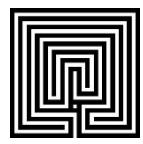


How RPG Dungeons Got Their Doors

Griffith Mon Morgan III



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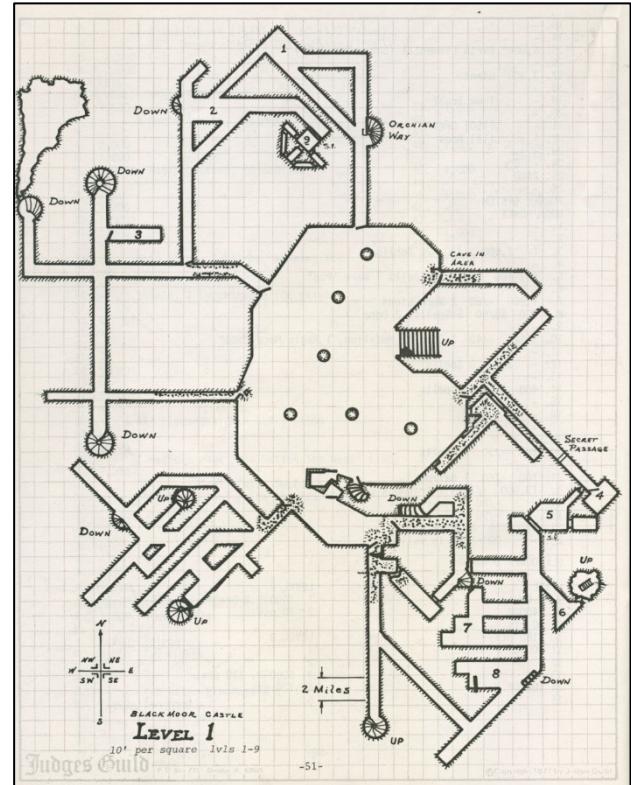
Standardization of Dungeon Door Symbols for RPG Game Maps

In 1971 David L. Arneson created a whole new genre of games within his already expansive *Blackmoor Fantasy Game* via the addition of a maze of tunnels below the baron's castle. Soon after, he also co-authored the very first role playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* in 1974. Although D&D was designed as an imaginary simulation for any kind of fantasy adventure, most gamers played the game entirely within underground mazes, or as they are more commonly called, dungeons. The expansion of the game led to more and more complexity in the dungeon designs as well as the need for more and more types of symbols on the game maps to represent the various details that were being added to them by designers and players.

Figure 1: Blackmoor Dungeon excerpt from First Fantasy Campaign, Dave Arneson, Judges Guild Game Company, 1977.

Interestingly, the map diagrams, or dungeons, are a very specific game rule as it provides constraints to the players mobility, as well as mood, through the shapes of rooms and hallways and their uses. Most game historians do not perceive the map as a rule and there isn't a whole lot written specifically on the evolution of the game map. Maps are so common that we all know what they mean and how to use them. Yet without a graphical representation for a dungeon, or of the world setting, our favourite adventure locales don't exist in games like D&D.

I've been staring at dungeon maps for over four decades, and something we all seem to encounter while playing is the problem of how best to represent details on the maps we make as the referees in the games, or as players on an adventure. Most evident are the doors that appear nearly everywhere in most dungeons. For those of us who first saw a dungeon example in the *Original D&D Three Little Brown Books*, or OD&D, the map was a very primitive looking white dungeon on a black background. As you can see, these doors are like two little lines that pass through the wall line at 90 degrees and represent a stone arch with a door. It's likely that a lot of player-created dungeons early on had doors that were drawn like this because this was their only example for how to create one's own map at that time, this would soon change with the publication of the first prefabricated setting, or module, Dave Arneson's, *The Temple of the Frog*.



In beginning a dungeon it is advisable to construct at least three levels at once, on lower levels, as well as the mouths of chutes and teleportation terminals. In methods egress still lower levels, good dungeon will have less than dozen levels down, with offshoot levels addition, levels under construction, or branching from these, nor is there any restriction to the number of levels, nor is there any restriction on their size (other than the size of graph paper available). "Greyhawk Castle", for example, has over a dozen levels in succession downwards, more than that number branching from these, and not less than two new levels under construction at any given time. These levels connect caverns filled with giant fungi, bowling alley high Giants, arena

A sample level is shown below in order to aid the prospective referee in designing his own game:

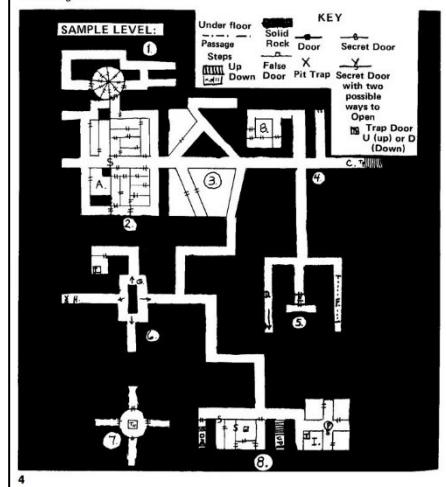
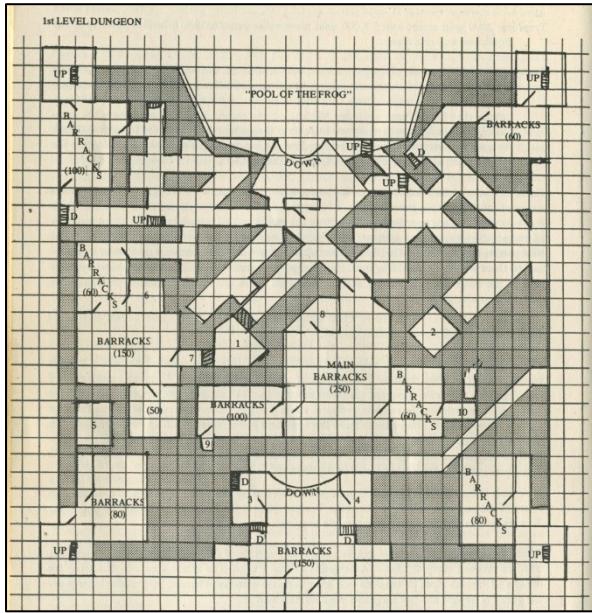
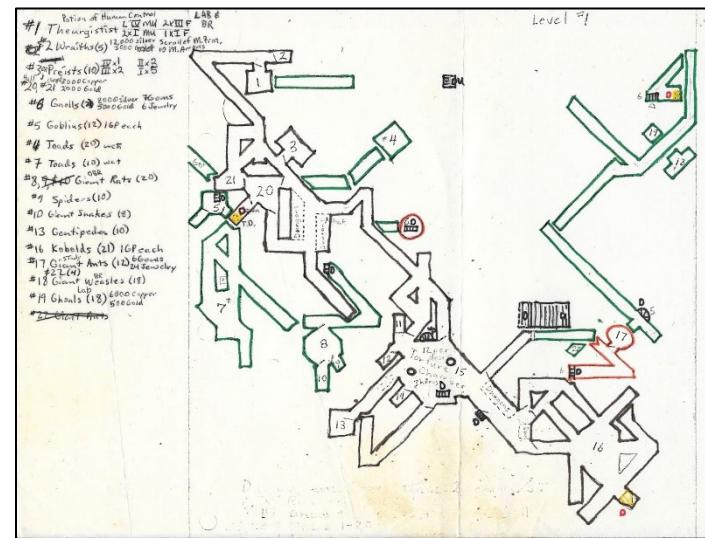


Figure 2: OD&D Volume 3, Underworld and Wilderness Adventures, 1974.



Left: Figure 3: The Temple of the Frog, D&D supplement II, Blackmoor, Dave Arneson 1975.

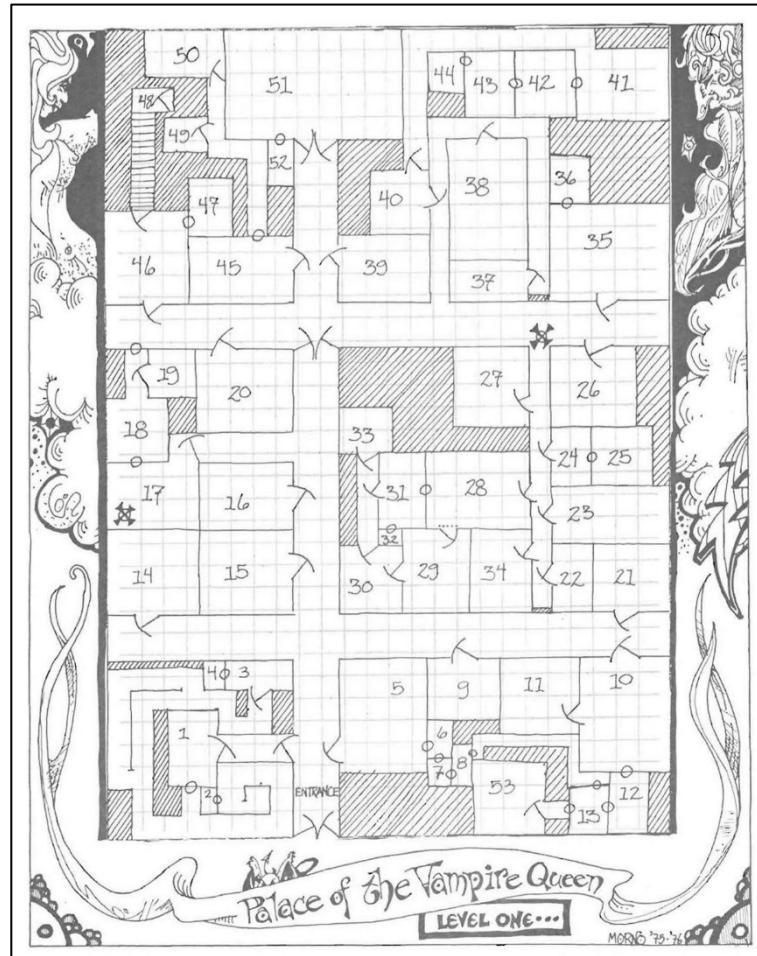


*Right: Figure 4: Tonisborg Dungeon
by Greg Svenson, 1973.*

In *The Temple of the Frog*, Arneson uses what I like to call the ‘pinball paddle’ for his doors. They are angled and drawn to show which way they will swing when opened. The pinball paddle is unique to a group of gamers known as ‘The Blackmoor Bunch,’ who used them from 1971 onward. Arneson uses it in every Blackmoor dungeon, and when Greg Svenson creates his own *Tonisborg Dungeon* (1973) he uses the exact same style of door.

As can be seen there are two types of dungeon door symbols between 1971 and 1975. Neither of these are adopted universally by most RPG gamers. A dungeon module titled *Palace of the Vampire Queen* appears in 1976. It has doors that look like pick axes, with a straight line representing the door and a curved line to show how it swings. This is a little more elaborate than the pinball paddle, and seems to be derived directly from architectural drawings.

Figure 5: Palace of the Vampire Queen, Pete and Judy Kerestan, self-published, 1976.



The most expansive catalogue for published game modules is likely The Judges Guild Game Company. An excellent example of their production maps is *Tegel Manor*. Published in 1977, it represents a haunted house setting complete with charts for what happens if you brush up against, or touch a magical statue! *Tegel Manor* takes an entirely different approach, with gaps in the wall with a thin line representing the door itself.

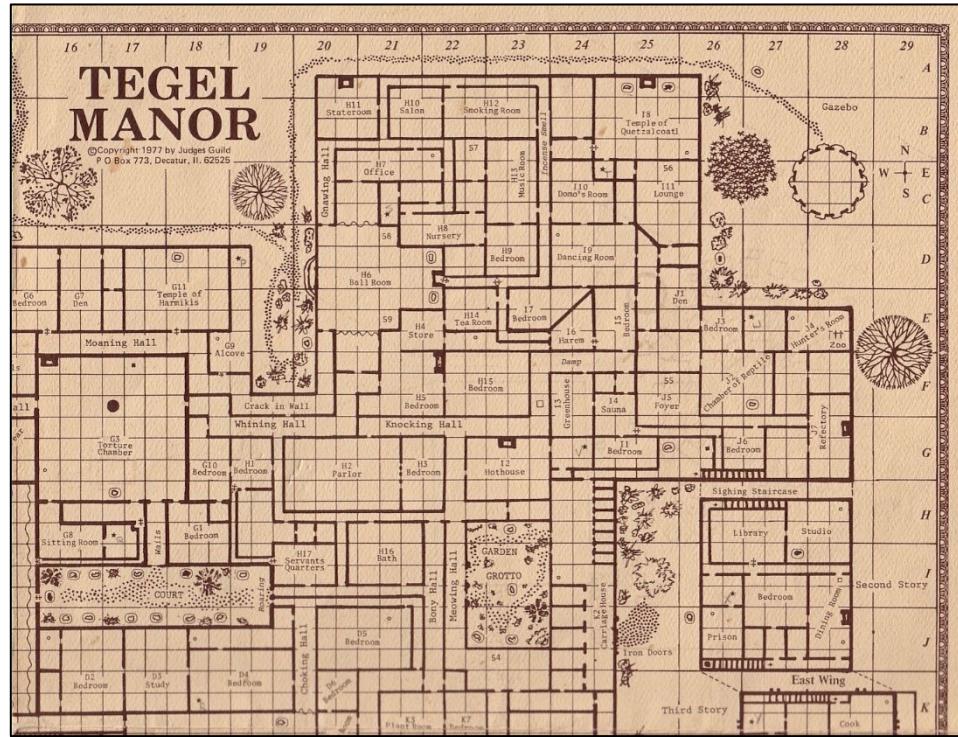


Figure 6: Tegel Manor, Judges Guild Game Company, 1977.

Another famous module is the dungeon that is in the back pages of the D&D basic set rule book, published by Eric Holmes in 1977. Based on what follows within the RPG industry, this dungeon seems to be the one that establishes the gold standard in dungeon door symbology – the line and the rectangle.

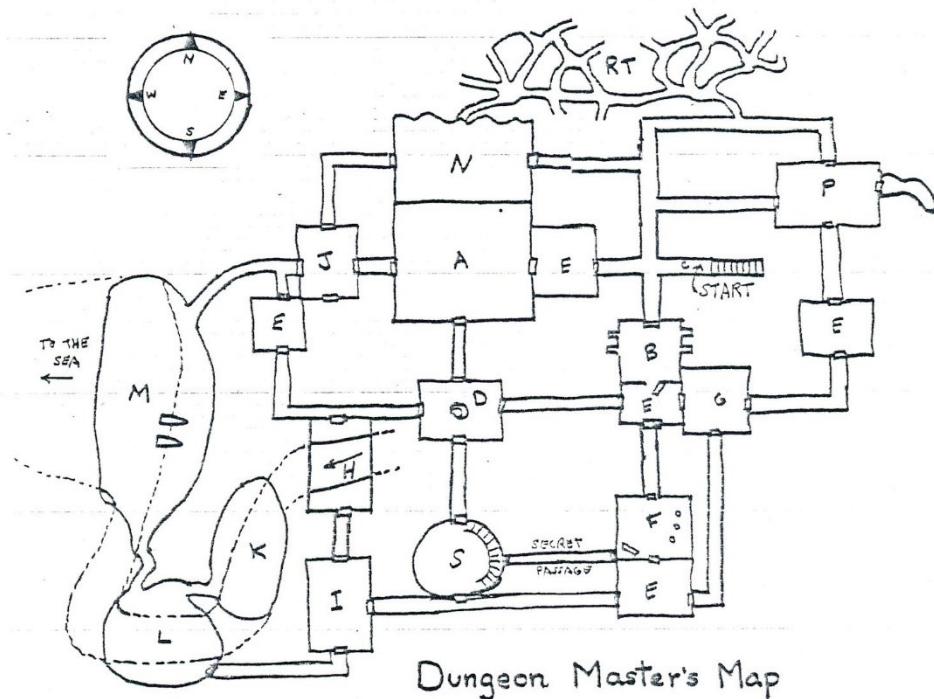


Figure 7: Pre-production map of Zenopus Dungeon from Basic D&D, J. Eric Holmes, TSR inc, 1977.

The D&D boxed basic set came with three items: a rule book, a list of pre-generated monsters and treasures to use in a dungeon, and a set of generic dungeon maps called “Dungeon Geomorphs.” If you look at the Dungeon Geomorphs they too have the rectangle door symbols which have become the standard in dungeon design. So as not to ignore *Tunnels & Trolls*, the second published RPG, their *Dungeon of the Bear* module from 1979 has a rectangle used as a door symbol on the maps as well. These are not all using the same symmetry as is seen in D&D dungeons, yet the line and rectangle door seems to have become the established standard.

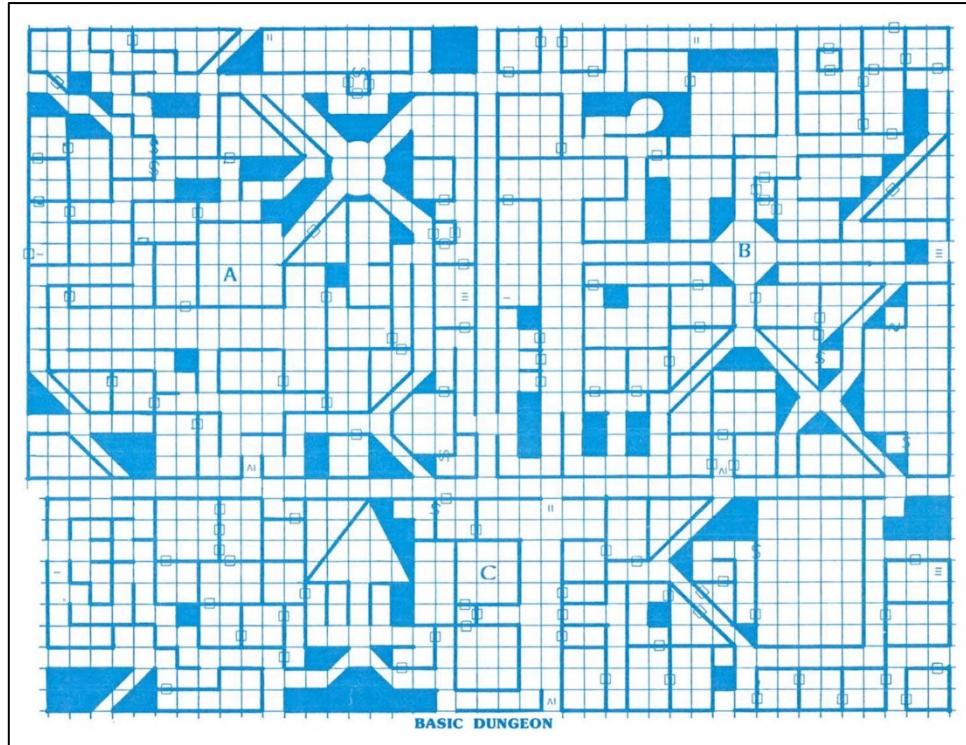


Figure 8: Dungeon Geomorphs, TSR inc. 1977.

Probably the most famous of contemporary dungeon cartographers is Dyson Logos. If you examine his maps, he uses the standard line and rectangle in his dungeon maps as well.

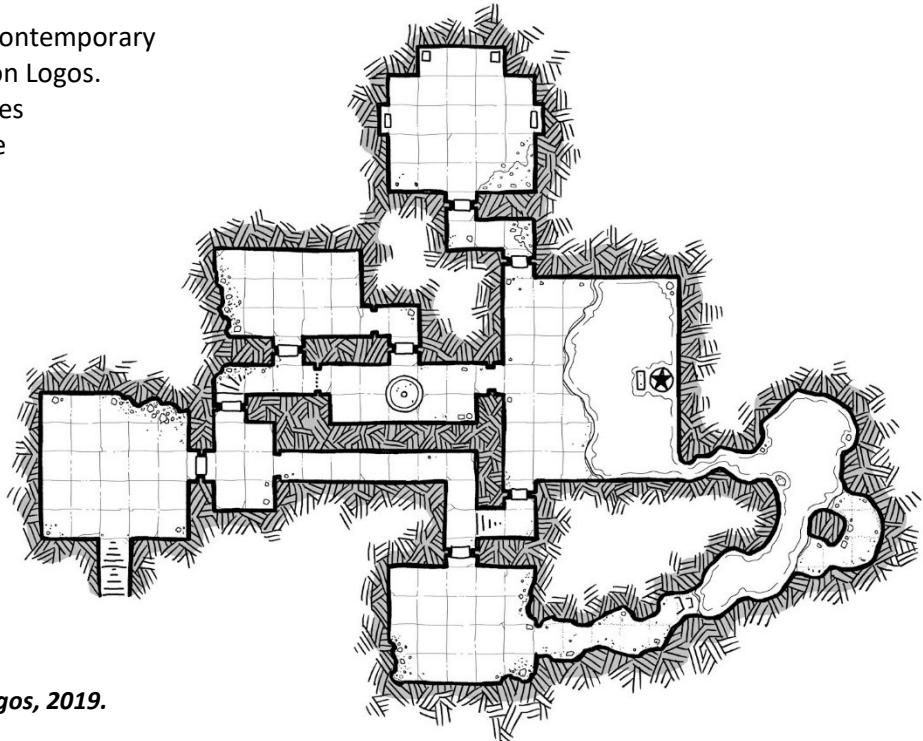


Figure 9: Map Example, Dyson Logos, 2019.

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The question remains, where do these come from? As I have been editing the feature documentary *Secrets of Blackmoor*, I have watched numerous video interview clips over and over during the past six years and the answer to this simple question has been staring me in the face the entire time. Somehow, I didn't notice it until quite recently.



Figure 10: David R. Megarry with his prototype Dungeon! game board (1972) in a video still from "Secrets of Blackmoor" documentary film.

Here is a video still of David Megarry seated in front of the prototype map for his *Dungeon!* family board game. The prototype map is made out of individually cut out pieces of coloured paper that are glued to the map surface in order to create his game environment. If you look closely, you can see that all of his doors are rectangles, just as is seen nearly everywhere in published dungeon modules today.

Since Gary Gygax first played on this very same map in November of 1972, and later had the entire game in his possession as he and Dave Arneson worked on the manuscript for *Dungeons & Dragons*, it appears that the likely source for all dungeon door symbolism can be traced back to Megarry's *Dungeon!* game as the original source.

Griffith Mon Morgan III, Denver, CO, USA; February 2020
Co - Director, *Secrets of Blackmoor: The True History of Dungeons & Dragons*
Additional map images courtesy of Zach Howard, Zenopus Archives, Washington DC

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