

Thoughts on the Proliferation of Magic Items in D&D

by Gary Gygax

In a recent letter from the worthy proprietors of Games Workshop, I was generously invited to write an article for *White Dwarf*. Now once upon a time (some of my favourite childhood words) it was possible for me to author a considerable number of articles and stories for various and sundry game hobby magazines. As my involvement in the business of gaming has increased, however, my "free" time has magically decreased. I find that there is almost no time for such pursuits as playing games or writing for enjoyment and recreation. (For those hobbyists who think otherwise, be advised that running a game company might not be quite what you imagine.) At this time I am in the process of drafting the third (Dungeon Master's) book of the *ADVANCED DUNGEONS & DRAGONS* series and doing some playing aid materials for eventual publication by TSR, viz. maps and explanatory material for the continent and city of *Greyhawk*. If any of these works are late you will now know upon whom the blame rests, for I could not resist taking just a few minutes of time away from those projects to dash off a minor epistle on D&D. Something has been bothering me of late; the proliferation of magic items in some campaigns, and the encouragement of this "magic on the cheap" by some of the hobby publications.

First and foremost no magic items should ever be for sale in a D&D campaign! Never? Well, almost never. Let's leave the qualifiers for a bit later on and get to the basics first. Magic items are the weight factors in the game. They can be the balance, they can overbalance. They are also the "plums" in the pie. Players immediately recognize the desirability of these items and evidence a strong wish to acquire as many as possible. They do so to assure character survival, but secretly hope for character dominance as well — either by the sheer power of the items or by employment of magic therein to defeat and loot encountered monsters and rise in level accordingly. The game does not envision any easy access to magic items, and the introduction of magic shops where players can purchase such is anethma. It will immediately overbalance the campaign, although this fact might not be discerned by the DM until later — usually too late to decide to change course and save the campaign. Characters who are walking magic department stores will have risen to astronomical levels of experience, nothing will be a match for them, and their interest in play will have been lost, for who enjoys a stale game with no challenge? What is obtained cheaply soon becomes dull. When the ultimate has been obtained, what incentive is there for further involvement?

Can just a few potions, a scroll or two, and a few magic arrows be all that destructive to a campaign? Certainly. That is if these items are regularly available. Think of how deadly a few elven archers with potions of *heroism* and +1 arrows could

be. Furthermore, if characters can purchase such items, why not others? And couldn't any reasonably well-off person have purchased a store of such magic too? Players will sometimes counter by stating that the only magic items which should be available must bear a price tag of thousands of gold pieces. Paying 50,000 for a powerful magic item is sufficient to assure its value and scarcity, is it not? I always answer by offering them the named amount for one of their choice magic items, and of course they immediately refuse to sell, thus squelching their own argument nicely.

D&D is a game system which is designed for a long period of active play. To assure that this period is not shortened in untimely fashion, it is incumbent upon the referee to make his or her campaign a continual challenge. There must be hazards, there must be rewards as well. Rewards must be in proportion to the risk, possibly less and never greater. An ultimate goal exists for each player, and it should be reached (if ever) only when that player decides the fame is no longer of interest — at least for that particular character. In fact, what usually happens is that players will reach such ultimate goals too quickly and lose interest in further play. Some drop D&D, others will begin again with new characters. Things must not be too easy, or there is no sense of accomplishment gained from playing the game. Conversely, a campaign must never be so difficult that players become discouraged with the hopelessness of never being able to have a character who can survive long enough to actively associate with. Therefore, magic items must not be made available by the DM as goods to be purchased over the counter for gold, no matter what the amount.

The difficulty of a particular campaign can modify the prohibition against "free" magic items somewhat. A DM with a very dangerous dungeon might wish to introduce a "family treasure" for his beginning player characters. This could be a +1 magic arrow, a *healing* potion, or even some item that is not a "one-shot" — a +1 magic dagger or a +1 shield. A better alternative, however, is to give such items out to player characters who take service for an adventure or two with some relatively powerful non-player character in the campaign. This character will then "lend" them the use of certain items during their period of service, and charge a fee as well — typically a better magic item than the one loaned and used. Note that this is recommended *only* for very hazardous dungeons.

Rather than putting extra magic items into the campaign, the superior DM will be plotting ways to remove them as players rise in level and begin to acquire numbers of enchanted weapons and devices. Although existing D&D tables of magic are weighted towards the "one-shot" and "ringer" items, there is no doubt that the better players will eventually amass quite a hoard of goodies. In order to maintain balance and retain challenge in the campaign the resourceful referee will set up traps for players, traps where characters will be captured and stripped of magic items or ransomed for them. He or she will

also use care in determining if devices survive various attacks when the character fails a saving throw. Fireballs and sudden falls can account for quite a few destroyed magic items. This allows the players to retain their characters in most cases, and that is really the meaningful part of the game. It also tends towards increasing the level of expertise in playing the game. Finally, it gives the players fresh incentive to continue playing, for they will always be desirous of finding something to replace what "wear and tear" has lost.

Another ploy is the high level non-player character magic-user, cleric, fighter, thief, whatever who has a very choice magic item he or she is willing to trade away for other items (note the plural there). If a player character has managed to amass a store of weapons and devices, the good DM will attempt to assure that most of these are done away with by trade — the long-sought *ring of spell storing* can be had for only a pittance, say the *wand of fire balls*, the *ring of invisibility*, and the *ESP medallion*. After all, the spells the ring stores are very high level . . . As this same high level NPC is probably the one whom players' characters must come to in order to get special help, resurrections, etc., he or she will have already acquired a fair collection of magic items in payment for services rendered. The items received in trade should then assure the NPC of remaining sufficiently strong to discourage players from attempting a coup to capture the treasure he or she holds. When this NPC becomes exceedingly well-off, he or she "removes" from the area, never to be seen again, and a new one comes into play; a non-player character without so tempting a hoard.

So the next time you hear someone talking about magic items for sale in a campaign I am hopeful that you will set the matter straight. In order to make D&D an interesting and viable campaign game of the ongoing sort, rewards must be true achievements merited by excellence of play, not dross available for coin. Problems and puzzles, challenge and accomplishment, imagination and the virtually unattainable are the stuff of D&D. To give away what is rare, to sell what should be earned, is to destroy the whole system. Tantalization and partial fulfillment are the order of the day, and when a prized item, long-sought, is finally acquired, how sweet it is. Magic items, like love, must be won. Thus speaks an unreformable romantic. Take my word for it rather than having a campaign spoiled with cheap goods.



LAIR OF THE DEMON QUEEN

continued from page 21

every melee round; if a character doesn't save, he doesn't flee but lies on the ground shrieking and generally incapacitated while it bites him. The creature also has one other dreadful characteristic — until it has killed someone, it cannot be harmed in any way (since it appears traditionally as a precursor of death — there's a time paradox resolved?). If it kills someone who regenerates, and is then killed itself, there is a chance it, too, will regenerate.

So whatever happens, at least one person in the party will die before the Banshee can be killed, and the necessity to save against fear every melee round probably means the death of a few others as well.

The treasure (in a box under the bed) was of course very rich. In my room there were coins, gems and jewellery worth a total of 8,300 GP and two very powerful magical items — a Ring of Three Wishes (full, untarnished wishes, of course) and a Rod of Rulership. When added to the treasure elsewhere in this area, the total GP value was 13,700 and there were three scrolls, a Potion of Heroism, a good book and a dozen other pretty good magical items (plus a crooked sword just to add spice).

I do not, of course, commend this area as suitable for low-level parties. I should have thought a party needed around ten characters of mixed type with total experience level of 70 or above to tackle it. And if they are to make much sense of the poem, there need to be some quite intelligent players. However, if you never get to meet the Demon Queen, count yourself lucky . . .



a new dungeon for



On a wet April morning, Games Workshop hired *Renta Crowd* for the opening of its new premises at 1 Dalling Road, Hammersmith, London W6.

As can be seen, many people turned up to take advantage of the special opening day offers. The bargain of the day was undoubtedly one copy of *Empire of the Petal Throne* which sold for £1.00 to a very patient Phil Mannion who queued outside for 17 hours! There were also six boxed D&D sets to be had at 50p each and their fate had been decided seven hours before opening with the arrival in the queue of Oliver MacDonald, David Coast, John Pope, Jonathan Barrett, Stephen Nigel and Peter Coles. When the doors finally opened there were over 100 people waiting to see the new shop which stocks all known SF/F games and over 1,000 different 25 and 54mm SF/F figures. What a day.

WHITE DWARF QUESTIONNAIRE

Last issue mention was briefly made of a questionnaire regarding the content of *White Dwarf*. As it was not practical for us to have this printed separately, would you please use the form below or copy or photocopy, and return it to *White Dwarf*, 1 Dalling Road, Hammersmith, London W6 to arrive before 1st July 1978.

1. Give marks out of ten for the following regular features:

- (a) The Fiend Factory
- (b) Treasure Chest
- (c) Open Box
- (d) Molten Magic
- (e) Kalgar

2. Answer YES or NO to the following questions:

- (a) Would you like a regular published mini-dungeon?
- (b) Would you like more articles on science fiction role-playing games?
- (c) Would you like more articles on SF/F board games?
- (d) Would you like articles on SF/F table-top games?
- (e) Would you like to read SF/F fiction?
- (f) Do you find the advertisements useful?

3. Get rid of your pent-up frustration!

I think *White Dwarf* could be improved by

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 (continue on separate sheet if necessary)

Next issue we will publish the results of this survey so that you can see what problems we have trying to keep you all happy!

Next issue:

White Dwarf 8 will be bursting at the seams with new features as well as the regular ones. In conjunction with Miniature Figurines Ltd we are proud to announce the start of the story of *The Valley of the Four Winds*. Also there will be a very useful article on how to make your own monsters. Last, but not least, will be an article entitled *Foresters* which is a character class from the forthcoming *Chivalry & Sorcery* sourcebook.

- * Valley of the Four Winds
- * Do-It-Yourself Monsters
- * Foresters
- * Fiend Factory
- * Treasure Chest
- * Molten Magic
- * Open Box