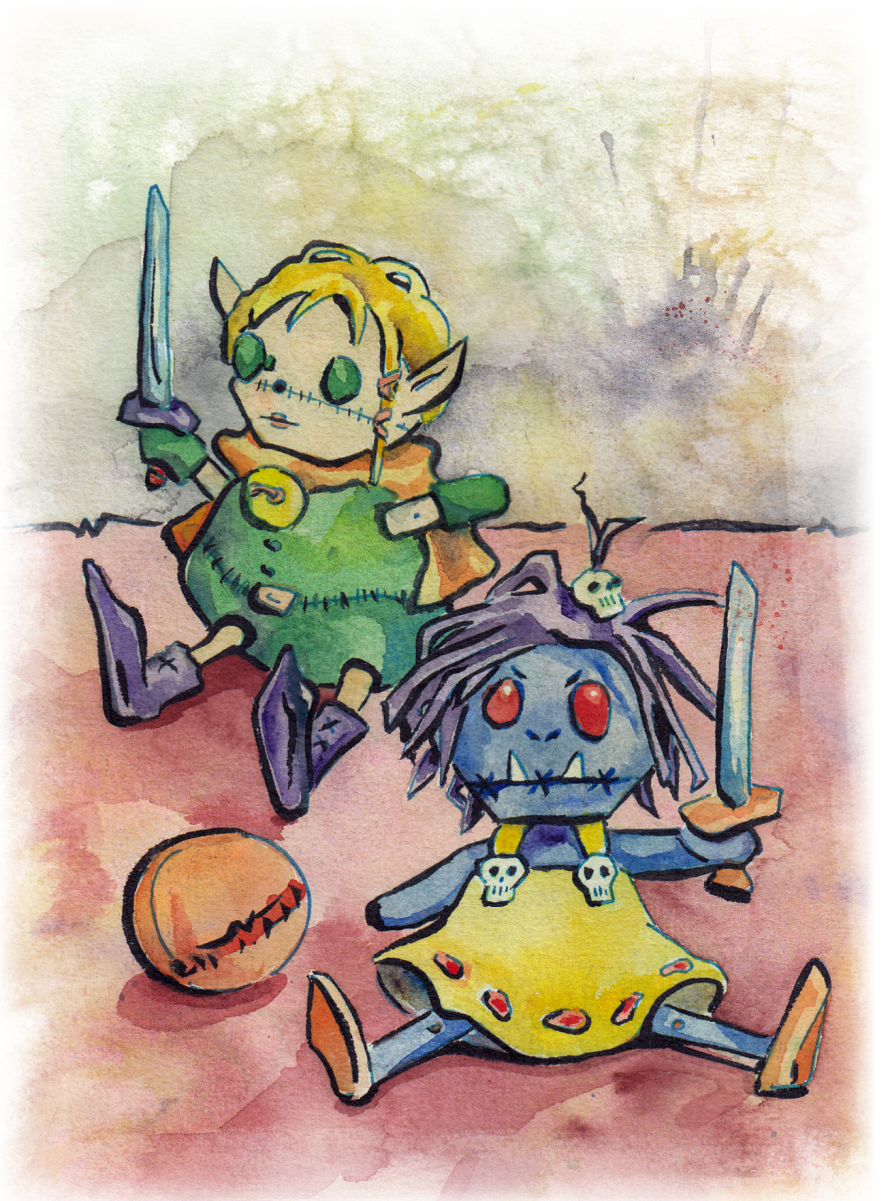


Cherished Trinkets

by
Ryan Chaddock

Small and enigmatic, trinkets enrich your game world and add detail to your adventures. Trinkets are pocket-sized treasures with little monetary value, but they hold rich storytelling potential. Spicing up your game with these prizes in the right moment can add an element of realism through thoughtful detail and provide a way of carrying experiences along as souvenirs. An intriguing trinket can become a plot hook to spur your players to delve into the world you've created. They can also jolt jaded players out of their ruts and provide new ways to add uniqueness to their characters.

Neither trash nor precious loot, trinkets fill a special niche in adventures. They can be more than mere filler for the dungeon floor or equipment handed out at character creation. These tiny treasures should either add detail to your world or create questions to intrigue your players.



Value to the Character

Some players ask what the point of trinkets is. Why should they care? A few seem like junk, and others like silly jokes, so to a greedy dungeoneer, trinkets just take up valuable pack space. And while most players aren't so cynical about interesting objects, some would carry around every oddity they came across for the rest of their adventuring careers.

A trinket's value is dependent on two things: the character in question and the lore surrounding the object. A good trinket has value because it holds special meaning to the character that holds it. Perhaps it's out of place, it's beautiful, or it just strikes the character as personally meaningful. Whatever the case, the mere act of taking it with them can be a roleplaying choice with deep implications.

Example: *Royvel the Bard has two prized trinkets. The first he's had most of his life, an ornately carved wooden figurine of an orc warrior. The carvings are of such loving detail that it has haunted him since he first set eyes on it. He keeps it as a good luck charm and hopes he never has to kill an orc. His second treasure is a more recent find, a black metal coin from a realm he's only heard of in whispers. How it came to be on that goblin's body he's not sure, but he intends to learn what all the fuss is about.*

Value to the Setting

Trinkets can be a powerful force within the larger context of a campaign. Even a short-term game peppered with the right mysterious items can seem as textured as a lengthy novel, as they hint at motivations, violence, foreign lands, history, and daily life. All these elements can come together to form the flesh and blood of a rich campaign setting.

One important trick is altering the kinds of trinkets provided in a given locale, depending on who lives there. For instance, having a small trinket list for the raiders who attack small farming communities might come in handy. The list doesn't need to be long; a half dozen items that convey the raiders' situation and culture will serve quite nicely. Another list for the kinds of gifts the helpful elves give out might be useful, both to better describe your elves and to imply their generosity.

The physical conditions of the area can be conveyed through trinkets fairly easily. Items might be filmed over with ash near an active volcano or forest fire,

or water damaged from the gloomy swamplands. Magical effects could warp or even imbue items with strange properties. In this way, trinkets can serve as a source of clues to the larger conditions at work in the area.

Example: *Stephanie is running a campaign that highlights the tragedy of a fallen elven society which once dominated the world. She wants to emphasize hubris and loss, as well as the use of magic in the elves' daily lives. Since the first adventure takes place in the ruins of an elven temple, she comes up with a few trinkets that showcase these themes. "A polished metal mirror, partially melted and warped," "A small magic wand that commands the flight of a tiny illusory butterfly," and "A scorched stone chalice which casts no shadow and seems to weigh far more than it should."*

Value to the Story

As the source of new stories and connections between characters, the value of trinkets cannot be understated. When your players find a foreign bank note hidden under a pile of goblin corpses, you might encourage them to seek out its origin. This can be a difficult feat to manage—you don't necessarily want every mysterious trinket to derail your planned adventure. On the other hand, if your game is more of a sandbox, those clues could be a useful way to gently guide your players.

Trinkets can also provide a source of backstory and even connections between PCs during character creation. Trinkets can be mementos from their prior adventures or possessions shared by childhood friends. Embellishments like this can come naturally, as collective character building, or in a structured way, by having each character pair up with another to tell a story of where they acquired the trinkets they carry. A player and GM might work together to weave the item's story into the plot, or the player might simply come up with a few ideas on their own and see what the Game Master wants to run with.

Example: *Jon, Amy, and Ray are creating characters and decide to connect them together through the trinkets they rolled. Jon and Amy decide that their connection is due to Amy's trinket: a necklace made of giant shark teeth. They decide their characters formed a deep bond on a nearby tropical island where Jon's hero helped Amy's fight off a giant shark attack, and made a necklace from its teeth. Jon and Ray determine that their characters met during a bar brawl and that both Ray's trinket, a bottle of goblin whiskey and Jon's blood-stained dart board, were kept to remember how dangerous things can get when they don't control their tempers. Amy and Ray think on their trinkets and decide that the letter Ray found, penned by a lovesick elven lord about a human warrior, is actually about Amy's character and that neither of them have discussed this just yet.*

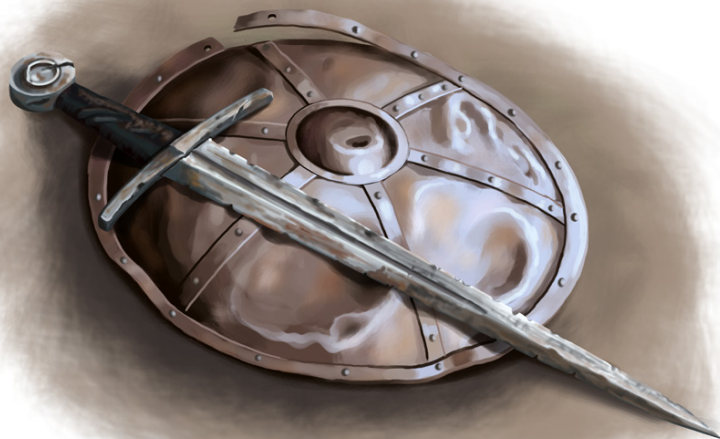
Trinkets as Weapons

Nothing encourages exciting and imaginative play more than saying yes to a brilliant idea. Nearly any item can be used as a deadly weapon, and though players are notoriously creative when it comes to violence, this is no reason to stifle creativity at the table. Your trinkets can and will be used against your monsters and villains. Most of the time this just means treating them as improvised weapons or equipment. At other times a player will come up with a truly creative use of your trinket, dovetailing an unusual property with the needs of the moment. Go with the flow and just be glad that your well-written trinket is now the stuff of legend.

Magical Concerns

In high-magic worlds and regions, trinkets are often mundane items infused with a spark of the arcane. While it's easy to imagine that handing out "magical" items left and right will encourage powergaming, remember that magic is like the technology of the day in some of these places. It might be too convenient to have a frying pan that doesn't need a fire to cook something, but will it break your game if a player comes up with a clever use for it? A good GM strives to reward player ingenuity, not punish it.

Bear in mind that treasure-loving adventurers will tend to hoard items with actual utility, especially if they bear the mark of magic. If this becomes a problem, defy their expectations and give your next batch of trinkets strange and flavorful magical effects, instead of conventional ones, like "a dull stone that glows green and whistles at random hours of the day." Incomprehensible effects can suffice to keep magic supernatural rather than mundane and straightforward, which is a good thing in certain campaign settings.



Managing Expectations

A challenging part of handing out trinkets is keeping the players interested in hearing what the trinkets are. This means you need to keep your trinkets intriguing and noteworthy, and it also means you need to be a little bit sparing in handing them out. Too many or too ordinary, and soon your players will be complaining about the "junk" you give them. This doesn't mean that every trinket should be a cryptic tie-in to the villain's machinations or an item with priceless magical properties. A good mix of three or four trinkets that really grab their attention is a good rule of thumb. Keeping your trinkets plentiful, but manageable, will help reward attention to detail and investment in your world.

Building Trinkets

When creating a trinket, it's good to follow a few guidelines to make things fast and keep your items interesting. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- *Keep it short.* Each trinket's description should be no more than two short sentences. Remember, you'll most likely be reading this aloud and your players will be copying down only the most obvious details. The simpler the better.
- *Keep it unusual.* Rooms in a dungeon can be full of random items. Trinkets are those things that immediately present themselves as just a little bit extraordinary. Try to think of these as treasured objects to those who put them there. Why would they hold on to this particular item? What does this say about the people who live here? These are questions you should ask yourself when you write the trinkets, and questions the players should ponder when they find them. *Example:*
 - *An old quill made from a vibrant feather of an exotic bird, obviously imported at great expense.*
 - *An artistically carved arrow, the tip of which is caked with what looks like golden blood.*
 - *A clay bowl stained with the vibrant colors of several poisonous native berries.*
- *Add a bit of mystery.* Items that imply a larger world, defy explanation, or seem out of place are great candidates for trinkets.
- *Defy convention.* Yes, your PCs might find a cigar and a shaving kit on the corpse of the dwarf miner, but they might instead find a flask of elven wine or a love poem. Mix things up a little.
- *Tie in your larger plot.* This can be a subtle art, but it's possible to leave clues for your larger campaign plans through some of the trinkets you provide. A coded communiqué here, a torn map there, and pretty soon players are figuring out what might lie ahead for them as the game unfolds. Be careful though. There's always one PC who wants to follow that trail with the zeal of a bloodhound. Make sure your clues don't tip your hand too much, too soon.
- *Don't overwrite.* Each trinket is an idea, and you only get so many of those before writing fatigue sets in. Have a small number you want to make and stop there.

Wrapping Up

If you're here you want to make the most of trinkets in your game. You want to bring depth, sentimentality, and enigmatic clues to a genre that focuses an inordinate amount of attention on combat stats and bloody trophies. Trinkets bring the game back down to earth and into the realm of the small, the precious, and the beloved. Ultimately the choice to supply your players with these kinds of items is a negotiation. If your players seem uninterested, maybe trinkets are not for your group. Finding ways to keep them interested is the real trick. The payout is a richer game world, which is well worth it.

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