

Iron Guts: High Adventure for Mid-Level Characters

Part 2 of 3

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This issue we pick up a discussion that we left off last issue, by taking a closer look at levels and ways and thoughts on how to CK from low level to high. Last issue we covered characters of levels 1-3, this issue we take a closer look at mid-level characters those ranging from 4-8. Next issue we'll take a closer look at high level characters, 9+, "god will and the creek don't rise," to offer up one of Gary Gygax's favorite sayings.

Through reckless adventure and brazen heroics and no doubt a fair share of luck the low level characters push their way through to the mid-level range it means that they have successfully cut their teeth on the horror and blood of the early trails. Green horns no longer they now begin the second stage of the journey to immortality. Mid-level characters enjoy many benefits of their growing power, hit points, wealth in armor and gear, as well a range of NPCs to access, and experiences to fall back upon. Against this stand increasingly powerful monsters, whose abilities range from the brute force to sorcerous weapons, new and strange. CKing mid-level characters offers the CK and the player several difficult challenges; for the CK the use of powerful monsters offer the risk of overkill, setting the characters against monsters whose powers prove insurmountable all the while maintaining an interesting, flavorful adventure; for the player its learning how to pit their growing skill sets against these new threats and balance their power in growing hit points, armor class, and magic without overextending themselves and getting killed.

In many respects mid-level characters are the most enjoyable to play as they offer a host of new monsters and allow the CK to pound the characters without instantly killing them, adding time to the equation of the running adventure, which in turn allows the enterprising story teller to really come to grips with the story and its threats and bring those down on the characters like a hammer. Whether carefully laid out and meticulously planned, or whether an adventure developed on the fly, the CK's object lies in capturing the players interest and challenging them to overcome any series of obstacles. These challenges culminate in what is best styled the moment of adventure; that moment, or long series of moments that bring the whole party to the table by engaging their characters in some type of threat. This danger need not be one posed by a powerful monster, a group of creatures; a complicated trap or series of traps, a mystery the players cannot easily comprehend pose equally engaging moments. Mid-level characters offer the CK a whole new host of opportunities to develop their story arc and expand these moments of adventure.

Foremost the characters possess more hit points. Where before one or two good blows threaten a character, especially a wizard or illusionist, with a quick death, the higher hit points allow them take much more punishment. This expands the CKs story telling in two directions.

The increased hit points allow the CK to bring more smaller monsters to bear in the battle; multiple monsters offer a greater threat that equates into more excitement. Capturing a battle where the character must fight off a horde of screaming kobolds, raking, clawing, biting, stabbing at them brings personal combat to its highest form. The swirling hordes of their enemies circle them, cutting one off from the other, attempting to drag them out into their own ranks there to consume them in their own weight of numbers. Here the hero carves through a host of his opponents, hacking to the left or right just to stay alive; no longer bound by one or two spells, the wizard, cleric, druid, or illusionist taps multiple spells to keep the madness at bay. The added bonus here is that the piles of fallen foes embolden the players, encouraging them to play the fearless, almost reckless hero in their quest to conquer and overcome their foe.

Beyond the madding crowd of orcs, kobolds, and goblins lie a host of monsters in both the *Monsters & Treasure* and the *Monsters & Treasure of Ahrde*. These monsters possess powers the low level characters cannot overcome but challenge the mid-level characters. Here are new threats the players may not understand so that the challenge is far greater as they do not immediately know the proper defenses or how to fight them. There is a danger here for the CK, as pitting the characters against monsters whose powers, on the surface do not seem very difficult, often prove very difficult and dangerous. The enterprising CK

must be able and willing to adjust and shift with these moments, curtailing affects of powers, devastating rolls, and the like if the situation should call for it.

This is the true challenge for CKing mid-level characters. Multiple monsters exist, traps as well, and magic items. Choosing them and balancing them is difficult. It is not the goal of the CK to destroy characters. Any such ranking that counts character kills is counter-productive to the story and the fun of the game. Reading the monsters and understanding the affects of their powers is very important. Many CKs fall into the trap of looking at a monster's HD and setting that against the level of the players; four 6th level characters fighting an eight HD monster sounds workable. But that monster's abilities are the true test of its power, for the characters must make their saving throws against that hit dice and if those saves are on average against no primes the chances of failure increase. If failure means death or incapacitation then the CK may find herself facing a dead party. Balance the encounter by looking at the outcome if characters fail multiple saves as well as the damage that monsters might deal out.

Of course this is not to say that encounters should not pose the threat of character death as that is the final motivator for fighting to survive. If the moment's danger becomes woven with chance or fate, and a character's poor actions fuel the flames and the character falls then it is what it is.

The best way to achieve the balance in the encounter is to utilize the story itself. If the encounter shifts to violently toward destruction, or even fall prey to the character's insane luck be prepared to change the encounter in mid stream. This is where playing behind screens proves most useful. Adjust the monster's hit points up or down as needed. The players need never know; adjust the AC through wastage; adjust the AC of the players through destroying shields; change the challenge level as needed. In short the CK must practice institutionalized cheating in order to salvage an encounter that proves too soft or too hard. Experience teaches CKs when this is necessary and when not; some encounters, startlingly dangerous that end precipitously through some bold action can be as moment inspiring as the long grueling fight that leaves scores dead and everyone wounded.

As always one of the best tools at the CK's hand in balancing these encounters lies upon the characters, literally. By shifting killing blows, breath weapons, magical attacks toward the character's war gear or traveling equipment destroys the character's worldly wealth but allows them to fight on. Crushing helmets, shattered shields, breaking hafts, and notching blades brings the reality of the battle to the player's without ending it; furthermore the wake of devastation always echoes in the halls of memory.

For the players (and the CK as well as in planning encounters) it is truly a time of picking up steam, as they now possess enough hit points to survive longer than two or three heavy blows and their skills increase to the point that they begin to affect the actual story arc and direction of the game. Here the fighter alone begins to settle into a pattern that last for many levels, but for the rest of the characters more levels mean more skills. These new abilities add role playing depth to the mid-level characters and allow them to understand what is going on and in some cases to impact it events. From the bard's legend lore and the ranger's tracking to the barbarian's intimidate and beyond the characters begin to push out from a low impact role to a higher one.

Learning multiple applications of their abilities is paramount for the character. The joy of C&C is that one's imagination alone restricts the character's ability use. "Try it" becomes the mantra of the game. Always think out of the box. Some abilities are linear and do not have many applications, but others might prove useful in multiple situations. An assassin might try to use his case target ability to learn something unique about an NPC, with no intention to slay them. The CK may or may not allow the check, but it is worth a try.

This becomes particularly true for spell casters. The limited number of spells they are able to cast in any given day, coupled with lower hit points, armor class, and their ability to hit forces them back upon their spells. Thinking out of the box is not easy and in of itself is challenging, but the character that expands the very usefulness of their spells, tremendously increases their power and ability to impact the game. A *message* spell designed to send a message to a friend, can serve as a weapon by sending a burst of threatening sound toward an enemy.

The player must carefully study their spells and abilities, casting about for multiple usages.

Understanding their increased powers is as important as expanding upon their own abilities. Where before a few blows or a trap destroyed half the party, now the increased hit points, level bonus to checks and saving throws, better equipment and spells brings the character forward in huge leaps and bounds. Now the character can take the punishment, and the player should not be shy in letting the character do so. Shying away from battle or challenges because of the threat of death does not serve the story arc or make for very fun play. Brave, brave Sir Robin*, must fight and not fear the consequences to their character. Plunging into the fray often upsets CK plans and forces them on the defensive which in turn fuels the storyline further bringing ever more excitement to the table.

With this increased bravado comes the oft mentioned equipment. Players must use their wealth to purchase ever greater equipment and weapons. This allows them to do more, inflict more damage, take more damage, as well as carry them through any number of dangerous scenarios. But as importantly it offers the CK a sacrifice. By willingly discarded equipment, especially magical equipment, it sates the CK's need to heighten the story danger, the narrative, that moment of adventure without actually destroying the character himself. Taking this a step further smart players willingly lose, set aside, or break items to avoid the damage to themselves. An adventure well played might be its own reward but the treasure it yields easily replaces empty coffers to resupply and replenish.

Mid-level characters offer a whole new range of possibilities for both player and CK. Taking advantage of them is as easy as reading through the monsters or studying the abilities. The adventure assume a new depth in both its longevity and its possibilities; everyone at the table must take advantage of this in order to further the story. And here is the rub for mid-level characters, the true breakthrough at the table. No longer content to sit and listen to the unfolding tale of the adventure from CKs prone to droning on, the players now directly impact the narrative, changing it as they use their increased abilities and powers to influence not only the outcome of the battle but adventure itself through those same abilities. Now NPCs, monsters, encounter areas, all become subject to the growth in power of the player characters.

But it's the high level characters who, enabled with tremendous abilities, begin to force the direction of the narrative, and dominate those moments of adventure. A subject we shall tackle in Issue 24.

* This is a reference to the movie Monty Python and the Holy Grail and the knight, Brave Sir Robin, who traveled with a band of minstrels exhorting his cowardly before for "he almost fought the chicken of Bristol."