

Dragon 127

Tucker's Kobolds

By Roger E. Moore

This month's editorial is about Tucker's kobolds. We get letters on occasion asking for advice on creating high-level AD&D® game adventures, and Tucker's kobolds seem to fit the bill.

Many high-level characters have little to do because they're not challenged. They yawn at tarasques and must be forcibly kept awake when a lich appears. The DMs involved don't know what to do, so they stop dealing with the problem and the characters go into Character Limbo. Getting to high level is hard, but doing anything once you get there is worse.

One of the key problems in adventure design lies in creating opponents who can challenge powerful characters. Singular monsters like tarasques and liches are easy to gang up on; the party can concentrate its firepower on the target until the target falls down dead and wiggles its little feet in the air.

Designing monsters more powerful than a tarasque is self-defeating; if the group kills your super-monster, what will you do next—send in its mother? That didn't work on Beowulf, and it probably won't work here.

Worse yet, singular super-monsters rarely have to think. They just use their trusty, predictable claw/claw/bite. This shouldn't be the measure of a campaign. These games fall apart because there's no challenge to them, no mental stimulation—no danger.

In all the games that I've seen, the worst, most horrible, most awful-beyond-comparison opponents

ever seen were often weaker than the characters who fought them. They were simply well-armed and intelligent beings who were played by the DM to be utterly ruthless and clever. Tucker's kobolds were like that.

Tucker ran an incredibly dangerous dungeon in the days I was stationed at Ft. Bragg, N.C. This dungeon had corridors that changed all of your donkeys into huge flaming demons or dropped the whole party into acid baths, but the demons were wienies compared to the kobolds on Level One. These kobolds were just regular kobolds, with 1-4 hp and all that, but they were mean. When I say they were mean, I mean they were bad, Jim. They graduated magna cum laude from the Sauron Institute for the Criminally Vicious.

When I joined the gaming group, some of the PCs had already met Tucker's kobolds, and they were not eager to repeat the experience. The party leader went over the penciled map of the dungeon and tried to find ways to avoid the little critters, but it was not possible. The group resigned itself to making a run for it through Level One to get to the elevators, where we could go down to Level Ten and fight "okay" monsters like huge flaming demons.

It didn't work. The kobolds caught us about 60 feet into the dungeon and locked the door behind us and barred it. Then they set the corridor on fire, while we were still in it.

"NOOOOOO!!!" screamed the party leader. "It's THEM! Run!!!"



Thus encouraged, our party scrambled down a side passage, only to be ambushed by more kobolds firing with light crossbows through murder holes in the walls and ceilings. Kobolds with metal armor and shields flung Molotov cocktails at us from the other sides of huge piles of flaming debris, which other kobolds pushed ahead of their formation using long metal poles like broomsticks. There was no mistake about it. These kobolds were *bad*.

We turned to our group leader for advice.

“AAAAAAGH!!!” he cried, hands clasped over his face to shut out the tactical situation.

We abandoned most of our carried items and donkeys to speed our flight toward the elevators, but we were cut off by kobold snipers who could split-move and fire, ducking back behind stones and corners after launching steel-tipped bolts and arrows, javelins, hand axes, and more flaming oil bottles. We ran into an unexplored section of Level One, taking damage all the time. It was then we discovered that these kobolds had honeycombed the first level with small tunnels to speed their movements. Kobold commandos were everywhere. All of our hirelings died. Most of our henchmen followed. We were next.

I recall we had a 12th-level magic-user with us, and we asked him to throw a spell or something. “Blast ‘em!” we yelled as we ran. “Fireball ‘em! Get those little @#+\$%*&!!”

“What, in these narrow corridors?” he yelled back. “You want I should burn us all up instead of them?”

Our panicked flight suddenly took us to a dead-end corridor, where a giant airshaft dropped straight down into unspeakable darkness, far past Level Ten. Here we hastily pounded spikes into the floors and walls, flung ropes over the ledge, and climbed straight down into that unspeakable darkness, because anything we met down there was sure to be better than those kobolds.

We escaped, met some huge flaming demons on Level Ten, and even managed to kill one after about an hour of combat and the lives of half the group. We felt pretty good—but the group leader could not be cheered up.

“We still have to go out the way we came in,” he said as he gloomily prepared to divide up the treasure.

Tucker’s kobolds were the worst things we could imagine. They ate all our donkeys and took our treasure and did everything they could to make us miserable, but they had style and brains and tenacity and courage. We respected them and loved them, sort of, because they were never boring.

If kobolds could do this to a group of PCs from 6th to 12th level, picture what a few orcs and some low-level NPCs could do to a 12th-16th level group, or a gang of mid-level NPCs and monsters to groups of up to 20th level. Then give it a try. Sometimes, it’s the little things—used well—that count.