

Rhyme & REASON

by Scott Roach

What sphinxes employ, the players enjoy

“ . . . the riddle game was sacred and of immense antiquity and even wicked creatures were afraid to cheat when they played at it.”

The Hobbit, J. R. R. Tolkien

Every adventure, on its most basic level, is merely a series of obstacles blocking the characters from attaining their goals. But players will soon become bored if there is not enough variety in the type of challenges with which they are confronted. The scenario in which heroes wade through vast numbers of enemies of every imaginable ilk (as a prelude to the inevitable encounter with some greater malevolent force) works fine the first few hundred times, but then it begins to wear a little thin,

Traps are also useful as a means of testing the mettle of heroes before they reach this final decisive encounter. But it can often be a very tedious business when players are required to specify that their characters are going to poke, prod, smell, dissect, and otherwise examine each object (or NPC, for that matter) they find. Players may also feel cheated if they have taken reasonable precautions but one of their characters still ends up being suddenly killed, wounded or imprisoned. Traps, by their very nature, tend to be capricious and unforgiving.

So what is one to do if he wishes to add some variety to what can often become a rather stale selection of preclimactic adventure filler? Well, how about adding riddles?

A riddle background

History, mythology and literature are filled with examples of epic confrontations that hinged upon successfully cracking a conundrum. Tolkien's novel, *The Hobbit*, contains action of all types, from natural disasters to interracial warfare, but the one confrontation that most stands out in the collective memories of its readers is one not of arms, but of words: the riddle contest between Bilbo and Gollum. It is one thing to engage in a guessing game as an idle diversion in the safety and comfort of one's own home, but it is quite another entirely when trapped deep within the belly of the earth with a slaving fiend who shall surely devour you at the first incorrect guess.

Riddle contests of a similar sort have

been popular since ancient times. There is an apocryphal legend that claims that Lycerus, the king of Babylon, and Nectanebo, the king of Egypt, once engaged each other in a war of riddles. The "war" was won by Lycerus only with the help of Aesop, the famed writer of fables, who was then residing at the royal court.

On a lighter and more modern note, the film, *Monty Python* and the *Holy Grail*, also borrowed a thread from the rich tapestry that is the history of riddles. Before crossing a chasm, the knights in quest of the Grail were first required to pass a quiz ("Answer me these questions three, ere the other side ye see."). If they failed, they were thrown from the cliff to their deaths. Although most of the questions were relatively easy ("What is your quest? What is your favorite color?" etc.), the indecisive and fickle knights were soon catapulted at great velocity into the chasm. This humorous story has its roots in Greek mythology, where the Sphinx guarded the road just outside Thebes in a virtually identical manner. The humorless Sphinx's quiz consisted of a particularly vexing riddle.

Riddles in gaming

While it is probably too much to ask that players be expected to make up their own riddles on the spot, there are still many uses for these frustrating enigmas in fantasy games. Of the general uses of conundrums in fantasy role-playing games, the most common is probably as an obstruction between sections of a dungeon or segments of an adventure. There is a certain advantage in occasionally using a riddle for this purpose rather than the usual physical barriers of guards or mechanically held doors. If an area can only be entered by first surmising the obscure meaning of a curiously worded rhyme, the players will find that they are being challenged on a much more personal level than is normally the case. Rather than relying upon cold tables of statistics and the fickle whims of gravity on an oddly shaped die, as occurs when a thief attempts to pick a lock or a fighter batters a door down, the players must depend on their own wits to gain access to these specifically protected areas.

If there are fortune tellers or sages in your present campaign milieu, you might consider having them dispense some of their wisdom in the form of riddles. The oracles of ancient Greece were said to be very fond of this technique, perhaps because if an augury was later proven to be false, the seer could always claim that the meaning of his pronouncement was merely misinterpreted. The amount of "plausible deniability" provided by such a procedure is something that even modern-day politicians would envy. If, on the other hand, a god truly does communicate some type of divine knowledge to his oracles or clerics in the form of riddles, he is likely to be bothered less frequently. His followers must first divine the meaning of his last sending before they will know if any further questions are appropriate, and the less patient or intelligent of the faithful are unlikely to ask any questions at all. Besides, those who figure out the riddle are likely to be smarter than others—and hence better liked and more appreciated by the deity.

1.



A man of a hundred stood out in the cold,
Exchanged his gay headdress, of colors
most bold,
'or one of pure ivory, just now a day old.
But though freshly dressed, the old man
stood alone—
It was his misfortune to live on a wold.

3.



I'm often held, yet rarely touched;
I'm always wet, yet never rust;
I'm sometimes wagged and sometimes bit;
To use me well, you must have wit.

2.



There's someone that I'm always near,
Yet in the dark I disappear.
To this one only am I loyal,
Though in his wake I'm doomed to toil.
He feels me not (we always touch);
If I were lost, he'd not lose much.
And now I come to my surprise,
For you are he—but who am I?



Solutions

in your campaign to answer this riddle before they can enter the local guild.
8. Sailor on a ship. This could be a clue that characters must visit a sailor in order to complete an adventure. The ship's name could be placed in riddle form, too.

ing the first three words: "In the window," This could serve as a clue to a magical candle, a candle signaling device, or a candle that is part of a trap or device.
6. Chain. This could be a needed item in completing a machine or siege device, or hanging over a pit in a dungeon and climb down it to find a treasure.
7. Key. You might wish to require thieves

project. Then again, perhaps a gynosphinx is simply using this riddle as an excuse to eat passers-by if they fail to guess it.
4. Tongue, again. The meaning of the word "row" to which the rhyme refers is an argument or quarrel. This is another favorite of the man-eating gynosphinx, but it could be a hint that the characters must use speech or argument to solve a problem.
5. Candle. Short riddles like this are often difficult to guess, so you might want to add some other clues, such as emphasis-

Players might also be able to benefit from knowing a puzzle or two of their own. The next time a favorite character is caught in a situation where he is up against a vastly superior (but vain and egotistical) enemy, such as a dragon, perhaps he can barter for his life by challenging the intelligence of this foe with a particularly nasty conundrum. Good game masters are always looking for excuses not to kill characters who have fallen into such sticky situations. This being the case, it has not been unheard of for sympathetic judges to allow even creatures as malevolent and powerful as dragons to become so perplexed or distracted with a difficult poser as to allow their would-be prey to take the initiative and escape. (Remember the tale of Scheherazade and *The Arabian Nights*.) There is, however, an extremely fine line between appealing to a dragon's vanity and offending his sensibilities (i.e., lining the walls of his stomach!).

Another dilemma that often arises in many campaigns occurs when the adventurers come into possession of a new

magical item, such as a wand or a staff. How are they to find the trigger word that allows the item to function? If the characters are of a relatively low level or are very far removed from civilization, they might not have access to the spells or research materials that are required to find the key word or phrase.

However, if the protective case that the wand was found in has a rhyme carved upon it that seems to be of some veiled significance, then the game master has a method of allowing the characters to discern the information that they are searching for without having to give it to them outright. This is particularly effective if the magical device has several scattered pieces that must be found and assembled over the course of many adventures before it can be used (such as a rod of seven parts in the AD&D® game). A separate line of a riddle could be carved into each section. In such a manner, not only would the trigger word be revealed, but by arranging the fragments in a way so as to form a coherent verse, the order

in which the device must be assembled might also be indicated.

These are just a few of the infinite number of ways in which riddles may be incorporated into a fantasy role-playing campaign. The reader is encouraged to use any that appeal to him, or to use his own creativity to come up with applications that he feels are appropriate.

A riddle sampler

Unfortunately, there does not seem to be any one good source of riddles that lend themselves to use in a fantasy role-playing game. Most books of "riddles" are actually filled with puns (Q: From what country do fish come? A: Finland). Surprisingly, one of the best collections of high-quality riddles turns out to be the aforementioned contest in *The Hobbit*.

The following are some original riddles, provided with answers and suggestions for their use in fantasy games. Good luck solving them!

4.

The only tool which sharper grows
Whenever used in any row.

5.

In the window she sat weeping.
And with each tear her life went seeping.



6.



I'm not really more than holes tied to more
holes;
I'm strong as good steel, though not stiff as
a pole.

7.

I've little strength but mighty powers;
I guard small hovels and great towers,
But if perchance my master leaves,
He must ensure he safeguards me.



8.

The floor's on top, the roof's beneath,
And from this place I rarely leave.
Yet with the passing of each day,
A new horizon greets my gaze.



Bibliography

- Lawson, J. Gilchrist. *The World's Best Conundrums and Riddles of All Ages*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1924. This book and the following ones are good sources of riddles for your fantasy role-playing campaign.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Hobbit*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1966. pages 81-86.
- Withers, Carl., and Dr. Sula Benet. *The American Riddle Book*. New York: Albelard-Schuman, 1966.

2. Your shadow. If you want to give the party a warning that they are being followed and watched, or that there is a traitor in the party, then this riddle might be handy. Perhaps the heroes are being followed by the monster-type shadows from the AD&D or D&D® games, too.

3. Tongue. Maybe this is a clue to a secret somatic gesture the characters must give (licking out their tongues), or maybe it refers to a spell or potion component needed to complete a wizard's alchemical

1. Tree. It is late autumn, and snow has just fallen over the brightly colored leaves. Trees, of course, live to a great age and would be a rarity on a grassy plain (i.e., a world). Perhaps a treasure is buried here, or a dungeon entrance is close by, or a creature the characters must meet lives in the tree (perhaps they must meet the tree itself).