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The Five Deadly Shadows

Design & Development

Teos Abadia

The DDI team's design concept was simple: a Kara-Tur adventure in which the heroes have to defeat five deadly assassins one by one, in classic Kung Fu style. I liked that, but I wanted a stronger story premise that might help players and DMs learn about the genre as the adventure progressed. I proposed that each of the assassins be linked to a tenet of Bushido, the ancient Japanese code of conduct. In retrospect, this really helped me throughout the writing process, becoming a central thread for my ideas.

I'm fortunate to have played RPGs such as AD&D *Oriental Adventures*, *Hong Kong Action Theatre!*, and the *Legend of the Five Rings* RPG. Sharing with other gamers a greater understanding of the genre's potential was my primary goal. My second goal was to replicate the iconic scenes from martial arts movies that at young ages had me jumping from couch to couch and pretending to be a Shaolin master.

Initial Creative Process

Typically I first envision a one-page version of a story and later break that down into encounters. This time I instead began by envisioning iconic elements. The geisha, the ninja, the tall man in simple clothing with a wide-brimmed farmer's hat, a Japanese garden, flying daggers, a monastery—I jotted these down as I went, scribbling additional ideas that could create links to Bushido or a fun scene for a showdown with an assassin. This filled two sheets of paper and also awoke a few story ideas, which I jotted down on a third sheet. I like this method as a way to gather cool ideas.

After letting the ideas settle for a day, I sketched out a very rough feel for encounters. I wrote each of the seven tenets of Bushido down on individual sheets and started assigning possible setting and foe ideas from my brainstorming. Working through the best fit of iconic concepts and tenets was a real challenge but also great creative fun.

As I went, I kept asking myself questions on the overall why, and at some point it just came to me and I jotted down what became the explanation for why five assassins were there and why and how the heroes had to prevail. This focused my ideas further.

Writing the Draft

It was time to turn on my computer. I like to write from start to finish in this stage so as to ensure a good flow between encounters. I tried to make the encounters visually rich in ways that would evoke the iconic imagery we all have for the genre. I used cultural references such as naming conventions, societal roles, and folklore. I also like to let players explore the encounter for a bit before the action starts, to let the setting shine.

I did a surprising amount of real-world research, from Bushido to martial arts to the layout of tea houses. This kind of research really pleases me, perhaps because I think that grounding fantasy in truth makes it stronger.

I always agonize over monster selection, especially how the monsters' appearance, ecology, and powers fit and enhance the story. *Dungeon* authors have to use existing 4E monsters, but here I had a problem. Flying daggers, a geisha wu-jen, a deadly solo monk, a ninja? These didn't exist! I took a chance and hoped the editorial team would allow reskinning. Thankfully, they agreed with the need and actually asked me to make some a bit more distinctive. I dug into the game's lore and the genre to rename powers. That solo monk draws inspiration from the AD&D PH, the 3.5 PH, *Sword and Fist*, the 4E *FORGOTTEN REALMS Campaign Guide*, *DARK SUN Creature Catalog*, *The Plane Below*, and *Draconomicon*. I used more than 15 RPG books and the online *D&D Compendium* in this adventure.

Editorial Review and Final Version

About a month after submitting my draft, I received an e-mail containing edits and asking me to take a second cut at the adventure. In my day job I'm used to collaborative efforts and edits, so I welcomed the feedback. My rule of thumb is that the editor is always right and that I will learn more by incorporating changes than fighting them. The fanboy in me was overjoyed to see that Rob Schwalb had happened to be in the office and reviewed the adventure!

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Rob's comments were really insightful, particularly his help with monster construction and balance. There is an encounter where PCs could gain a power through their actions. Rob noted that I had used the format for a recharging monster power, among other issues. In the end the power became a terrain feature. It works a lot better that way and his comments triggered several additional improvements.

Both Rob and Chris Perkins suggested that I turn the solo monk into an elite and add foes or traps. In the end I felt the story worked best if the PCs could really feel a hatred for that one foe and focus on him. Maybe Rob had foreseen this, because he had alternatively suggested a number of ways to improve the solo, all of which I incorporated.

Final Thoughts

From start to finish, it really was a dream come true to work on this project. I hope the final effort really brings the flavor of Kara-Tur home and that the story and encounters will be fun for DMs and players alike. I have a second Kara-Tur adventure in the works. Believe it or not, this next one will be humorous—far more Jackie Chan than *Seven Samurai!*

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[Pyrate Jib](#)

Teos I couldn't agree with you more on the aspect of research and real life history! I think it enhances the D&D experience both as a Player and as a DM.

1 WEEK AGO



[ChunMalao](#)

thank you very much for the depth with which you describe your process. I've only been playing for about a year and from the start I had to jump straight in to the DM role. I've had little trouble getting a story started but it is getting... [\[show more\]](#)

1 WEEK AGO • [1 REPLY](#)



[Alphastream1](#)

Thanks to you and others for the kind comments. I tried to impart as much of the process as I could in a limited space. I'm glad to discuss it further on the forums. And I think many of us struggle with sandbox styles and how to make the gaming sessions have impact and not feel as if they lack purpose.

1 WEEK AGO



[smerwin29](#)

Thanks Teos. It is always amazing to revisit the creative process for projects, which for me changes drastically from one project to the next. It was great to see how your process worked for this project.

1 WEEK AGO



[warfteiner](#)

Nicely done, Teos

2 WEEKS AGO



[Egotist](#)

Up a little early, don't you think? Like 6 hours early.

Whatever, enjoyable read. When I write my adventure ideas I do it much in the way you describe at the top, brainstorming the abstract ideas that I want to include or that are iconic for a... [\[show more\]](#)

2 WEEKS AGO • [1 REPLY](#)**Alphastream1**

I envy your style. I'm really one of those planning types, to the point of overdoing the details (and then I often just run with things anyway at the table when my players gleefully derail my plans).

1 WEEK AGO • [1 REPLY](#)[2 PEOPLE LIKE](#)**Egotist**

I actually envy your style a bit too. I've tried the pre-planned thing before, and it's never had the energy that I get when I'm improv-ing. I love my improv though, I did it in my first game, and I've always been most comfortable with that, and I... [\[show more\]](#)

1 WEEK AGO

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Wizards_DnD (Mike) An excellent article from Kotaku about our close friend [@mikeface](#) bit.ly/sL8L5E. Send the man some Twitter love. He deserves it.

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Wizards_DnD [#dndenc](#) Make a Wish. Reroll one attack roll, saving throw, or skill check you make while in a square also occupied by a fountain.

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