

Three Suggestions for...

Alternatives to Potions

Potions are a lot of fun. Whether a Healing Potion, Potion of Giant Strength or Potion of Invisibility, it's usually the cheapest magical item around, and for a simple reason – you can use it only once. After you drink it, it's gone, and its effect is usually personal and temporary.

Potions provide an interesting tactical element. Which potions should I have on me? When should I drink them? These are interesting questions in every action-heavy game. However, potions tend to suit only a specific fantasy setting, one that includes magic or alchemy in the style of the European Middle Ages. If you wish to enjoy potions in a different atmosphere – and especially in a different genre – you should turn them into something else, something that isn't a liquid in a bottle.

It's rare to find one-time abilities in a game that includes sci-fi elements, since we're used to technology that works reliably and continuously. It's still possible, though, so some of the following suggestions attempt to give legitimacy to one-use items in technology-heavy genres.

You can also take inspiration from the eponymous cyphers in the Cypher System. A cypher is the name given to any piece of technology that has a one-use effect. Unlike the classic potion, many cyphers have an area effect, rather than a personal one. In the suggestions below I chose to focus on effects that influence the character herself (like most potions do, although there are of course exceptions to the rule) but most of these suggestions can be used as for environmental effects as well.



Something You Destroy

Items in this category are simply no longer useable after you smash, break or crush them, the same way a potion bottle contains a single portion of drink.

- **Nature's Gift:** Nature already did most of the work for us, we just need to find the right *thing* and release the energies or components it holds. In a fantasy world, this can be a golden crystal holding unique energies, which are unleashed when you break it and engulf you. There may even be a few different

types of crystals, with different effects; many dwarves earn a living mining, polishing, and sorting them. In a sci-fi setting, maybe some parts of some alien flora, or the internal organs of alien creatures, which contain useful enzymes, which have a one-time temporary effect on the body when consumed or injected (Later, your metabolism gets rid of them in the usual way).

In any case, the magical or technological capabilities of the local culture are not sufficiently advanced to trigger this ability in an artificial way. In other words, there's no choice but to mine the crystals, collect the mushrooms from deep within the woods, or set out and kill the Sabre-toothed Shramsh in order to harvest its liver.

- **So Much Effort:** In order to gather the magical energies, or to force the organic molecules to fold just right, someone needs to invest a lot of time and effort. This isn't that different from the requirements of making a classic potion, but the process is different and likewise the needed skills. Whatever it is that you actually do, it requires a lot of work to prepare, and then a smaller effort to trigger the effect. The skilled creators of these objects probably get a lot of appreciation in their society.

For example, the magic might originate in small astral spirits, with animalistic instincts. In order to gain their effects, you must first tempt them into an origami prison, and there's a very specific and delicate origami design to draw in and hold each type of spirit. In order to release the spirit, you simply unfold the paper, then the spirit's magical energies enter you for a moment, before it returns to the astral plane.

In a sci-fi world, maybe there are strange metallic materials with an unusual ionizing radiation. You need very precise equipment and a lot of understanding in metallurgy in order to fold thin sheets of metal into a small cube so the magnetic power within it can be released when you squeeze it (or maybe it's a powder that you need to spread over yourself, and it reacts when coming in touch with oxygen).

Something Inside You

You probably can't see it, but there's something inside of you. You installed it within yourself, and there it shall remain until you choose to use it – after which it will dissolve. Unlike a potion, this one-use ability can't be transferred between members of the party. On the other hand, it's a lot harder to take this ability away from you, and it's not likely to spoil or break in an accident. Even if you're imprisoned and all of your equipment is taken, this ability is still available to you – and that's usually the time and place where a powerful one-use ability is especially useful.

- **Delayed Blessing:** Praise Kato, the goddess of prosperity! Kato's Elder Priest imparted her blessing on you, and when you'll need it, just call out to her and you'll gain a miraculous ability. You should choose carefully when to use this blessing, for it will only come once! (Until you return to an Elder Priest and convince them to give you another one. Or maybe, if you find the correct shrine and perform the required sacrifice. This type of blessing might be especially common among specific classes or cultures; for example, maybe most paladins use these blessings, while other adventurers mostly use potions. You might be able to "hold" several blessing, the same way you can keep different types of potions or several potions of the same kind.

- **Total Recall:** If the desired effect isn't overtly physical in nature, it might in fact be the right mental state at the right time. In D&D, for example, you can express healing, advantage on rolls, or Proficiency as overcoming pain, sudden realization or unexpected memory resurfacing. Maybe the equivalent of a healing potion is the readiness to accept the pain and carry on with a sudden rush of adrenaline; or maybe the ability to cloak your mind from a Detect Thoughts spell is simply keeping a cool head at the right time, thanks to the brave words your father told you once. Instead of a Potion of Escape, which gives you excellent lock pick ability with no need for tools (quite useful when you're in jail), maybe you just suddenly remember a suggestion your mentor gave you once, or the great advice you've heard during the days you spent in dirty taverns, something that's really useful right now, for *this* kind of lock. Like potions, and like the rest of the suggestions here, this effect needs to be purchased in advance – it doesn't just pop out of nowhere at a convenient time. It should be planned *outside* of the story, between player and GM, and the payment might be more amorphous than usual: Maybe you paid your mentor extra (since she was such a great teacher), or maybe you spent a lot of money buying drinks and gambling while hanging around in those taverns. Maybe after an important emotional event, you tell the GM you're spending money or time to deal with it – order a drawing that'll remind you of it, go for a short vacation to recuperate, etc. In exchange, you've agreed with the GM on a fair price to pay for a specific effect that you can one day use as a brilliant idea, a useful memory, or emotional surge.
- **Installed and Ready:** This is a capsule, or maybe even a tiny creature, that you've implanted in yourself so that one day you'll be able to utilize its effects. It may be the egg of a magical or alien parasite, lurking beneath the skin of your arm, and when you break it with your fingers (like popping a zit, only a bit harder), the chemical elements within it spread through your body and influence you in a wondrous way for a few moments. Or maybe you switched one of your teeth with a fake one in which there's a capsule filled with one dose of magical powder, which you can blow like a Potion of Fire Breath. This is basically Something You Destroy (see above), prepared so it'll be inside your body. Or maybe there's no choice *but* to place it within your body – the parasite eggs, for example, can only stay alive when hosted inside a living human body.

Something You Activate

This device should simply be used as normal, the way it was intended to. For some reason, its special ability only works once. Maybe its battery is very limited, or the magic is quick to evaporate. The device remains the way it was, so it can be recharged or reenchanted, a process that requires a lot of time and resources – in an amount equal to the cost of a potion.

These suggestions are especially suited to be used as environmental effects.

- **It Works as Intended:** Your magical sword is capable of more than just hitting enemies. Three purple gems are affixed to the hilt, and you can activate one to turn to mist for a while. This power doesn't refresh by itself, you must use special oils to polish the gems or have a skilled blacksmith replace them with new ones. Or maybe your glasses are covered with a special chemical coating that can be activated with fierce shaking, and then you can see through them in near complete darkness. The coating evaporates, you'll need to recoat them later. In these cases, the tool has a regular use, with an extra one-use and perishable ability, that doesn't affect the regular use.

Alternatively, the device might be intended to be used for this one and only ability. Maybe it's a magma gun, that fires one fireball after which it must be reloaded with special ammunition. Or you might have an enchanted wooden stake, that you can stab into a piece of food to clean it of all poison and rot – but after one use, it's just a regular stake.

- **It Really Doesn't Work as Intended:** The one-time effect happens when you use the item in a way that's *unintended* by the manufacturer. Maybe you discovered the enchantment on your Amulet of Health is a bit wonky, and sometimes you can spit on the gem, forcing a strange reaction in the magic that makes you twice as large for a few minutes. Or maybe your laser rifle's heat sink tends to leak, and you've learned how to direct that extra warmth through your heat-conducting coat to keep you warm for a few minutes, in a way reminiscent of a Potion of Cold Resistance.

These kinds of items open the possibility for a payment made *after* the act. The GM and the player first agree on the one-time effect the device can produce; the player can then activate it as with any regular potion. The payment is made afterward, in order to *fix* the device (the cost is equal to buying a potion). After fixed, of course, it can be broken again in the same way, to recreate the effect.

GMs and players who want to make it harder for the character to avoid skipping the payment can decide that as long as the item remains broken it occasionally fails to work.

Potion Variant Rules

Activating a regular potion requires an action, but how do you activate a memory? The following variant activations can be used for the examples given above.

Quick yet slow: Activate as a bonus action, but takes effect only at the start of your next turn.

Examples: squeezing the parasite's egg and waiting for the toxin to spread through your body; hitting the hand cannon on its exhaustion port to force a building of power.



Unbalancing: Activate as an action, but triggering the effect leaves you temporarily unbalanced. Gain an advantage on your next ability check and a disadvantage on your next saving throw - or the other way around, determine randomly. This effect dissipates after 5 minutes.

Examples: releasing a whimsical astral spirit from its origami prison, her presence temporarily unbalancing your chi; recalling a disturbing memory along with a useful advice, getting suddenly emotional.

Hidden: Activate as an action, and as a bonus action you can make a DC 10 Dexterity (Sleight of Hand) or Intelligence (Deception) check to try and hide this activation. The former is intended for objects on your person, the latter is for memories, blessing and the like. If facing an important NPC, these checks should be made instead against the NPC's Wisdom (Perception) or Wisdom (Insight), respectively.

Examples: Calling forth the blessing by whispering it under your breath; pushing against the crack in the gem of your malfunctioning talisman, without arousing suspicion.



Three Suggestions for Alternatives to Potions 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

Drawing of a medusa carrying drinks: Aviv Or (www.avivor.com)

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