

Things your intelligent item is doing behind your back

Whether it's the magical talking sword you've found in the dragon's hoard, or the advanced AI of your gun, many players find themselves holding in their hand an item that is, in a manner of speaking, an NPC. We won't be discussing the question of how to portray such an NPC – that's a question for another time – and instead let's ask the question, what does this item want to do? With an emphasis on the things its *already doing*, *without you knowing about it*.

These items can be inserted into the campaign pre-planned, or you can decide to retroactively treat an intelligent item as having such intentions that no one suspected so far (maybe they didn't even know its intelligent!). These suggestions are suitable both for sentient magical items in fantasy worlds, and for artificial intelligent in sci-fi settings; some of the suggestions are more suitable for “lesser” intelligences, those who aren't actually sentient, lacking an internal world.

In order for the item to be able to further their interests without the character's knowledge, they must be able to operate by themselves.

In a fantasy setting, the item might be telepathic, with the ability to cast Charm Person or Dominate Person, or having an unlimited access to Message, thus giving it an access to the world, behind the character's back. It's possible the character doesn't even know the item is capable of casting these spells. Anyway, the item's declared Purpose is probably quite different from its actual Purpose (which is, of course, to further its secret agenda).

In a futuristic setting, a smart agent software can be installed in cybernetics, equipment, or any other system. Thanks to the prevalence of wireless connection, it's very easy for the agent to send and receive information, making them a very real risk.

It Wishes You the Best

Yes, your *Bag of Holding* indeed has its own agenda, and the computer in your right arm has a secret daemon program, but it's only for your own good. The item is trying to help you; it just doesn't want you to know, or maybe it can't tell you about it. Here are a few suggestions for the things your item might be trying to do, and the reasons for the need of secrecy:

- **Manufacturer's Instructions:** The item's creator forced it to keep its activities hidden. Maybe it's a hacker working against the big corporations, installing helpful software inside their components, to delete malware left by the corps inside the device. Or maybe the Great Wizard ordered the hat she gave you to cast charm spells on people you'll meet, to help you in your journey, but without it being discovered, since the council's rules forbid her to help you directly.
Despite its good intentions, the intelligent item might do more harm than good, and maybe that's how it's hidden agenda is revealed to its owner. Maybe a new generation of malware is so deeply ingrained in the software, that when the daemon tries to erase them, it deletes everything, disabling your gun completely. Or maybe the hat casts charm even on your fellow adventures. Also, because the owner doesn't know that someone agrees with him only because they were secretly charmed, he'll be quite surprised when they suddenly change their mind!
- **Best of Intentions:** The item thinks you're a great pal, and would love to help you... but it thinks you won't agree with the *method* it chose. Maybe your *Slippers of Spider Climbing* think the city's laws are merely a suggestion, and so during the night they sneak into other rooms of the inn, stealing money and

placing it in your purse. After all, you'll do great and important things with this money. Or maybe your digital visor thinks you should only see a wonderful and glorious world, and so, sometimes, they make a piece of ugliness vanish from your sight. It might give you a somewhat skewed outlook, but hey, they think you're not losing anything important, so that's fine!

While at first the item's behaviour might be nothing more than an annoyance, the big question is, what will happen after you discover the item's actions. It'll probably stop if you ask it to, but... it might then start doing something *else* secretly, since that's simply in its nature. Or maybe it'll get resentful and bitter, since it was only trying to help, and what's your problem, sheesh. Anyway, after it kept *one* thing hidden from you, it's now clear that your item *can* keep secrets from you. Maybe even betray you. Will you ever trust it again?

It Plots Against You

This item is actively working against your agenda, maybe even trying to bring you harm. It keeps its actions a secret, because if you'll discover them, you'll be *very* unhappy – and will try to stop the item's plot. Maybe the item has special properties that allows it to keep its actions secretive, or a special kind of attack it can direct against you, if and when its plot is revealed.

- **It's Nothing Personal:** The item tries to sabotage the workings of an organization that you, or someone close to you, are a part of. Maybe the new IC breaker software you bought is actually also a spy virus (last time you're



buying from Johnny "Filthy Liar" Samosa!), planted by a rival corp that wants to gain information about your Mr. Johnson, the person who sent you to do the job. Whenever you activate the software, it does a quick search of the last places you've visited in meat space, in order to try and deduce where you usually meet that person.

Or maybe the item is trying to advance an ancient plot that isn't related to you directly. Maybe the telepathic crown you've found in the Tomb of the Eleven Saints is actually an escape plan they left for themselves, hundreds of years ago. The moment someone starts using it, it wakes up, immediately starting to gently push its owner to go and search for necromancers, in order to implant a suggestion in their mind: resurrect the Eleven Saints.

- **It's Very Personal:** Your intelligent item wants to harm *you*, and it's probably planning your death. It isn't just a dumb cursed item, one that is simply harmful by nature, but a sentient being that hates you personally and wishes you only the worst. Maybe you did something it considered forbidden, and because intelligent items tend to think in extremes, it decided you must be brought down (maybe at one time it wanted to help you, but you insulted it in some way, or "proved you're unworthy to hold it"). Or maybe the item is actually the agent of a villain, a known enemy of yours, who made sure the item falls in your hands in order to spy on you, or sabotage your actions – especially the kind of feats you're known for.

Anyway, it tries to make things harder for you. It can be a telekinetic amulet that triggers traps ("I'm telling you, I've rigged the cog, I have no idea how it got loose!"). Maybe while you try to sneak into a facility, your mobile phone quietly calls the facility's security centre, allowing them to listen in on the plans you lay out to your friends.

Or maybe the item itself is the enemy, one who was ready to go so far in their revenge, that they implanted their soul – after their death, or maybe even in life – into a useful magical item, knowing you'll want to use it. In a technological world, this can be a brain scan ("shadow") of the enemy, or maybe a full upload (requiring taking out the brain and dissecting it into thin slices). The enemy might even be able to keep managing their evil organization, leaving secret messages at pre-agreed upon locations or giving hints to secret agents by way of certain behaviours.

This Has Nothing to Do with You, At All

Look, with all due respect, the item just has its own thing going on, okay? Maybe it doesn't want you to know about it, because it's afraid you'll tell it to stop ("You're a helmet! Stop wasting my time, helmet!"), or maybe it still isn't ready to reveal its plans, waiting for them to be complete first.

- **I've Got This Thing:** The item wants to do something, and it suspects you won't approve, or maybe it doesn't think about you at all, figuring you're not actually relevant to its plans. Maybe your magical shield wants to keep an eye on the knightly Order it used to belong to, but you were never very knightly, so it doesn't think you'll consider its desires worthy of attention, and decides to try to accomplish them on its own. Or maybe your drone's auto-pilot system shows interest in the world of pro-flight races, and spends some of its time doing extreme manoeuvres, reminiscent of those of Haflo Sparks, the pro-flier it admires. (And it already bought tickets to the next race – now it only needs to invent some reason for you to go there).
- **Go Figure How an Object Thinks:** Sentient items have an alien mind, with a different reasoning from our own, and it's hard to understand what they want or why they even want it. Maybe your sword thinks aesthetics are above all – even above your health, by the way – and so if you're hurt on one side, it'll make sure you're hurt on the other side as well, in a similar way. Symmetry is very important!

Another option is to have the item behave in a truly alien way, with no discernible reasoning at all. This option, however, isn't recommended, as the players tend to enjoy the process of slowly coming to understand how the item thinks, and after figuring it out, attempting to direct the item's behaviour in useful ways. If the item acts in ways no one can ever understand, the mystery can't ever be figured out.

Using the Loyalty Optional Rule

A sentient item with a hidden agenda will avoid open conflict (DMG 216) with its owner, since, well, its agenda is hidden. However, its behaviour is still very much influenced by the way it's treated.

You can use the Loyalty optional rule (DMG 93) to simulate an intelligent item's willingness to refrain from misbehaving. The item's maximum and starting loyalties are calculated based on the character holding it, its owner. Give the item a Special Purpose (DMG 216) that fits its hidden motivation, and use it as the basis to determine when to add or subtract 1d4 from its loyalty score.

An item with a loyalty score of 0 or less is going to start to misbehave, or increase the frequency of its misdeeds. At that point, it might also start to show less concern for keeping its activities secret, its misbehaviour becoming more and more obvious.



Three Suggestions for things your intelligent item is doing behind your back is by Eran Aviram. Eran is the writer for Up to Four Players; the Lead Hebrew Translator for D&D and other games; produces the weekly podcast On the Shoulders of Dwarves, the main RPG podcast in Hebrew; and used to own a gaming store, it was awesome.

Up to Four Players is a webcomic about tabletop gamers and games, by Aviv Or and Eran Aviram. Check it out: www.uptofourplayers.com

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