

# ACTION SCENERY

## WHAT IS IT?

The characters, seeking a secret cult in the cellars under the palace, suddenly come into sight of the Theophant, supposedly a pure and virtuous soul, leading some awful ritual. The moment they do, a throbbing alarm begins to sound. Great. Well, it's a rat's nest of shelves, barrels, ladders, and ropes. Should make for an interesting fight, at least. Right? Well... It should. But in some games, or without some preparation, it doesn't. So let's talk about some of the scenery that makes a fight wild.

## JUST THINGS TO THINK ON

Because these bits aren't game-specific, figuring out the exact applications and rules for using each one in your conflicts and encounters is left open. This is an article about the *what*, not the *how*. It's likely that any game with significant rules for fights will include some of this stuff; in that case, you may simply be adding to that list rather than creating one.

## MAP, TOKEN, CARD

Possibly the fastest way to include action scenery is to simply not it's presence on a map. If you're using tiles or folded maps, you might want to make "Icon" tokens to represent the various active bits, and playing cards that can be dropped next to an area and include the rules for different zones. Or make a 'quick list' of your active bits, numbered, and just drop dice of a specific color on the map to indicate which one goes here (and tell players the green dice mark scenery options - here's a list!).

## ZONES

These are action scenery that affect the whole area of play. If the fight takes place hip-deep in a river, that's a zone - though there may be places to go in the encounter that counteract the effect of the zone. You likely won't want to set all, or even most, of your encounters in a special zone, but one every few go-rounds can be entertaining. Some kinds of zones:

- **Hazard:** A hazard zone is one where simply staying in it presents a constant danger. The point of a hazard is often either to make the fight more draining or to give it time pressure. When creating a hazard effect, try to keep the rules very simple! Complicated hazard rules just add up to extra bookkeeping every round.
- **Slog:** A slog is an area where movement is impaired and slow. Most games with tactical combat already have rules for sloggy areas.
- **Clamber:** This is an area where the rules for movement are completely different. A vast chasm lined and balconied with nets made out of chains, which character climb down on, where "distance moved" is based on a roll, is a clamber. A set of rickety ladders bridging ruined rooftops might be, too, and so on.
- **Switchable:** An area where the basic terrain can be 'switched', such as the frozen surface of a lake, in a game with plenty of flamethrowing action available.

## BITS

Where a 'zone' sets a condition on the whole field, a bit is just that - a singular thing the characters can interact with. Some zones, like the 'rickety ladders', are almost completely made out of bits. Regardless, the more intense the zone, the less bits are usually required. When the zone is totally stable, bits are fun. When it's not just stable, but the encounter is of a very predictable scale (a tavern brawl, say), you can go completely nuts with bits. While the basic 'mini-zone' and 'ten foot pit' remain standard, and yanking out the carpet to trip a group is classic, here are a few more...

- **Balances:** Running on tightropes, on poles bridging chasms, or (in high-end kung-fu opera) the branches of trees, is only appealing if it provides fast movement, keeps a character out of hazards, or the like. Place accordingly.
- **Boltholes & Squeezeways:** Boltholes are small places, often with good cover or out of hazards, that also severely limit the character's movement. Balancing these is always about making the benefits of protection and cover sometimes better than the problems, and sometimes not.
- **Burnables & Burstables:** Big barrels of water, wine, and grease can not only be dropped, but burst - glowing toxic waste, even more so. Thatch roofing can be set ablaze, and wooden structures incinerated. And combining the two - the big barrel of oil? Provides a magnet for incendiary weapons and powers.
- **Lifts & Throws:** Having the thief jump out the window with all the gold they can carry, and aim for the very back of the cart below in order to send his bodyguard and driver upwards may be unlikely, but it sure is fun. Likewise, giant vents gushing compressed hot air upwards, and mining conveyors.
- **Screens:** Paper walls and 'dividers' of varying levels of fragility can make something simple much less so. If the lights are out, and people are shoot at the glows through the walls and the noise, it might get worse.
- **Slides:** Every banister is a slide, but sometimes, you want more.
- **Swings:** Not in the mood to walk that tightrope? Hang on, and cut one end. Or grab that chandelier.
- **Tippables and Hanging Stuff:** Statues can be knocked down, chandeliers sent plummeting, and pianos can fall from their ropes (okay, maybe not pianos). Cutting down heavy drapes to drop them on foes can slow them down.

## THE BIGGEST KEY

The most important thing you can do once you've got a handle on how to use this kind of stuff is to "call it out", to make it clear to your players that you're down for stuff like this. Whether you hand them crisp house rules, numbered and tidy, placing marker dice on maps, or just decide to "wing it all", and print this article to slap it down so they can surprise you? Get the group thinking about it as something they can do, and it'll start happening.