

These notes date from the mid-90s and bear no real relationship to the dungeon the players are going through now. I just thought some folks would get a kick out of seeing some of the very early concepts I was playing with.

Footnotes are my modern reaction to my writing.

The dungeon of Ringwell has 20 levels, divided into 3 sections. Each section is cut off from the other sections due to collapse, the ravages of age, or the fact that some sections are not directly beneath the earlier sections, but rather lie on other planes¹.

Millennia ago in the grand city of Capital, two massive towers stood in opposition. The Pillar of Dragons rose, gleaming white and magnificent, to match the High Towers of the Lords and Magistrates of Capital. 50 levels high², the Pillar was the final repository of arcane knowledge. Sorcerers and wizards from across the land considered the pilgrimage to Capital a necessary component of their studies. Supplicants were allowed³ to study in the Pillar's unparalleled library and test at the Dragon Academy. Those who graduated bore a signet ring engraved with a unique dragon created by the Herald of the Pillar and customized to reflect the graduate's skills, lineage, and personality. Graduates who excelled in their tests and studies were invited to stay and further the research of the Pillar. Eventually, the most powerful mages underwent a life changing ritual, becoming the Ascendent, immortal guardians of the Lore⁴. Because of the Pillar's reputation for aiding the agents of good and law throughout the land, the Ascendent were given many titles, foremost among them; Lichbane.

Few beyond the influential and powerful citizens of Capital knew that Lichbane was more than an honorific. The Pillar of Dragons fought a centuries-long secret war against an organization devoted to evil and chaos. Though a handful knew of the organization's existence, none knew its location. Legends persisted that the Pillar of Dragons was one of a set of twins. Two towers destined to war throughout eternity. Though many went in search of this second tower, none returned and many believed the second tower didn't exist. It certainly couldn't be in Capital, for no such tower marred the perfectly ordered landscape of Capital.

But the Ascendant knew the truth. Somewhere beneath the city, dug into the earth, lay the Pit of Soul's Blood. And though the average citizens never knew it, their lives and freedoms were ensured only by the continued efforts of the Seven Ascendent and their eternal war with the Lichmasters of the Pit.

The Pit was 50 levels deep and, like the Pillar of Dragons, many levels of the Pit existed elsewhere, on other planes, in pocket dimensions. As the Pillar was devoted to good and law, the Pit was devoted to evil and chaos. In truth, the Lichmasters of the Pit were stronger in their divine power than the Ascendent were in their arcane mastery. But torn with infighting from within, the Pit regularly succumbed to its own chaos, routinely failing to take advantage of its hidden, hideous strength.

Finally, a band of heroes uncovered the location of the Pit and exposed it to the city above. A great war broke out in the grandest city on this or any world, and Capital was rent asunder. To preserve the knowledge stored in the Pillar, the Seven Ascendent wove a magic artifice, and thrust the

¹The idea here is that it's not really one continuous adventure. The players would quest through one section, be unable to find the next and leave and have other adventures. Later, they or their enemies would find a key to the next section.

² 50 levels! Well, modern skyscrapers are higher. But if you keep reading you see that not all the levels exist in the Mundane World. Some are in pocket dimensions.

³ This is not great writing.

⁴ The 90s were all about capitalizing random words in RPG books. It served as a substitute for good writing.

Pillar forward in time, in the hopes that the passing of ages might see the Pit weakened. But the 5 Lichmasters of the Pit, typically, didn't know they were winning. One, Kostor Rex, the Banelord, summoned the power of his dark god and moved the Pit far away from Capital, in the hopes that sufficient distance and a new, hidden, location would buy the Pit the time it needed to marshal its strength.

But the spell had an unforeseen effect; the magics that kept the Lichmasters alive failed them briefly, and their minions took the opportunity to rise up, destroy their masters, and escape to vomit their filth across the unsuspecting new landscape they found above the Pit. When the Pit arrived in the area now known as the Central Plains⁵, Men had not yet settled the area and the Elves and Dwarves found themselves battling untold minion of evil. Eventually, the Pit was emptied of it's⁶ intelligent population and the Elves and Dwarves built a garrison town to guard the entrance to the Pit.

It is now several thousand years later and the Pit lies beneath the High City of Selkirk in the nation of Corwell in the Central Plains. Humans now dominate the area, the dwarves are retreated to their mountain fastness and the civilization of the elves has collapsed. No one remembers the events surrounding the arrival of the Pit of Soul's Blood in the Central Plains. The elven phrase for "Soul's Blood" is Rengd Weil, and the phrase, along with legends of the Pit, have become corrupted into 'Ringwell⁷.' The dungeon of Ringwell is well known, many adventurers hear tales of the famous dungeon and the wealth that lies within. The notion of the ring-shaped dungeon (for every level of the pit is circular) and the depth of the well (for the Pit is deep indeed) have grown up around the Pit of Soul's Blood like lush green vines around a decaying tower.

Legends of the elves and dwarves tell that the garrison that predated Selkirk is now a tavern, and the entrance to Ringwell lies within. Indeed, there is a tavern named Ringwell in Selkirk. Many newly starting adventuring companies attempt to brave the barred, iron door in the Ringwell Tavern. But this 'dungeon' is a sham, constructed by the owners of the tavern only a few generations ago to take advantage of the legend. Those foolish enough to enter are assaulted by the band of bugbears who make their homes in the cave warrens beneath Ringwell Tavern and treat with the owner to split the wealth of the companies sent below.

Elsewhere in the city lies a walled-off cellar in the Red Eel Inn. No one has noticed the proliferation of dire rats and the seeping presence of evil near the Inn. Both come and go with the season and many generations pass without incident. But below the Red Eel, behind an ancient elven wall, lies the entrance to Ringwell.

Ringwell will be found, sooner or later. The levels of the Pit are no longer deserted and, though those who dominate the various sections of the Pit lack any centralized intelligence, it is only a matter of time before something below revives the 5 Lichmasters or discovers the secrets of their power. And then, without the Pillar of Dragons, without the Seven Ascendent, the new Lichmasters of the Pit will sweep across the Plains and turn the golden wheat fields of the Texas-Gol black with pitch and ash.

The upper levels are still deserted save for several powerful but unintelligent naturally occurring monsters. The lower levels, with their various entrances and exits in this and other planes, are now repopulated, many with intelligent beings who strive to dominate the entire Pit and discover its secrets.

The adventure begins with a low-level party watching as another Company braves the iron door of

⁵ I eventually ditched generic names for everything, The Infinite Desert, The Uttermost North, the Central Plains, in favor of proper names. Khemara, Vanigar, Vasloria.

⁶ Still a bugaboo for me and I have to say "It is" every time I write this as a test to see if this is the one that gets an apostrophe.

⁷ I think this is probably still the origin of the name.

Ringwell tavern. Though hideous noises are heard from below, the Company never returns. The PCs are invited to attempt the door. When they discover the bugbears and realize the sham, they expose the owners of the Tavern, and can safely tell people "there is no Ringwell dungeon." This presumes the bugbears don't kill them!

A few adventures later, and the party fights an intelligent creature who provides a clue; Ringwell is not a sham, it does exist and lies somewhere under a tavern in Selkirk. The search is back on! Where can the dungeon lie?

Once the clues and hints are put together, the party (or one of their competitors! Several companies seek the fame and wealth that will surely accompany whoever discovers and defeats the dungeon) finds the last wall of the elven garrison that originally protected Ringwell. Tearing the wall down reveals the mighty Hellgate, the massive dwarven double-doors that lead to the first level of Ringwell.

Over the course of the adventure, the PCs learn the history of Capital and the Two Towers (nice name, huh?) One of the group inadvertently activates a powerful magic item and is whisked back in time to the height of the City of Capital. From his perspective, the character is gone for a year, studies at the Pillar of Dragons, and is armed with an amulet that can seal Ringwell once and for all. Sent back by the Seven Ascendant, the character arrives only a few hours after he disappeared. He tells the group they must find the Ultimate Level of Ringwell, and there recover the Phylactery of the Banelord, the most powerful of the 5 Lichmasters of the Pit. The Amulet of the Ascendant and the Phylactery of the Banelord combine to form a powerful key which, if inserted into the lock in the Hellgate, will banish Ringwell from the material plane forever. But this means reaching the Ultimate Level of Ringwell, acquiring the Phylactery of the Banelord, and returning to the very first level, closest to the surface.

When the PCs assemble the key, they inadvertently activate another spell that *resets* the dungeon, rejuvenates it, and restores Ringwell to the Pit of Soul's Bane, replete with all the original tapestries, contents, and denizens. Four of the 5 Lichmasters are revived and the party must fight their way back *out* of Ringwell to secure the Hellgate and banish the dungeon forever⁸.

The fact that Ringwell dungeon is 'famous,' and that 'everyone knows where it is' is accompanied by the truth that no one knows where it is. Ringwell is surrounded by myth and legend. The fog of knowledge that surrounds the thing, its hidden nature, the time abyss that separates it from its origins, the Ringwell tavern and the fake Ringwell dungeon all come together to build a unique dungeon adventure. At each stage, the players are given every reason to believe they've solved the final mystery of Ringwell, and even at the Ultimate Level, they are proved wrong.

Among many other things, the dual nature of Ringwell (it's one dungeon on the way down, and another one on the way up, the fact that you have to **fight** your way out, you can't just leave) is an homage to Nethack, the undisputed king of dungeon crawls⁹. Much of Ringwell evokes Nethack. The early levels are populated by minor beasties, unorganised and naturally occurring. Lower levels exist on different planes and are populated by organized intelligences, not all evil.

⁸ I still like this idea. The notion that the confrontation at the bottom of Ringwell causes the heroes to inadvertently bring the ancient tower *forward* in time. So it's an ancient ruin all the way down, but a new, busy, populated evil-wizard's tower on the way up.

⁹ This document predates games like Diablo and pretty much any other game someone might consider the ultimate dungeon.