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Save My Game

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Managing Wishes

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This column provides advice for DMs whose campaigns are in trouble. Do your players constantly bicker or complain about issues both inside and outside of the main campaign action? Do your best ideas fall flat? Have you set up a situation that you now wish you hadn't? Worry no more, because Jason Nelson-Brown has the answers to save your game!

Be Careful What You Wish for

In this installment of *Save My Game*, we look at that most complex of spells -- the *wish*. Most players consider a *wish* the best possible reward, the last salvation of a mission gone sour, or the key to a vast treasure trove. But adjudicating the effects of a spell that seems so open-ended can prove quite challenging, even with the stricter guidelines that **D&D** v.3.5 offers. What's a DM to do?

Problem: Managing Wishes

What's the best way for a DM to handle wishes? It's nice to be able to dole them out when needed, but what exactly are their limitations and potential drawbacks? Should PCs be warned to be careful what they wish for? -- Ned from WotC

Adjudicating *wish* spells can be tricky because their purpose in the game isn't entirely clear. The purpose of the *wish* and the source of its power can have a significant effect on how you as DM choose to adjudicate the effects of the spell.

Solution 1: Who Grants Wishes Anyway?

One obscure rule that caused lots of trouble in the 1st Edition **AD&D** game was that *wishes* were granted by the nearest divine power. That entity knew the nature of the *wish* and could choose to grant it, refuse it, or twist it as desired. So a character in the Demonweb Pits didn't have to bother trying to wish that something bad would happen to Lolth. In fact, it was wise not to make any *wish* at all in such a place, since doing so could only end poorly for anyone other than Lolth's buddies.

That rule made the *wish* spell basically useless on any plane other than the Material, and maybe the Astral and Ethereal. Since *miracle* exists as a spell in **D&D** v.3.5, cutting the deities out of the *wish*-granting business only stands to reason. The gods are in charge of *miracles* requested by their own followers, but they need not respond to those originated by anybody else.

The game also includes a variety of *wish*-granting creatures, such as genies, pit fiends, and a handful of others. These creatures can decide whether or not to grant a *wish*, and their personalities and natures determine what kinds of *wishes* they will grant and how they will do so. In determining whether a particular *wish* will be granted, consider whether it furthers the creature's ends or pleases it in some way. Even if the creature is bound to grant the *wish*, how obnoxiously technical, literal, and anal-retentive can it be in twisting the meaning of the request? Maybe such creatures should be using *miracle* instead of *wish* anyway, to tie the possible effects more firmly into the nature of the granting creature.

So where does the power behind the *wish* come from when a character casts the spell or uses a *wish*-granting magic item rather than requesting direct intervention from some divine entity? The simplest answer is that such a character is tapping into the primal energy of the cosmos to bend reality to her whim and make her *wish* come true. In a sense, she has cut out the middle-men. Casting *wish* is ultimately no different than casting *meteor swarm*; you cast it, and the desired effect just happens. After all, it's a 9th-level spell with an XP cost -- shouldn't it work as described in the book without adding extra complications? Why does the DM need to intervene with this spell in particular?

Solution 2: Apply the Rules Precisely

Unlike some previous versions of the game, **D&D** v.3.5 gives very explicit guidelines for what a *wish*, *limited wish*, or *miracle* can do. As DM, therefore, you can choose to play a *wish* strictly by the book. If your players wonder what they can wish for, tell them to look in the *Player's Handbook*. If they make a

wish that would cause some effect not shown there, you have three choices.

- The *wish* doesn't work at all and is wasted.
- The *wish* is partially fulfilled, in that it gives the character the result closest to what he wished for out of the possibilities given in the *Player's Handbook*.
- The *wish* is not granted, but the character gets to try again.

Which option you choose depends on how mean you are feeling and the source of the *wish*. A generously inclined creature might offer the wisher another chance to make a valid *wish*, but a creature bound to serve certainly would not. A *ring of wishes* might produce the nearest substitute for the invalid *wish*, or it might not respond at all, ignoring the improper *wish* and activating only when a valid *wish* is made. A character who casts the *wish* spell himself shouldn't bet on getting a do-over. After all, high-level wizards are supposed to know what their spells can do before casting them and have enough intelligence to think ahead.

If a creature is granting the *wish*, using the Diplomacy skill or offering a bribe might improve the character's chances of a favorable interpretation. Getting on the *wish*-granter's good side helps to prevent problems from occurring in the first place. So a character could perform an evil ritual or sacrifice to make the pit fiend who's granting her *wish* happy. Or if a lamp-bound genie must grant three *wishes*, a canny PC might offer to use the first one to set him free -- on the condition that he will favorably interpret her other two *wishes*.

Solution 3: What Purpose Does the *Wish* Spell Serve?

Before you introduce any *wishes* into your campaign, it's wise to define the purpose of the spell in your game. If *wish* is just a spell like any other, interpret it strictly according to the rules. They spell out what a *wish* can do and what it can't, so stick to those parameters.

You could also broaden the definition by ruling that *wishes* allow characters to achieve results outside the normal scope of the rules, such as becoming a prince or gaining some fantastic prize or goal. If you take this tack, be prepared to adjudicate *wishes* on a case-by-case basis. The *Player's Handbook* rules can guide you in this endeavor, but you are the only one who can decide whether a particular *wish* fits the flavor and power level of your campaign. Be generous with *wishes* that are inventive, fun, and colorful, and look with a skeptical eye at those that are game-mechanically focused.

The last point in the question -- the admonition to be careful what you wish for -- is an important issue to address. Do *wishes* exist in your game as a subtle form of trap similar to a *deck of many things*? Is a *wish* a cosmic crapshoot in which being totally reamed by the DM is just as likely as getting a really cool reward? If so, make sure that everyone realizes it at the start. If you're playing Ravenloft or a similar creepy-themed campaign, it makes sense for *wishes* to have awful "monkey's paw" side effects or twisted results -- you get your *wish*, but you wish you hadn't! Putting certain *wish* items that function this way into a "regular" campaign is also fine. But if all wishing just leads to a bad end, players should know that ahead of time, so that they view *wishes* as a desperate last resort rather than expecting them to provide substantial rewards or benefits.

Summary

With a spell as complex as *wish*, it's wise to decide in advance what purpose it will serve in your campaign. Will it be just a spell like any other? Or will it allow characters to achieve results outside the normal scope of the rules? Or is it a trap, always twisting the wisher's intent in some subtle or overt way? Once you know what role you want the spell to play, get familiar with the spell description -- in particular, the details of what a *wish* can and cannot do. When a character makes a *wish* that does not fall within these parameters, you can treat it in one of three ways, depending upon its source and your purpose: ignore it and consider the *wish* wasted, ignore it and let the character try again, or substitute the closest possible valid result.

About the Author

Jason Nelson-Brown lives in Seattle with his wife Kelle, daughters Meshia and Indigo, son Allen, and dog Bear. He is an active and committed born-again Christian who began playing **D&D** in 1981 and currently runs one weekly campaign while playing intermittently in two others.

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