

Practical Jokes

By Ed Larmore

This document is both a sub-setting (a gnome village) and a “how-to” on injecting humor into a fantasy campaign through the use of practical jokes.

Throughout, gnomes are the perpetrators (and most of the victims). Why gnomes? Because D&D v.3.5 describes gnomes as ‘inventors and alchemists who love pranks and excel at engineering’. But the GM may substitute any race or sub-culture with a renowned sense of humor.

1. GM Tips

Caution

Let’s be honest: some players can dish it out, but can’t take it. If you make their PCs the victim of too many pranks, they may never want to play in your campaign again. So be sure to have NPCs play jokes on other NPCs as well.

Another possibility is that PCs might become over-cautious, looking around every corner for the next prank to spring on them.

In either case, just stop victimizing those PCs with pranks, even if they decide to dish it out to others.

Let PC pranks succeed

Remember that the goal is to have fun; so don’t throw up obstacles to a prank that the PCs are planning, especially if they’ve been on the receiving end of several pranks. In fact, go out of your way to make sure their prank succeeds.

In my most recent session, the PCs were in a gnome village (see below) and after seeing the items for sale at the local joke shop, concocted a plan of pouring both love and fart potions into the drink of the mean and greedy merchant who had hired them to escort his caravan.

I could have looked up the rules on mixing potions, but I didn't. And I made sure the merchant left the room to go to the restroom so they'd have an opportunity to spike his drink. To complete the setup, I made sure to have a pretty NPC lady at the table next to them that was flirting with the merchant. Well, you can probably imagine what happened next, and the players had a great time.

2. Gnome Village

Have the PCs visit a gnome village as part of their adventure. Gnomes are unapologetic pranksters, excellent mechanics, and dabblers in magic (especially illusions).

Oddities are the norm

As visitors walk about the village, they'll notice odd things happening all around them, most of which are pranks.

Examples:

1. When trying to open a door, the doorknob falls off.
2. While picking up a bucket, the handle detaches, spilling the bucket's contents on the person's shoes.
3. Someone keeps scratching an itch caused by itching powder.
4. Another wakes up with half his beard shaven off, or finds himself strapped to the minute hand of the clock tower (see below)
5. A kaleidoscope is offered as a gift, but the rim of the eyehole was marked with black ink that doesn't quite wash off, leaving a black ring around his eye after he looks in.
6. A victim keeps squirming because someone dropped a lizard inside his shirt.
7. While a victim is asleep, someone resizes his left boot to be one size too large. It will fall off at inopportune times, such as when running or climbing, or in battle.
8. The mayor wakes up in his bed, which was moved during the dead of night (with him in it) to the middle of town, along with his nightstand and dresser.

9. A life-like mechanical monster is seen chopping a rope that if severed will kill people. When the automaton is attacked, its head comes off, gears and springs pop out of the neck.

The best jokes are saved for Prank Your Neighbor Week (see below).

In addition to pranks, there are other odd goings-on, especially in fall and winter. For example a visitor may see gnomes:

1. Climb a lamppost and scratch an astronomical symbol on top of it.
2. Scratch an encoded message on the branch of a tree.
3. Paint a cryptographic key under a shelf at the General Store.

This “graffiti” is actually encouraged, because it is preparation for Wizenclimer’s Winter Treasure Hunt (see below).

The Clock Tower

In the central square is a clock tower with the words “The World’s Second-Most Accurate Clock”. The clock chimes once an hour except after 8 pm and before 8 am.

Practical jokes involving the clock:

1. Chimes at midnight, waking up the whole town
2. Doesn’t ring at certain hours when it should.
3. Chimes every hour and 10 minutes, instead of every hour.
4. Chimes twice at 1 pm, thrice at 2 pm, etc.

The clock keeper is an old codger, who feigns irritation at all of the practical jokes, but in fact loves all the creativity. Often, he leaves the back door of the tower unlocked “by accident”, so the pranksters can enter more easily. He is a master mechanic and it was his forefathers who designed and built the clock tower.

Joke Shop

Items sold:

1. Itching powder
2. Hand buzzers
3. Birthday candles that relight when blown out

4. Whoopee cushions
5. Mechanical teddy bears
6. Fart potions
7. Love and hate potions
8. Minor potions from *Dungeon Master's Guide*
9. Minor Wondrous Magic Items, such as Quaal's Feather Tokens
10. Super-sour lemon and lime drops
11. Other prank items PCs might want (GM discretion)

Encourage the players to buy these items and use them against each other or NPCs.

Whirling Widget Workshop

Sells gears, springs, grease, metal boxes, parts for mechanical traps, masterwork thieves' tools, etc.

3. Even gnomes have limits

Most gnomes know the limits of practical joking and endeavor to not take a joke too far. And there is a tradition of never "getting serious" unless absolutely necessary.

But seventy years ago, a young gnome named Hackett Greasesprocket thought it would be funny to spoil the town's entire grain supply with mold spores. The elders were very concerned because the entire village was threatened with starvation. So they put a stop to all practical jokes while they tried to resolve the crisis.

But later it was learned that Hackett had only contaminated a very small portion of the food supply in the most visible locations, near the access hatches to the grain silos. He had also put in hidden safeguards to prevent the pestilence from spreading to the rest of the food.

Gnomes, quick to forgive, gave the youngster a parade and voted him "Best Prankster of the Year" for having fooled the entire village for three days straight. The following year, Hackett was elected mayor - the youngest in history.

Ever since, there have been many efforts by enterprising pranksters to push the limits in an effort to trick the elders into “getting serious” again. The elders, not wishing to be embarrassed again, have resisted the temptation, even when jokes really do go too far. Twenty years ago, an elder gnome lost a finger to a mechanical jaw trap that was set in his dentures, but the elders made light of the whole thing.

The spring in the trap was a size 12, when the prankster should have known to go no higher than a size 8. Ironically, the elder gnome who lost the finger was Hackett Greasesprocket, the same prankster who had pulled off the spoiled food joke fifty years prior. Most of the other elders think that Hackett staged the whole event and never really lost his finger, though twenty years is an awfully long time to keep a joke going.

4. Prank Your Neighbor Week

The first week of winter is Prank Your Neighbor Week. Gnomes normally play lots of practical jokes on each other, but during Prank Your Neighbor Week it is especially bad. This is because the gnome with the best practical joke (determined by vote) is dubbed “Best Prankster of the Year” and gets a head start on Wizenclimer’s Winter Treasure Hunt (see below).

5. Wizenclimer’s Winter Treasure Hunt

Wizenclimer’s Winter Treasure Hunt has along history among the gnomes, and is by far the highlight of the year. Gnomes form teams following clues that lead to an unknown treasure.

Preparation

Some gnomes spend the entire year planning for Wizenclimer’s Winter Treasure Hunt. Here’s how it works:

The hunt organizers, the winning team of last year’s hunt, have spent the entire year coming up with:

1. Clues that lead to other clues (clue-trails)
2. Clues that hint at what the “treasure” might be

3. Clues that are revealed after complex mechanical puzzles are solved.
4. Clues that are tied to astronomical events.
5. False clues that lead to practical jokes

The organizers begin planting these clues on the Autumnal Equinox.

The Hunt Begins

Starting the second week of winter, the winner of “Best Prankster of the Year” gets a full 3-day head start on the hunt, after which the other teams may join in.

When a team finds a clue they may leave it where they found it, or hide it somewhere else. If they hide it, they must leave a legitimate clue trail from its original location for others to find the original clue.

The difficulty of following clues expands exponentially as each team leaves trails of false clues that lead to practical jokes or dead-ends. This sows confusion and wastes the time of other teams.

Sometimes these false clue trails are as intricate as the real thing, sometimes more so, as teams plan them out well in advance of winter.

Hunt Duration

The treasure hunt takes on a life of its own, and is the main topic of conversation throughout the winter, mostly via whispers.

Every effort is made by the hunt organizers to draw out the hunt for the entire winter, so as to give the gnomes something interesting to do and discuss. The whole town gets depressed if it is solved too quickly. So key clues only reveal themselves on certain days or are given out by the organizers at scheduled times. Other key clues are given to the winning team of scheduled competitions throughout the season.

Interaction with visitors

Visitors will often be the focus of certain clues in the treasure hunt.

Examples:

1. A clue might be stenciled on the side of an adventurer's boot.
2. A hunt organizer may ask a visitor to respond with "the lark plays where the skunk stays." if a treasure hunter asks, "Who flies while the other lies?" (Skunks hibernate during the winter).
3. A young gnome may come up to a visitor and say, "May I please look at your left thumbnail?" or "May I please look under your chair?" After which he'll thank the visitor without explaining and scamper away.

Visitors are even encouraged to join in the Hunt.

Treasure Found

In the end, one team will find the treasure, which will be some odd item of value. But the real prize is winning the respect and admiration of all the other gnomes in town for the rest of the year. Plus they get to organize next year's hunt.

Clean-up

In spring, every attempt is made to scrub out or paint over old clues left from last winter's hunt to prevent muddling the next one. But many are missed, adding to the confusion of next winter's hunt.

6. Reason for the madness

The treasure hunt and all the practical jokes have a secondary purpose: education. The clues in the hunt impart both useful and arcane knowledge to the youth. For example, some clues can only be solved if certain facts about astronomy or mechanics are known, encouraging the clue-holder to look it up in a book or ask someone who knows. Devising pranks, such as detaching doorknobs and broken bucket handles, in addition to providing lively entertainment, teaches gnomes mechanical skills.

In fact, clues and pranks are so pervasive and educational, that there is no need for schools, though the village has one anyway (paid for by a wealthy human merchant who was alarmed at the lack of educational facilities). But

when the children aren't playing hooky (the norm), the entire school day is filled with paper airplane contests, devising the best spitball shooter, building towers out of the desks, etc., all with the tacit approval of the teacher, who only pretends to be upset.

7. Final Notes

If the players respond favorably to all the joking around, have an NPC gnome travel with the party on their further adventures. Or better yet, encourage a player to roll up a gnome PC.