

The Magic Merchants Primer



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Using the Magic Merchants Series

Magic lies at the very heart of fantasy, yet too often in d20 fantasy the process of acquiring magic items only serves to reduce the power of magic to spark the imagination. In a world where wizards can craft staves and wands with ease and fighters can calculate the cost of their next magic sword, the wonder of actually owning a magic item is quickly lost. To make matters worse, d20 fantasy is balanced on the assumption that characters will have access to magic equivalent to their level, so merely ruling that magic cannot be created or traded for by the players simply replaces a thematic concern with a mechanical one. Hence the core question remains: how does the gamemaster keep magic important and interesting as the players reach higher levels?

The Magical Merchants series is designed to help strike a balance between the necessities of theme and mechanics, providing you with a series of detailed characters and locations that the players must interact with in order to get that crucial *+1 dagger* or *potion of cure moderate wounds*. Every release in the series is designed with the belief that magic stores and the people who run them should have just as much character and importance as the dragon the adventurers defeated in order to earn their gold. Rather than a simple exchange of gold, shopping for magic items can become an experience that reinforces the power and role of magic within the campaign world.

While the series can make the process of acquiring items interesting once more, there is more than can be done to help generate interest in magic from even the most jaded player. In this primer you will find suggestions for making the most out of the Magic Merchants series, as well as alternate rules you can use to maintain the mystery of magic while still allowing players to buy and sell at will. There are hints for using magic to generate a sense of place and history, as well as rules for limiting the kind of magic that can be created without denying players the opportunity of creating their own staves and swords should they wish to. Whether you use the Magic Merchants series or not, these rules can be used to liven up the magic items found in your games.

Rule 1) Attach a Sense of Place to Magic Items:

While some items are universally useful and should be found nearly anywhere, choose a few items from your treasure lists and simply state that they are only crafted in a few select locations in your world. In many ways, these items become a signature for a place or culture within your campaign.

Countries, particular wizards, humanoid tribes and cities are all candidates for signature items of some kind or another, it's simply a matter of selecting one or two and making a note of it for future reference. Just as a katana can make us think of Japan and the horned helmet makes us think of vikings, signature items can become a short-hand for an entire image if used carefully. While taking the time to give each item a history can be time consuming, signature items and magic items with strong cultural associations are often a quick and easy way of giving the same effect.

A *+1 spell-storing greatsword* may seem mundane on its own, but if the only people who create these swords are the tattooed Warrior-Sorcerer's of Ken'Lun it instantly becomes more interesting to the players. Finding such a weapon among a treasure hoard starts raising questions beyond *Should we sell it or give it to the party fighter?* Instead it prompts the players to question how such a blade came to be so far from home, or why it was found in the hand of a goblin-chieftain's bodyguard. A wizard who wants to create such an item must travel to Ken'Lun to study the secrets of forging the weapons himself, or must acquire such a blade to study within the privacy of his home (and it's possible the warrior-sorcerers guard the secrets of the blade's creation very, very closely).

Even if only one item in five or ten has this sense of connection, it's enough to remind players of the world outside the current treasure horde. Places and people continue to exist, even if the player characters aren't paying attention to it at this very moment.

Rule 2) Attach a Sense of Place to Magic Stores:

The Magic Merchants series can generate the same effect on a more localized level, particularly when coupled with the signature items included with each installment. Just as rulers and culture can define a feel of an area, magic stores and the items they sell can have an impact on their surrounding area. A store that focuses on magic weapons will produce a region with inordinately skilled fighters, enhancing the martial reputation of characters that emerge from the small town where it is located. An apothecary focusing primarily on alchemical items can set the tone for an impoverished village, where magic is still a rare and suspicious thing.

Once you place the House of the Transformed Toad into your campaign, it serves as an easy short-hand for determining the kind of magic items that are likely to be carried by local adventurers. A low-level fighter carrying a liquid image probably hails from one of the towns close to Telgen's store, and the hordes of monsters in the local area are probably littered with items purchased from the store (much to Telgen's distress, to be sure).

Finding a dusty vial containing a potion that is only found in the player's home town in the hands of a villain several thousand leagues from the store where it was made could provide a subtle clue about the bad guy's origins. Or it could raise important questions as to how or why such an item ended up so far from its source. Is there a former apprentice of the wizard in town, replicating his master's items? If so the party may be able to use their familiarity with original store to gain a valuable contact in an unknown territory. Has the villain spent his life searching for an item of power? Then it's possible that the wizard has a useful scrap of lore hidden away in his inventory, or that he can direct the players to another clue in the small town where they started their adventures.

Rule 3) Require Item Formulas to Craft Items: Just because a spellcaster has an item creation feat, that doesn't mean she automatically knows how to create every item in the DMG. Just as a wizard must learn the words and gestures needed to cast a new spell, magic items require the knowledge of specific rituals and formulas to bind magic to an item. Those who wish to create an item and do not have the formula for it must seek out its secrets, either by learning them from another spellcaster or studying a completed sample of the item.

When using the item formulas rule, assume that any character selecting an item creation feat knows the secret of crafting 1 item + 1 additional item per point of Intelligence bonus (minimum 1 item). Learning the secrets of creating a new item requires either one week studying a completed example of the item to be created and a successful Spellcraft check (DC 15 + item caster level) or learning the formula from a caster that already knows it (Spellcraft DC 15).

Creating a new item without the benefit of notes or a completed example requires a strong understanding of magical theory. The initial planning of the item requires one week of study per caster level of the completed item and a successful Knowledge (arcana) check (DC 20 + item caster level), followed by a Spellcraft check (DC 15 + item level) to ensure the magical theory can be put into practice. If either of these checks are failed, the research process must be started again. A successful check allows the character to uncover a method of crafting the item he is researching, while those that fail the check by 5 or more may create cursed or flawed items.

Using this option makes item crafting more difficult for players, but also turns each item into something of an achievement. Just as learning to cast a new spell becomes the goal of every wizard as they gain levels, learning the craft of a new item becomes a key moment in the career of any spellcaster devoted to artifice. Items can quickly become

closely associated with particular creators, and players may even search out master craftsmen in order to learn the secrets of creating a particularly important item.

Even if you choose not to use item formulas in your campaign, it's recommended that you keep the signature items listed for each magical merchant's installmet rare in order to get the most out of the series. You may also choose to apply the item formula rule to specific types of magic items, such as special abilities for Arms and Armor, Staves and Rods, and Wondrous Items. This keeps scrolls, wands, potions and +1 weapons freely available to characters, while making the creation of permanent items a more unique ability.



Rule 4) Give Items Meaningful Backgrounds:

Attaching names and history to an object may be time consuming, but it's among the most effective ways of making a magic item interesting. Ask yourself a quick question – would you rather be known as the guy wielding a +1 longsword or the Blade of Vistahl, used by a legendary elven hero to slay a thousand orcs? It's a fairly easy choice for any young hero to make.

There are two main problems with giving items this kind of detail. The first is that it's time consuming. D20 games tend to involve a lot of magic items and even if you limit yourself to only generating brief histories for the permanent items, you can still spend hours writing up notes when the PC's hit high levels.

The second problem lies in the mechanics of the game – if the Blade of Vistahl is treated as nothing more than a +1 longsword with an interesting name, its glamor quickly wears off and the details only serve to make the experience of wielding the blade even more hollow. When no one acknowledges the blade is special, or they dismiss the blade because it lacks power it quickly becomes another disappointment to the player with visions of heroes from fantasy literature dancing through his head.

The key to keeping these items interesting is to make their backgrounds meaningful to the characters. As you dole out details about the sword's background, back those details up with game mechanics or value in the campaign. If the Blade of Vistahl grants the wielder a circumstance bonus when dealing with elves of Vistahl's tribe, the players get the chance to see the background of the weapon having concrete effects and may act accordingly. If the tribe is willing to pay a little more than the blade is worth in order to regain possession, you can give the players the opportunity to divest themselves of the weapon

when it is no longer needed but retain a sense that the blade is important to someone else.

No magic item comes out of a vacuum, and all were created for a purpose. Even a simple potion can seem important when this is remembered. A simple *potion of neutralize poison* can seem a mighty prize when the players find out that it was the vial stolen from the page of King Tallarn III, mere hours before the king was killed by poison in his wine. The magic value of the potion may be negligible to high level characters, but the historical value of the vial may be ten times its original asking price. To the family of the knight that originally lost the vial, disgraced and outcast due to the failure of their ancestor, its symbolic value could be even greater.

When other people actively want the item a character is carrying, the player starts to get a sense of its worth. If the history of an item suggests that it is valuable, make that value meaningful beyond the rules for the item. If it means letting the characters have a little extra gold or a circumstance bonus under certain conditions, let them have it and find a way to balance the game elsewhere.

Magic Merchants Primer

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