

The Rules of the Game

How can you teach someone to role-play? Here's one system

by Thomas M. Kane

Have you ever tried to teach someone how to role-play? The rule books make no sense to a beginner; they contain reams of data but almost never actually explain how one plays. The game master (GM) and players must teach new players the rules, clearly and entertainingly. Although every new player learns in a different way, there are certain processes that you, as the GM, will always need to explain.

Before the game

A new player has to have some desire to role-play before he will listen to your explanations. Tell him about exciting adventures you have had (but don't overdo

it). Explain the setting of your campaign and suggest inspirational reading, such as mythology or fantasy novels. These early "lessons" need not be dissertations—deliver them long before the game, in normal conversation.

Beginners want to start playing immediately. Unfortunately, most role-playing games consist of an unstructured crossfire of ideas, questions, and jargon, all of which quickly bewilder a new player. Give the new player a short introduction before his first game. Make it both direct and simple—never ramble about "escaping inward" or "exploring the realms of your imagination." Explain that each person pretends to be a character in a story and simply tells the group what he or she wants to do. And since the player characters (PCs) might not be able to do everything their players want, dice are used to decide if they succeed or fail.

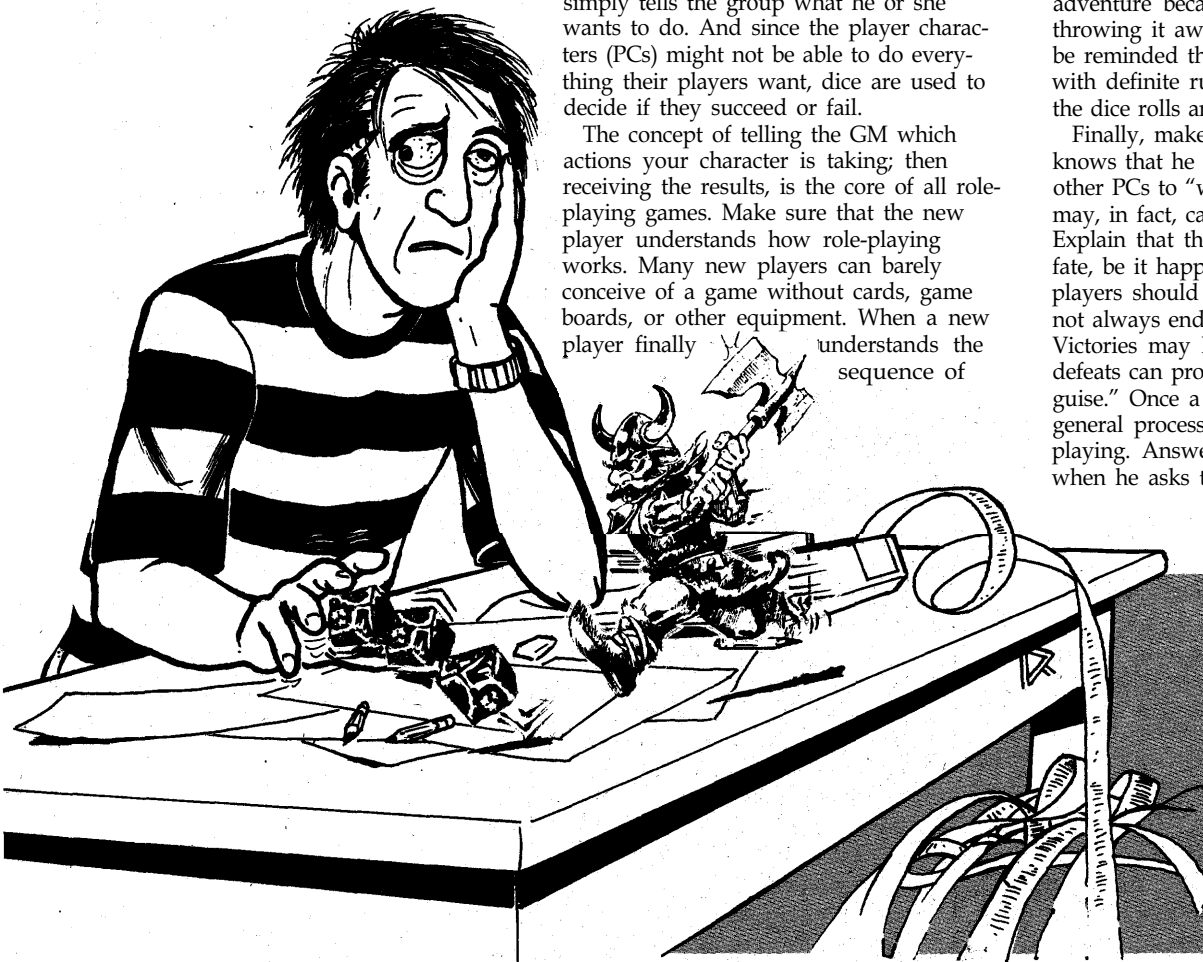
The concept of telling the GM which actions your character is taking; then receiving the results, is the core of all role-playing games. Make sure that the new player understands how role-playing works. Many new players can barely conceive of a game without cards, game boards, or other equipment. When a new player finally understands the sequence of

play, he often worries that role-playing rules are too simple—that all players do is talk. Assure him that the GM plans adventures in advance, and that role-playing is as challenging as any game.

After outlining the sequence of play, describe your functions as the game's GM. Explain that you are both an author and a referee—whatever you say is true, even if players disagree. The GM maintains and controls the game environments for the PCs. You might have to steer the new player between two opposing misconceptions. Some new players feel limited to making prescribed moves. My first fantasy-game character carried a spare suit of plate mail throughout his first adventure because there were no rules for throwing it away. Other new players must be reminded that they are playing a game with definite rules. They must abide by the dice rolls and cannot "fudge."

Finally, make sure that your student knows that he does not need to kill the other PCs to "win" (and that such actions may, in fact, cause trouble in the game). Explain that the party shares the same fate, be it happy, tragic, or neither. New players should know that adventures do not always end in either a gain or a loss. Victories may later seem Pyrrhic, while defeats can prove to be "blessings in disguise." Once a new player understands the general process of the game, let him start playing. Answer further questions only when he asks them.

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Artwork by Roger Raupp

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Fitting in

On page 111 of the AD&D® 1st Edition *Dungeon Masters Guide*, Gary Gygax sug-

gested that novices play their first role-playing games alone, without interference from experienced players. However, most GMs have no time to run separate campaigns for beginners, and most new players resent being segregated. Let new-

comers play an introductory adventure in your regular campaign. Before the new player arrives, make sure that the experienced players will be polite. Never let anyone ridicule a newcomer. Both the GM and the party must listen to the new player and encourage him to play, reacting enthusiastically to good suggestions and setting aside terrible ideas with reasoned but respectful comment. Established players can nurture the new party member while role-playing. In fantasy games, tough fighters may give terse and cynical warnings about the adventure to come, while intellectual wizards might recall their own apprenticeships and take a special interest in the newcomer.

Every new player needs a character, but many new players become bored while rolling one up. Be sure that the new player understands that generating a character is part of preparing to play, not the game itself. Briefly explain that in role-playing games you pretend to be another person, and randomly generated statistics (created by dice rolls) show how strong, smart, dextrous, etc., the imaginary character is. Point out that as characters gain adventuring experience, they generally (if the game allows for it) become more powerful. You might compare rolling up a character to dealing out cards in a poker game. Your character's statistics—like a poker hand—determine how you will play. Then let the new player choose between playing a prerolled character and generating a new one. If a game's PC-generation system is prolonged, a pregenerated PC would be best; offer a choice between two or three.

If the new player wants to, roll up his own character, do not complicate the process with unnecessary detail. Height, weight, and other details seldom matter in a first adventure. Explain what each important statistic means and how it is determined. Let the new player participate, but do not flood your student with data. When the new player gets to choose something, such as race, class, or alignment, mention only the most attractive possible choices. In most fantasy games, fighters and thieves probably make the most satisfactory beginning PCs. Clerics require especially sensitive role-playing to avoid seeming effete. Magic-users die easily, and the rules for spells are complex. If your new player wants to play a magic-user, you should probably wait until later to explain the difference between memorized spells, known spells, and spells written in the spell book.

In games with an alignment system, new players might not understand concepts such as "lawful" and "chaotic." Most new players become even more confused when they are given a list of which alignments believe in individual rights and which might condone murder. You can describe alignments by pairing fictional characters with their ethos. For example, if the new-

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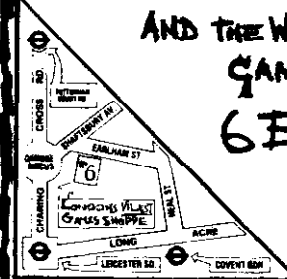
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comer to an AD&D game has read Tolkien, you could say that that Aragorn was lawful good, Frodo was neutral good, and Tom Bombadil and Galadriel exemplify two different views of chaotic goodness. Similar archetypes appear in most fantasy literature.

New characters should always be good aligned. Only a skillful role-player can portray a villain without behaving like a psychopath, and new players usually feel uncomfortable about willfully choosing to be "evil." Do not make lawful or good alignments sound prudish. Almost all fictional heroes, even dashing scoundrels, would have been good guys in fantasy games. Use Robin Hood as an example.

New players should not buy equipment before the adventure; they seldom know what a mace is, much less a bec-de-corbin. Instead, let each character buy what he wants after the game begins. The PCs should probably begin in a small town, where they can buy equipment without the distraction a city offers. This not only starts the game faster, it lets new players discover for themselves what they will need. It also lets them experiment with role-playing without endangering the entire party. If the new PC teases a shopkeeper, he may have to borrow somebody else's iron spikes. If the new PC insults a dragon, everybody in the party might get roasted.

When the player has a character, either newly rolled or pregenerated, analyze its strengths and weaknesses aloud. For example, "You're strong and clever, but somewhat unattractive. This character might make a good warrior? Usually, one or two sentences is enough. However, if the new player seems interested in your description, you might add some background from your campaign, such as: "You were born in the Barbarous Plains. That makes you an unsurpassed horseman—and a fierce-warrior."

On with the game!

Try to start the game within 20 minutes. If the new player still seems confused, just say, "Tell me what your character wants to do." As the new player watches more experienced players role-play, he will probably begin to understand the game. New players often try to wheedle hints from the GM. If this occurs, keep him from becoming frustrated, but make it clear that PCs have to solve their own problems. When the new PC is in a party with experienced adventurers, get them to give advice to the new guy. If nobody in the party can help, try to have an NPC provide the answer or at least make up some reason to offer information. Maybe the new PC heard a bard's song about a similar situation or was warned about it as an apprentice. Most people learn board

games by making random moves whenever it is their turn, thus gradually finding out what the rules allow. In role-playing games, this "turn" may never come. Whenever a new player seems ignored, the GM should ask the newcomer what action his character wants to take. If possible, force the new PC to do something heroic—alone.

During the game, a new player will face most typical game processes, such as combat tables, "plusses to hit," and terms such as "PC," "NPC," "player," and "GM" or "DM." Keep the game going, but give a short explanation of each such concept. Usually a sentence is enough, such as: "This is the eight-sided die." Explain dice mechanics as early as possible, including percentile rolls and abbreviations (like "3d6").

New players learn best by playing, whether they completely understand the rules or not. Once the new player feels comfortable role-playing, you may introduce more complex rules. You can start by showing the entire party the module they just explored (assuming you aren't going to use it again). All players, new and old, enjoy hearing about things that might have happened and how clever they were to evade the many enemies who opposed them. This also gives you an excuse to talk about spells, treasure, maps, monsters, game balance, and all other features of a typical adventure. However, avoid talking too much or giving more answers than the new player wants. Keep the new player interested!

After the first adventure, new players need personalized characters. They know enough to use one properly now and should start accumulating memories and experience points. If you used a prerolled character, take it back and help your student roll up a new one if he wants (or let him keep the prerolled one and play that if he likes it). Even when the new player has already rolled up a character, he will need statistics for height, weight, and anything else you ignored before. Let the new player know that a PC leads an imaginary life in your campaign world and exists even when not adventuring. Give a new PC a history, friends, enemies, and living expenses.

A new player becomes an expert by glancing through the rule books, turning rules and ideas into a vision of the game. If you dare, lend new players your rule books. Otherwise, let them skim rules during slow parts of the game or arrange a trip to some bookstore that allows browsing. You can also recommend fiction that represents your campaign. Be ready to suggest which books the new player should buy, but remember that newcomers are usually not ready to spend much money. New players will probably not use anything more than the rule books allowed for players to use. Of course, a beginner can play with nothing but dice.

Special warning: Be aware that the AD&D game is *not* an "advanced" version of the D&D® game. Some people recom-

mend that novice AD&D game players learn the D&D Basic Set rules first. However, these are two entirely different games, each quite complex but not using the same rules system. Either one is fine in itself, but confusing them will only lead to serious frustration later! Similar problems might exist with other game systems that were revised in later editions—e.g., Game Designers' Workshop's TRAVELLER®, MEGATRAVELLER®, and the since-renamed TRAVELLER: 2300™ games (the latter now being the 2300 AD™ game). Know your rules!

When you introduce the rules, avoid scaring beginners with gargantuan piles of books. Newcomers should respect the rules but not feel compelled to memorize them. You can compare role-playing rules to the Chance and Community Chest cards in Parker Brothers' MONOPOLY® game; players must obey them but do not have to study each one in advance. New players should know that role-playing games constantly change and expand. Explain that since players want rules for anything that might ever happen, new guidelines will always be possible. You might even encourage beginners to design optional rules of their own. This can mollify players who envy the GM's license to "cheat."

There are certain mistakes that almost all beginners make, and GMs should watch for and correct these. For example: In the AD&D and D&D game systems, remind newcomers that lower armor classes are more protective; therefore, a suit of *plate* mail + 1 actually subtracts one point from the wearer's armor class. Also, emphasize that shields improve a character's armor class by one—not reduce it to -1. New players need to know that "monster" often means nothing more than "NPC"—any nonplayer character.

When a game uses foreign currencies or imaginary money, watch moneychanging closely. Most new players have a very hard time converting gold pieces to silver or dollars to francs. Some GMs just call gold pieces "dollars," but if you let new players develop a habit of this, they will probably never stop, and that makes the game seem slightly less realistic.

The novice adventure

A new player forms countless prejudices and expectations during the first game. You should use this opportunity to shape the new player into the sort of gamer you want in your campaign. Use a wide variety of challenges and settings. If the entire adventure takes place underground, a newcomer might not understand that any surface world exists.

The first adventure must accomplish three things. First, it should demonstrate the game. This is why you need a varied assortment of encounters. Second, it should summarize your campaign world. Let the new PCs meet important NPCs and expose them to the stories, geographical features, etc., of your milieu. Third, it

should build expectations for the next game. The new players should face some exciting challenge and overcome it. Do not let the new player PCs fail, because in the first game it is more important for new players to feel triumphant than to enforce every rule of game balance. Have the beginners find a small reward; even a few silver coins will excite them. Then make them anticipate even better successes. Let them learn about magical items to lust for and expensive luxuries that they would buy if only they were rich. PCs will pursue these things for lifetimes.

The first adventure should have a simple plot. Since the new players do not understand the rules yet, they should not have to concentrate on understanding your storyline. This innocence lets you use all the fun tricks that experienced players might consider hackneyed. New players feel proud to be hired by the village chieftain, and animated skeletons still terrify them. Fantasy-game GMs could also see the introductory D&D modules B11 *King's Festival* and B12 *Queen's Harvest* for other novice-level adventure ideas.

The GM cannot tell a new player every thing, and new players remember things much more completely when they teach themselves. Unfortunately, most rule books assume that their readers can role-play. Therefore, this article includes a short introduction to role-playing in the following section. Have the new player read this section, and if he becomes interested in a game, so much the better!

How to play

Most games simulate something people want to do. Perhaps they recreate emotions, like triumph. Maybe they demand certain skills, like military strategy. Chess, for example, is almost exactly like war. And there is a type of game, called a role-playing game, which tries to simulate all of life. The players assume the parts of characters in a story, and all of their experiences are played out in conversation. Playing a role-playing game is like creating a fantasy, science-fiction, or adventure story from the players' imaginations. The characters that the players control have a task or conflict to resolve during each game session. The game, like life, does not always end with a winner or a loser. Some game sessions end well, with the players getting what they want, but others prove to be more difficult.

The setting and plot of an RPG session are invented by one player—the game master, or GM. The GM prepares long before the game by making up the plot and goals of the story. Work like this is much like writing fiction—but the GM does not decide how it will end. The GM draws a map of the imaginary area where the game is supposed to take place and writes a description of various locations on the map, as if for an encyclopedia. One place might be a tomb guarded by evil spirits, while another might be a peaceful

farm. The GM will reuse this map in many games. In this way, a campaign develops—a continuing plot with a consistent theme, like a long novel.

As mentioned, the other players take the roles of characters in the story. It is important to distinguish between “players” and “characters.” A player is a real person who plays the game. A character is one of the people in the story. The characters that the players control are called player characters, or PCs. Everybody else in the story is invented and controlled by the GM. These people are called non-player characters, or NPCs.

You play an RPG by talking. The GM describes the background for the story and what each PC sees and hears. After considering this, the players tell the GM what they want their characters to do; these actions can be anything that a real person might do. The GM then describes the results. By using the map, the rule books, and common sense, the GM tells the players where their PCs are and what happens to them.

At some point, a character will want to do something that he might not be able to do. For example, if a PC shoots an arrow at a target, he might ‘hit or miss. Dice rolls are used to simulate these chances. The results are compared with tables that show how difficult these feats are. Ideally, there would be tables for everything a PC might ever do in a game. Some game systems have an incredible number of rule books and gaming materials. Many beginning players complain that this is too much to read. The truth is, almost nobody knows all the rules. Players have their PCs do whatever they want and look up rules when they are needed. Creating a believable, exciting tale is more important than following the books. Often, a GM is forced to invent new rules to cover unique situations.

Different sorts of dice appear in various role-playing games. These dice often do not have pips—dots showing what number you have rolled. Rather, each die face has an Arabic digit, such as 2 or 19. The most commonly used dice have four, six, eight, ten, twelve, and twenty sides. (Ten-sided dice are sometimes numbered zero (10) through nine.) In descriptions of role-playing, dice rolls are often abbreviated with the letters “D” or “d.” Notations on dice rolls usually involve two parts. First is a number showing the number of rolls to be made, then a number showing how many sides that the dice to be rolled must have. Rolling 3d6 means rolling three six-sided dice and adding the results from each die into a total score. Dice rolls can also be abbreviated by giving the range of the appropriate die; for example, a roll of 1d6 is often abbreviated 1-6, and 2d12 is 2-24.

There are also references to d100 or percentile dice, which are used to generate a number between one and 100. Two ten-sided dice are usually used, of two different colors. One color is the tens die, and the other is the ones die. The same die

can also be rolled twice, first for the tens digit, then for the ones digit. Thus, if the first roll is a 3 and the next roll is a 2, the number generated is 32. If the first number was 0 and the second was 3, the result is 3. Rolls of 0 and 0 represent 100. Percentile rolls are useful when a chance is expressed as a percent. If a PC has a 60% chance of swimming, 1d100 is rolled. If the number is above 60, the character cannot swim; if the roll is 60 or below, the character can. Percentile dice are also used to roll large random numbers.

Before the game, players fill out character sheets which describe their PCs. There are many things to know about a character. Is he strong, weak, clever, or stupid? What sort of skills does the character have? Some of these things are determined by rolling dice, and others are selected by the player.

Basic attributes like strength, intelligence, and dexterity are called ability scores, and one generates them by rolling dice. A PC is trained for a certain profession, such as fighter, thief, or magic-user in fantasy games. The player may choose what sort of job his character is trained for. In many games, PCs might not be human, so a player may also get to choose his PC's race, such as elf, dwarf, or gnome. As a PC plays the game, he will gain experience and become more skilled at whatever he does. Experience is measured in experience points, which are awarded for completing successful adventures. When a character has enough experience points, he may gain levels, increasing his personal powers. High-level characters often gain new skills and can improve their old ones. The same character can be reused in many adventures. Eventually, characters develop complete histories, as if they were real people.

Dice, rule books, and paper are the only equipment needed for playing RPGs. Some players collect tiny lead figurines which resemble their characters. These are props and can be moved around to simulate what is happening in an adventure. However, you do not need figures to play.

Although fantasy games are used most often here in examples, role-playing games have been written to recreate adventures of all sorts, including stories involving medieval fantasy and ancient mythology, modern espionage, postnuclear ruins, science-fiction starships, Vietnam war patrols, 1920s gangsters, and cartoon comedies. The rules for different games will vary, and few will use the same terms, rules, and equipment. But if you can play one RPG, you can play any of them.

The most important rule for learning how to play an RPG is this: If you don't know, ask. You can learn any RPG by watching how the other players act in the game, but always feel free to ask questions. The more you know about a game, the better you can play it and the more fun you'll have.

And the fun is worth it, too.

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