

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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The Teleporting Oddity

By Ed Greenwood

How and where and when did the Forgotten Realms start? What's at the heart of Ed Greenwood's creation, and how does the Grand Master of the Realms use his own world when he runs D&D adventures for the players in his campaign? "Forging the Forgotten Realms" is a weekly feature wherein Ed answers all those questions and more.

Something players in my home Realms campaign have become very used to over the years, but which I usually hesitate to mention in print when I'm writing about the Realms (because it's a complication that deserves a lot of words of explanation, usually not germane to the main discussion at hand), is the prevalence of small, odd items that teleport into and out of the player characters' lives.

Yes, teleporting oddities. Not major MacGuffins useful in unlocking the Doors Unlocked or defeating the Overly Formidable Monster or claiming a throne or some such, mind you, just little items of mysterious heritage and purpose that flit into and out of the possession of characters. Sometimes these are frankly inexplicable (Hauntings? Or what Dr. Seuss once termed happenings "that just happened to happen" and D&D gamers sometimes ascribe to the doings of attentive gods?), and sometimes they are clues to long-ago magical processes or remnants of teleportation systems (such as disguised scroll tubes that flit from ruined and forgotten courts to empty air where a tower once stood).

To be honest, I always included them for one of two reasons: to build creepy atmosphere that would get players wondering or jolt them out of deepening "everything's under control here; we know it all" complacency, and as lures to possibilities the player characters really should look into (in other words, adventure hooks). Doing this blatantly—the treasure map, the lost crown that adventurers have already come across legends about, and therefore know—is clumsy DMing to say the least, but when the item remains cryptic, mysterious, and intriguing for some time after it shows up, or when characters end up carrying around small portable oddments for months or even years of game time, hoping to find the place or "other matching piece" or right creature for their meaning or use to become clear, it can be a lot of ongoing fun. (Not to mention a reminder that the setting is alive around them, not a lifeless backdrop enlivened only by their heroics.)



And the tendency of such mysterious items to teleport away, seemingly of their volition (sometimes to be silently replaced by other items), so they can't be relied upon or so they become doubly mysterious, just adds to the fun. Early on, I sensed that this sideshow, if I was to use it at all, must occur often, not come out of the blue just when the DM wants it to be a plot element and then go away again until the next time it becomes useful, or it really is carrot-and-stick manipulation or becomes perceived as such. It can be a tip-off to players that Something Important Is About to Happen. The sequence of appearing and disappearing items must be, in some ever-morphing sense, "always there," so it maintains an air of mystery yet makes characters feel special (in that their characters seem to be foci for these teleporting items more than, say, the nearest street merchant or stablehand encountered in their travels).

Here are a few of the oddities I've visited on various player characters over the years:

- The battered and bladeless hilt of a sword, obviously old and of beautiful design, fashioned of some unusual gleaming blue alloy. It has words engraved on it in archaic tongues, and it has tiny studs or buttons worked into its design that the fingers of someone grasping the hilt can readily reach. The words must be deciphered and the buttons pushed by trial and error to learn what they do. In most cases this is nothing—and if a player character has a new blade fitted to the hilt, he or she will affect that new blade in the same way as he or she augmented the former one. A few of the buttons do such things as enable the hilt-holder to become weightless (so he or she can walk across a surface of a pond, or a flimsy branch, or a shop awning, and fall as if protected by *feather fall*); make the pommel at the end of the hilt emit a shaft of glowing radiance (a flashlight beam); and project a 4-foot-radius magical silence focused on the hilt (so sounds made

within that globe, such as a bent-heads conversation, won't reach outside the globe). The sword has, of course, a name, a history, and some magical purposes that will be learned only by long and diligent character investigation (such as consulting sages and peering into dusty tomes in old and good libraries as those at ruling courts and in such guilds as Waterdeep's Watchful Order of Magists & Protectors).

- A human-palm-sized clear rock crystal sculpture of a human skull, the eye sockets obviously holders for glass vials that drop down into each socket and then screw into place to hold them there until unfastened. These vials each contain potions of unknown purpose that emanate magic so strongly that they glow with a faint purple radiance whenever in darkness, shadow, or dim lighting. From time to time a dry, sardonic voice speaks lone words or very short phrases in Common out of the skull (obviously a magical effect, since the skull lacks vocal cords or a moveable jaw). Although contact with a spell is one reliable trigger for this speech, other triggers will have to be discovered by characters through trial and misadventure—as will the meanings of the utterances, and why the skull is making them.
- A small, nondescript, unlabeled chapbook or traveling notebook with thin copper-sheet pages that are painted white and so are blank (and can readily be written upon) except for one word stamped deeply into each page, at its head. Characters will have to learn for themselves that each of these words, if spoken aloud by someone holding the book who has smeared a little of their own blood onto the graven word, causes the page to transform into a small but sturdy metal item (a dagger, a grappling hook, a saw capable of gnawing through metal, a lock, a short length of chain, a bowl, a helm, a buckler, a cauldron, and so on) for a limited time—after which it transforms back into the page and won't work again for the same person until an entire month has passed.
- A palm-sized polished ivory plaque (a little larger than a real-world business card) bearing the message, in Common: "Tharlokh has warned that Othmir is not to be trusted. So use the underway rather than the Dragon Gate, and make certain of the ruby locks, for they are trapped to 'reward' fumblers. The password is: AMALVUR."
- A large, round coin of unknown minting, stamped of thick electrum and bearing the same face-on grinning human skull on both sides. One face bears the words in Common "BEWARE AND PREPARE," and the reverse side displays the words "TWO LAST CHANCES" and sometimes glows. About a third of the arc around the edge of the coin has been sharpened to a razor edge. If someone holds the coin so his or her thumbs and/or fingers are touching both skulls at once, and utters the words "Beware and Prepare," the coin sometimes enshrouds that someone in a glowing aura in which he or she can perform activities at four times the speed of the surroundings, and so take more actions, manage a spellcasting, ready and get out items, and so on, much faster than he or she would otherwise be able to do. Yes, the bearer can launch multiple missile attacks, and work multiple spells, but the moment a single spell is cast out of the aura or a single direct attack is made reaching out of it, the effect ends (so someone using a "last chance" could cast four quick, simple spells on themselves or items within the aura, but not hurl more than one magical attack out of the aura). The "two last chances" wording refers to the fact that a given being can make use of this power of the coin only twice in a lifetime.

The great majority of these teleporting items are less magical, less useful, and less powerful than those I've described here. Cryptic partial messages are favorites. I want to stress again: overuse of this sideshow will feel arbitrary and high-handed to most players. Gentle, ongoing weirdness works best.

About the Author

Ed Greenwood is the man who unleashed the Forgotten Realms setting on an unsuspecting world. He works in libraries, and he writes fantasy, science fiction, horror, mystery, and romance stories (sometimes all in the same novel), but he is happiest when churning out Realmslore, Realmslore, and more Realmslore. He still has a few rooms in his house in which he has space left to pile up papers.

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