

SUNKEN EMPIRES

TREASURES AND TERRORS OF THE DEEP



OPEN DESIGN™
PATHFINDER®
ROLEPLAYING GAME COMPATIBLE

BY BRANDON HODGE
FOREWORD BY DAVID "ZEB" COOK

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CREDITS

Design Brandon Hodge

Additional Design Wolfgang Baur, Bill Collins, Adam Daigle, Richard Flanagan, Mike Franke, Jim Groves, Clare Jones, Jonathan McNulty, Eric Miller, Jan Rodewald, Karl Rodriguez, Jason Sonia, Christian Sturke, Stefen Styrsky, Ian Turner, Mike Welham

Special Thanks to Stefen Styrsky for his incredible and copious design collaborations and contributions to this project

Editing Scott Gable

Graphic Design Crystal Frasier

Cover Art Malcolm McClinton

Interior Art Thomas Cole, Brandon Hodge, Pat Loboyko, Hugo Solis, Christophe Swal

Cartography Jonathan Roberts

Special Thanks to our Patrons: Jason Alexander, George Andrews, Joel Arellano, Kenneth Austin, Andrew Baggott, Michael Baker, Dennis Baker, Stefan Beate, Mark Bibler, Richard Blair, Ignacio Blasco, Alain Bourgeois, Terence Bowlby, Sean Bradley, Leslie David Brown, Daniel Brumme, Jesse Butler, Jason Carl, Tom Carpenter, Christopher Carrig, Nathaniel Chaddock, Michael Chambers, Jeremy Coffey, Bill Collins, Bradley Colver, Alex Coynor, Daniel Craig, Patrick Curtin, Matthew C. Cutter, Adam Daigle, Mark Daymude, David DeRocha, Rob Doran, Matthias Drexler, Andrew Eakett, Nikolaus Ehm, Simon English, Duncan Eshelman, Jarrod Farquhar-Nicol, Richard Flanagan, Gary Francisco, Mike Franke, Dale Friesen, Scott Gable, Mark Gedak, Thilo Graf, Jim Groves, Brian Guerrero, Patrick Halverson, Günther Hamprecht, Geraint Harries, Geoffrey Hart, Lyle Hayhurst, Issak Haywood, Brandon Hodge, Lutz Hofmann, Ronald Hopkins, Keil Hubert, Phillip Ives, Laurent Jeanmeure, Craig Johnston, Clare Jones, Jay Joyner, Stavros Kalenteridis, Patrick Kelly, Philip Kendall, Brian Koonce, Jason Kramer, David Lai, Troy Larson, DeWitt Latimer, Steven Lau, Kevin Lawrence, Samuel Leming, Kevin Levingston, Michael Machado, Clay Mahaffey, Bridget Mahoney, William Maranto, Emiliano Marchetti, Jonathan McNulty, Ben McFarland, Francois Michel, Eric Miller, Steven Milner, Olivier Miralles, Paul Mollard, Sean Molloy, Matthew Monteiro, Mark Moreland, Matthew Morris, Chris Mortika, Paul Munson, Charles Myers, Daniel Artigas Navarro, David Nusloch, Zachary O'Connor, John Overath, Jeff Oyler, James Patterson, Daniel Petersen, Tom Phillips, Markus Plate, Patrick Plouffe, Pookie, Charles Powell, Callum Prior, Stefan Radermacher, Frank Reding, Trent Revis, Kevin Reynolds, Grayson Richardson, Jan Rodewald, Karl Rodriguez, Franz Georg Roesel, Toby Rogers, Roy Sachleben, Jose Auriel Montero Sanchez, Michael Schell, Eddy Schmidt, Benjamin Sennitt, Craig Shackleton, Sean Silva-Miramón, Warren Siström, Gavin Smith, Joe Smith, Burt Smith, Jared Smith, Hugo Solis, Jason Sonia, Marzio Spairani, Jeff Spencer, Christian Spies, Trevor Stamper, Joshua Stevens, Christina Stiles, Christian Sturke, Stefen Styrsky, Brian Suskind, Scott Sutherland, John Tanzini, Constantin Tertton, Jefferson Thacker, Ian Turner, Keith Unger, Giorgio Vergani, Oliver von Spreckelsen, Jani Waara, Stephen Wark, Justin Webb, Oliver Weigel, Michael Welham, Joe Wells, Donald Wheeler, Michael White, Matt Widmann, Mike Wilson, Christian Wilson, Adam Windsor, Paul Woods, Nathan Wormer, and Matt Zander

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INTRODUCTION A HISTORY OF THE ABOLETH

—by David “Zeb” Cook

*A is for Aboleth
And all things wet...*

—Derro nursery rhyme

A is for astounding. Who would have thought that nearly 30 years after their first appearance in *Dwellers of the Forbidden City*, I'd be sitting down to write about a creature as strange as the aboleth? That somehow a mucus-secreting, lamprey-mouthed quasi-amphibian managed to develop a following is... astounding.

I would love to write that the creation of the aboleth was all part of some great plan, that its role in the cosmology and ecology of fantasy RPGs had been thought through and plotted out; that, in short, I had a greater picture in mind when I set them to paper. I would love to claim that, but it wouldn't be true. The aboleth, after all, had a minor guest shot in one module, floundered its way into a *Monster Manual*, and then quietly sank out of sight. Little did I know that it hadn't disappeared but had simply retreated, patiently lurking beneath the surface for the time when it would rise again. In short, it was living up to its description.

So where the hell did I come up with the aboleth and what was I thinking? In all the years since, I cannot say that's a

question I've pondered, so bear with some fuzzy and rambling recollections of an old game designer lost on Memory Lane as I reconstruct their creation.

The aboleth made its first appearance in *Dwellers*, but it wasn't part of the initial design. The core of that module was the city—the tasloi and the yuan-ti—while the sole aboleth encounter was a precursor to the main show. Now the source of the adventure had been my original writing sample when I applied to TSR, but at thirteen or so typewritten pages, it was far too short for publication. When the time came to turn that sketch into a module, it was clear more material was needed. That meant creating a whole city, a framing story to get you there, and some adventures on the way. So began the first steps toward the aboleth.

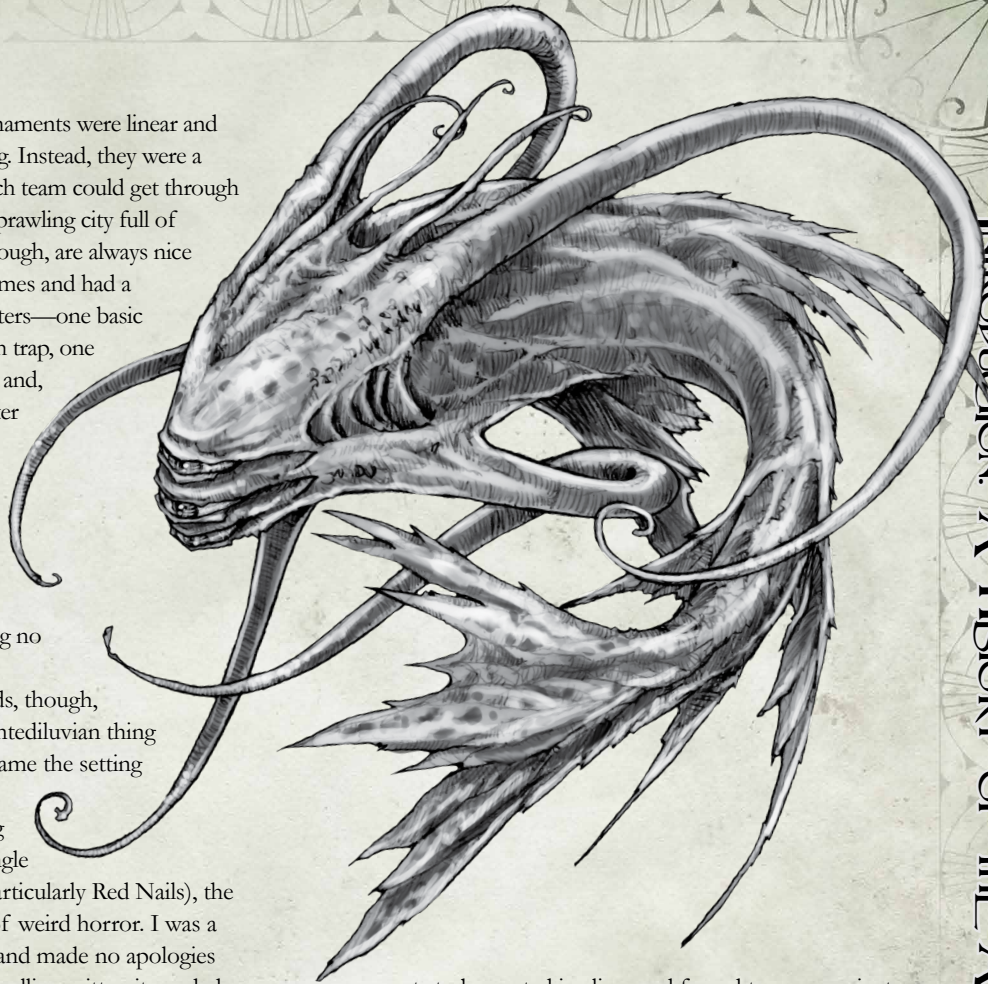
The second step involved conventions and tournament play. Ignoring the odd idea of roleplaying as competitive play, game conventions wanted tournament adventures, and for a time, TSR was willing to supply them. From our side, it seemed like good marketing—supporting the fan base and adding another bullet point to the back of the module. After all, we were going to create these adventures anyway, so why not make the little extra effort? On the convention side, it gave them something theoretically professional and tested.

Of course, the problem was that tournaments were linear and didn't really lend themselves to roleplaying. Instead, they were a race to see how quickly and efficiently each team could get through a series of obstacles. So, for Dwellers, a sprawling city full of problems wasn't a good choice. Caves, though, are always nice and linear. Plus, we had done this a few times and had a simple formula for setting up the encounters—one basic monster, one trap, one basic monster with trap, one basic monster with allies, a boss monster, and, of course, a brand new monster. This latter was the aboleth's role, to be the new guy on the block, the thing no player, no matter how good, had ever seen. Plus, it didn't hurt that with its illusions, the aboleth was also a good trap. So I had the need for an cave-dwelling thing that could be part of a trap and was something no player had ever seen before.

The tournament's laundry list of needs, though, was a far cry from the mucus-spewing antediluvian thing that is an aboleth. For that, I can only blame the setting and some warped personal preference. Dwellers was an stab at creating a setting with a particular tone—a mashup of jungle adventure tales, Conan-esque fantasy (particularly Red Nails), the lost worlds of Tarzan stories, and a bit of weird horror. I was a fan of 1920's and 30's pulps at the time and made no apologies for it, so if I was going to have a cave-dwelling critter, it needed to fit the theme. Seeing as the module already had yuan-ti (Conan-style snake-men), mongrelmen (the degenerate men of Opar), and tasloi (little forest fiends of jungle tales), it made sense for the aboleth to be weird horror. The aboleth was a nod to things Lovecraftian, an unspeakable horror silently dreaming of ancient secrets more terrible than man can bear.

Of course, Lovecraft and other weird tale writers had it easy (comparatively so). It was enough for them to write the thing was horrible, its appearance unfathomable by man, and its nature utterly evil. Unfortunately, that's not good enough for a roleplaying game. Tournament GMs wouldn't let me get away with that. They needed to know what it looked like and how to kill it. Regrettably, answering those questions would certainly take away from the drama. The only solution was to make the aboleth as freakishly bizarre as possible, so it was completely unlike anything else the players had encountered.

Frankly, I don't know exactly where the look of the aboleth came from. Making them cephalic was already out—mindflayers had already conquered that fantasy niche. Bugs were too cliché (and I don't find them particularly horrible), and spiders were dridered to death already. That left something like the leeches I'd tangled with in childhood—soft, wet, slimy with little bloodsucking jaws—fused with photos of lampreys and remoras. Of course, tentacles are always good, but the whole three eye thing? Not a clue. I wanted the aboleth to be disgusting because that made its intelligence and mind-control all the better. Who



wants to be coated in slime and forced to serve a giant leech that's the smartest thing in the pool after all?

Stating monsters is another unfortunate side effect of roleplaying. Sure it may be necessary for play, but it strips away the mystery surrounding *things that should not be*. Once the players knew the powers and the numbers behind the aboleth, it became just another problem, another thing to kill. The only solution was to hint there was more to know, that the aboleth had secrets we weren't telling you. Hinting is also convenient because I meant I didn't have to make it up. It's always easier—and often better—to suggest there's more to the story and leave the rest to the imaginations of others. I think that, ultimately, it was this image of the aboleth that accounts for its appeal. Here is a thing you can kill, but it is still more powerful, more sinister, and more damned in ways you can ever imagine.

The obscene horrors lurk at the bottom of the pool, whispering dark secrets into the minds of the greedy and depraved. Many an ambitious wizard has found the traces and hints, the crazed writings and ancient texts, and tracked them into the darkness. Drawn by promises they search out the waters only to be betrayed and enslaved by their new masters. Where they go and what the creatures do with them no one knows for sure. Some say they are consumed, their memories eaten slowly over centuries. Others tell of slime-coated souls found years later; men with soft, porous flesh and soulless eyes who splutter of twisting secrets and horrid cities no man has ever built. "Master," they sadly burble as their bodies sag into lifeless sacs, finally releasing an ebon runestone clutched in their hands. Or so the stories say.

Now, if that's not an adventure hook for an ambitious GM, then I should just give up the business.