

NAVIGATING THE HEXES

A GAME MASTER'S GUIDE TO HEX CRAWLS



THE DMLAIR

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From *Isle of Dread* to the *Tomb of Annihilation*, the hex crawl is a staple of fantasy games, having its roots in the earliest days of tabletop role-playing games. Exemplifying the sandbox style of play, the hex crawl embraces the exploration pillar of role-playing games and brings it to the forefront of a campaign. It also allows players who choose more nature-based classes, like rangers and druids, to utilize some of their classes' less commonly used aspects.

This resource explains when and how to run hex crawls. If you would also like a sample hex crawl that demonstrates how these rules are implemented – or to just run at your own game table – [Endeavors & Exploration, the March 2023 issue of Lair Magazine](#), contains a complete hex crawl designed for level-five to level-seven characters.

WHEN TO CRAWL THE HEXES

While hex crawls can be a fun addition to the game, they can quickly turn into a slog of moving one hex, searching for anything interesting, and moving on, especially when they're dependent on random encounters for their excitement (more on that later). Because of this, it's not recommended that a game master employ a hex crawl every time the characters travel from one place to another unless their players enjoy hex crawls.

Hex crawls are usually reserved for *significant* overland travel when the region the characters are moving through is unexplored or otherwise unknown. If the characters are

exploring a wild area of a continent, searching for a legendary site or item without a clear destination, or perhaps searching for someone hiding or who has been taken by hostile forces to a secret location, a hex crawl could be just what you need. To execute a hex crawl, the game master needs to know how much the characters know about where they're going... and how much they don't know.

It is possible to run a hex crawl randomly. Even in a well-planned crawl, there should be the opportunity for random encounters, and a game master can use random encounter tables that include not only encounters with creatures but also places or entire dungeons. While some groups enjoy this style of play, this can significantly slow gameplay and create periods when the players are doing nothing but watching the game master prepare the encounter. The most efficient way to run a hex crawl is to prepare the individual hexes in advance.

Terrain and encounters should be logically placed, and the game master should understand the region's politics, geography, and climate. If there is a goblin tribe in one hex and a kobold tribe in another nearby, how do they get along? Do they trade and cooperate for survival, or are they territorial rivals in a constant state of war? Is the terrain mountainous, and if so, are those mountains rocky and covered in crags or smooth and lush with foliage? Is the region arid, arctic, or temperate? These factors considerably affect the characters' challenges while running the adventure.



HEX CRAWL BASICS

To run a hex crawl, a game master needs to prepare a few things at the minimum. First, the game master needs a map... but not just any map. The map needs to be divided into hexes. There are a myriad of online tools and applications, free and paid, that a game master can use to create such a map. Depending on the scope of the hex crawl, the map can be as small as a circle of seven hexes – one hex and the neighboring hex on each side – to the size of an entire continent. In any case, the game master will probably only want to prepare a small selection of hexes at a time in which the characters are expected to adventure rather than an entire continent.

Once the map is created, it needs to be keyed. To do this, the game master determines the size of each hex, the dominant terrain for each hex, and the location of key sites and encounters. Some game masters number the hexes to make them easier to identify, and many applications that aid in creating hex maps can be made to do this automatically. Once the map is complete, the game master should flesh out the hex encounters and sites the characters will likely explore in the next session or adventure.

A hex's most common scale on a map is 6 miles, 12 miles, or 24 miles. This makes each hex navigable in a quarter, half, or full day of standard travel. Of course, the terrain may affect how swiftly characters can cross the hex. Such terrain should make sense. A single hex of mountains rarely stands in the middle of a vast open plain, though in a world of magic, such things can occur. An understanding of the terrain and standard distances makes the game master's job easier when it comes time to determine the duration and distance of travel.

Some game masters want every hex to have an encounter or something essential to entertain their players, and this is a fair opinion. However, it isn't entirely necessary. There is nothing wrong with leaving some hexes empty and just rolling for random encounters, especially at smaller scales when every hex is only 6 or 12 miles. However, not every hex should be one random encounter after another, either. As a rule of thumb, the game master should have one planned encounter for every 24 miles of travel and allow random encounters to occur organically.



ENCOUNTERING ADVENTURE

Encounters can be with creatures, sites, or events; only some encounters should inevitably result in combat. Adventurers wandering through the plains are as likely to encounter a group of peaceful traveling pilgrims as a goblin ambush, depending on the region's inhabitants. Most importantly, the encounters should be engaging and entertaining to the game master's specific player types. Each type of encounter has its own challenges or memorable moments.

Creature encounters can range from large herds of grazing animals to peaceful-but-suspicious homesteaders to gnoll hunting parties. Every planned encounter should come with some challenges for the characters to overcome. For the previous examples, the characters may need to hunt for food or avoid a stampede, acquire the NPCs' trust to gather information, get a safe place to rest, or avoid or battle the gnolls to keep themselves from being dinner. Random encounters, on the other hand, tend to be more direct.

Additionally, planned encounters should be more challenging than random encounters. The latter should expend some of the characters' resources, but deadly encounters should be rare. Planned encounters should serve as the capstone, the most challenging encounter of any given hex or day of travel. In any case, the game master needs to put together some random encounter mechanic, whether random tables or a pile of prewritten encounter cards to pull from. Terrain should also affect how often random encounters might occur and how close the characters are to the encounter when they notice it. After all, it's easier to see things coming on the plains than in the mountains.

Adventuring sites encountered can be anything from a lone ruined tower to an entire dungeon to a source of powerful good or evil magical energy. The types of sites that characters can encounter are countless. Still, a few familiar sites include ruins, native villages, wizards' towers, abandoned mines, isolated temples, mysterious palaces, mystical springs, and faerie circles... and that barely scratches the surface of possibility. On a large-scale hex map, such sites could even include towns, cities, or the first watchtowers of a new nation. Ultimately, one site should be the leading adventure that the game master has planned for the players unless, of course, the exploration is the adventure.

Specific sites should have a set number of encounters built into them, but never more than a standard adventuring day's worth, unless the game master wants the hex to be the site of a grander adventure creating a more significant break in the actual hex crawl. The adventures at these sites should result from the players' interest in exploring the area. Regardless of how much the game master may love one of the sites they've invented, it should never be forced on the players if they're not interested in the location.

Events are a special kind of encounter that may incorporate creatures or sites. Usually, they advance the adventure's plot or introduce some wondrous element into the world. If the hex crawl involves territorial goblins and kobolds living in close proximity, an event may include the characters stumbling upon a battle between the two factions. If the characters need information about a region to complete a quest, they might encounter a legendary beast that carries the key to that knowledge. Or perhaps the characters stumble upon a field of geysers that only erupt in perfect unison once per century, and they just happened to arrive on that day.

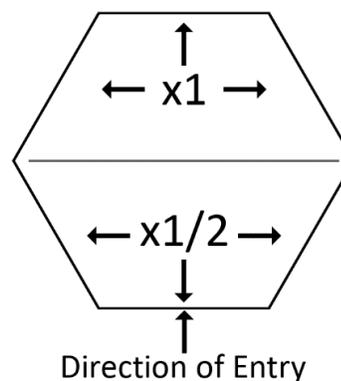


TIME, TRAVEL, AND THE HAZARDS OF THE WILDERNESS

Speaking of time, the game master needs to carefully track time during a hex crawl to create a sense of realism and track the adventuring day, ensure characters rest appropriately, and manage the resources available to the characters. Many factors often hand-waved by game masters become essential to a hex crawl. Do the characters have enough food and water, or do they need to forage? Are they moving at a stealthy pace or trying to make the best time? Are they taking time to navigate carefully, or could they end up lost? How is the weather today, and what will it be like tomorrow?

Some of these considerations are addressed daily, others a few times a day, and perhaps weekly, depending on the terrain and climate. For the mechanical aspects of the day, such as random encounters, resting, and tracking supplies, the game master should break each day of travel up into two- or four-hour increments assuming eight hours of travel, eight hours of rest or activity, and eight hours for a long rest each adventuring day. This is also where those special abilities of rangers and druids can come in handy.

When navigating the hexes, the distance traveled ties very closely to time. An adventuring party moving at normal speed can cross four 6-mile hexes, two 12-mile hexes, or one 24-mile hex per day, but that also assumes they're moving in a straight line. The direction of travel when leaving a hex in relation to the direction of travel when entering it affects travel time. As a rule of thumb, moving ahead in a straight line or veering left or right while continuing forward should utilize standard travel time while switching back or turning around to return from which the characters came takes half as long unless the characters cross the middle of the hex, see the diagram below for an example of how this works.



RUNNING THE HEX CRAWL

Once the game master has prepared the hex crawl to their (and their group's) level of comfort, it's time to run the thing. If the characters are going into a completely unknown region, the players should receive nothing more than a blank hex map with their starting point identified. Those elements should also be provided if they know the terrain or location of some key sites. At this point, it's entirely up to the players which way their characters go, and the game master reacts to their decisions and tracks time.

Whether the game master chooses a two- or four-hour time scale, several things must be resolved for each period unless the characters arrive at a planned encounter, site, or event.

RANDOM ENCOUNTERS

First, the game master should determine if there are any random encounters. There are many methods for rolling for random encounters, but encounter density and terrain should play as factors. Encounter density is up to the game master and should serve as a modifier to the likelihood of a random encounter, usually a factor of plus or minus one or two at most. The chance of a random encounter should otherwise be determined by the terrain, as demonstrated in the below table. However, this is just an example, and the game master should make the final determination on the encounter chance for their game.

Terrain	Random Encounter Chance (d12)
Arctic	1 - 2
Coastal	1 - 4
Desert	1 - 2
Forest	1 - 5
Grassland	1 - 2
Hill	1 - 3
Mountain	1 - 4
Subterranean	1 - 5
Swamp	1 - 6
Underwater	1 - 3
Urban	1 - 4

Urban encounters are usually outside of the scope of a hex crawl. However, it's possible to run a hex crawl in a mysterious city with a proper map, but distances per hex should be a mile or less, and travel times should be reduced accordingly.

WEATHER

Aside from random encounters, game masters should determine the weather at least once a day, though it may be more realistic to do so for every two- or four-hour increment. Realistically tracking weather can be challenging for even the most experienced game master. The tables below are intended to aid in that endeavor. However, these tables don't represent the most realistic tracking method since the weather is intimately tied to climate. Some forms of weather may not even exist depending on the environment through which the characters are traveling. The game master should use their discretion when using the below tables.

Commonality*	Starting Weather Condition
1 - 6	Clear
7 - 12	Cloudy
13 - 15	Light Precipitation (rain/ snow)
16 - 17	Heavy Precipitation (rain/ snow)
18 - 19	Storm (thunderstorm/ hail/ sleet/ heavy snow)
20	Torrential Storm (hurricane/ blizzard)

d20 Roll	Change in Weather**
1	Drastic Change: roll 1d20 for new Starting Weather Condition
2 - 4	+/- 1d2 + 4 to Current Commonality
5 - 12	+/- 1d4 to Current Commonality
13 - 20	+/- 1d3 - 1 to Current Commonality

Commonality*	Starting Wind Condition
1 - 11	No Wind
12 - 16	Light Wind
17 - 19	Heavy Wind
20	Intense Gales

d20 Roll	Change in Wind**
1	Drastic Change: roll 1d20 for new Starting Weather Condition
2 - 4	+/- 1d2 + 4 to Current Commonality
5 - 12	+/- 1d4 to Current Commonality
13 - 20	+/- 1d3 - 1 to Current Commonality

*When the game master determines the starting weather conditions, they should assign it a number within the given range; alternatively, the DM may roll a 2d8 and consult the table to determine starting weather. Travel is unlikely to start during a storm or worse weather.

**The game master should randomly determine whether the die roll increases or decreases the commonality of current weather or wind condition.

At the beginning of every day of travel, the game master should ask the players how fast they're traveling and whether they're attempting to be stealthy. At the end of every day of travel, the game master should remind players to decrement their food and water rations and make any wilderness survival rolls, such as foraging and navigation, to determine whether the characters get lost. If the characters ever get lost, the game master should track their movement on a separate map rather than letting the players know where their characters are going until they once again have their bearings.

Official rules for weather, wind, and environmental hazards, some more complex and some lighter, can be found in the *Game Master's Core Rulebook*.

HEXES WITH PLANNED ENCOUNTERS

When the characters enter a hex that has a planned encounter, the sequence of events that unfolds is quite similar to how it unfolds when they run into a random encounter, with a few caveats. For example, the weather should be determined in the same way as before unless the planned encounter affects the weather in some way (for example, if a druid were manipulating the weather). The key difference when the characters run into a planned encounter is to determine when the characters first lay eyes (or ears) on the encounter. The chart below can be used to determine the starting conditions of the encounter, though the game master may want to adjust it to fit with the terrain or other factors.

d4 First Sight of Planned Encounter

- 1 The characters do not find the encounter themselves. If there were hostile creatures present, they may ambush the unaware characters if they see fit. Otherwise, the characters do not find anything until they succeed on a DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check or they spend a full day doing nothing other than searching the hex.
- 2 The characters do not see the encounter until they are in the midst of it or immediately adjacent to it. They lose the benefits of stealthy travel.
- 3 The characters do not see the encounter until they are in the midst of it or immediately adjacent to it. They lose the benefits of stealthy travel.
- 4 The characters hear the encounter a long distance away or see the encounter from the very edge of their daytime vision. Any creatures present do not notice them regardless of whether they were traveling stealthily; however, if the characters were traveling stealthily for the day they have advantage on all Dexterity (Stealth) checks until discovered.

If the characters have a ranger in the party, any result of a 1 should be rerolled until a different result is rolled; any result of a 2 should be rerolled and the new roll must be used.

CONCLUSION

Hex crawls can be rewarding and dynamic experiences and add much to the game. However, hex crawls add complexity to overland travel which isn't necessary when characters travel from point A to point B on established routes. It should only be used when appropriate or as often as any group of players enjoys. And while they require much preparation on the game master's part, they can be a welcome variation in the typical adventure structure, giving the exploration pillar a real opportunity to shine.



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