

Delivered by breath, scares heroes to death: What is it?

The Answer is ...

the Riddle!

by Mark Anthony

Editor's note: As sometimes happens here at DRAGON® Magazine, we received two articles on the same topic, each of which complemented the other quite well. In this case, the topic was riddles. We hope you enjoy these two perspectives.]

Alive without breath,
As cold as death;
Never thirsty, ever drinking,
All in mail never clinking.

J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*

Riddles in the dark made for a rather nasty adventure as far as a poor hobbit named Bilbo Baggins was concerned—and they can do the same for player characters in fantasy role-playing games. If your heroes are bored with fighting the same smelly orcs, toss a riddle or two at them. Even the most calloused adventurer will start to sweat when it's "Answer—or else!" (In case you're wondering, the answer to the riddle above, as Gollum well knew, is "fish.")

Riddles and perplexing puzzles of many sorts are a perfect means to liven up an adventure when role-playing has become routine. Unlike tossing in new twists on the same old physical dangers ("Okay, folks, this time it's a plaid dragon!"), riddles provide a new kind of challenge—a mental one—that can restore vigor to a jaundiced campaign. And riddles provide wonderful obstacles for low-level characters who can't go out and fight the big stuff, but who are tired of killing a score of kobolds in order to get twelve copper pieces.

Riddles involve players directly with the action going on. It's not just rolling dice and looking at tables; suddenly it's the players themselves and their own abilities that determine whether or not they'll make it through the adventure, find the treasure, rescue the princess, or even escape with their lives! In this way, riddles add a dimension of reality to an adventure, making the excitement of the situation more vivid in the player's mind, which makes for more creative role-playing.

The riddles there are

There are many kinds of riddles and puzzles a crafty game master (GM) might use. The most basic sort is the What-Am-I? riddle, a bit of poem or prose that describes some sort of object, place, or event. These riddles generally have one answer and often use vague language and rhyme to beguile the would-be answerer. Bilbo's "fish riddle" is one example. Try this for another:

In daytime I lie pooled about,
At night I cloak like mist.
I creep inside shut boxes and
Inside your tightened fist.
You see me best when you can't see,
For I do not exist.



In case you haven't got the answer, here's a different sort of puzzle, but the answer is the same as in the riddle above:

Devils and rogues know nothing else,
save starlight.

Have you given up, or were they too easy? In either case, the answer is "darkness." The first riddle merely describes the attributes of darkness, though in a rather roundabout way. The second is a word puzzle; take the first letter of every word, and you have it. This one could have been even harder if the letters required rearrangement. I'll explain in more depth later how I made these and other riddles. First, here are a few other types of riddles worth mentioning.

One is the prophecy. This is similar to a What-Am-I? riddle except that it describes a situation that lies sometime in the future. Usually a prophecy cannot be understood until the appropriate time or place has been reached, and it's up to the clever adventurer to realize when the prophecy has been fulfilled and then react accordingly. Say that the great hero Kaladan follows a prophecy spoken over him at his birth by a witch, telling him that he will meet his destiny if he ever reaches a particular place. The prophecy states:

Your doom awaits you in a land
That treads upon the sea.
No matter where you turn and stand
One bearing will there be.
Here all colors fade to one;
Unclouded eyes can't see.
And sideways always runs the sun
Around your destiny.

One day, our hero journeys far into the northlands of the world, where he travels

over a frozen ocean into the white, blind-
ing land of the eternally setting sun. If he's
clever, he will realize that this is the place
the prophecy described: the North Pole.
(Or did the prophecy mean the South
Pole?) If he's not clever—well, let's hope his
doom doesn't surprise him too horribly.
While they can describe a variety of sub-
jects, all prophecies should have one thing
in common: excruciating vagueness! After
all, that's what keeps the players on their
toes, and it saves the GM from being too
exacting in setting up adventures for the
future. Note that the hero is not guaran-
teed to reach his destiny (he might be
killed beforehand), and he is certainly not
guaranteed to triumph in the end!

A creative GM will use many other sorts
of riddles and puzzles to baffle his players
as well. Secret messages are a particularly
fun method. Perhaps it's a parchment with
a hidden message (perhaps a riddle in
itself) written in lemon juice. The message
is invisible, but when held over a fire (use
care when doing this, of course!), the
lemon juice darkens, thereby revealing the
message. Or perhaps it's a map that, when
folded in a special way, reveals an all-new
terrain, showing the way to a dungeon
entrance. Or maybe the players are forced
to solve a mathematical problem, a rebus,
or a musical code in which notes are let-
ters. The possibilities are limited only by
the GM's imagination and deviousness.

Of course, riddles should be limited to
the known abilities of the players. For
example, don't use a musical code when
no, one in the group knows how to read
music. And riddles of the What Have I Got
In My Pocket? type, though one once
worked well for a certain hobbit, are
impossible to solve and quite unfair. How-
ever, the GM shouldn't hesitate to make
riddles varied and difficult. The best rid-
dles are those that are perfectly solvable
but only with a goodly amount of creative
thinking.

Though riddle types abound, ways in
which to use riddles are even more plenti-
ful. Riddles can replace almost any sort of
physical barrier in an adventure—
particularly monsters and traps—that
might hinder characters on their way to
the treasure or other goal. And riddles,
too, should follow the same rules for
placement as both monsters and traps.
Riddles in the upper dungeon levels are
easier, but deep down where the hoard of
gold is hidden, the riddles should become
more complex, more difficult, and more
deadly if not solved.

To add to the suspense of riddle solving,
players should have to discover the an-
swer in real time, not game time. Of
course, some riddles are long term. A
prophecy, for example, might not be solv-
able for months or even years of game
time, and a riddle-map that leads the way
to a dragon's lair need not be solved until
the players wish to go there. But other
riddles can and should be more immedi-
ate; especially when the stakes are high, to

add tension and excitement to the game.
It's difficult to be bored when one has just
three minutes to answer a djinn's riddle or
else become trapped in the creature's
bottle. And a GM will never see his players
so involved with an adventure as when
their favorite high-level characters must
solve a puzzle in five minutes or be cast
into the depths of the Abyss. Riddle-
solving in real time is an experience your
players will not soon forget!

Riddles are also perfect for starting off a
new adventure. One character may have
an ancient map willed to her by a mysteri-
ous great uncle. The map leads to a fabled
temple. But there's a riddle on the map:

With this ancient map,
you must find your own way.
Don't heed the directions;
they'll lead you astray.
If first it seems odd,
then its help will be naught;
Infinity sideways
means nothing but ought.
If you lack direction,
can you go amiss?
Perhaps you might wish
to reflect upon this.

This riddle gives a set of instructions con-
cerning the use of the map. The first coup-
let lets the readers know something's up.
The second tells them to ignore odd num-
bers and to treat eights ("infinity side-
ways") as zeros, and the third couplet says
that the directions on the map are mir-
rored. With the riddle solved, the adven-
turers can be off to find the temple.
Solving a mystery or puzzle such as this
provides a great motive for the start of a
group's adventures and adds an extra
dimension to the usual orc-den raid.

Riddles also work particularly well when
a group has both beginning and experi-
enced players. Normally, the beginning
players will be forced to sit out on the
sidelines as the more seasoned players
take over the adventure, knowing just
which spells their characters must use,
when to look for secret doors, and how
the GM's mind works. Riddles, however,
even 'the score, taking away any advan-
tages an experienced player might have. In
fact, with the fresh way of looking at role-
playing adventures most new players
have, they often tend to be the best riddle-
solvers of all! By incorporating riddles into
an adventure, the GM can help the begin-
ning player feel like he can actually do
something to help the group rather than
have his character simply cower at the
rear of the marching order. This in turn
helps new players to get and stay psyched
(as we like to say) about the game.

Working on the same principle, GMs can
use riddles to get an unruly campaign
back under control. If the players have
become too powerful and can kill just
about anything sent their way, toss them
something they can't shake a sword at—a
riddle (or, preferably, lots of them, even a

whole dungeon of riddles!). A holy sword
or artifact will be of no avail in the solving
of a riddle. The players suddenly have to
think for themselves instead of tossing a
few dice. Adventure and challenge are
back in the game.

Riddles can also live up a hack-and-
slash campaign by providing an alternative
to winning by might. GMs can send their
players the message that mind really can
prevail over muscle; nonwarrior types
simply love this. Instead of a squad of
skeletal knights guarding the gate of a
forbidden city, how about a pair of pon-
derous bronze gates inscribed with a
cryptic riddle? (Don't forget what an inter-
esting time the Fellowship of the Ring had
getting through the west gate of Moria!)
And, instead of the heroes confronting a
powerful wizard and absorbing all the
spells he can send their way before hack-
ing him down in his tracks, perhaps an
ancient codex spells out another way they
can bring about his demise:

Both king and horse have this, of course,
But you'll want neither of them,
perforce.

If they're clever, the adventurers will
realize that rain (as opposed to the reign
of a king and a horse's reins) might be
deadly to this particular mage. They might
then devise some clever ruse to entrap
him in a rain shower rather than simply
cutting him to bits.

Riddles don't have to be so straightfor-
ward, though. In fact, players can be
riddled without even knowing it, if they're
not paying attention. Names are a perfect
medium for hidden riddles, both those of
people and places. One way is to re-
arrange or reverse the letters of a word or
a name, thereby creating a new name (an
anagram). For example, a group of charac-
ters may just have escaped their worst
enemy, Doomfell, when they happen upon
a merry merchant named Lom de Lof
going their same direction. By the time
they realize what "Lom de Lof" spells
when the letters are transposed, it may be
too late, and Doomfell may have them all!

Name riddles can also reveal something
about the place or person that they name.
A haggard wanderer called Rex might
really be a king. And a band of adven-
turers searching for the legendary Black
Valley may or may not think of anything
unusual when they come to a town called
Ebonvale. Riddles can be everywhere,
limited only by the GM's discretion and
imagination. The more riddles of this kind,
the richer, more meaningful, and more
mysterious the fantasy campaign world
becomes.

Riddles also provide a convenient way
for the GM to give a group of players some
desired piece of information without hav-
ing to be too obvious about it. One of the
characters could come across a strange
message carved into a wall by a warrior's
dying hand. Another might find a scrap of

parchment with part of a riddle (even better than the whole thing) which could provide a clue to finding a mage's cache. GMs won't have to wrack their brains to come up with ways to introduce riddles into an adventure. After all, they don't require much logic. In fact, the players don't even need to find out just how the riddle got there. That can be another mystery.

Making them up

No GM should feel intimidated at the task of creating riddles. With a little imagination (which every GM has already) and a few easy steps, thinking up riddles is no more difficult than creating any other part of a role-playing adventure.

One of the first things to remember is that your absolute best friend is a thesaurus. A thesaurus is loaded with plenty of obscure words with which to stump your players. A rhyming dictionary can also be of help if you get stuck when making rhyming riddles. With these two tools by your side, the rest is just thinking up an idea and setting it down.

In creating What-Am-I? riddles, the first step is to think of what you want to riddle about. This sounds awfully basic, but consider your ideas carefully so that the riddle describes precisely what you want to detail. Once you have an object, idea, or concept that you think is describable, interesting, and applicable to the situation

in which it will be used, you're ready to begin. For example, in a riddle I mentioned earlier, I chose darkness as my subject (perfectly suitable for a riddle in some subterranean cavern). The next step was to merely list some of its attributes. In my case, I wrote down:

- covers everything at night;
- shadows in daytime;
- inside things, like boxes;
- see it when eyes are shut; and
- an absence of light, doesn't really exist.

After this step, I was ready to arrange this information in sentences—not a riddle yet, just a descriptive set of lines in an order in which I liked them. I wrote:

- It's in shadows in daytime.
- It covers the world at night.
- It can hide inside things, like a box.
- It can be seen when you shut your eyes.
- It doesn't really exist.

That wouldn't really stump anyone, but now comes the final step. Put the sentences in as vague a language as possible, use obscure words for common ones, and use literary devices like metaphor and analogy (comparisons), puns (plays on words), rhymes, and personification (giving an inanimate object a sense of life). For more information about using any of these devices, consult any standard English writing manual.

In my case, I had the object describe itself in the first person. I also replaced

"being" verbs with "action" verbs; instead of "being" in shadows, I had it "pooled about." In the place of rather ordinary words, I put mysterious sounding ones that also helped to personify darkness, giving it a life of its own; instead of "covers," I used "cloak," and instead of "hide," I used "creep," making it sound more devious. I also stuck in various descriptive phrases such as "cloak like mist" and "inside your tightened fist" purely for sake of rhythm and rhyme.

The end result was an interesting and usable riddle. If this sounds difficult, just try it yourself. To go from plain sentences to riddle-language, simply turn on your "lofty language" circuit (everybody has one) and thumb through your thesaurus. You'll have no problem whatsoever.

Other puzzles and riddles are just as easily created. For a word puzzle, pick a code pattern after you choose your idea. This type of riddle must have a fixed coding system. It can be complex and difficult, but it must be logical and regular in order to be solvable. In the example of this type I gave earlier, I decided to make a sentence in which each word began with a letter from the word "darkness." The next step was to simply think up a set of words that began with those letters. A thesaurus is a great help. Don't worry if the sentence doesn't make complete sense. Riddles are supposed to be cryptic, anyway!

To make the riddle more complex, I could have created a puzzle in which the first letter of each word had to be rearranged to get the answer (an "anagram acronym"). Or the last letter in each word could have been the important one. Or every third word could have been pulled out to form a message. Or the message may have been written backwards. The possibilities are limitless. Remember: No matter how plain and apparent the pattern seems to you, the players have no idea just what type of riddle you've given them. They may try to solve it as a What-Am-I? riddle when the superficial meaning has nothing to do with the answer at all, and it's the hidden code that's important.

Creativeness can yield a multitude of other original puzzle and riddle ideas. A seemingly ordinary message could have a symbol embossed upon it that shows up only with a pencil-rubbing. GMs might buy blank, pre-cut jigsaw puzzles and create their own puzzle maps. A new message may be revealed when a parchment is folded in a certain way. Players will have a great (if sometimes frustrating) time solving any of these and countless other riddles. Having actual physical objects to manipulate brings the game to life in a new way and gives the player a more vivid feel for their character's situation.

Any way they're used, riddles can restore life and excitement to role-playing, putting brand new twists on the same old challenges. So if your players are looking for a little new adventure, the answer is—the riddle!

Food Fight Erupts in Neighborhood Supermarket

Carrots, broccoli, tomatoes, even brussels sprouts were flying into grocery carts as **The Great American Food Fight Against Cancer** broke out in area supermarkets.

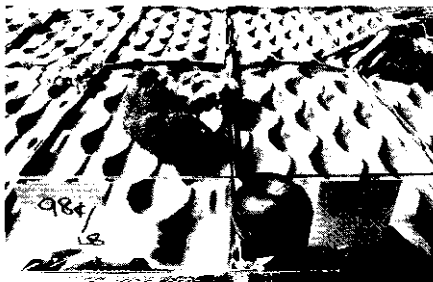
Consumers are reacting to studies which show that foods high in vitamins A and C, high in fiber and low in fat, may help reduce cancer risk.

"My husband is getting whole grain toast tomorrow morning," one shopper declared. A mother was seen throwing carrots into her bag. "Snacks for the kids," she said.

Grocers are, of course, delighted. "This food fight is pretty exciting," said one produce manager, "and there's nothing for me to clean up!"

The American Cancer Society, sponsor of the Food Fight, has more information. Call **1-800-ACS-2345**.

And, be on the lookout for Community Crusade volunteers armed with shopping lists.



Produce section after recent food fight.



Public Service Message