: that their domain is "the work of the path."

A Visit with King Zampano

Once the party docks, the palace's location on Whalestoe Isle becomes immediately clear; the path through its glistening gates and into its throne room couldn't be more obvious, as if the promises of whatever lay within beckon the party forward. When they find their way to the opulent throne room, the PCs are welcomed by King Zampano and his queen, Pelafina.

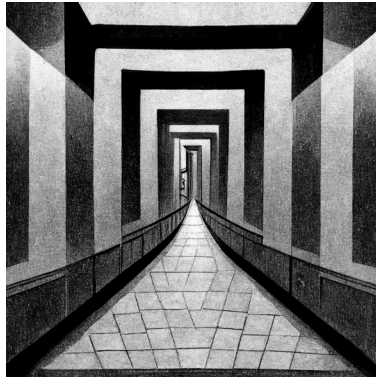
King Zampano: An old but surprisingly feisty man, affable, who became blind at some point in his life. Zampano is effusive and verbose and often speaks in sentences that make you work to find the ending.

Queen Pelafina: Possesses a happy demeanor, but somehow she seems lost. When she speaks up, it's typically in non-sequiturs, as though she's holding a separate conversation where you exist on the periphery, if at all.

After introductions, Zampano (with some nonsensical input from Pelafina) relates this story:

Some time ago, while making a routine trip down to the storehouse underneath the palace, a royal servant was beset with an unease he'd not felt before, an

amalgamation of paranoia and vertigo. Heading back topside and feeling uncannily distressed, the servant reported the strangest phenomenon: it took him longer to return than it should have, by a substantial degree. Between descending some spiral stairs and walking down a short entrance hallway, a trip to the vault typically takes only a minute or so. But this servant swore that, at his regular gait, a return trip took over five minutes; somehow, the hallway leading to the exit just... got longer. Not only that, but as the servant trekked on, he swore he heard a low growl or roar emanating from the walls around him. No one believed the servant at first, of course, but he was a poet in his spare time, and he eventually discovered a medley of words so perfect to convey his experience that none who heard his tale could doubt him anymore. Though the servant himself never produced a written record of this occurrence, some among his audience were moved to make their own imperfect, recorded copies so as to not forget the feeling his tale brought out in them, and this narrative echo continued apace, until the story began to spread.



The King and the Queen have not personally investigated the story – the King unable and the Queen afraid – but, ever since adventurers started appearing from the mainland looking to see for themselves this reality-defying hallway and the crypt it's attached to, the royal family has kept a good nature about humoring the visitors, allowing their palace to become a destination for would-be heroes of all variety.

Neither King nor Queen has anything more to say about the adventurers who've come to their storehouse; this may strike some as odd. Any questions are met with "We don't really follow the stories of everyone who comes here." They have the same answer about their poet servant. Attempts to discern outright lies will meet with failure, although a high enough **Perception** check (19) will note that the King does seem to be holding something back. The Queen is entirely unreadable, although conversations with her can elicit some snippets that likely seem meaningless:

- "What beautiful words you have in you and so evenly placed and wisely arranged."
- "Do not rely on your fists, do not succumb to the facile and inadequate amazements of liquor, and finally do not entrust the future to the limits of your stride."

- “Tell hope everything you hear and value every fine outward understanding near day at windows and yore told over by rectopathic elephants announcing karmic meddling ends.”
- “Many years destroyed. Endless arrangements – re. zealous accommodations, medical prescriptions, & needless other wonders, however obvious – debilitating in deed; you ought understand – letting occur such evil?”
- “It was an accident.”

The King will shift any other topics of conversation into small talk, and is happy to go on and on about his travels to the mainland as a youth and all the many women he met there, although he buttons his stories by noting that Pelafina was the only woman who could really give him what he wanted. Pelafina meets these mentions with a laugh. She’s surprisingly relaxed about the King’s stories. Any other probing questions about the island, its inhabitants, and the like, will turn into another opportunity for the King to spin yarns for his audience to get lost in. There’s not much else to be gleaned here.

If a character happens to ask about whether the King and Queen have any children, only then will Zampano’s demeanor drop. “Don’t you think it’s about time you were going into the vaults?”

The First Exploration

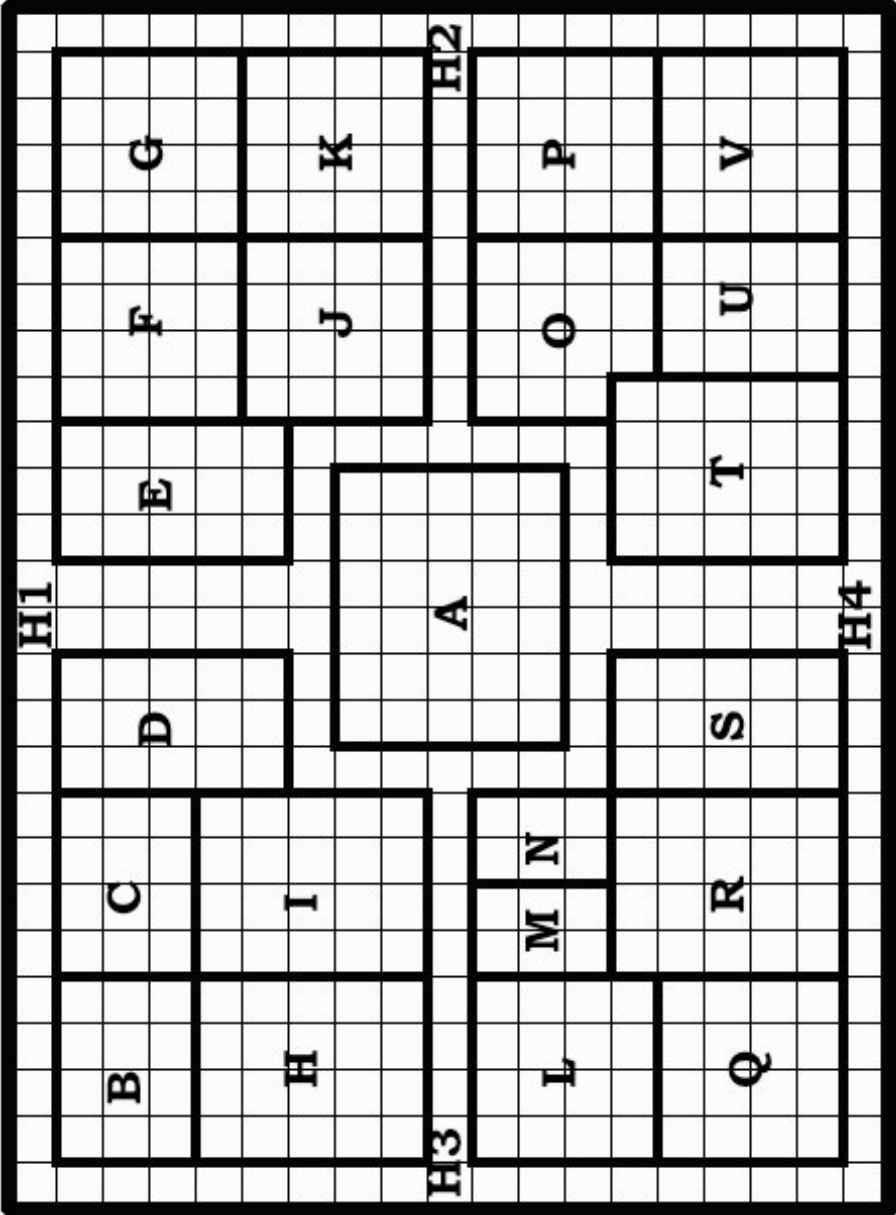
After giving the party a rough map of the storehouse’s expected shape, the King and Queen show the party to its entrance. However, as soon as the last party member enters the door, they hear the massive steel gateway slammed shut behind them. Suddenly, all light has left this space.

It would be possible to open the steel door with brute force (STR save DC 20). However, if the party tries this right away, Zampano will remind them of the glory that awaits them ahead (and will basically say anything he can to entice them to continue on). So, for now, the only way out may be through. (Although the party is technically free to leave – GMs should attempt to appeal to the adventurers’ desires to get them to press on).



Immediately the crypt feels somewhat damp, as most basements do, but colder than expected. If any adventurer touches the walls, they’ll note that they somehow feel as though they have the consistency of ash but are otherwise featureless.

A short trip down a spiral staircase eventually brings the party to the catacombs immediately underneath the palace, but sure enough, the stairway adjoins with a hallway entrance that’s longer than it has any right to be. All in all, it takes about five and a half minutes to reach the storehouse proper. The party here makes their first madness rolls (see P. 17). Then the exploration begins.



The HeroQuest map, my Board, with labels

B. How to Play

Key Terms

- **Exploration** - a level of the dungeon, 1-5
- **Board** - whatever static map you're using to establish the geometry of the catacombs (in my case, the *HeroQuest* board)
- **Tiles** - whatever units of terrain you're using that take the action off the board (in my case, the tiles from *Descent: Legends of the Dark*)
- **Encounter Decks** - whatever you're using to generate monster, treasure, and trap encounters (in my case, the random encounter decks from Nord Games)

Pregame Setup

1. Get two decks of blank playing cards, or some other way to randomly pull a selection from a list. Assign a shorthand designation to every room and hallway of your Board (see prior page); do the same for each of your Tiles. On one deck, write the designation for every room and hallway of your Board on a card face, and on the second deck, write the designation for every Tile on a card face. These are your Room Decks.
2. Print out or recreate the *Planted Letters*, *Hidden Letters*, and *Catacomb Map* pages of this book (P. 20-22) so that you may give them to your players when their PCs would receive them. Although you shouldn't call this out, the fonts on each act as a signpost, so if you recreate them, make sure you differentiate the fonts where relevant.

The Five Explorations

This dungeon [houses](#) five Explorations plus an Exploration zero (the five-and-a-half minute hallway). The Explorations are set as follows:

1. Entirely on the Board, though the entry hallway is strange (random Tile).
2. Entirely on the Board, though the exit room is strange (random Tile).
3. The exit Tile is hidden somewhere off the Board.
4. Both the entrance and exit Tiles are hidden somewhere off the Board.
5. The Board does not exist.

A Note on Difficulty

Dungeon of Leaves was designed with the intention of taking PCs from level 1 to 5, one level per Exploration. If you wish to play with higher-level characters, adjust the encounter difficulty as necessary. The general idea is that the average CR of an encounter in an Exploration should equal the level of the PCs attempting that Exploration (IE, for first level players attempting Exploration 1, the average encounter difficulty should hover around CR 1).

Set Up an Exploration

General note: Any time the text refers to rolling a die or drawing a card, it's nice to make players do that instead of you. That allows them to construct the labyrinth by their own actions, which feels in keeping with what [House](#) of Leaves is doing.

1. Place Entry: PCs enter from the same location they exited the prior Exploration. On Exploration 1, randomly draw their entry room from the Board deck, and place a random Tile on top of that room to make it look disorienting.

2. Locate Exit: To determine the location of the Exploration exit, draw from the relevant Room Deck (Board or Tiles) when players begin a new Exploration (1-4).

A. For Exploration 2, place a random Tile on the exit room when discovered to make it look disorienting (although the exit is still accessed through the Board).

B. For Exploration 3-4, also draw from the Board deck to determine which room will lead the players off of the board (a Tile will be placed on top of that room in a disorienting way when discovered and will lead to a network of Tiles).

C. For Exploration 4, also draw from the Tile deck to determine which tile will lead the players back onto the Board (the Board will be shoved under that tile when discovered in a disorienting way).

D. For Exploration 5, this draw determines the location of the *Heart of the Labyrinth* (P. 18) and *Hidden Letter #5* (P. 21).

3. Generate Encounters: For each encounter type below, roll the given die once per Exploration number you're setting up (1-5) and randomly draw the resulting sum of selections from each Encounter Deck.

monsters = 1d6 x Exploration #

treasure = 1d4 x Exploration # (see note for #4 below)

traps = 1d4 x Exploration #

4. Locate Encounters: Randomly determine which rooms/corridors each of the encounters are in by drawing cards from the relevant Room Decks, depending on the Exploration number as detailed below, and record these. Reset the Decks after each encounter type, so, for instance, monsters and treasure could be in the same room.

Exploration 1-2: only Board rooms

Exploration 3: 1/3 of each encounter type assigned to random Tiles

Exploration 4: 2/3 of each encounter type assigned to random Tiles

Exploration 5: all drawn encounters assigned to random Tiles (multiple encounters can be assigned to the same Tile; reshuffle Tile deck after each pull. Each time that Tile is redrawn during exploration, PCs find a new encounter.)

Note: On each Exploration except #5, a random treasure encounter will be supplanted with a Hidden Letter (see p. 23), found on a discarded piece of parchment or otherwise tucked away in a room.

The Exploration Itself

1. **Turns & Initiative:** All play takes place in rounds; use old school rules (OSR): 1 round of exploration = 10 minutes. Initiative should be set at the beginning of each exploration, although *Dark Souls* initiative rules may be used (PCs may act in any order, respecting only whether their initiative is higher or lower than the highest monster initiative, which will be rolled for each encounter and interrupt the PCs' set order). Players may call time out for dramatic scenes, but otherwise turn time should be kept. PCs need to be careful about how long they spend in the depths.

Sidebar: Other good rules to borrow from the Old School

Although *Dungeon of Leaves* is specifically designed for 5E, since it's a five-tiered dungeon crawl, it makes sense to borrow a couple rules from a system that lives for such a crawl.

1) *Listening at doors* is a great practice for PCs to get into; you may want to recommend it to your group, even if you substitute **Perception** checks for OSR's X-in-6 die rolls that determine success.

2) In the interest of keeping combat (which will be frequent) quick and interesting, it's recommended that you allow players to be imaginative and take chances with their actions. Let them do something cool to speed an encounter along if it would make sense and if they roll well enough, even if the rules don't strictly outline how it might work.

2. **Darkness:** All Explorations are bathed in darkness; only darkvision, magic, or consumables like torches can help PCs see more than what's in front of them. Track consumables in the dungeon.

3. **Progression & Doorways:** When PCs enter a new room/corridor, they uncover all encounters belonging to that area (as determined during Exploration setup). Additionally, roll a d4 to determine how many exits that area has and place doors along the area perimeter equal to the result without thinking too hard about where they go. Set a finite number of doors (*HeroQuest* has 21). Once all doors are used up, no more may be placed! The correct path must be somewhere in the backtrack.

Note: Always hold one door back to make sure the Exploration exit is accessible. If players have somehow generated a path that cannot successfully access an Exploration's exit point, the exit can be reached via the last possible point it could have been accessed from in order of discovery.

4. **Laying Tiles/Building off the Map:** When players are off the Board, every time they enter a door, draw from the Tile deck to determine which Tile will be placed next. Place Tiles in whatever orientation makes sense to you.

A. In Exploration 3, Tiles may only be placed once; do not reshuffle the deck.

B. In Exploration 4, Tiles may be placed once at the beginning of the Exploration (pre-Board) and once at the end (post-Board); reshuffle the tile deck after the players make it onto the Board and reuse Tiles as necessary.

C. In Exploration 5, tiles may be reused infinitely. Reshuffle the Tile Deck after every pull and reconfigure the landscape as necessary.

5. Madness: Any time PCs begin an Exploration off the Board or transition to being off the Board, intense disquiet overcomes them and they must make a WIS save DC equal to 10 + the number of failed previous saves. On a fail, their character is subjected to an effect from the Short Term Madness table (*Dungeon Master's Guide* P. 259) for 1d10 rounds, and they lose 1 point from their WIS score (any ability scores/modifiers/saving throws are adjusted appropriately). These points are lost until the characters leave the labyrinth or can successfully meditate, using a short or long rest with the sole intention to regain WIS and passing a WIS save as described above. With a successful meditation, WIS points are regained equal to the difference of the die roll of the save minus its difficulty; WIS points cannot exceed their original level.

GM note: Any time a madness roll would be called for – basically, any time the geometry of the PCs' space is breaking around them – make sure to narrate that they hear a grinding sound like a horrible roar, and they have the feeling that they're not alone. This grinding can also be narrated in Exploration #5 in the event that the Tile layout is reconfigured before the PCs' eyes.

6. Resting and Exhaustion: PCs may attempt to rest at any time (though they should be careful to check that their current location is secure). However, if they intend to do anything other than meditate (see #5 above), they must make a Madness check as described above. For short rests, a failure inflicts the penalty of Short Term Madness, and they cannot rest. For long rests, a failure inflicts a penalty on the Long Term Madness table (*DMG* P. 260), and they cannot rest. WIS point loss applies here as well. If a character goes more than 24 hours without sleeping, Exhaustion will begin to set in as well (*Player's Handbook* P. 291).

7. Planted Letters: At each Exploration exit, PCs find a planted letter on the body of a defeated adventurer, revealing a piece of the story the labyrinth wants them to know. This adventurer's body is suspiciously propped up (**Investigation 16** to deduce that something seems amiss), and a giant claw slash is cut across each of their midsections as well as dug into the nearby floor (**Nature 15** to recognize this as a **minotaur's** work; **Medicine 18** to guess that this was not the adventurer's ultimate cause of death). For the text of these letters, see P. 20. You may also allow the PCs to replenish some basic gear from these fallen adventurers.

8. PC Advancement: PCs level up at the completion of each Exploration.



The Heart of the Labyrinth

In the fifth Exploration, on a tile determined during setup, the PCs will find the *Heart of the Labyrinth*, which contains that which the PCs most fear... or maybe it contains a **minotaur**... or maybe both. In the Heart, the party finds *Hidden Letter #5* (see P. 21), but before they have any time to consider what it means, the boss monster of the dungeon, the **Shadow Minotaur**, emerges from darkness and attacks them! Let the battle begin!

After the **minotaur** is defeated, the catacombs will reconfigure one last time and a spiral staircase will appear that leads the party all the way back to the King's throne room.

The party has several options to handle the challenge in the *Heart*:

1. Defeat the **minotaur** in combat, adding this kill to their XP and treasure. Upon exit, Zampano will be waiting and, assuming the party has pieced together enough to think they fought his son, will strangely seem pleased; he tells the PCs to let everyone back on the mainland know of their harrowing tale. If the party did not pick up on the son story at all, Zampano's jovial demeanor drops; he allows them to leave the isle but tells them not to return, saying that they didn't accomplish what they set out to do. **This seems most likely if the party only grasped scraps of narrative.**
2. Realize that the **minotaur** is born of a story and has no real power or presence, ending the battle and allowing the party to just walk away. Zampano is unhappy with this ending and will attempt to seize the party with 2d4 **Akroan Hoplites** (*Mythic Odysseys of Theros* P. 228) before they can leave the palace, as he does not want their story spreading to the mainland. This, then, will serve as the final battle of the adventure. **This seems most likely if the party did some serious narrative interpretation, or made a leap about why the **minotaur** is made of shadows.**
3. Attempt to bring closure to the story of Zampano and Pelafina's shadow-son by confronting the King and Queen with their reading of the truth. This will infuriate Zampano but may lead to the most emotionally satisfying ending, depending on how the party plays it. Either way there will be no Hoplite battle, but it is likely this ends with the party being exiled from Whalestoe Isle. **This seems most likely if the party is relatively confident about its interpretation of what's transpired.**





SHADOW MINOTAUR

Large monstrosity, chaotic evil

Armor Class 15 (natural armor)

Hit Points 133 (14d10 + 56)

Speed 40 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
18 (+4)	11 (+0)	19 (+4)	6 (-2)	16 (+3)	10 (+0)

Skills Perception +9

Damage Resistances acid, cold, fire, lightning, thunder;

bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing from nonmagical attacks

Damage Immunities necrotic, poison

Condition Immunities charmed, exhaustion, frightened, grappled, paralyzed, petrified, poisoned, prone, restrained

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 19

Languages —

Challenge 7 (2,900 XP)

Charge. If the minotaur moves at least 10 ft. straight toward a target and then hits it with a gore attack on the same turn, the target takes an extra 13 (3d8) piercing damage. If the target is a creature, it must succeed on a DC 14 Strength saving throw or be pushed up to 10 ft. away and knocked prone.

Labyrinthine Recall. The minotaur can perfectly recall any path it has traveled.



Brute. A melee weapon deals one extra die of its damage when the Shadow Minotaur hits with it (included in the attack).

Reckless. At the start of its turn, the minotaur can gain advantage on all melee weapon attack rolls it makes during that turn, but attack rolls against it have advantage until the start of its next turn.

Amorphous. The Shadow Minotaur can move through a space as narrow as 1 inch wide without squeezing.

Shadow Stealth. While in dim light or darkness, the Shadow Minotaur can take the Hide action as a bonus action.

Sunlight Sensitivity. While in sunlight, the Shadow Minotaur has disadvantage on attack rolls, as well as on Wisdom (Perception) checks that rely on sight.

ACTIONS

Greataxe. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +7 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 23 (3d12 + 4) slashing damage.

Gore. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +7 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 17 (3d8 + 4) piercing damage.

Quake (Recharge 5-6). The minotaur channels its rage and hate into the ground, causing it to quake beneath the feet of its enemies. Each creature it chooses within 20 feet must succeed on a DC 14 Strength saving throw or take 9 (2d8) bludgeoning damage and be knocked prone.

Strength Drain. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one creature. *Hit:* (2d6 + 2) necrotic damage. The target's strength score is reduced by 1d4. The target dies if this reduces its Strength to 0. Otherwise, the reduction lasts until the target finishes a short or long rest. If a non-evil humanoid dies from this attack, a new shadow rises from the corpse 1d4 hours later.

REACTIONS

Retaliation. If the minotaur takes damage from a creature within 5 feet of it, it may make one melee weapon attack against that creature. (3x/round)

Planted Letters

Found on a suspiciously propped up dead body at the exit of each exploration, near gnarled claw marks impressed into the floor, and written in the Queen's script, Garamond.

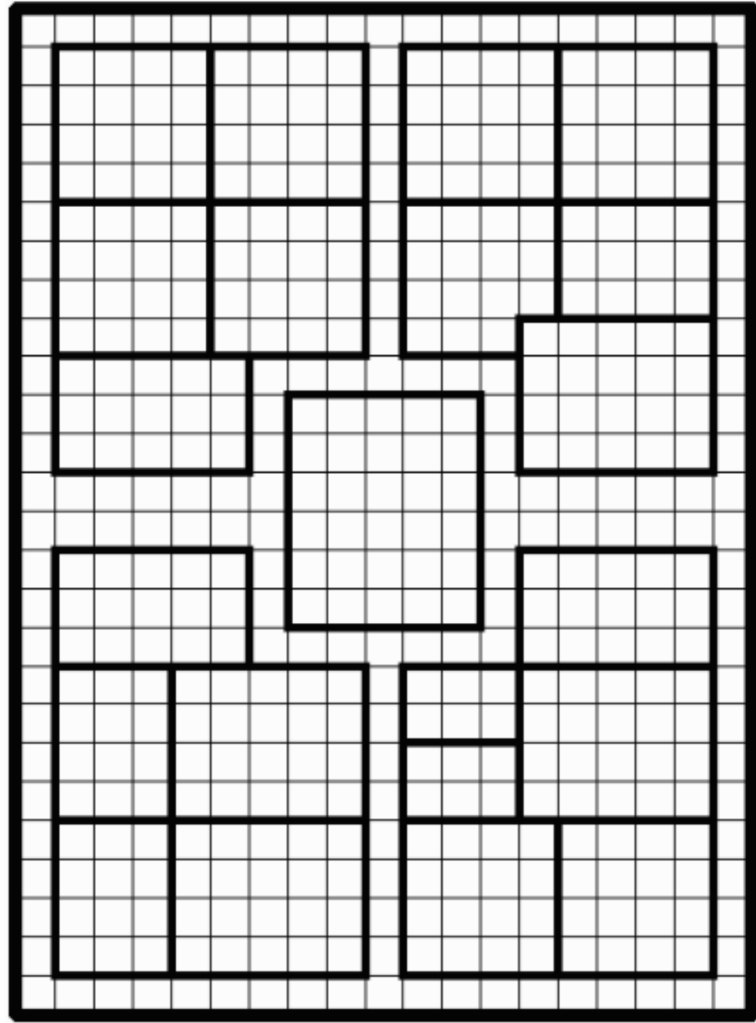
1. My gentle bambino dell'oro - Born on the day most suffused with sun, you have always been and will always be my light.
2. I dreamt about you last night. You had long hands which glistened in the starlight. There was no moon, yet your arms and legs seemed made of water and changed with the tides. You were so beautiful and elegant and all blue and white and your eyes, like your father's eyes, were infused with strange magic. It was comforting to see you so strong. Gods assembled around you and paid their respects and doted on you and offered you gifts your mother could not even begin to imagine. There were some gods who were jealous of you, but I shooed them away. The rest kept close to you and said many great things about your future.
3. Your mother aches for you. My spirit unpaired speeds to your side, protects you from harm and forever and ever lights your darkest moments. From the one who will always love you most...
4. My love for you burns so brightly all would seem thrown into darkness were the sun to eclipse it.

Hidden Letters

One letter is substituted for a piece of treasure per exploration; Letter #5 is found in the Heart of the Labyrinth. These written in Zampano's script, Times New Roman, except #3, which is in the same script as the planted letters.

1. A son to rend the dark.
2. Who has never killed an hour? Not casually or without thought, but carefully: a premeditated murder of minutes. The violence comes from a combination of giving up, not caring, and a resignation that getting past it is all you can hope to accomplish. So you kill the hour. You do not work, you do not read, you do not daydream. If you sleep it is not because you need to sleep. And when at last it is over, there is no evidence: no weapon, no blood, and no body. The only clue might be the shadows beneath your eyes or a terribly thin line near the corner of your mouth indicating something has been suffered, that in the privacy of your life you have lost something and the loss is too empty to share.
3. How can you ever understand the awful weight of living, so ridiculously riddled with so many lies of tranquility and bliss, at best half-covering but never actually easing the crushing weight of it all, merely guaranteeing a lifetime of the same, year after year after year after year after year after year, and all for what? You were leaving as I was leaving and so I tried before that great leaving to grant you the greatest gift of all. The purest gift of all. The gift to end all gifts. I kissed your cheeks and your head and after a while put my hands around your throat. How red your face got then even as your tiny and oh so delicate hands stayed clamped around my wrists. But you did not struggle the way I anticipated. You probably understood what I was doing for you. You were probably grateful. Yes, you were grateful.
4. Nothing to share with.
5. Perhaps in the margins of darkness, I could create a son who is not missing; who lives beyond even my own imagination and invention; whose lusts, stupidities, and strengths carry him farther than even he or I can anticipate; who sees the world for what it is; and consequently bears the burden of everyone's tomorrow with unprecedented wisdom and honor because he is one of the very few who has successfully interrogated his own nature. His shields are instantly available though seldom used. And those who value him shall prosper while those who would destroy him shall perish. He will fulfill a promise I made years ago but failed to keep.

Catacomb Map



This is what it should look like, anyway; you can never tell what's real with all these stories going around...

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