

Playless Play

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The ZOZ Koans of Dungeon Master Foo

Dungeon Master Foo and the Hundred Doors and Traps

Dungeon Master Foo once said to a visiting game-designer: “There is more old-school nature in one roll of a search check than there is in a hundred fully-detailed secret doors and traps.”

The game-designer, who was very proud of his mastery of the Old Ways, said: “How can this be? Foiling traps and opening secret doors by interacting with the in-game fiction instead of the game mechanics is the very essence of old-school!”

Dungeon Master Foo replied: “That is so. Nevertheless, there is more old-school nature in one roll of a search check than there is in a hundred fully-detailed secret doors and traps.”

The game-designer grew distressed. “But through role-playing out the act of searching, we experience the enlightenment of the Patriarch Arneson! We become one with the game-world, reaching a state of true immersion!”

Dungeon Master Foo replied: “All that you say is true. But there is still more old-school nature in one roll of a search check than there is in a hundred fully-detailed secret doors and traps.”

The game-designer scoffed at Dungeon Master Foo and rose to depart. But Dungeon Master Foo nodded to his student, Nubi, who produced a sheet of graph-paper bearing a one-page dungeon that he had been working on. Nubi passed this sheet to the game-designer and said: “Master game-designer, consider this dungeon. If every secret door had a special way to open it, and every pit trap and chest trap and room trap had a unique and specific trigger, would this dungeon not become a module of many pages, each room-key a dense wall of text?”

The game-designer muttered through his beard, contemplating the dungeon that Nubi had drawn. Finally, he agreed that it was so.

“And how many hours would you require to prepare yourself to referee this module?” asked Nubi.

“Many,” admitted the visiting game-designer. “But only a fool would spend the time to do that when a one-page dungeon can be run with minimal preparation to achieve the same result.”

“And who better understands the old-school nature?” Dungeon Master Foo asked. “Is it he who writes up the hundred doors and traps, or he who, perceiving the folly of the task, reserves detail for a few special dungeon-features and allows the rest to be located one or two times in six by players who simply declare that their characters are searching?”

Upon hearing this, the game-designer was enlightened.

Dungeon Master Foo and the Thespian

A stranger from the land of Yu Tu Bei came to Dungeon Master Foo as he was sitting down to run his weekend game at the friendly local game-shop.

“I hear that OSR games are the best,” he said. “The rules are light and fade into the background. They get out of the way and just let you role-play!”

Dungeon Master Foo’s players looked at each other, confused by the stranger’s assertion; for they were playing the First Edition, an advanced game with many important rules that were not to be ignored.

Dungeon Master Foo just smiled and replied: “You wish to learn the Old Ways?”

“I’m a really good role-player.” the stranger replied. “I do voices and everything. Whenever I play, it’s just like *Critical Role!*”

“I do not teach that way,” replied Dungeon Master Foo.

The stranger grew agitated. “If you can’t DM like Matt Mercer, you’re nothing but a poser,” he said. “Come on, let me roll up a character. I’ll show you what real role-playing is!”

Dungeon Master Foo merely nodded and gave a blank character sheet to the stranger, who spent the next thirty minutes creating a dwarf fighter with an elaborate backstory. The other players, as was their weekly custom, explored Dungeon Master Foo’s deviously challenging labyrinth and had great fun. Even when a player lost a character, they were back in the game quickly, either taking over the role of a henchman or rolling up a new character in a few short minutes.

At last, the stranger declared that he was ready to enter the game, and so Dungeon Master Foo permitted the party to encounter the stranger’s dwarf fighter in the very next dungeon room.

“Och, hoots mon!” thundered the dwarf in a thick Scottish burr. “Who be ye? I be Shalefist Mac Axebeard, the seventh son of a seventh son of the line of Durin! I be on a grand quest ta avenge me fallen—”

Dungeon Master Foo’s longtime student, Nubi, who was a very cautious player, interjected. “That is all well and good,” he said, “but should you not perhaps speak more quietly? If you are too loud, you will draw the attention of wandering monsters, and we would prefer to avoid unnecessary random encounters.”

Snapped out of his method-acting, the stranger scoffed and said in his own voice, “Oh, come on. Nobody uses random encounters. That’s stupid. They eat up time and don’t advance the story.”

“Nevertheless,” said Nubi, “there are wandering monsters in this dungeon. It would behoove you to tread softly and speak quietly.”

“Fine,” grumbled the stranger. He took a moment to get back into character and then growled, “I see ye have an elf wit’ ye. I will nae join th’ company o’ a filthy knife-ears! Never trust an elf!”

The players all looked at one another, until Nubi spoke: “You refuse to join us?”

“Aye!” cried the stranger. Then, once again switching back to his own voice, he informed Dungeon Master Foo: “I start drinking all the ale in my inventory.”

“As you wish,” said Dungeon Master Foo with a sage nod.

“Is that wise?” asked Nubi.

“It’s called character detail!” said the stranger. “Now, come on, you have to give me a reason to join the party!”

The elf’s player spoke up: “We are treasure-hunters in a dangerous labyrinth. I believe that it is you who must give us a reason to allow you to join.”

The stranger folded his arms, sat back, and sulked. “Fine, I’ll agree to tag along. Jeez, I was just role-playing my character. Haven’t you people ever heard of ‘yes, and’?”

The party resumed their exploration, moving through the dungeon until they came to a demonic statue with great, faceted gems for eyes. As Dungeon Master Foo described the statue, the stranger interrupted him, mixing his brogue with the feigned slurring of drunken speech: “Och, I waaants themmm shinies...” and then, once again speaking with his own voice, “I stumble over to the statue and pull out the gems.”

“Wait!” said Nubi. “Have caution! Should we not first search the statue for traps?”

“Shalefist is a greedy dwarf and drunk off his ass!” said the stranger. “It’s what my character would do in this situation!”

Nubi said nothing and merely motioned for the stranger to proceed.

“Very well,” said Dungeon Master Foo. “As you reach out to touch the gems, they flare with an eldritch, ruby-red light, and two bright beams of energy strike your character. Please roll a saving throw versus death magic.”

The stranger cast his twenty-sided die and observed the result. “Five... what does that mean?”

“I am sorry to say that Shalefist Mac Axebeard has been vaporized by the beams,” said Dungeon Master Foo. “Your character has died.”

The stranger gaped. “Just like that? But what about my backstory? My revenge plot? It would have made a totally epic side-quest for when it was my character’s turn to have the spotlight!”

“Shalefist has perished,” said Dungeon Master Foo, “but you may easily create a new character to replace him.”

The stranger accepted a new character sheet and sullenly rolled up a new set of ability scores. A few minutes later, he entered the game again, now with a human cleric.

Dungeon Master Foo asked: “Have you not written a backstory this time?”

“What would be the point?” griped the stranger. “If my character can just die for no reason, it’s a waste of time, isn’t it?”

“And how, then, will you guide your role-playing, without a backstory?” asked Dungeon Master Foo. “When presented with a decision, how will you know what your character would do?”

The stranger just grumbled, “Guess I’ll just do whatever I would do in their place.”

Dungeon Master Foo smiled. “Here,” he said, “is the beginning of wisdom.”

On hearing this, the stranger was enlightened.

Dungeon Master Foo Discourses on the Two Paths

Dungeon Master Foo instructed his students:

“There is a line of dharma teaching which emphasizes the flexibility of the Old Ways. The referee must be prepared to improvise, as when a random encounter indicates orcs, and the referee then has to decide what the orcs are doing and what their goals are when the party encounters them.

“But there is another line of dharma teaching, exemplified by the Guide of the Great Patriarch Gygax, which emphasizes the thorough creation of a milieu before play can begin, and various sutras on the preparation of dungeon levels, wilderness hexes, and the keeping of strict time records.

“Now, tell me: which teaching has the old-school nature?”

After a silence, Nubi observed:

“Dungeon Master, these teachings may conflict.

“Improvisation is necessary, but it seems a necessary evil, for if the referee simply makes everything up on-the-fly, the milieu will lack cohesion, and verisimilitude will suffer. Furthermore, there is nothing to stop the referee from using on-the-fly decisions to railroad the player characters. Surely, these are not the Old Ways?”

Dungeon Master Foo nodded in agreement.

“On the other hand, it is well known that creating an entire fantasy world is both tedious and impractical, and many a referee has succumbed to burnout, or wasted years on worldbuilding pointless and uninteresting details. Surely, these are not the Old Ways?”

Dungeon Master Foo nodded in agreement.

“What, then, is the proper dharma path?” asked Nubi.

The Dungeon Master spoke: “When the eagle flies, does it forget that its feet have touched the ground? When the tiger lands upon its prey, does it forget its moment in the air? Begin with just three hexes of wilderness, one town, and one dungeon!”

On hearing this, Nubi was enlightened.

Dungeon Master Foo and the Artpunk

When Dungeon Master Foo and his student Nubi journeyed among the sacred sites, it was the Dungeon Master's custom in the evenings to offer public instruction to the Old Ways neophytes of the towns and villages in which they stopped for the night.

On one such occasion, an artpunk was among those who gathered to listen.

"If you publish a system-agnostic sourcebook which contains no game mechanics, you will be like the fisherman who casts his net in an empty lake," said Dungeon Master Foo.

"Is it not, then, also true," said the avant-garde artiste, "that if your book contains no illustrations, you will be like a fisherman who casts his net in an empty lake?"

"I once came upon a fisherman who just at that moment let his net fall in the lake on which his boat was floating," said Dungeon Master Foo. "He scabbled around in the bottom of his boat for quite a while looking for it."

"But," said the artpunk, "if he had dropped his net in the lake, why was he looking in the boat?"

"Because he could not swim," replied Dungeon Master Foo.

Upon hearing this, the artpunk was enlightened.

Dungeon Master Foo Discourses on the Unified Mechanic

One evening, Dungeon Master Foo and Nubi attended a gathering of gamemasters who had met to learn from each other. One of the gamemasters asked Nubi to what school he and his master belonged. Upon being told that they were followers of the Old Ways, the gamemaster grew scornful.

“The mechanics of old games are crude and backward,” he scoffed. “Modern, properly designed game systems do everything with a single, unified mechanic.”

Dungeon Master Foo said nothing, but withdrew from his pocket a set of seven dice. He invited the gamemaster to pick up and roll the twenty-sided die. The gamemaster did so. Dungeon Master Foo then asked: “Tell me, have you just made an attack roll, a saving throw, or a skill check?”

The gamemaster rolled his eyes. “I guess it could have been any of those. But that’s a pretty stupid question to ask—a GM always knows what kind of roll he’s calling for!”

Dungeon Master Foo said, “Then let us suppose that it was an attack roll. You have struck your foe with a sword; how much damage have you inflicted?” The gamemaster reached for the eight-sided die, but before he could pick it up and roll it, Dungeon Master Foo snatched the die away and flung it from the table.

“Why did you do that?” snapped the gamemaster.

Dungeon Master Foo continued, “Now let us suppose that it was a saving throw. You have been affected by a *confusion* spell and failed your save. What happens? Do you move aimlessly; do nothing; attack an ally; or act normally?”

The gamemaster reached for the four-sided die, but once again, Dungeon Master Foo snatched it away and flung it from the table.

“I don’t understand why you keep doing that!” snapped the gamemaster.

Dungeon Master Foo concluded, “Now let us suppose that it was a skill check. You attempted stealth, but failed, and now there is a random encounter. There are twelve different monsters on the encounter table; how shall I determine which one you have met?”

The gamemaster reached for the twelve-sided die, but once again, Dungeon Master Foo was the quicker of the two. He snatched the die away and flung it from the table.

The gamemaster became angry and demanded, “Stop throwing the other dice away! I need them to do all the silly things you’re asking me to do!”

“If you wish to calculate damage, adjudicate a complex spell, or determine the nature of a random encounter, why do you not simply roll a twenty-sided die, add a modifier, and compare the result to a target number?”

“Because that would be absurd!” exclaimed the gamemaster. “That’s not how those subsystems work at all!”

Dungeon Master Foo frowned thoughtfully. Then he bodily picked up the foolish gamemaster and flung him away from the table. The gamemaster landed ass-first on the four-sided die and received a painful puncture-wound to his backside.

At that moment, the gamemaster achieved enlightenment.

Dungeon Master Foo and the Grognard

An experienced grognard, hearing of Dungeon Master Foo's wisdom, came to him for guidance. Approaching the Dungeon Master, he bowed three times and said:

"Dungeon Master Foo, I am gravely troubled. In my youth, those who followed the Old Ways played games that were simple and unaffected, like B/X. Today, they turn to DCC. Tomorrow, I fear that their games will become even more complex, until they have become bloated and corrupted—like Fifth or even Third Edition."

Dungeon Master Foo said: "Are players of the First Edition, or the LBBs with Supplements, not followers of the Old Ways?"

The grognard said, "Yes, of course they are. But a true master of the Old Ways plays B/X, or, if he is wise enough to abjure the wicked company of thieves, the LBBs alone. The complex rules of First Edition or the Supplements are a crutch to be discarded once a referee learns the true meaning of the mantra, 'rulings, not rules.'"

Dungeon Master Foo then said: "And tell me, after you have made a ruling, do you forget it, trusting your future self to make that same ruling when the situation arises again?"

"No, Dungeon Master, of course not," said the grognard. "For the sake of consistency, when I make a ruling, I record it. If it comes up many times, it becomes a house-rule."

Dungeon Master Foo said: "And what, then, happens to a campaign that lasts for many years, even if it has begun with only the three Little Brown Books to guide it?"

The grognard replied: "It... grows in complexity as more house-rules are added over time."

Dungeon Master Foo then smiled and said: "Would it not be wiser, then, to say instead that rulings *become* rules? For is it not the case that the man who builds his own house and the man who pays builders to do the work for him are both equally sheltered from the cold?"

Upon hearing this, the grognard was enlightened.

Dungeon Master Foo and the Three Agendas

An Old Ways novice came to Dungeon Master Foo and said: “I am confused. Are the Old Ways gamist, simulationist, or narrativist?”

Dungeon Master Foo asked: “What makes you think that the Old Ways are gamist?”

The novice replied: “In many cases, the Old Ways prioritize a fun and playable game over logic or realism. Awarding experience points for the recovery of treasure, for example, or many aspects of the combat system, such as hit points, armor class, and to-hit rolls.”

Dungeon Master Foo then asked: “What makes you think that the Old Ways are simulationist?”

The novice replied: “The Great Patriarch Gygax wrote much about maintaining the verisimilitude of the fantasy milieu. And there are many followers of the Old Ways who appreciate a grounded, human-centric setting that incorporates many aspects of real-world medieval history.”

Dungeon Master Foo then asked: “What makes you think that the Old Ways are narrativist?”

The novice replied: “Because when all is said and done, no matter how we approach the game, we are still recreating fantasy adventures in the vein of Howard, Burroughs, Lieber, Moorcock, and the other Bodhisattvas of Appendix N.”

Dungeon Master Foo nodded and replied: “When you are hungry, eat; when you are thirsty, drink; when you are tired, sleep.”

Upon hearing this, the novice was enlightened.

Dungeon Master Foo and the Nervous Novice

There was a novice who had learned much at the Dungeon Master's feet but still felt that something was missing. After meditating on his doubts for some time, he found the courage to approach Dungeon Master Foo about his problem.

"Dungeon Master Foo," he asked, "why do Old Ways practitioners not grant fighting men the benefit of feats and special class abilities?"

Dungeon Master Foo smiled and said, "When your house is well-constructed, there is no need to add pillars to keep the roof in place."

The novice replied, "Would it not be better to give fighting men these things anyway, that the players of fighting men may be as engaged as the players of magic-users?"

Dungeon Master Foo reached for a nearby ball of string, and he began wrapping it around the novice's feet.

"What are you doing?" the novice asked in surprise.

Dungeon Master Foo replied simply: "Tying your shoes."

Upon hearing this, the novice was enlightened.

Dungeon Master Foo and the Edgelord

An edgelord, having discovered that that weird fantasy and cosmic horror appealed to him, sought an audience with Dungeon Master Foo to learn more about the Old Ways. Dungeon Master Foo met the edgelord at a crowded game convention.

The edgelord said, “I have observed that Old Ways referees often scowl or become annoyed when I ask them about the OSR. Are not weird, gonzo, and dark games like *Lamentations of the Flame Princess*, *Dungeon Crawl Classics*, and *Mörk Borg* the very essence of old-school?”

Dungeon Master Foo withdrew a twenty-dollar bill from his pocket and placed it on the table. Then he then took a scrap of paper and wrote “\$20” on it. The edgelord was puzzled and asked, “What are you doing?”

“I am doubling my money,” replied Dungeon Master Foo.

“You can’t just write on a piece of paper and call it money!” the edgelord exclaimed. “Hell, that’s technically counterfeiting!”

“Yes, but the paper that I have written upon with my own hand looks very different from genuine printed money,” replied Master Foo. “As a scrap of paper, it is quite useful; but as a counterfeit bill, it would fool no one.”

Upon hearing this, the edgelord was enlightened.

Master Foo Discourses on Modern Games

A student said: “We have learned that the Old Ways are not just a game system, but also a style of play.”

Dungeon Master Foo nodded in agreement.

The student continued: “Then, the Old Ways can be applied to other game systems?”

Dungeon Master Foo sat silent for a long while, and then said: “In every game system there is a path to the Old Ways, if only one can find it.”

The student continued: “What, then, of Fifth Edition? It is currently the most popular game system, and though its mechanics are mostly far inferior, they appeal to beginners and casuals. Surely, Fifth Edition players could benefit from the Old Ways philosophy.”

Dungeon Master Foo nodded again.

The student said: “How, then, are those enlightened in the Old Ways to return to the Wizards’ Coast?”

Dungeon Master Foo said: “To return to the Wizards’ Coast, you have but to play the Wizards’ game.”

The student said, growing agitated: “Dungeon Master Foo, if it is so easy, why are there so many terrible Fifth Edition campaigns? Verisimilitude and player agency should also be possible with modern mechanics and copious class abilities, but there is little evidence that this occurs. What becomes of an enlightened one who returns to the Wizards’ Coast?”

Dungeon Master Foo replied: “A broken mirror never reflects again; fallen flowers never go back to the old branches.”

Upon hearing this, all present were enlightened.

Dungeon Master Foo and the OSR Zealot

An OSR zealot, having heard that Dungeon Master Foo was wise in the Old Ways, came to him for instruction. Dungeon Master Foo said to him:

“When the Patriarch Arneson invented the dungeon-crawl, he did not understand it. Then he gained in understanding, and no longer invented it.

“When the Patriarch Gygax created D&D, he knew that it would transform hobby gaming, but he did not know that it would transform the world.

“Though the Patriarchs Holmes, Moldvay, and Cook tried to simplify the rules and bring the Ways to neophytes, they nevertheless condemned gamers to a thousand hells of low hit die rolls, insufficient thief-skill percentages, and arbitrary class restrictions.

“Truly, the Patriarchs were blind and foolish!”

The zealot was greatly angered by the Dungeon Master’s words.

“These enlightened ones,” he protested, “gave us the Great Old Ways! Surely, if we mock them, we will lose merit and be reborn as beasts or FATE players.”

“Is your campaign ever completely without stain or flaw?” demanded Dungeon Master Foo.

“No,” admitted the zealot, “no man’s is. For my part, I conceded that I often fail to live up to the OSR ideal. My players are frequently able to overcome the challenges I set before them not with wit and cleverness, but through the use of their spells and magic items.”

“The wisdom of the Patriarchs,” said Dungeon Master Foo, “was that they knew *they* were fools, and *players* are endlessly clever. Sometimes the answer *is* on your character sheet!”

Upon hearing this, the zealot was enlightened.

Dungeon Master Foo Discourses on the True D&D

A student said to Dungeon Master Foo: “We are told that the Wizards who dwell on the Coast hold true dominion over *Dungeons & Dragons*.”

Dungeon Master Foo nodded.

The student continued, “Yet we are also told that the Open Game License gives the D&D rules freely to all.”

Dungeon Master Foo nodded.

“How can this be?” asked the student.

Dungeon Master Foo replied:

“The Wizards of the Coast indeed have dominion over the name of D&D, but the name of D&D is not D&D. The Open Game License indeed sets free the rules of D&D, but the rules of D&D are not D&D.”

“What, then, is the true D&D?” asked the student.

Dungeon Master Foo replied:

“Not rules. Not name. Not mind. Not things. Always changing, yet never changing.

“The true D&D is simple and empty. Because it is simple and empty, it is more powerful than a typhoon.

“Moving in accordance with the law of nature, it unfolds inexorably in the minds of gamers, assimilating ideas to its own nature. All other games that would compete with it must become like unto it; empty, empty, profoundly empty, perfectly void, hail!”

Upon hearing this, the student was enlightened.

Dungeon Master Foo and the Illusionist

Once, a famous DM came to Dungeon Master Foo and asked him for instruction: “I have heard that you are a powerful Dungeon Master and a mighty wizard of the Old Ways. Let us trade secrets, that we may both gain thereby.”

Dungeon Master Foo said: “It is good that you seek wisdom. But in the Old Ways, there are no secrets.”

The famous DM looked puzzled at this. “But it is said that you are a great guru of the TSR editions who knows all the innermost mysteries. As do I with the WotC editions; I am a DM of nearly twenty years’ experience, and I have memorized many obscure rules and devised many ingenious methods for entertaining my players with carefully-crafted, perfectly-balanced, tactically-engaging encounters. Yea, even if my benighted players knew that there was no way for them to avoid the encounters I have prepared, still they would not fear to charge heroically into the fray with little fear of death, so well-designed, so sportsmanlike, so fun are my encounters! Why, I only sometimes have to fudge the monsters’ hits points or attack rolls. Now tell me, O Great Dungeon Master, what is the arcane lore that gives you your powers?”

Dungeon Master Foo said: “I have none. Nothing is hidden, nothing is revealed.”

Growing angry, the famous DM said, “Very well, if you hold no secrets, then tell me: what do I have to know to become as powerful in the Old Ways as you?”

Dungeon Master Foo said: “Imagine that you have created a marvelous city and placed it within your campaign world. It is a city of spires and dragon-statues, of thieves and paladins, a place of wonders where many of your most interesting encounters will take place.”

“Ha! That is trivial,” said the famous DM with a smug laugh.

Dungeon Master Foo continued: “Now imagine that your players never visit this city. For whatever reason, they always avoid it and go elsewhere. What, then, is to become of all your interesting encounters?”

“Well, I’ll just make them happen wherever the players *do* go,” said the famous DM. “It would be a waste of good prep to just let all that content go to waste.”

Dungeon Master Foo said: “Now imagine that you are playing not *Dungeons & Dragons*, but *Boot Hill*, and the player characters are riding a train that takes them away from your beloved city of spires and statues. If you move the city’s encounters into their path, how is that any different from twisting the railroad to take them to the city?”

The famous DM grew red-faced and sputtered, “It’s—it’s just different, okay? It’s different because the players don’t know that I’m doing it!”

Dungeon Master Foo said: “Even a child can tell his toy train apart from his sandbox.”

Upon hearing this, the famous DM was enlightened.

Dungeon Master Foo and the Casual Player

On another occasion when Dungeon Master Foo gave public instruction, a casual player, having heard tales of the Dungeon Master's wisdom, came to him for guidance.

He bowed three times to Dungeon Master Foo. "I wish to learn the Old Ways," he said "but the rules seem harsh and unforgiving. Characters die at zero hit points, or from a single failed saving throw; and level drain is permanent."

Some of the onlooking neophytes began to mock the player, calling him a "pussy" and saying that the Old Ways were for those of courage and intelligence.

The Dungeon Master held up a hand for silence, and he called the most obstreperous of the neophytes who had mocked forward, to where he and the casual player sat.

"Tell me," he asked the neophyte, "of the rules that you have written and the games you have designed."

The neophyte began to stammer out a reply, but fell silent.

Dungeon Master Foo turned to the casual player. "Tell me," he inquired, "why do you seek the Old Ways?"

"I am discontent with the tabletop games I see around me," the player replied. "They lack stakes and tension, they do little to facilitate player agency, and they are needlessly complex. Having heard that the Old Ways, though difficult, are superior, I seek to cast aside all snares and delusions."

"And what you do in the world," asked Dungeon Master Foo, "that you must strive so with tabletop games?"

"I design computer games," the player replied. "My specialties are roguelikes and open-world sandboxes."

Dungeon Master Foo turned back to the neophyte. "The housecat may mock the tiger," he said, "but doing so will not make his purr into a roar."

Upon hearing this, the neophyte was enlightened.

Dungeon Master Foo and the Game-Design Prodigy

There was a time when rumors began to reach Dungeon Master Foo and his students of a prodigiously gifted game-designer, a young man who wandered the length and breadth of the land performing mighty feats of worldbuilding and dungeoncrafting, humiliating all who dared set their skill against his.

Eventually this prodigy came to visit Dungeon Master Foo, who received him politely and offered him tea. The prodigy accepted with equal politeness and explained the motive for his visit.

“I have come to you,” he said, “seeking a blog review of my latest adventure module. For it is of surpassing intricacy, and I do not have peers capable of understanding it. Only an acknowledged master such as yourself—” and here the prodigy bowed deeply “—can have the discernment required.”

Dungeon Master Foo bowed politely in return and began examining the prodigy’s text. After some time, he raised his eyes from the manuscript. “This adventure is at first sight very impressive,” he said. “It is elegant in its design, original in its conception, and it appears to be formatted in a professional way that maximizes usability at the table.”

The prodigy looked very pleased at this praise, but Dungeon Master Foo continued: “However, I detect one significant flaw.”

“Flaw?” the prodigy said. “What flaw?”

“This adventure is unbalanced,” said Dungeon Master Foo. “Practically every encounter is designed to punish any player that deigns to engage with it. There is very little treasure to be found, and the likelihood of a total party wipe is quite high. I would not run this adventure in my own campaign, for the only way to ‘win’ it is not to play.”

The prodigy drew himself up haughtily. “Balance is a pointless artifice for modern games,” he said. “Old-school games are lethal and challenging. Only when the possibility of character death is real can an adventure be a true test of player skill.”

“This is so,” said Dungeon Master Foo. “But is not the most important player skill the ability to make an informed decision that fairly judges risk against reward?”

Upon hearing this, the prodigy was enlightened.

Dungeon Master Foo and the Zen of ZOZ

On one occasion, as Dungeon Master Foo was traveling to a conference with a few of his senior disciples, his student Nubi spoke to him.

“Dungeon Master Foo,” he said, “I have devoted many hours and days to meditating upon the mysteries of the Old Ways, and still there is something that I do not understand. What, O Great Dungeon Master, is ZOZ?”

Dungeon Master Foo said: “Is GNU Unix?”

“No,” said Nubi. “As all nerds know, Gnu’s Not Unix.”

Dungeon Master Foo continued: “Is MiNT TOS?”

“Yes,” said Nubi. “As all retro-gamers know, MiNT is Now TOS.”

Dungeon Master Foo nodded with approval. “Now tell me: what is the Zen of ZOZ?”

Upon hearing this, Nubi achieved enlightenment.