

THE GAME MASTER'S GUIDE TO EVOLVING MAGIC ITEMS



**Create engaging 5E magic items that
grow with your players!**



Teos Abadia
Alphastream.org

CREDITS

Designed and Developed by:

Teos Abadia, [Alphastream Game Design](#)

Cover Illustrator:

Joyce Maureira (Godbound Art Pack)

Template:

[Simple Microsoft Word Template](#) by Laura Hirsbrunner

Interior Illustrators:

- Throne room, page 2: Jeff Brown (Godbound Art Pack)
- Smith, page 3: Ede László (Worlds Without Number Art Pack)
- Magic items, page 4: Luigi Castellani
- Treasure chest, page 5: David Lewis Johnson
- Key character, page 6: Jenna Fowler
- Obelisk, page 8: © Dean Spencer, used with permission. All rights reserved
- Horizontal items, page 9: David Lewis Johnson
- Hammer, page 10: Dean Spencer
- Characters and items, page 12: Luigi Castellani
- Tome, page 13: Luigi Castellani
- Podium, page 14 and Skull gem, page 15: Publisher's Choice Quality Stock Art © Rick Hershey / Fat Dragon Games
- Smith, page 17: Dean Spencer

Special Thanks

My Thanks to Shelly Mazzanoble and Greg Tito for inviting me to the Dragon Talk podcast. My sincere thanks to the patreon and [Ko-fi subscribers](#) who make this and other upcoming work possible. If you aren't a member and like what I am creating, please consider joining and becoming a part of my next project. Thank you!

- Teos Abadia, [Alphastream.org](#)



Disclaimer: Wondrous items can be addictive. Once you set upon the path of evolving magic items, your players may never allow you to turn back!

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS, D&D, Wizards of the Coast, *Dungeon Master's Guide*, *Xanathar's Guide to Everything*, *Fizban's Treasury of Dragons*, and all other Wizards of the Coast product names and their respective logos are trademarks of Wizards of the Coast in the USA and other countries. This is not an OGL product.

All other original material in this work is copyright 2022 by **Teos Abadia**.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| Credits..... | 2 |
| Introduction | 4 |
| Concept: Making Magic Items Awesome..... | 4 |
| How Much Treasure? How Often? | 4 |
| Dungeon Master's Guide | 5 |
| Xanathar's Guide to Everything..... | 6 |
| Cursed Items | 7 |
| Fun curses..... | 7 |
| Examples | 7 |
| Ending the Curse | 7 |
| Creating Engaging and Rewarding Magic Items | 9 |
| Characteristics, Properties, Quirks, and Other Special Features..... | 9 |
| Player Requests | 10 |
| Magic Doesn't Have to Be Powerful to be Awesome..... | 11 |
| Evolving Signature Magic Items | 12 |
| Designing an Evolving Signature Magic Item | 12 |
| Additional Inspiration..... | 17 |
| Feedback | 18 |
| Where to Find Me | 18 |



INTRODUCTION

If you received this by subscribing to my Patreon of [Ko-fi](#), thank you! In appreciation, I am providing my rules for evolving signature magic items.

This supplement was inspired by my appearance on Dragon Talk, the official 5E podcast! Host Shelly Mazzanoble and I discussed magic items on the *How to DM* segment airing on January 6th, 2022. You can [listen to episode 364 of Dragon Talk here](#).



CONCEPT: MAKING MAGIC ITEMS AWESOME

We all love the wonder of a treasure chest! As players, our anticipation builds as we prepare to open one and wonder what may be inside. I have many such memories from my **earliest** days as a player, marveling as I would lift a tome, sword, or glowing ring from a treasure chest.

As Game Masters (GMs), we ponder different questions. What should be inside that treasure chest? How do we make treasure and magic items compelling? Will a cursed magic item be fun? Are we giving out the right amount of treasure? How do we handle player requests, and characters advancing over time?

These questions are critical, because in so many of our games and campaigns we see how magic items can be dull and uninspiring – the opposite of what we want. We can have too many magic items, and over time characters end up carrying a number of magic items they rarely use or which simply provide statistics and lack narrative engagement.

In this supplement we will first review the rules for how much magic is given out. We then examine how to breathe life into existing magic items, building upon the rules in the *DMG* (*Dungeon Master's Guide*). With that groundwork we then create a new concept called evolving signature items. These rules create flavorful magic items that become a central and even iconic part of a player character and which improve over time. Let's make magic items awesome!

HOW MUCH TREASURE? HOW OFTEN?

Before we can look at our new system, let's make sure we understand the current fifth edition rules.

First, and perhaps most importantly, the *DMG* says that treasure frequency is up to us, the individual GM. The rules are guidelines and it is intended for us to alter them.

Second, the amount of treasure and especially magic items that we introduce will create a particular style of campaign. Ideally, our amount of treasure will match our campaign, from gritty to super-heroic. When choosing the number and power of magic items, have it reflect the campaign.

Beyond this general guidance, we have two sources of specific guidance: the *Dungeon Master's Guide* and *Xanathar's Guide to Everything*.

DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE

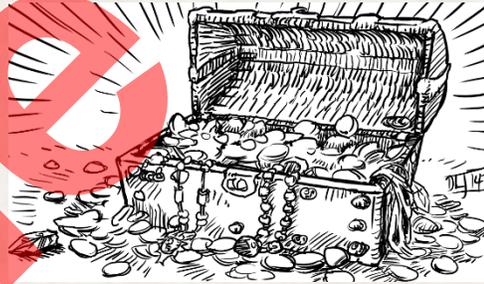
The *DMG* provides several tables that provide chances to find treasure. These tables are based on the CR of the creature. A tougher monster will mean a roll on a table that has a better chance at magical items, and the magical items are likely to be stronger.

The *DMG* distinguishes between individual monsters (two goblins in the hallway) and a hoard (the place where the goblins store their loot, which could be spread across several rooms). So, if we are making a base or lair for creatures, we use the hoard tables. If it's a handful of creatures on patrol or away from their lair, then we use the individual tables. A treasure hoard is encountered, on average, every 5 medium-challenge encounters. This may or may not include magic items (depending on our rolls on the table).

The *DMG* rules don't provide expected amounts. Fortunately, Andy Pearlman and David Hartlage have figured out how much gold and magic we can expect on average.

GOLD:

- Expected gold sadly isn't a simple formula, but if we go to DMDavid.com, [this article will provide a handy table](#) we can reference. It's actually a fair bit of gold.
- Level 1 and 2 are each awarding a total of 94 gold per PC, on average. 3rd level is 190 gold per PC, 4th is 280.
- Levels 5-10 award 3,408 gp per PC per level. That's a steep increase!
- Levels 11-16 award 18,100 gp per PC per level.
- Levels 17-20 award 168,012 gp per PC per level!



MAGIC:

- Andy Pearlman has taken a close look at the nine magic item tables in the *DMG* and the chances each provides for useful items. We can [learn more about the underlying math here](#).
- In general, each level of play, each PC will gain 1 good consumable. Once per every 4 levels, each PC will find 1 good magic item. A good magic item is one that changes the math of the game or otherwise has a measurable impact on play (a +x weapon or implement, a weapon that adds significant damage, armor, and so on). The design of the game is very consistent on this.
- PCs will also find magic items that are fun but not powerful.
- We can use that as a gauge: **1 cool magic item every 4 levels, 1 cool consumable every level! The rest should be fun but not powerful.**

XANATHAR'S GUIDE TO EVERYTHING

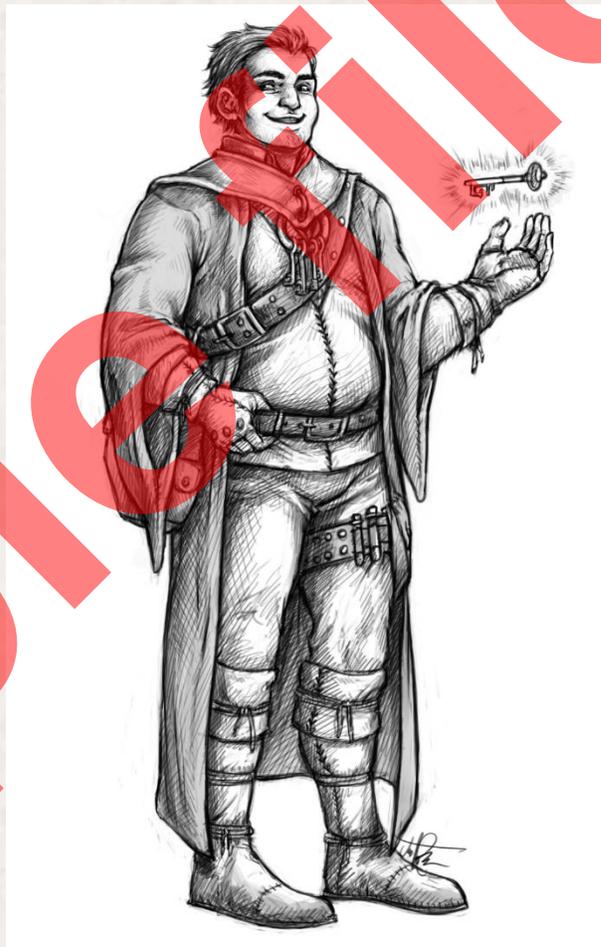
Xanathar's provides us with an alternative to the hoard system. Instead of rolling on random magic item tables using the *DMG*, we can award magic items we select based on rarity tables found in *Xanathar's*.

- The table is organized according to level bands. The magic items can be given out at any point while the characters are in that level range.
- During a particular level band (such as levels 1-4) the table will specify the number of Minor items and Major items.
- As noted in the rules, the difference between Minor items and Major items are the random treasure tables in the *DMG* where the items can be found.
- A second table breaks the items down by rarity. For example, for a particular level range there may be 9 Minor items: 6 common, 2 uncommon, 1 rare.

As a GM in a campaign, we can use the table as a checklist. For each game session, give out an item or two (to the party, not to each character) and check them off the list. We keep doing that until the maximum has been awarded. If we are running a campaign and the table tells us to give out two Major uncommon items and we already awarded two, we shouldn't give out any more Major items until they advance beyond that level band. Conversely, if our characters are nearing the end of a level band and there is still a rare Minor item to give out, it can make sense to give one out in an upcoming gaming session.

While the *DMG* and *Xanathar's* are intended as separate systems where we use the one we prefer, we can also check the items we give out (using the tables in *Xanathar's*) against the *DMG* guidance of 1 good item every 4 levels per PC. That will keep the power level in check.

A final option is to use the rules found in chapter 4 of *Fizban's Treasury of Dragons*. These tables are intended for dragons of different age categories, but we can repurpose them for particularly interesting and powerful creatures.



CURSED ITEMS

Let's quickly address cursed items as they are a special kind of magic item. We want them to be fun, even while posing a challenge. If an item causes a character to always attack at disadvantage, or always attack themselves, that will be very frustrating. And if the characters have access to the spell *remove curse*, cursed items as written won't have much of an effect. Here are some guidelines to address both issues.

FUN CURSES

- A fun cursed item is one that is interesting without being overly frustrating.
- Any drawback still allows the character to function and the player to have agency and fun.
- A fun curse may offer choices.
- A fun curse may offer roleplaying opportunities.
- A cursed item should still be a drawback, and the player and their character should seek to end the curse.
- Cursed items should have special characteristics or quirks (as we discuss later).

EXAMPLES

- The cursed item adds a personality trait that is a drawback. You might now be loud and opinionated. You might seek to take on challenges against which you might not prevail. You might now revere a different deity. The curse could require you to always seek the high ground in combat, even if that is dangerous or foolhardy.
- The curse (particularly a strong curse) may only have a chance of happening. Perhaps the curse activates when you roll a 1 on a skill check. The curse effect is ideally one that will make play interesting. Roll a 1, and you have to loudly explain what went wrong. (That could be a significant detriment if it happens while sneaking up on an enemy!)
- A cursed item may offer a choice. A weapon that thirsts for souls wants you to land the killing blow. If you attack a target at

maximum Hit Points, and a wounded target is within the range of your movement, you must attack at disadvantage. The player has the choice.

- It may be possible to temporarily end the curse's effect at a cost. A cursed weapon might have the drawback that, once you miss in combat you attack at disadvantage until you again hit... or until you give a portion of your life essence (lose a hit die, or take a die or two of damage). A weapon might have a chance to cause you to go berserk, attacking the closest creature. You can choose to strike yourself, rolling with advantage, to end the effect for the next hour.
- A cursed item can have a reliable drawback in order to gain the item's benefit. Magical boots or armor can grant you the *barkskin* spell, but you then can't move as you become rooted to the ground. Both the detriment and benefit might happen automatically if you ever fail to move during a round.

ENDING THE CURSE

The *remove curse* spell is often dissatisfying, because it is all-or-nothing. At low levels, the spell isn't available and curses can last a very long time. At higher levels, it ends curses so quickly that there is barely any impact from a curse. Consider the following:

- The *remove curse* spell can temporarily abate the curse effects for a few minutes or even an hour, but does not remove the curse permanently. A *greater restoration* can provide respite for 24 hours or until the next long rest.
- To permanently remove the curse, something specific must be done, based on the item. For example, a weapon that thirsts for blood may require slaying a specific creature, or brokering peace between two warring creatures.
- Ending the curse may be tied to the item's history. Finding the history can be its own interesting quest to learn what caused the item to become cursed. Characters may need to undo the situation that caused the curse to first appear. Perhaps they must find the corpse of the original owner and give them a