

PTOLUS: RUNNING THE CAMPAIGN

A CONFUSION OF NAMES

[by Justin Alexander – January 24th, 2024](#)



DISCUSSING

[In the Shadow of the Spire – Session 34A: In the Dust of the Old City](#)

You can assure Reggaloch that additional slaves will be sent to him within the week. We have become very interested to discover what our Brothers of Venom are doing that requires such a constant flow of common flock. We have asked Illadras, but she has told us not to concern ourselves with it. Be cautious, but discover what you can.

Urnest

Sauron and Saruman.

The similarity in their names — and the confusion it's engendered in generations of book-readers and film-watchers — is often held up as a cautionary tale to writers: If character names are too similar to each other, it will make it difficult for your readers to differentiate them.

In the specific case of Sauron and Saruman, the confusion was so feared that, infamously, Saruman's name was changed to Aruman in Ralph Bakshi's animated version of [The Lord of the Rings](#).

The questionable wisdom of Bakshi's decision aside, this is nevertheless advice also well-heeded by GMs.

This confusion of names is actually something I ran afoul of in this session. In brief:

- Urnst is the name of the Commissar who rules the city of Ptolus.
- Urnest is the name of a chaos cultist based out of the Temple of the Rat God.

So when my players encountered this note from Urnest, the entire group was suddenly filled with dread: Oh, no! The Commissar is in league with the cultists!

... and this was despite the fact that [they'd already made this mistake once before](#).

In that older installment of [Running the Campaign](#), I talked about how and why you can maneuver your way out of that situation, but I wanted to approach it from a slightly different angle today: While acknowledging the logistical challenges that can be created by similar names, why would you *want* to nevertheless have similar names?

First, if you're dealing with a sufficiently large cast of characters (which is not unusual in a long-running RPG campaign), it can simply be a matter of necessity. For example, you'll sometimes hear the Sauron/Saruman rule given as, "You should never have two character names with the same first letter."

Except that would mean never including more than twenty-six characters, and then only if you're willing to include some exotic X's and Z's and the like. (Although this is quite a bit easier in your typical fantasy fare.)

Second, there could be any number of practical reasons for doing so. Tolkien, for example, may have chosen the names deliberately for their similarity and the thematic resonance it would have in the book. Or, because the names were ultimately derived from the languages he had created from Middle Earth, the linguistic world-building may have been the most important factor for him. (He never commented on this issue, so we don't really know if it ever occurred to him.)

Similarly, in the [Ptolus](#) sourcebook there are two more characters named Urnst: Vladimir and Taltos. Urnst are alchemists operating a shop in the Undercity. Unlike Urnest, however, the similarity of their names to Commissar Igor Urnst is not a coincidence, as they "claim to be distant cousins of the Commissar..."

When you have similarly named characters, though, there are a few things you can do to help your players (and maybe even yourself) keep things straight:

- Keep the characters in different spheres of the campaign from each other — different locations or different factions, for example.
- Is there a different name that they could be referred to? (A first name or nickname, for example.)
- Give one or more of the characters a title (Lord, Chancellor, Empress) and use it consistently to distinguish the characters.
- Provide context reminders to help nudge your players' memory (e.g., "Tessa, who you meet at the tavern last week...").

Some of these tips are a good idea even if the character's name ISN'T similar to anyone else!

PTOLUS: RUNNING THE CAMPAIGN FACTION V. FACTION

[by Justin Alexander - January 31st, 2024](#)



DISCUSSING

[*In the Shadow of the Spire – Session 34B: Webs of Ambush and Betrayal*](#)

Tor, scarcely slowed by the lightning that had seared him, reached the spider-like creature. He cut a gash along its other side, causing it to cry out. "Gavele! Help me!"

Gavele shook her head. "You're on your own Ibulli!" She slammed the door shut – thwarting Tee, who had just bounded back to her feet once again.

"Damn you, bell bitch!" The spider-thing skittered up the wall of the tower.

In most RPGs, the players form a team that works together to overcome the challenges that the game world presents to them. The world, of course, is created, controlled, and played by the GM.

This means, of course, that there's a fundamental opposition between the players and the GM at the table. Yes, the GM is also acting as a neutral arbiter. And, yes, there are other layers of interaction in which the GM and the players are all cooperating towards a common end.

But this doesn't mean that the opposition doesn't exist. It just means that, like a high-grade steel, it is tempered and alloyed.

Of course, when the opposition is NOT tempered and kept in balance, all kinds of bad stuff can happen at the table.

One of the most dramatic examples of this is the **antagonistic GM** or **killer GM**, who believes their job is to crush, mangle, and destroy the PCs in the name of “challenging” them. This doesn’t work, of course, because the GM controls the world, making it trivial for them to destroy the PCs if that’s their goal.

But there are subtler traps that this fundamental opposition can trick us into as a GM.

For example, it’s quite easy to accidentally transition from GM vs. players to world vs. players.

But the game world, of course, should be more fractured and complicated than that. All of your NPCs may have their actions masterminded by a single puppeteer, but they don’t know that!

I’ve previously talked about how you can place your PCs into [a nest of friendly factions](#), but you can get equally interesting play by making sure your enemies are factionalized, too. (And the difference between friend and foe, of course, may be anything but clear.)

Having enemy factions working against each other can provide a rich engine for generating new scenarios in your campaign. For example, think about how a police force needs to respond to a gang war. Or the opportunities for created for shadowrunners during a hostile corporate takeover. Or the infinite skullduggeries unleashed during a political campaign.

The friction between factions also provides all kinds of grist for the roleplaying mills, as can be seen in the interaction between Gavele and Ibulli above. PCs can obviously also be drawn into these interactions, whether to choose a side, negotiate a peace, or simply try to weather the storm.

Even better, PCs who learn about these divisions and rivalries will have the opportunity to take advantage of them! Dominic, for example, does so in a rather blunt (but nonetheless effective) fashion:

The charge came close to routing them, but then a ratling and a ratbrute emerged from the building. The ratbrute was unslinging a greatsword of leviathan proportions while the ratling lowered another of the dilapidated dragon rifles and –

“Two hundred gold pieces for each of you if you attack the dwarf instead!” Dominic was still struggling in the goopy web, but he shouted out the offer in a voice laced with sincerity.

The ratling hesitated. Then he turned to his companion with a sly grin. “I never liked that dwarf anyway.”

The ratling started to lower his rifle and turned back towards the building.

“TRAITOR!” the ratbrute cried in a thick, lumbering voice. It brought its greatsword crashing down towards the smaller ratling, who barely managed to turn the skull-crushing blow into a merely laming shoulder wound.

The ratling stumbled back, shooting at the ratbrute with his rifle. The shot went wild, but a second shot – coming from the interior of the building – struck the ratbrute in the chest. The stench of burning rat fur filled the air.

As can also be seen directly in this session, adding faction-based play to a dungeon can deeply enrich the experience, adding whole new dimensions to your scenario.

Along these lines, you may also want to check out [Keep on the Borderlands: Factions in the Dungeon](#).

PTOLUS: RUNNING THE CAMPAIGN

TACTICS TOOLKIT: ORNATE CHOKEPOINTS

by [Justin Alexander](#) - February 7th, 2024



DISCUSSING

[*In the Shadow of the Spire – Session 34C: Back in the Tower Again*](#)

Tee slapped Elestra out of her hypnotic trance and then headed for the door.

“Tee! Wait!” Elestra called. “Help me finish off the whatsit!”

The quasit popped out of thin air and raked at Elestra’s throat, sending blood pouring down her chest. It hissed with a sneer. “Don’t call me a whatsit!”

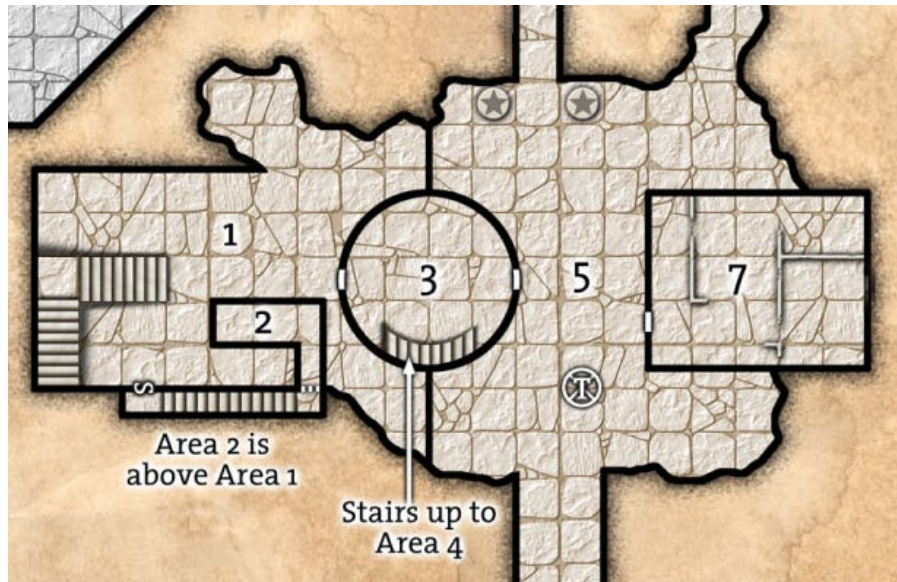
Tor retreated back into the tower. Dominic, having finally freed himself from Ibulli’s web, infused him with a wash of divine energy that closed his wounds and soothed his battered limbs and then sent him back into the fight outside.

Ibulli flew down from above.

“She’s flying now!” Elestra cried. “That’s not fair!”

We’ve previously discussed the value of developing a toolkit of basic tactical techniques as a GM — e.g., in [Half Across the River](#) and [Hear the Reinforcements](#). The technique that I’m referring to as an **ornate checkpoint** is actually one that I first discovered while running this specific adventure designed by Monte Cook.

The basic idea can be seen in Area 3 on the dungeon map:



This tower creates a chokepoint between Area 1 and Area 5. A similar effect, of course, could be created by just having a single door leading directly from Area 1 to Area 5 (as we discussed at greater length in [Battles at the Door](#) during the previous session), but in practice, the fact that Area 3 is a distinct **liminal space** had a profound impact on the complexity of the tactics that both the PCs and NPCs were able to employ.

Meanwhile, below, Tor threw himself against the tower door and burst it open. The inside of the tower was bereft of interior walls with a floor of sandy, hard-packed dirt. A broken staircase wound its way around the inner wall of the tower, up to a trapdoor in the ceiling above.

By the time Tor burst in, Gavele had already crossed the entire tower (with seemingly preternatural speed). Tor and Agnarr raced to catch her, but she managed to wrench open the far door, slip through it, and slam it shut behind her.

The effect was further enhanced by the **vertical design** of Area 3. This included windows looking out into the other areas, which created unusual **multiple access points**. The staircase and webs also made Area 3 an interesting **tactical arena** in its own right, and the presence of Area 4 above actually made it a **multi-directional chokepoint**.

Take all of these elements together, and you can easily see both the opportunities and challenges that are created for the PCs.

Of course, this works best when you're running the [dungeon as a theater of operations](#), and you can see that during this fight, with the PCs engaging foes across Areas 1, 3, 4, 5, and 7, with additional reinforcements also coming up from the south. (And Area 7 is a multi-level area in its own right.)

Here are a few random tips I've learned while designing and running ornate chokepoints:

- They don't have to be ultra-complicated. In fact, they don't need to be complicated at all.
- Personally, I find the imagery of an "airlock" useful. The ornate chokepoint is the transition between two much larger and more complicated regions of the dungeon.
- You might find the idea of the ornate chokepoint being a "pivot" more evocative. Sometimes I think of it as a "gravity well," with the focus of the dungeon being drawn into the chokepoint.
- For the ornate chokepoint to truly come alive, you'll want to make sure to challenge the PCs from multiple directions. If you don't, the ornate chokepoint will usually just collapse back into a

simple doorway. (For example, imagine if the PCs in this session weren't being harried by aranea and quasits from Area 4. The dynamics of the fight would have collapsed into the doorway between Areas 3 and 5. That's not necessarily a bad thing, of course, particularly if the PCs have earned their victory on one of the fronts.)

- This, of course, can also be very dangerous, since it can easily result in the PCs being cut off from retreat. (That's one of the tactical challenges of the ornate chokepoint, but doesn't make it any less catastrophic if the fight turns against them.) This is where designing the ornate chokepoint as a multi-directional chokepoint can be very useful: You can pressure them from two directions, while still giving them the opportunity for escape along a third.
- Often you'll discover – or the players will force you to discover! – an ornate chokepoint during play. This will happen more often if you make sure random encounters can approach the PCs from any direction (most notably, the rear), particularly if those encounters are being triggered due to the noise from combat.

Of course, not every ornate chokepoint you include in a dungeon will automatically become an Epic Fight Scene™. But scatter a few of them around the place, run dynamic fights across a theater of operations, and see where the game takes you!

PTOLUS: RUNNING THE CAMPAIGN

COMBAT VERTICALITY

[by Justin Alexander – February 14th, 2024](#)



DISCUSSING

[*In the Shadow of the Spire – Session 34D: The Battle Turns Again*](#)

Tee, now outside the tower, levitated into the air and tried taking potshots at the ratbrutes... but the dwarf, having safely retreated down the hall from the melee but still with a clear line of sight, started summoning fiery-eyed hawks with metallic, razor-sharp feathers to harry her. Their cruel beaks and claws took bloody gouges of flesh out of her.

2D battlemap = 2D thinking.

But if you neglect the third dimension in your game, then you're flattening the game experience. (Pun intended.)

This session provides a pretty good sampler platter of third-dimensional stuff: The multi-level tower. The structure with both a rooftop and interior level. Windows looking down on the battlefield. Spider-creatures crawling around on the walls and swinging on webs. Flying imps. Levitating heroes. Leaping and climbing and all kinds of stuff.

A few things I think about when combat goes vertical.

Multiple Elevations. When designing your dungeon and/or battlemat, don't forget to include multiple elevations. It won't do you any good to remember that the third dimension exists during the fight if you get trapped by 2D-thinking during design and everything is flat as a pancake.

I kind of roughly think of this in terms of **bumps** and **levels**. The distinction here is not a particularly firm one, and I may have just made up those terms as a convenient way of leveling thoughts that have been pretty vague in my own head. A bump is basically just something that alters a continuous floor level — a dais, a rocky outcropping, a treehouse, etc.

A level, on the other hand, is a completely separate floor. A balcony flanking one side of a courtyard is a great example. You might also have a floating platform thirty feet above the ground, or a cliff that leads to a lower pit. It's possible the two levels are directly connected, but they might have completely separate exits and entrances.

On that note, something to think about here is what the transition from one elevation to another looks like: Is it as easy as just stepping from one to another? A set of stairs or a ladder? Do you have to climb or jump? This will obviously have a profound impact on how the fight plays out, so think about the chokepoints you're creating on the battlefield and how limited access can create challenges for both PCs and NPCs to overcome.

(And since NPCs can often have access to abilities that the PCs don't — i.e., a dragon flying or giant spiders climbing on the walls — this can also create asymmetric battlefields.)

Levitation v. Flying. Of course, being able to move through the air is a great cheat code for navigating spaces with multiple elevation.

I think it's important for levitation to feel distinct from flying, particularly in D&D. (They're separate spells for a reason!) The key thing is that levitation only allows you to move straight up or down unless you can push or pull yourself along a wall or ceiling. This is fun in its own right because it creates a unique challenge for levitating characters, but in D&D it's also how you set up the reward of unlocking full-blown flight later in the game.

Fun levitation "hacks" you can play around with: How far can you go by pushing hard off a surface? Do you just float in a straight line until you hit another obstacle (like an astronaut in zero-g)? Or is it more limited than that? (Maybe you could determine distance from a push-off the same way you would with a jump?)

Can you push off other combatants? Or be thrown by them? (And if so, how would you want to resolve that?)

Something else to think about is **aerial strafing**. The image of a dragon flying past a battlefield and unleashing a torrent of flame is pretty awesome. Some games will try to enforce that "realistic flying" (as opposed to magical/Superman-style "perfect" flight) mechanically, but many won't (in part because a lot of those systems just turn into a huge bookkeeping headache).

If you want to try to enforce "realistic flying," it's probably enough to just require a minimum movement each round, and just assume that somehow the character is doing aerobatic maneuvering to pull off whatever path that movement actually takes.

Either way, even if it's not mechanically "required," you can still describe your dragons strafing the battlefield.

Tracking the 3rd Dimension. If you're using miniatures, how do you keep track of all this?

If you've only got one or two or maybe a few fliers on the battlefield, I find it's usually enough to just provide a clear indicator of THAT CHARACTER IS FLYING to help everyone keep track of things.

The most effective — and also visually pleasing — way of doing this, in my experience, is some kind of platform that the character's miniature or token can sit on.

- You can [buy combat risers](#) specifically made for this.
- The dice cubes that d6s or other dice sets are sometimes sold in can be a great solution.
- The little plastic platforms that pizza places use to hold up the box lid are also great. Plus, they're free. All you need to do is start a collection.

I'll often track the elevation of a flying character by just writing the number on the [Chessex battlemat](#) right next to them. If can't write on the map, or don't want to, you can also use numeric tokens or a stack of blank chits.

If you want more than that, more sophisticated combat risers will incorporate height-tracking, either through a [gauge](#) or through [stackable pieces](#).

(The stackable risers are great because they give an easy visual reference for where different flying combatants are located in relation to each other. In my experience, though, it's best not to get too tightly trapped in the idea of tracking specific 5-ft. or even 10-ft. increments with the risers. Partly because you can easily limit the flexibility of your three-dimensional space. But more importantly because fidgeting with stacks of plastic bits can be a real drag. So I tend to use the stackable risers to broadly indicate which vertical "level" combatants are on — these guys are all about ten feet up; these guys are about forty feet up; etc. — and, if more precision is needed, it can be handled through the other tracking methods we've described.)

Mapping 3D Spaces. Of course, if you've been designing areas with multiple elevations, it's not just the combatants you need to depict verticality for.

If you're using 3D terrain, of course, this problem can often take care of itself.

If the separate elevations are fairly clear, just noting the height difference on the map is often enough. For more complex spaces, you might want to sketch a side-view next to the primary battlemat, providing a quick reference for, e.g., how high the tower is vs. the carriage-house vs. the boulder vs. where the harpies are currently flying.

Tip: Duplicate minis or other tokens can also be to track figures simultaneously on both maps; the battlemat giving X-Y coordinates, and the side-map giving a X-Z coordinates.

Calculating Movement. Tracking the elevation of characters moving straight up and down isn't too hard, but as soon as characters start moving at angles through the third dimension it's easy for your brain to break.

Your grade school math teacher told you the Pythagorean theorem would be useful! And they were right!

But what I've done is actually prep an **Aerial Distance Table**: Calculate the horizontal distance and vertical distance traveled, and a quick cross-reference on the table will tell you far the character actually traveled in a straight line.

This table appears on page 78 of [Legends & Labyrinths](#), so you can grab a copy for yourself.