Vicious Venues
Allocating Treasure
Does the Party Get Enough?
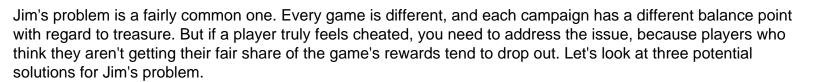*By Jason Nelson-Brown*

Is your **D&D** campaign having some troubles? Do your players constantly bicker or complain about issues both inside and outside of the main campaign action? Do your best ideas fall flat? Have you set up a situation that you now wish you hadn't? This week we discuss treasure -- everybody wants it, but players often think their characters aren't getting enough.

Problem: Poverty-Stricken PCs

My DM is cheap when it comes to passing out treasure. When I compare the Typical Character Wealth entry on page 135 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide* with what's on my character sheet, I can see right away that my treasure total falls far short of the goal. Even worse, my character seems poor in comparison with the rest of his party. I think the DM plays favorites, giving the best items to other people. How can my character get his fair share of the rewards in our game? -- Jim

Jim's problem is a fairly common one. Every game is different, and each campaign has a different balance point with regard to treasure. But if a player truly feels cheated, you need to address the issue, because players who think they aren't getting their fair share of the game's rewards tend to drop out. Let's look at three potential solutions for Jim's problem.

Solution 1: Communication

If others feel the way Jim does, then the whole group -- DM and players -- needs to sit down together and have a candid conversation about treasure in the campaign. How far apart are the DM and the players with regard to how much loot is available, and what style of play are they accustomed to? Does the DM tend to be conservative with treasure when the players are used to a Monty Haul style of game? Or is the DM throwing out *+5 longswords* like candy corn to PCs whose players are used to making do? During this discussion, the group should try to find some common ground regarding the amount of treasure that's appropriate for the kinds of challenges the PCs face.

Solution 2: Treasure Placement

Jim's problem probably stems from a difference of opinion over the right amount of treasure, but a similar situation can also arise from misunderstandings regarding treasure placement. Differences in the way treasure is organized from one campaign to another can create confusion and even alter the way people play the game. The crux of the problem is that some DMs place treasure in every encounter, and others don't.

In the former kind of game, even PCs who kill a bear in the woods can still track the creature back to its cave and find some loot there, mixed in with the gnawed bones and rubbish. Maybe not every animal or bug or slime has treasure in this kind of arrangement, but almost any kind of "monster" does possess one or more items of value. This model has the advantage of fairness, and it ensures that treasure is spread out fairly evenly over the course of an adventure. However, the placement may sometimes seem less than logical.

In the second case, the DM distributes treasure unevenly, often placing more at the end of a given adventure than at the beginning. This model has the advantage of better logic -- guards, minions, and incidental monsters may be challenging, but they tend to possess little more than their own personal gear. Most of the loot is in the hands of the main monster or mastermind, who keeps the best items for her own use and hoards coins with which to support her minions. In this latter respect, she bears a strong resemblance to a boss guarding the company payroll.

If players who are used to games of the former sort start an adventure of the latter kind, they may quickly decide that the scenario isn't worth finishing because they have found no treasure. In fact, such players often repeat the same process over and over, starting any number of adventures and abandoning them before they find the main treasure. This kind of behavior can become a self-fulfilling prophecy: The PCs don't find any treasure, so they quit looking, thereby negating their chances of finding any in the future. This behavior is logical enough -- experience tells them no treasure exists, so why should they keep looking? In this kind of situation, the players are frustrated because they find nothing of value, and the DM is frustrated because the PCs never finish any adventures or find any of the treasure that she has placed for them.

Again, the solution here is communication. The players and DM should talk about placement of treasure and the way the DM prefers to organize adventures. If the players realize that they shouldn't stop looking for treasure, they'll learn not to quit so easily.

Solution 3: Accounting

The forms in which wealth is distributed may be quite different from one campaign to another. For example, one DM might give out lots of low-value items plus a few high-ticket pieces, and another might limit the number of permanent items but hand out lots of disposable ones, such as wands and scrolls. Still another DM might award lots of magic but little cash, or vice versa. All of these techniques can end up making players think their characters are poor even when the aggregate numbers don't support that theory.

Keeping a tally of treasure gained can help a player figure out whether his character is really poor or not, in either absolute or relative terms.

To apply this solution to your campaign, just conduct a wealth audit for each character. Everyone can add up the value of his character's possessions, including all money, magic, gems, jewelry, and any other valuables or property he might possess. The characters in a party need not all have the exact same gp value of treasure -- variations are to be expected based on attendance, luck with treasure division, attrition of items, and the like. In addition, a few characters might be temporarily out of balance with the rest of the party because they possess high-value items for which the rest of the party cannot compensate via division of lower-value items. Such inequities should, however, balance out over time as other characters accumulate higher-value items of their own. If one player is receiving a disproportionate share of treasure, the DM should address that situation by making more items available that are useful to other characters until the situation is resolved.

Summary

If someone in your group feels slighted on treasure, find out if the problem is one of perception or communication. In either case, conversation may be enough to resolve the issue. If not, tally each character's possessions and compare the totals. Discuss whether the average party wealth is appropriate for the campaign, both in absolute terms and relative to the campaign's wealth level. Then check to see whether one or two characters have been receiving a disproportionate amount of treasure and try to balance future treasure awards. In the end, the players and the DM must all be flexible enough to adjust their expectations and find a comfortable level of reward for the challenges of the campaign.

About the Author

Jason Nelson-Brown lives in Seattle with his wife Kelle, daughters Meshia and Indigo, son Allen, and dog Bear. He is an active and committed born-again Christian who began playing D&D in 1981 and currently runs one weekly campaign while playing intermittently in two others.

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