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Fat Goblin Games Presents

SIDEBAR #14

Alternative Death Effects

Written By Matt Roth

Art and Design By: Rick Hershey

Fat Goblin Games Team: Chris Bayes,
Eric Hindley, John Bennett, Justice Mora,
Kalyna Conrad, Lucas Palosaari,
Nick Esposito, Rick Hershey,
Troy Daniels, Tyler Beck

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Disabling effects are an important part of the game, giving players and baddies alike a multitude of options to bewitch, ensnare, petrify, and even outright kill a target. But all too often, these 'save or suck' crowd control effects leave players twiddling their thumbs or playing with their phones until the spell either wears off or another player jumps to their rescue. With Sidebar: Alternative Death Effects, you'll find a new way to keep players invested in the game even after they bite the dust!

The **Sidebar** product line brings you an assortment of ideas, homebrew rules, and various options from the talented pool of writers at **Fat Goblin Games** for use with the Pathfinder Roleplaying Game. These short and low-priced products are perfect for Game Masters and Players who want to integrate unique new options to their games.

DIAGNOSING DEATH

Death effects. Those big, game-ending effects that wizardly powerhouses and world-destroying beasts throw about with abandon. And as a player, they're the sort of things you never, ever want targeted at you.

Death effects are almost as iconic to tabletop gaming as the dice themselves. But, perhaps too often, death effects are resolved with just a single roll of a single die. (Pun very much intended.) Encounters with death effects are almost universally of a grand scale... but does that ever really lessen the impact of having a beloved character turned to ash in a matter of seconds?

Assuming the players survive the encounter, a death effect's only real consequence is the drain it puts on the party. The loss of team wealth, and the freshly resurrected, weakened party member, only make the group more susceptible to future deaths. Of course, the deceased party member could simply be replaced—but if the new character comes in with free wealth, that only further unbalances the party. And if he doesn't? Well, you'd better hope that new character is also a small-sized polearm-based martial character!

Don't misunderstand me; death effects can be great! They create instant tension. Unlike whittling a target down with hit point damage, a death effect is quick. Permanent. Frontloaded with massive amounts of damage or straight up death, they aren't the sort of injuries you can walk off with a quick tap from the cure-light-wand. Death is a decisive tide-turner, no matter its source. Players rally around death effects. It really hammers in the fact that this particular encounter is serious.

But that encounter should still be fun for the player defeated by a single die roll of fate!

DEATH TO DEATH EFFECTS

Instead of imposing instead death, death effects instead incur a death-like state. This achieves the same short-term result—instantly removing a creature from the battlefield and doubling down on the encounter's difficulty—but removes the long-term penalties of resurrection costs and negative levels.

With this optional rule, the souls of creatures targeted by death effects do not immediately depart for the afterlife. Souls linger in a quasi-ghostlike state, trapped between the mortal coil and the world beyond. Its body remains comatose and lifeless, on the verge of death.

Deathless Souls

Souls and spirits lingering is a frequent concept in fantasy—they're one of the most common sources of the unquiet dead! And while not every spirit needs to hang around the mortal coil for centuries of torment, the act of being suddenly shunted from life to unlife can be disorienting enough to keep a spirit lingering for a minute or two.

Deathless souls are the disembodied spirits of any creature that is slain by a death effect. While only echoes of the living, they are still capable of acting with limited agency for a short time. A free soul is a ghostly, ethereal creature with a perfect fly speed of 60 feet. A free soul must stay within 100 feet of its body at all times, or else immediately depart to the afterlife. Despite being ethereal, deathless souls cannot directly interact with any other creatures, material or ethereal. A deathless soul may communicate empathically with any creature it can see within 60 feet.

The only other non-movement action that a deathless soul may take is alter fate:

Alter Fate (Su) A deathless soul may touch a creature as a standard action, changing fate in a single instant. If used on an ally, that ally may choose to reroll a single d20 roll in the next minute. He must use the new result, even if it is worse. Alter fate may instead be used on an enemy as a melee touch attack. If successful, that creature must roll twice on its next d20 roll within the next minute and take the worse result. A creature can only have its fate altered once by any one free soul.

A deathless soul lingers for 1 minute minus a number of rounds equal to half the caster level of the death effect that slayed them (which means a 20th-level caster would still instantly kill his target). A creature or effect without a caster level instead uses its HD.

Effects that destroy a target's body (such as *disintegrate*), do not allow a saving throw (such as *power word kill*), or merely trap a body in a death-like state (such as *flesh to stone*) do not free the soul of the creature. Resurrection effects or emergency healing effects (such as *breath of life*) must be cast upon the deathless soul's body to function, and take effect as normal as they guide the deathless soul back into its body.

Creatures with an Intelligence score of 2 or less cannot manifest deathless souls. Undead creatures and other creatures without souls (such as most constructs) cannot become deathless souls, as death is merely returning them to their 'natural' state.

Trapped Souls

Allowing the recently departed to continue to interact with the world gives players a considerable boost in power. Consequently, GMs may wish to allow particularly cunning villains a means of countering these beneficent souls. Trapping the freed soul is not only particularly evil, but it makes the PCs' imminent victory over the villain all the more pressing—now they must free their ally's spirit!

To trap a deathless soul, a creature must possess a receptacle suitable for housing souls. Typically called soul gems, most are crafted from precious gemstones or intricate glass beads. Soul gems cost a minimum of 100 gp, and cost an additional 100 gp for every hit dice beyond 1 they are capable of storing (a 20 HD soul gem would cost 2,000 gp).

If the receptacle is presented when the death effect takes effect, the wielder may attempt to trap the soul as a free action. A creature may attempt a Will saving throw to negate this effect (DC = 10 + 1/2 the HD of the trapper + the trapper's Wisdom modifier). If the initial trapping fails, the wielder may try again as a full-round action until the free soul departs.

Any attempt to resurrect a body whose soul is trapped in a soul gem requires a caster check against a DC of 10 + 1/2 HD of the soul gem. Failure results in the spell having no effect, while success shatters the target's soul gem and returns the creature to life as normal. If the soul gem resides in an unholy location, such as that created by *unballow*, the DC of this

check increases by +2.

Trapped souls are stored indefinitely—they may not act in the mortal realm as a deathless soul, nor can they move to the afterlife. Shattering a soul gem frees the soul and allows it to be resurrected as normal. Particularly devious GMs may devise unique means of shattering a soul gem that completely eradicate the soul within, though such a monumental task may be the goal of an entire adventure!

Access to Soul Gems

Soul gems are an incredibly powerful means of (almost) permanently slaying friend or foe. Don't be afraid to make access to them more difficult through higher costs, esoteric rituals, or simply accessible only to the biggest and baddest of BBEGs!

Departed Souls

This is just a polite way of telling the player that yes, she is actually dead. Departed souls have passed beyond the mortal coil and may be resurrected as normal.

At least you can't say you didn't give your players a fighting chance!

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