

The Sword of the Skull

By Willow Palecek

Prologue

When looking over the ingredients for the Ronnies, I was naturally trying different combinations until I found one that resonated with me. The entries speak of potential violence- the Soldier's Sword, the Soldier's Skull, Old Swords, Old Skulls, etc. But it was the idea of the **Sword of the Skull** that jumped out at me- it sounds like the sort of magic item that 13 year old me would drool over at the end of a dungeon. There's the nostalgic adolescent fantasy of power through awesome magic items, attached to a game that makes the acquisition and use of said awesome magic items the point of play.

Inspiration for the various mechanical bits from the game comes from AGON (adventure budgeting for the GM), HERO (point bought abilities), Red Box Hack (zone based dungeons/combat), and Burning Wheel (Let it Ride).

I also thought about my experiences playing "Old-School D&D" (which for me was AD&D 2nd Edition, decades after the actual original old-schoolers), Storming the Wizard's Tower, and Beast Hunters.

The Game

The Sword of the Skull is a game for two players. One plays the adventurer, a stalwart hero who searches ancient ruins and dungeons for potent magic items. The other plays the GM, who designs the dungeons and provides the adversity.

The Resolution System: Task Checks

Anytime you attempt to take an action where the outcome of the action is in doubt, you make a Task Check. To perform a task check, the GM tells you the difficulty of the task check, based on your preferred outcome, possible consequences, and such.

Then, roll 1d6 for each point of the relevant attribute, and any dice added by one equipment item. Each die that shows a 4 or higher is a hit. Count the number of hits rolled. If it equals or exceeds the target number set by the GM, the action is successful.

Elements of Character

Your character is defined by three attributes: Might, Nimble, and Cunning.

Might is used whenever your character takes an action defined by strength, prowess, sinewy thews, or the like. Might is always the relevant attribute when Attacking in combat.

Nimble is used whenever your character takes an action defined by physical quickness, speed, agility, or general suppleness of build. Nimble is always the relevant attribute when Defending in combat.

Cunning is used whenever your character takes any kind of mental or social action. Cunning is always the relevant attribute when using or defending against Tricks in combat. Cunning is also used for Initiative in combat.

Divide ten points between your Might, Nimble, and Cunning scores.

Everything else is defined by your equipment items. Certain equipment items will add bonuses to certain types of actions.

Your character starts with 50 points worth of equipment. You can take this off the list of basic equipment, or make new items working in tandem with your GM. Any points of equipment you don't spend turn into Gold Pieces.

Getting Hurt and Recovering

Normally, if you get hurt, you take a Scratch. Make a note on your character sheet. There is no inherent penalty for taking a Scratch. However, if you take three Scratches, erase all Scratches on your sheet, and replace them with a Wound. You suffer a -1 die penalty for each Wound you have. If you would roll zero dice or less on an action, you automatically fail that action.

If you have Wounds equal to your highest Attribute, you fall unconscious. Negotiate your character's fate with the GM.

At the end of each adventure, you heal all Scratches and Wounds.

Building Magic Items

General Magic Item Costs

+1 Die to a Combat Task: 10 points.

+1 Die to a Non-Combat Task: 5 points.

+1 Die to all Non-Combat Tasks of a certain Attribute: 10 Points.

+1 Die to a Combat Task against certain enemies or in certain situations: 5 points.

+1 Die to a Non-Combat Task agreed to be rare, fringe, or unusually restricted: 3 points.

Takes up a 'slot' (one handed weapons, armor, etc.) -5 points.

Takes up two 'slots' (two handed weapons, armor with helmet, etc.) -10 points.

Requires a hand to be used, but is normally used out of combat: +0 points.

Does not require to be held, and only needs to be present on the character's person to function: +10 points.

Item gives a penalty to a Task: discount is same as cost for like bonus. If an item gives penalty to multiple uncommon Combat or Non-Combat situations, simply treat the penalty as 1 higher. (a item that gives -2 to attacks vs. Ogres is worth -10 points. If the item has another combat limitation significantly different in scope, such as vs. Dragons or while on sandy beaches, the discount can be at the three die level, or -15 points.)

Weapon has Reach property (can attack adjacent zones): +10 points.

Weapon has Ranged property (can attack 2 zones away): +20 points, !0 points for each additional zone of range.

Item Grants Power:

A Power is an unusual ability that transcends simple boosts to a character's ability.

Magic Attack: 5 points per die. Do not add any of character's Attributes to attack roll. (Apply Reach or Ranged cost)

Item Cures Scratches: 40 Points, Power must have Restricted Uses.

Item Cures Wounds: 100 Points, Power must have Restricted Uses by Adventure.

Power attacks all creatures in a zone: +30 points.

Power attacks all creatures in a zone, and in each adjacent zone: +50 points, +20 for each additional zone beyond that one.

Item/power has restricted uses per adventure: 5: 0 points. 3: -10 points, 2: -20 points: 1: -30 points.

Item/power has restricted uses per encounter: 3: -5 points, 2: -10 points, 1: -15 points.

Item/power can only be used once, ever: -50 points.

Item has a power that eludes conventional pricing: Point Value must be agreed upon by player and GM.

Basic Equipment:

Sturdy Sword or Axe: +1 Attack Die (5 points)

Finely Balanced Sword, Main Gauche: +1 Attack Die, +1 Defense Die (15 points)

Massive Sword, Axe, or Hammer: +3 Attack Dice, 2-Handed (20 Points)

Polearm: +2 Attack Dice, Reach, 2-Handed (20 Points)

Staff: +1 Attack Die, +1 Defense Die, Reach, 2-Handed (20 Points)

Shield, Parrying Dagger: +1 Defense Die (5 points)

Heavy Shield: +2 Defense Dice (15 Points)

Throwing Knives: +1 Attack Die, Ranged, 3 Uses Per Encounter (25 Points)

Infinite Throwing Knives: +1 Attack Die, Ranged (30 Points)

Bow: +2 Attack Dice, Ranged (40 Points)

Bow with Only One Arrow: +2 Attack Dice, Ranged, Only Once per Adventure (10 Points)

Supple Leather Armor, Hides: +1 Defense Die (5 Points)

Chain Shirt, Owlbear Hide: +2 Defense Dice (15 points)

Hefty Armor: +3 Defense Dice, -1 Die to All Non-Combat Nimble Tasks (15 points)

Massive Armor, With Helmet and Everything: +4 Defense Dice, -2 Dice All Non-Combat Nimble Tasks, Takes up Body and Head Slots (10 Points)

Rations: +2 Dice Tasks of Endurance, 3 uses per Adventure, Held (5 points)

Compass: +3 Dice in Tasks where Direction is Important, Held (9 Points)

Impressive Clothes: +3 Dice in Tasks of Socializing, Body Slot, (7 Points)

Running Boots: +1 Die to Non-Combat Tasks of Nimble, Foot Slot (5 Points)

Eye-Glasses: +2 Die to Tasks where Perception is Important (10 points for Binocular or Opera Glasses that need to be held to be used, 5 if it takes up the Head Slot, or 20 for Glasses that can be stacked with other Head-type items.)

First Aid Kit: Heal a Scratch 1 time per Encounter: 25 Points

Mystic Amulet of Protection Against Undead: +2 Defense Dice vs. Undead, Must Only Be Present on Person (20 Points)

Bottle of Endless Water: +3 Dice in Tasks of Thirst, Endless Supply of Water, Held (9 Points, plus a 10 Point Ad-Hoc cost, for 19 points.)

Scroll of Fireball: 8 Die Magic Attack, Ranged, Hits Zone and Each Adjacent Zone (50 Points)

Potion of Healing: Restores one wound when drunk. (50 points).

Adventure Structure

Step 1: Make Up A Magic Item

At the heart of every adventure is the Magic Item the adventurer is questing for. Come up with a cool name and look for the item. Draw it, if that's your thing. Make some cool powers for the item.

Step 2: Negotiate Powers and Cost with the GM

Present your item to the GM. The GM may suggest changes to the item, or feel that pricing of certain abilities should be adjusted.

Any final stats of the item must be agreed upon by player and GM alike. The point of this step is not to try to wheedle for a more effective point spread, it is to come to a fair and mutually agreeable item price.

Optional: The Element of Surprise

For players for whom the suspense of discovery is desirable, they may present a basic description and general budget to the GM, and place the onus of building the item on the GM. "I want a magic sword that shoots fireballs and is worth about 130-150 points."

This is not a tool for lazy players. This is a chance for the GM to surprise the player with a unique and unexpected item, with some additional interesting powers (perhaps the fireballs also teleport the player to ground zero after the blast goes off, providing for interesting combat and non-combat applications).

The GM may not insist that the adventurer invoke this option. It can only be invoked by the adventurer. Likewise, if the adventurer invokes this option, he revokes his right to negotiate pricing with the GM- the GM's interpretation of what the item should cost is final.

Step 3: GM Builds Adventure

The GM builds the adventure, with a point value for the dungeon based on the value of the item.

When building the adventure, the GM should come up with a compelling location as a suitable site for the quest item. How did it get there? What inhabits the site?

The GM should come up with some possible monsters, traps, interesting places to fight, and various different routes for the dungeon. The GM should make a cool map of the dungeon, with different routes and possibilities to get to the treasure

The GM will purchase two types of adversity: Task Checks, and Monsters. The GM's pool of points is called Adversity. This is a resource the GM will spend during play to activate Task Checks and Monsters. The expenditure is not made before play when the adversary is invented, but rather during play when it is encountered.

Step 4: Play

Task Checks

The cost of a Task Check is the difficulty the player rolls against. The player and GM may negotiate a change in the difficulty. For example, the GM might say “It's difficulty 3 to climb over the ruined wall into the sewer, but it's a difficulty 2 if you do it while being careful to take your time.” When the player makes the check, the GM spends Adversity based on the Difficulty that was actually rolled against.

The Gamemaster may declare a Task Check Hazardous. This costs +1 Adversity. A failed Task Check results in the adventurer taking a Scratch.

If the adventurer comes up with a cunning plan or strategy to bypass the Task, the GM should make an offer to lower the Difficulty, or even negate it. An adventurer with a flying carpet might be able to easily bypass a pit trap without rolling. The GM should remember that he only spends Adversity for the actual Difficulty rolled against- if no roll was made, the GM does not need to spend any Adversity.

Once a Task Roll is made, the results stand. If the player succeeds in a roll to climb over the ruined wall, he may freely climb back down, back up again, and back down to his heart's content. This means that an obstacle bypassed on the way in, all else being equal, can be bypassed on the way out. The exception is if there is a notable change in circumstances (perhaps the player originally took the GM's offer of a lower Difficulty due to time and effort taken, and during the exodus from the dungeon, the player is pursued by a horde of goblins), the GM may re-invoke the hazard, **by paying full price**.

Likewise, if the player fails, the failure stands- the player may not climb the ruined wall, no matter what. The player must come up with a different course of action, such as laying down magic powder to explode the wall. When a player comes up with a different course of action to retry a failed Task Check, the GM **pays only 1 point of Adversity** to invoke the hazard again at the same level of difficulty, and paying for any additional difficulty normally.

Creatures and Other Challenges

Creatures come in two types: Minions, and Monsters.

The Cost of a Minion is 5 times its rating. The Rating of a Minion is how many dice it gets for any check it makes. It only takes one Hit to kill a Minion.

(A Rating 2 Goblin costs 10 points. A horde of 10 Goblins costs 100 points.)

Monsters have Attributes, just like adventurers. The Cost of a Monster is 3 times the sum of its Attributes. A Monster can take a number of hits in combat equal to its highest attribute.

(A 3 Might, 4 Nimble, 3 Cunning Massive Goblin costs 30 Points).

Traps and such can be stated like monsters, the only difference is effectively narrative color.

Fighting Monsters

Combat is a back and forth between the adventurer and the GM during which the adventurer fights

monsters.

At the start of combat, sketch out the area of the battleground, dividing it into zones. As a rule of thumb, a zone is any area small enough that everyone in it can reach each other with minimal or slight maneuvering. A single small room is a zone. A hallway is a zone. A large room is made up of smaller zones. A cavern with a ledge overlooking a smaller passage might be two zones (high ground and low ground), or those zones might be subdivided further.

At the start of combat, the adventurer rolls Cunning, and the GM rolls the highest Cunning of any monsters involved in the combat. Whichever side has the higher number of successes goes first.

When the GM takes his turn, he takes one action for each of his monsters. When the player takes his turn, he takes two actions, but he may not take the attack action twice against the same monster.

There are three basic combat actions: Attack, Move, and Trick.

When you Attack, roll your Might against a target within your range, who rolls Nimble. If you get more successes, the defender takes a Scratch (if the adventurer) or a Hit, if a Monster.

When you Move, you declare what adjacent area you wish to move to. The GM may establish that the movement requires a Task Check, and pay for the privilege as normal.

When you attempt to Trick a Monster (or the adventurer), roll Cunning against the target, who also rolls Cunning. If the attacker has more successes, the defender loses one action on their next turn.

The adventurer might, through movement, cause the fight to flow into hazards or monsters previously encountered and evaded; those hazards remain applicable. If the movement of battle causes previously unencountered monsters or hazards to be revealed, or if the GM determines that the appearance of a 'wandering monster' would spice things up, he should pay the relevant Strife to activate said monsters.

What About Traps?

Depending on the circumstance, a trap might be a Hazard, or it might be built as a creature. A hallway of spinning blades might just require a Nimble check to pass without getting cut to ribbons, but a rolling boulder that chases the player through the dungeon can be a full, exciting encounter in its own right!

Finding the Treasure

A good adventure design should have the player facing roughly half to two-thirds of the GM's available Adveristy- this allows the player to get his fancy new toy and hack his way out of the dungeon with it!

The treasure might be sitting on a pedestal in easy reach, on a high shelf, or in the hands of a deadly foe. If a Hazard or Monster is faced to get to the treasure, this counts towards the half/two-thirds requirement. A Monster using the treasure **does not** get any game benefits from it- however, it should be built as a suitable menace. It's only fitting that if you're looking for the dread sword Wrackblazer, you'd have to fight its current owner.

On the way out of the dungeon, any Hazards that have been activated and bypassed can be freely

bypassed as normal (unless the circumstances have notably changed), but any Hazards that have not been successfully bypassed, or monsters that have not been defeated will still be in place.

The GM is also encouraged to set a few points for surprises: wandering monsters, cave-ins, or the old classic of the whole ruin collapsing as the adventurer makes a hasty retreat. That one never gets old.

Adding Additional Treasures

The GM may add additional treasures to the dungeon, gaining up to +50% of the original value of the dungeon. These may be other minor magic items, or Gold Pieces. (Gold Pieces are worth 1 point each).

The GM does not get any Adversity until the treasure is actually found by the player. It's fine to eyeball the likely budget and plan with the treasure in mind, make side passages to reward an adventuresome player, but don't commit to anything.

Running out of Adversity

If the GM does not have any adversity left, he may not activate any new monsters or hazards until he gets more (by having the player find some treasure.) If the GM's notes indicate that there are hazards or monsters on the map, then his notes are wrong- the monster lair is empty, the trap is decrepit and crumbled.

Victory! (or Defeat?)

When the player finds the treasure and exits the dungeon (through the original exit, or by an alternate route found during play), the player is victorious, and has a respite to heal, shop, and plan his next foray into a dungeon.

If the player has found the treasure, the GM is out of adversity, the GM may declare the adventure a success, no need to continue. If there aren't any active monsters or hazards between the player and the exit, the player can insist on this.

If the adventure ends victoriously, the GM may rollover up to 10 unspent Adversity for the Adventurer's next adventure. Anything more than that is lost.

If the adventurer is next to an exit of the dungeon, he may declare he is escaping the dungeon. If he didn't find the treasure, the adventure is a failure, but he lives to fight another day. The GM does not rollover any unspent Adversity.

If the adventurer takes enough wounds (a number equal to his highest attribute), the adventurer's fate should be negotiated between player and GM. Maybe the adventurer gets away scott-free, waking up later, and sulking back home to regroup? Maybe the adventurer loses some equipment. Maybe the adventurer is captured, with some of his equipment forming the "treasure" for the adventure where he must break out of his confinement. Maybe the adventurer dies, and it is time to make a new adventurer or take a break from *Sword of the Skull*. The decision should be based partially on the 'story,' but also on what will be most fun. Taking high risks should entail potential consequences and loss of resources.

Spending Your Hard Earned Gold

Between adventures, gold can be spent in town to gain new basic equipment. No piece of basic equipment may cost more than 50 gold pieces- items more expensive than that can only be found in dungeons. Basic equipment can come off the list presented in this text, or designed in concert with the GM.

When you get an item designed by the GM in a dungeon, if you don't actually want the item, you may **immediately** turn it in for its value in gold pieces when you end the adventure, provided you did not use it during the adventure.

Otherwise, if you choose to sell or part with an old piece of equipment or a magic item, you get gold pieces equal to half its value, round down.

You can spend 100 gold pieces to find a trainer and add +1 to any of your Attributes.

Using the Same Dungeon More Than Once

Perhaps an adventure ends in failure, or the hero cleans out the dungeon and returns later, learning that a new menace, with new treasure has moved in. This can be a fun way to make use of previously established game elements.

Mechanically, it is the same as exploring a new dungeon: hazards are paid for anew, and the player must make Task rolls to overcome them, a dragon that was bought by the GM and evaded by the player must be purchased and evaded once more.

Afterward

So just what are the stats of the Sword of the Skull, anyways? The Sword of the Skull is going to vary for person to person, so providing stats for it would seem to defeat the purpose. For me, it looks like a long broadsword, with a miniature ivory skull in the pommel, with rubies for eyes and golden teeth. Point the pommel at something, and it shoots fireballs! Kill something, and the rubies glow red, and the Sword of the Skull eats their soul. Now that's what I'm talking about!