GUIDANCE SUCKS IN FIFTH EDITION

by Justin Alexander – September 28th, 2021

Warning: This is a rant about game design. Ye have been warned!

Guidance is a terrible spell. It's so bad, in fact, that I'd argue it flirts with being *objectively* bad.

I mean, not if you're the character casting it. If you're casting the spell, it's absolutely fantastic. *Guidance* is not only incredibly powerful, it is *constantly* useful. That's actually part of the problem.

Let me back up for a second.

There are two principles of game design on which this rant is based.

First, in a game where players choose between different abilities, any ability which is so good that *everyone* should pick it every single time is almost always an indication that the ability is broken. Whether or not the ability actually breaks the play of the game, it has broken the process of choosing abilities. The auto-choose ability flattens the game by reducing the diversity and variety of characters.

Second, declaration gotcha mechanics aren't fun. This is basically the, "Whoops! You forgot to say 'Simon Says' before collecting your victory points, so I automatically win the game!" school of game design and it almost always results in terrible experiences. Just imagine Dennis Nedry laughing in your face for eternity:

(Another common example of this in D&D are DMs who resolve traps as purely declaration gotchas: "Whoops! You forgot to say, 'I search for traps,' so here's your random damage tax!" See *Rulings in Practice: Traps* for a better way of running traps. But I digress.)

So let's talk about *guidance*.

In 5th Edition D&D, *guidance* is a cantrip that allows the caster to touch one willing creature and grant them +1d4 to any ability check of their choice made within the next minute. It requires concentration, but because it's a cantrip you can cast it as often as you like.

First off, this is clearly a must-have spell. It grants, on average, +2.5 on ability checks. So any group without *guidance* is, on average, performing 12.5% worse on ability checks. That's huge! To put that in perspective, getting a +2 proficiency bonus requires at leas five levels of advancement. *Guidance* allows 5th level characters to make skill checks as if they were 13th level characters.

This makes *guidance* the auto-choose spell we were just saying is a huge, neon red flag in game design. If you're the character in the group who has it on your spell list, you're obligated to take it, and I've witnessed multiple Session 0's in which players have specifically coordinated to make sure that *guidance* was being covered. It's absolutely a character creation tax.

It's also just a terrible spell in actual play.

Let's start by pointing out that it's actually difficult to explain what *guidance* actually *does*. If I cast a *fireball* spell, it creates a giant ball of fire. If I cast *absorb elements*, we can visually imagine the flames of the *fireball* being absorbed or noticeably weakened around me. With *knock* we can imagine tendrils of magical energy turning the tumblers in the lock. And so forth.

But *guidance*? It's a spell that can help the recipient with both a Dexterity (Acrobatics) check a Wisdom (Insight) check; and I don't even have to determine which one at the time I cast the spell. In some cases you can kind of improvise something that the magic might be doing (lightening your limbs? letting you see someone's pulse? whispering secrets from the primeval Font of Knowledge to help with that Intelliegence (History) check?), but in practice the spell appears to be sufficiently dissociated that its casting is almost always a simple declaration – "I cast *guidance*!" – with no clear concept of what's actually happening in the game world.

More importantly, what makes the spell so essential is that it can improve every single ability check. And therefore, of course, *it must be cast for every single ability check*.

This is the declaration gotcha. You forgot to say you were casting the spell? Congratulations! You just made your group significantly worse!

And even if you *do* remember to say it, the experience at the table is just dreadful. "I cast *guidance*. I cast *guidance*. I cast *guidance*. I cast *guidance*. I cast *guidance*. I cast *guidance*. I cast *guidance*. I cast *guidance*. I cast *guidance*." An endless, mindless drone which is both a tax you are obligated to pay and an action which is not only devoid of narrative worth, but an active distraction and detraction from whatever the focus of play actually is.

"But I like it when PCs assist each other!"

Me, too. But that's not really what *guidance* does. Because the spell has no narrative presence in the game world, it doesn't create the experience of one character helping another. And because its use is so generic as to be mindless in its application, there's no true satisfaction or sense of accomplishment. In my experience, *guidance* actually gets in the way of players creatively coming up with ways of assisting each other!

"You should just tell the player to stop metagaming!"

There's no metagaming here. If you're on a dangerous adventure and you have a spell that you can freely cast that will help you or your comrades succeed in your tasks, you would *absolutely* cast that spell. In fact, because the spell lasts for one minute and allows the recipient to invoke it at the moment the skill check is made, it would actually make the most sense in character to be *constantly* casting the spell every minute. You'd be a fool not to.

"But *guidance* isn't as useful in combat because the caster has to use an action to cast it!"

I honestly don't care. You could completely ban *guidance* from being used in combat and it would still be a broken, awful spell.

It *is* true, though, that *guidance* is less of a problem in combat. Why? Because your actions in combat are a limited resource, and therefore the need to use one of those actions to cast the spell imposes a cost.

And that cost is, essentially, what's missing from *guidance*. Without a cost outside of combat, it's actually *failing* to cast *guidance* as often as humanly possible which is the cost. And it is precisely this which makes the spell miserable in play and broken in design.

So is there a way to fix it?

Yup.

Ditch *guidance* entirely and roll it into *bless*, which is a 1st level spell that currently only affects attack rolls and saving throws. The spell remains quite useful, but you'll now need to exercise some thought to determine when it is best used.