Epic-length Campaigns

A guide for the GM who wants to take things a little more slowly.

Philosophy of the epic-length campaign:

There are several aspects of the core XP table, and related rules, that I don't find as suitable for truly epic campaigns, where the same characters are played for years.

1. At 10-12 encounters per level, an adventure of any real length must encompass multiple levels in order to be challenging from beginning to end, however, this also means that care must be taken in how soon PCs are allowed to reach the later encounters to avoid being outmatched by them.

2. The emphasis seems to be much more on leveling up quickly, getting a constant flow of new "toys" (powers, feats, magic items, etc.) to play with. More power to those who're into that, but for a campaign that's more about the development and exploration of both the world and the PCs, it's really too much, too fast. The early levels, where PCs are just starting to find themselves and their place, can and should be reasonably rapid, but as the game progresses there really needs to be more of a mountain to climb to reach the lofty heights of an epic-level character. After all, if one assumes that there are also high-level NPCs, shouldn't it have taken them a good while to get where they are? Or are they too on the fast track to retirement or godhood?

3. There is little or no room for any kind of XP bonus items beyond the encounters, without compressing the advancement even more. For the GM who likes to reward roleplay and creativity, the core rules make life difficult if one is not trying to drive levels upward even more quickly.

4. High levels, where PCs should be getting their chance to be movers and shakers in the campaign world, zoom by almost as rapidly as low levels. Epic powers are there and gone in a flash, and it's time for a new PC.

5. Characters amass ever-growing mounds of money and magic, which are rendered obsolete nearly as quickly as they're gotten. It's almost like they're at the top of some pyramid scheme, raking in more and more loot. And what they get a month from now will make what they just got look like peanuts, because the rewards grow almost exponentially. Never mind the arguments...valid though they may be...about campaign economics and players appreciating what their characters have now. Does anyone remember "Monty Haul"? He's making a big comeback in 4ed.

Table 1: Revised XP progression for epic-length campaigns

Level	Mini-Epic XP	Epic XP	Ultra-Epic XP
1	0	0	0
2	1,050	1,200	1,500
3	2,400	2,800	3,500
4	4,000	5,000	6,500
5	6,000	8,000	11,000
6	8,700	12,000	17,500
7	12,000	17,000	26,500
8	16,000	24,000	38,500
9	21,000	33,000	54,000
10	27,000	44,000	74,000
11	34,000	59,000	100,000
12	43,000	77,000	134,000
13	54,000	101,000	178,000
14	68,000	130,000	234,000
15	85,000	167,000	305,000
16	105,000	214,000	396,000
17	131,000	274,000	512,000
18	161,000	347,000	658,000
19	199,000	439,000	839,000
20	245,000	551,000	1,060,000
21	300,000	688,000	1,330,000
22	370,000	854,000	1,660,000
23	450,000	1,050,000	2,060,000
24	560,000	1,300,000	2,550,000
25	680,000	1,600,000	3,150,000
26	840,000	2,000,000	3,950,000
27	1,050,000	2,500,000	5,000,000
28	1,300,000	3,200,000	6,000,000
29	1,600,000	4,000,000	8,000,000
30	2,000,000	5,000,000	10,000,000

Mini-epic: This speed is very close to core rules at low levels, only slowing significantly when reaching Epic levels. It will take XP equivalent to 508 encounters to reach 30th level. Encounters per level start at 11, hit mid-teens by Paragon levels, and 20's into Epic.

Epic: This speed slows notably in the Paragon levels, and quite a bit when reaching Epic levels. It will take XP equivalent to 1,115 encounters to reach 30th level. Encounters per level run in the teens and 20's at Heroic, 30's to 40's at Paragon, and 50's to 60's at Epic levels.

Ultra-epic: This speed starts close to core rules, but begins to slow notably by Paragon levels, and dramatically when reaching Epic levels. It will take XP equivalent to 2,132 encounters to reach 30th level. Encounters per level ramp up quickly, reaching 50 by Paragon levels, 90 by Epic levels, and ending in the 120-130's.

Treasure in epic-length campaigns:

One of the things that occurs when your game's PCs spend more time at a given level is that you're given more time to dole out the treasure that they're expected to gain in the level to come. This is especially helpful for the GM who wishes to maintain at least the illusion of a viable fantasy economy in a finite space, such as the campaign that occurs almost entirely around one kingdom or even one subcontinent.

Here's an example: at 10th level, you're supposed to start doling out the equivalent of 10,000 gp plus some nice magic items. Each treasure parcel is now larger than the *entire* 1st level treasure group, which means you'll be handing out some pretty nice sums over the next 10 encounters, only to turn right around and hand out nearly twice as much over the 10 following. And some people think stocks are the way to make money...

If you use one of the epic-length XP progressions, you gain a little breathing room. Even the mini-epic grants you 14-15 encounters to spread the loot; the ultra-epic allows you a whopping 52...which means that if you subdivide the parcels, each encounter would average about three times the amount of loot as the PCs got for 1st level encounters. Fiscal sanity has returned! Better yet, you can save the choicest bits for your main bad guys, allowing them to have truly memorable treasures while still giving out a little loot for all the underlings the party has to grind along the way. There is a saying: "That which is gotten cheaply is often held in contempt." Contempt should be the furthest thing from players' minds when you're handing out the goods, and if they really had to work a while for them, it will be.

Of course, we've yet to discuss the other culprit responsible for skyrocketing treasure drops: the prices of magic items. Bless their hearts, WOTC really did do a good thing by making a scaled price system for magic items, but did they give us too **much** of a good thing? So far as I'm concerned, the answer is a resounding affirmative. What we need to consider is scaling back the rate of ascent, which in turn will give us reason to scale back the speed of treasure acquisition to match.

Table 2 gives some example prices if you reduce the growth ratio per 5 levels (GRP5). For example, if you set the GRP5 to 3, you end up with prices that won't bankrupt entire nations. Even a value of 4 seems reasonable by comparison; the high-end items are definitely luxury goods, but not astronomically so. Table 3 gives values for the full set of treasure parcels for a given level. If you want to make magic items relatively more expensive at higher levels, use a lower GRP5 for treasure than for magic (though I recommend only a one-point difference).

Table 2: Alternate magic item prices

Magic Item prices by level				
Growth ratio	(core)			
	5	4	3	2
Item Level				
(base)	200	200	200	200
1	360	320	280	240
2	520	440	360	280
3	680	560	440	320
4	840	680	520	360
5	1,000	800	600	400
6	1,800	1,280	840	480
7	2,600	1,760	1,080	560
8	3,400	2,240	1,320	640
9	4,200	2,720	1,560	720
10	5,000	3,200	1,800	800
11	9,000	5,120	2,520	960
12	13,000	7,040	3,240	1,120
13	17,000	8,960	3,960	1,280
14	21,000	10,880	4,680	1,440
15	25,000	12,800	5,400	1,600
16	45,000	20,480	7,560	1,920
17	65,000	28,160	9,720	2,240
18	85,000	35,840	11,880	2,560
19	105,000	43,520	14,040	2,880
20	125,000	51,200	16,200	3,200
21	225,000	81,920	22,680	3,840
22	325,000	112,640	29,160	4,480
23	425,000	143,360	35,640	5,120
24	525,000	174,080	42,120	5,760
25	625,000	204,800	48,600	6,400
26	1,125,000	327,680	68,040	7,680
27	1,625,000	450,560	87,480	8,960
28	2,125,000	573,440	106,920	10,240
29	2,625,000	696,320	126,360	11,520
30	3,125,000	819,200	145,800	12,800

Table 3: Alternate treasure group values

Treasure values by level				
Growth ratio	(core) 5	4	3	2
Treasure level (base)	400	400	400	400
1	720	640	560	480
2	1,040	880	720	560
3	1,360	1,120	880	640
4	1,680	1,360	1,040	720
5	2,000	1,600	1,200	800
6	3,600	2,560	1,680	960
7	5,200	3,520	2,160	1,120
8	6,800	4,480	2,640	1,280
9	8,400	5,440	3,120	1,440
10	10,000	6,400	3,600	1,600
11	18,000	10,240	5,040	1,920
12	26,000	14,080	6,480	2,240
13	34,000	17,920	7,920	2,560
14	42,000	21,760	9,360	2,880
15	50,000	25,600	10,800	3,200
16	90,000	40,960	15,120	3,840
17	130,000	56,320	19,440	4,480
18	170,000	71,680	23,760	5,120
19	210,000	87,040	28,080	5,760
20	250,000	102,400	32,400	6,400
21	450,000	163,840	45,360	7,680
22	650,000	225,280	58,320	8,960
23	850,000	286,720	71,280	10,240
24	1,050,000	348,160	84,240	11,520
25	1,250,000	409,600	97,200	12,800
26	2,250,000	655,360	136,080	15,360
27	3,250,000	901,120	174,960	17,920
28	4,250,000	1,146,880	213,840	20,480
29	5,250,000	1,392,640	252,720	23,040
30	6,250,000	1,638,400	291,600	25,600

Assembling the pieces:

By carefully combining the effects of a slowed level progression with a less hyperbolic treasure curve, you can achieve a remarkable effect: average loot values grow significantly, but not outrageously, as characters level up. No longer will the golds recovered at 1st level be a pittance at 10th, and magic items, whose value in gold may be lessened but whose value as tools for the adventurer remain as high as ever, become increasingly anticipated.

And this leads me to some recommendations for those of you who are seriously considering these changes for your own games. Here are my thoughts on which settings work best for each of the epic-length options:

Mini-epic:

For the still fairly quick mini-epic speed, I'd advise a GRP5 of 2 (for games where money is intended to be somewhat tight) or 3 (which will allow good growth, with really sizeable treasures at Epic levels). You might also start with 2 for Heroic, then go to 3 for the remainder.

Epic:

A GRP5 of 3 will give a good growth potential for loot from the average encounter. A 2 would be extremely tight, and a 4 would be very loose, but it might work to scale the number up with the levels: 2 for Heroic, 3 for Paragon, 4 for Epic...just be aware you're making yourself some extra work.

Ultra-epic:

At this point, you can actually hand out some pretty decent chunks of loot over the course of each level, because each level takes so much longer to complete. A GRP5 of 3-4, depending on the prices you want to see, will give characters a decent increase in gold as they advance. Again, combining the two numbers could work well, with a cutover point of your own choosing.

Author's Note:

If you liked this, or have thoughts on how I can expand it, please drop me a note at stormhoundster@gmail.com to let me know.